

Negotiating Social Security through Network Building: A Study of the Livelihoods of Resident Caretakers in the new Metropolis of Kolkata

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***Abstract:** The “resident caretakers”, who constitute a distinct category of indentured labor in the newly emerging urban metropolises of India, have remained a relatively neglected component of research in the field of sociology of labor relations, and therefore they rightfully deserve meticulous attention from the scholars. The present study explores the patterns of migration and re-settlement of this category of urban labour force in one of the major suburban cities of Kolkata as an attempt to uncover the process of their absorption into the urban informal sector. The growing number of these indentured laborers in the urban informal sector in India has remained marginalized and denied most of their rights that are given to the formal sector workers. The present paper thus intends to examine this issue as a redresser to the problem of social security among these urban contractual laborers that is multiplying every day in the major cities of West Bengal with the development of the new towns, confiscating boundaries of the upper middle class. The study uses ethnographic case accounts drawn from qualitative face-to-face interviews that draw attention to their livelihood patterns and the vignettes of their network building processes through the derivative component of social capital that is constantly been generated in specific interactional contexts. This in the long run builds together in maintaining a constant sense of identity, personal wellbeing and social recognition of their form of labor in a relatively “negotiated” social space.*

Keywords: Resident caretakers, metropolis, informal sector, migration, livelihoods, indentured labour, social security.

Introduction

The caretaking occupation is slowly receiving heightened importance in the all the major urban metropolises of India and that world. As the lifestyles of the urban middle classes are undergoing rapid changes with their

increasing spending capacities, choice of employment, consumption patterns, and their attendant connoisseurs of life, the demand for security and service production is becoming an ultimate necessity. In addition, to the contemporary urban world is grappling with a host of uncertainties in the form of crime, old age problems, damage to property due to ecological factors and varied other social problems that impact the metabolism of city life from time to time. This is subsequently increasing the need for resident caretakers who in the Indian context function not only as guardians of the big housing premises but also as caregivers of urban nuclear families. For the younger ones they supplement the role of parents, sharing the socialization function. They are largely responsible for the social organization of city life through facilitating the employer's needs from time to time.

The present paper takes into consideration six case studies of urban resident caretakers who reside in the various cooperative flats in the City of Salt Lake, a region where numerous conglomerations of urban resettlement projects are still proliferating and in the process deciphering newly developed patterns of labor relationships, mostly contractual, that are often encountered in a formally unrecognized and intuitively foreign social setting. The empirical findings of the study reveal that the "resident caretakers" bear their countryside origins as mostly rural participants in the agriculture labor force in the circumferential districts of West Bengal and states adjacent to it like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Jharkhand and are typically migrant indentured laborers who make their entry into city life with the accompaniment of their families chiefly for the purpose of finding a new employment which would suffice to their bare needs of subsistence. The primary reason for this urban perusal is largely accounted for their relative lack of economic dependence on former profession that avail as a result of the persistent vulnerability of cultural and social distress prevailing this occupation.

However, this present employment generation¹, due to the multiple spaces they inhabit in the urban context, takes on peculiar forms, informal sector of urban city life owing mainly to the nature of their job structure. This is because the kind of employer-employee relationship that is being generated through these rural-urban intersections, informs the much broader definitions of social protection and more essentially social security as it incorporates the more non-statutory and private measures of social assistance and recognition of their personal wellbeing. This is mainly comprehended by the fact that the fundamental aspect of their working-class lives is their *insecurity*, which is coherently defined not only by their separation from

the means of production, but also lack of their access to means of subsistence, which is not always guaranteed (Das 2003). For these poor laborers, caretaking becomes the only possible job that ensures their survival as it requires minor financial input, relatively low levels of skills and minimal educational qualifications. It is mainly in complementary to their expectations of a basic living allowance in the urban cityscapes that these migrant workers establish useful ties with their social superiors and enter into dependency relationships where they accept a wide range of contractual and semi contractual commitments. However, the relative absence of a meaningful social security arrangement becomes a problem not merely for these individual contractual workers and their families but also bears wider implications for the economy and society.

Constitutional Provisions for Social Security for the Resident Caretakers

In common parlance the term “social security” refers to the protection which society provides for its members against the economic and social distress that otherwise would be caused by substantial reduction or ceasing of earnings resulting from sickness, maternity, employment injury, unemployment, invalidity, old age, and death; the provision of medical care; and the provision of subsidies for families and children. In the Indian context, the concept of social security is derived from the provisions of Article 38 of the Constitution, which requires that the State should promote the welfare of the people by securing and protecting a social order based on justice - social, economic and political – in all walks of life. Article 41 requires that within the limits of economic capacity and development the State shall make effective provisions for securing the right to work, to education and public assistance, in case of unemployment old age, sickness and disablement, and in other case of undeserved want. Article 42 requires that the State should make provisions for securing just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief. Article 47 mandates the State to raise the level of nutrition and the standard of living of its people, and work for improvement of public health. These provisions are in accordance with Thomas Paine’s *Rights of Man* which states that society owes subsistence to citizens either by procuring work or by ensuring the means of existence for those who are unable to work. The Right to work enables a person to earn his livelihood through work. If for any reason the person is not able to work, society has to provide him with the means of livelihood by other means. Society has therefore the obligation to provide everyone with either work or other means of livelihood.

Notwithstanding all the measures taken by the Government to protect the rights of the unorganized sector workers the most important characteristic for the majority of the workforce in this sector has been the absence of any form of social protection. The urban residential caretaker presents one such category whose rights for social protection have not yet been recognized. The resident caretakers neither have employment and income security nor the security against the contingencies of life due to their too little income. In addition to this, they have no facility for covering risks such as ill-health, accidents, death and old age. A large body of the social protection policies in India largely covering the unorganized sector workers has remained silent about a large section of the workforce of which the resident caretakers constitute a part. In the following paragraphs I have the major problems the resident caretakers face due to lack of social protection.

First, it is an irony that India is a signatory of a number of international conventions including the ILO conventions, yet, out of about 41 conventions ratified, it is mainly the minimum wages legislations that cover the informal workers and others deal with the conditions of workers in the organized sector only. The crisis becomes severer as the size of employment in the informal sector is increasing since globalization. In fact, the need for minimum wages provides one such issue that has not been taken into consideration on account of the employment of resident caretakers. The meagre salary they receive from their employers is not sufficient to maintain a minimum standard of living.

Second, there is no life insurance, old age pension or retirement benefit for them. There are no statutory holidays or annual vacations. Whenever they wish to take a holiday, they have to depute somebody whom they have to pay from their own salary. In cases, where the unorganized worker has a clearly identifiable employer and the employer has the capacity to pay, the employer has the primary responsibility of ensuring basic conditions of work. The role of the government is of regulation and enforcement of rules. But in cases where the employer cannot be identified or does not have the capacity for creating appropriate conditions of work, the responsibility of the state in creating appropriate conditions of work will be paramount. Given the weak state of voice and representation of the unorganized workers, the state and the civil society organizations have the most important role in contributing to an industrial and labour relations environment in which the minimum conditions of work of the unorganized, workers can be secured.

It is the state which alone is constitutionally mandated to enforce society-wide regulations and create conditions for the development of the economy.

Third, resident caretakers are sometimes classified as independent contractors instead of employees. Numerous factors apply to determine whether a person is a true independent contractor as opposed to an employee but some key factors include the amount of control exercised over the duties and how they are performed; the chance of profit or risk of loss and ownership of the tools or equipment for the job. The fact that the employer and the employee have chosen to call the resident caretaker an “independent contractor” the employer’s option of entering into a written contract with the resident caretaker should not be overlooked and taken into consideration². Employment contracts often help clarify issues like the employee’s duties, statutory payment obligations, rights upon termination and other key elements of the employment relationship.

Fourth, the termination of employment of a resident caretaker is governed by the provisions in the *Employment Standards Act*. In reality, however, a flat owner can terminate the employment of a caretaker if he plans in good faith to depute another caretaker. The caretaker thus loses his job as well as shelter.

Fifth, the resident caretaker represents a category of rural non-agricultural wage workers and self-employed workers who have no viable means of earning a livelihood through farming. These workers also have low educational attainment and, as the study reveals, they take up manufacturing and petty trading activities and production related occupations in the unorganized sector before getting the job of a resident caretaker. This is primarily because they lack the skills for moving into formal sector work or more productive occupations. This sheds light on the limited access to human and physical capital among the unorganized workers which acts as a major constraint on access to jobs or growth of self-employed activities.

Sixth, in India, by and large, trade union activities are largely oriented towards organizing the organized workers rather than the unorganized sector workers. The trade union initiative is aimed at generating awareness among the workers regarding the existing legal provisions that are available for their protection and for providing an appropriate platform and structure for exercising their “voice”. The trade union movement in a developing country like India is largely oriented towards the organized workers whose interests are protected through a large number of labor legislations. Furthermore, arguably, there is not much concern from the government as well the trade unions for the workers in the unorganized sector. However, it can safely be

argued that the trade unions have a definite role to play in organizing the workers in the unorganized sector in India. This is also applicable for resident caretakers. Although efforts are being made in undertaking this activity in right earnest, there is still a large gap in this regard.

Network Building and Social Capital: A Space for Negotiating Livelihood

It has long been debated that social capital involves self-help and mutual aid which are the only resources that poor people possess to mitigate their circumstances, the norms or rules of reciprocity they use (as a social resource) to negotiate their belongingness to the urban setting and the way it affects their economic condition as a part of their participation in their daily labor. The poor people in a place generally know many people like themselves who belong to the same community and many have some scattered connections to people in other places. This accounts for the causal mechanisms through which social capital is linked mainly through the types of reciprocity that are exchanged in interactional settings. Thus, while the aspect of migration has been a potential marker to explain the reasons for which these resident caretakers are compelled to sustain livelihood by seeking better employment in the urban spaces, it cannot nevertheless be structurally enunciated without taking into consideration the strategic implications of the network building processes through which these spaces are being built which only be determined synthetically by taking into consideration the aspects of social capital accumulation of the caretakers these negotiations are being built for ensuring their social security.

The intellectual history of the concept of social capital³ can be traced back to the works of Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, Georg Simmel, John Dewey, and Max Weber. These scholars have emphasized the role of culture in economic development — an implicit use of the idea of social capital. However, the first systematic exposition of the term and its entry into the academic debates can be attributed to the works of Pierre Bourdieu (1986) and James S. Coleman (1988). However, it was the pioneering work of Robert D. Putnam (1993) that heavily popularized the term among social scientists and attracted the attention of researchers and policymakers. He defines social capital as “... features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions” (Putnam 1993: 167). Social capital refers to connections among individuals — social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them (Putnam 2000: 18-

19). For him, social networks have value and social contacts affect the productivity of individuals and groups. Social capital is closely related to “civic virtue”. The number of civic associations and degree of participation in those associations indicate the richness of social capital in a society.

Observations from the Field

I present here the results of the qualitative interviews that were taken in the caretakers’ residences that will determine the conditions under which these working-class people live and contribute to social capital. The basic observation is that social capital presupposes social interaction and such interactions take place in a localized spatio-temporal context causing the local dependence of people in the neighborhood. Being in the particular place or being a part of place-based social support network people get help or can help the others. One reason for the geographical boundedness of this mutual help is that mutual help presupposes trust and trust relations takes time to develop through routinized place-based interactions characterized by what Giddens (1987) has termed “co-presence”. From this argument, it follows that the norms and practice of reciprocity tend to be spatially bounded; these tend to happen in limited geographical spaces.

The consequences of such network building that are facilitated by the norms of reciprocity and mutual trust can take trivial forms. When I interviewed Govindo a caretaker, aged 63, who hails from Nadia district of West Bengal I found some remarkable insights that underlie the potential causes of their migration and the way the structuring of social capital is contextualized in different spaces. Govindo has been working in the city for the last 23 years and is now residing with his family. Govindo remarked:

I never even dreamt that he would ever get the chance to become an owner of a flat in New Town. When asked how he got this opportunity he said that a few years back the Government hoisted a lottery for LIG (Lower Income Group) one-room flats in an area beside Eco-Park. It is known as Sampurna Housing Society. Sampurna Apartments by Bengal DCL Housing Development Co. Ltd. is one of the popular residential projects in New Town, Kolkata. It is an upcoming project with expected possession in Dec 2017. It has thoughtfully designed residences which the people from the lower income groups can afford. My employer had helped immensely in this respect in noticing the advertisement in the papers and the filling up of the forms from time to time.

Moreover, Govindo is currently a member of Sukanta Swayambhar Gosthi, a Self-Help Group in West Bengal set up to organize and strengthen poor and marginal sections of the society. Its main office is in Burdwan and has a branch at Salt Lake. With a subscription of Rs 200 every year he attends temple *Kirtan* a few times a year and visits the major temples of Kolkata and Burdwan to offer *puja*. The group also provides monetary help to its members. This shows that contrary to popular belief the poor households are engaged in myriad of micro enterprises which are linked to their livelihood. As a source of employment, the micro enterprise has a lot of potential because of its ease of entry and low startup capital. On many occasions such groups also play a significant role in self-employment when employment in organized sector or even wage employment is scarce.

I also asked the residential caretakers about the types of economic benefits that they get from the flat members and the other caretakers who are residing in the flats adjacent to his residence. The fact that city-life had exposed these caretakers to the partial fluidity of the boundaries elite networks has allowed them to understand the importance of “trust” as a determining factor of their community life. This can however be explained more theoretically by bringing into context the ways in which the caretakers ensure their stability of economic livelihood by the sincere accumulation of bridging capital and by the subsequent possession of bonding capital that are generated through the employer-employee relationship.

As with the case of Subhas who was originally a farmer of the Sundarban delta, and had been a resident of Pathgola village located just a few kilometres away from the dense forest Sundarban, known mostly for its mangrove trees and the home of the most ferocious and enchanting creature, the Royal Bengal Tiger. When I asked him the reason for taking up this job he conveyed to me that in the Pathgola region, where climate change is a very unique phenomenon and the pertinent issue has been that rainfall patterns are changing over the Sundarbans every year. As a result a large number of poor people living in such agriculturally marginal areas now move out of their areas to other places without any guarantee and protection of wages, dignity of labor and life. Hence, family migration from rural areas occurs largely as survival option. The city space has imbued within him a fresh hope for starting a new life.

As Subhas recounted:

I receive a bonus during the Pujas. Also, the previous secretary of this building used to give me Rs 500 during the pujas and gave me

clothes but after his replacement the new secretary does not bother to give me anything. Furthermore, I should say that I am really lucky to have a family of doctors residing in of the flats of my Housing Society. They provide me with all sorts of medical needs. I have good relationship with all the members of the flat. It is primarily for that reason that I am here for so long. They have complete faith in me and I always make sure to put all my heart and soul into my work. They care for me very much. So, despite of my merger salary I am willing to stay here because the people in this flat really love me... I have somehow managed to sustain my livelihood in this way.

The laborers belonging to the same status situation help each other in many ways. As for Niranjana Biswas:

When I am not in the house and out for work, I ask my fellow caretakers to keep an eye on the front gates. In case of any family exigency they also offer me with much assistance because we all belong to the same category of people. There is an understanding that if today I am in want, the other persons might be in want tomorrow. Because of this good relation exist.

Thus, mutual help based on reciprocity and expectation of a certain degree of security act as the foundation of social networks among the caretakers. Most of the people who are recruited as residential caretakers are newcomers to the city and they use the existing social networks as a part of their survival strategy to weather off the difficulties that face them.

Linking social capital refers to ties and networks among individuals and groups who occupy very different social positions and power. It reaches out to people in dissimilar situations, such as those who are entirely outside the community. Linking social capital may involve network and ties of a particular community with states or other agencies.

It must also be considered that social isolation and exclusion are one of the many processes that that the rural migrants have to encounter in their aspect of everyday lives. Dissimilar people who suddenly find themselves in proximity of each other, with no social script to guide them, are far more likely to behave like strangers in an elevator than neighbours. However, these processes are also not entirely insurmountable. Social interactions are highly contingent on context, at both the individual and organizational levels, and changing social contexts in which these processes are operating has the potential to disrupt (or exacerbate) their effects.

The next case study enumerates the experience of a caretaker from Bihar who took employment at the Handloom Industry of Barabazar through the help and assistance of his fellow employees was able to get this job.

As Nandalal recounts:

One of my friends has earlier worked here in Salt Lake for a couple of years as a caretaker. It is from him that I got to know about this job. Prior to this I worked in a garment store in Barabazar for 2-3 months. There I was able to build contacts with some of the employees who would provide me with information of any kind of new job with a better salary. One of them informed me of a landlord in Salt Lake who was in search of a caretaker. When I contacted him and he offered me the job and that is how I came to be a caretaker.

Thus, a defining aspect of being poor or being out of job is that one is not a member of — or is even actively excluded from — certain social networks and institutions, ones that could be used to secure good jobs and decent housing (Wilson 1996). This makes impossible to separate social capital from the material circumstances that define people's wellbeing and more importantly their social security. Without access to employment information networks, rural migrants to the city find themselves trapped in low-wage jobs (Loury 1977). Hence diffuse sets of social ties are crucial to the provision of better job opportunities.

Most of the caretakers being originally farmers whose main source of income is daily casual labor carried out in the fields, there is practice of surplus exchange of rice and other vegetables derived from cultivation, a part of which is shared on an informal basis. This probably due to the fact that they know that for several months in year their families will be in short of food because of the decline in harvest caused due to the changing weather conditions. After they have found a job at the city there is a practice of bringing a part of the surplus to their new residence and exchanging it among fellow caretakers. This informal exchange of food on a reciprocal basis widely practiced among residential caretakers forms an important part of Putnam's generalized reciprocity. As for Gautam:

When there is surplus rice or vegetables in the village, I bring them to my Kolkata residence and barter them with my neighboring caretakers. Social relations and the bonding between us are very intimate and we often share as much as we can. Since we belong to the same economic category and live in the same neighbourhood

we are fully aware of each other's difficulties. A lender today might turn a borrower tomorrow. This awareness of each other's vulnerability helps to develop a relationship of cooperation and trust, and so there is mutual help and sympathy.

It must also be considered that social isolation and exclusion are one of the many processes that the disadvantaged have to encounter in their aspect of everyday lives. As this study has shown the urban resident caretaker presents one such category whose rights for social protection have not yet been recognized. The majority of the social protection policies in India largely covering the unorganized sector workers has remained passive for a large section of the workforce and the resident caretakers resembles one such category of the vast majority those who have been left out. The migratory experiences of these labourers shows that the majority of them fall under the category of displaced peasants who have left agriculture or have lost their jobs due to the destruction of the domicile industries that they were traditionally engaged to. The cumulative result of these two mutually reinforcing processes, has brought these different people into contact with each other into developing a relationship of trust. As studies has shown in such circumstances it has always been the case that dissimilar people who suddenly find themselves in proximity of each other, with no *social script* to guide them, are far more likely to behave like strangers in an elevator than neighbours. However, insurmountable such processes may be, social interactions based on reciprocity are seen to be highly contingent on context, at both the individual and organizational levels. A disruption of the contexts in which these processes are operating has the potential to derange (or exacerbate) their effects. Intuitively, then, the basic idea of "social capital" entails that at the communities endowed with a rich stock of social networks and civic associations will be more in a much stronger position to combat poverty (Moser 1996; Narayan 1997), resolve disputes (Schafft and Brown 2000), and/or take advantage of new opportunities (Isham 1999) and conversely, the *absence* of social ties has the potential to concurrently hinder the consequences of survival. The contending dualism of city space and community life has been shaped to a large extent through such negotiations of social security procurement renders inevitably to eradicate the broader generalizations of social development policy making in the abridged form.

Conclusion

The present study brings to light the ways in which the resident caretakers have evolved as a new category of labor force in the urban informal sector. The arrival of the residential caretaker marked the arrival of a certain category of unskilled labor force whose supply and demand are greatly controlled by a particular section of urbanites, chiefly, the urban middle class. Therefore, one can see that their class identity is to a great extent shaped and reshaped by the middle class “value” consciousness. The extent to which the middle-class people of Salt Lake City value their labor is determined by the contents of negotiations regarding the terms and conditions of their recruitment. Adequate social security provisioning has been a major stimulus in the process of socio-political development and economic growth of developing nations like India. This need has been particularly realized with the globalization induced policies of the government which have led to contractualization, outsourcing, informalisation of industries which, in turn, have contributed to the rapid growth of the unorganized sector. This essentially demands that the benefits from the social security schemes for informal sector workers should not be restricted to the beneficiary workers alone but should be shared by the entire economy and society in terms of better productivity and improved wellbeing. A work force with higher capability and security could contribute to higher growth, which, in turn, would enhance the aggregate demands in the economy through higher purchasing power of this vast mass of the work force. The mutually reinforcing nature of this relationship needs to be recognized and exploited and evaluated in terms of the larger societal context. The structure of the urban economy of India is reflective of these changes characterized by various development shifts through urbanization, creation of new jobs in the informal sector, the transfer of agricultural work into various forms of non-agricultural work; increasing migration of various types, including circular migration; and the take-over of land for various mineral and industrial projects and the consequent destruction of older livelihoods. It is in these crucial times that universal social security can become the main benefactor in making these development transitions easier and less contagious. It is of no doubt that more and newer kinds of jobs are needed for the successful economic prosperity of a nation, but social security can be the necessary catalyst in making these transitions from old to new jobs and occupations more worthwhile (Nathan 2012; Kanbur 2003). Social security, in the form of an assured social minimum, can promote the self-employed workers like the resident caretakers who are lacking individual or household security in undertaking more productive investments. Therefore, necessary steps

should be taken to improve understanding of the temporary nature of their employment relations as well as to make the necessary revision of labor legislations in the line with conditions of the informal sector.

Note

1. The extent of diversification of non-farm employment is very high in the heavily urbanized districts of West Bengal particularly in Kolkata where there is complete absence in agricultural work. This mainly accounts for the policies taken by the Government of India to increase employment elasticity in the urban sectors in order to cater to the problem of adequate employment generation which so far however has remained as one of the most pressing social and economic problems in the state as much as in the rest of India.

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