

# Calcutta's Lonely Crowd

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COMPARED to many of the great cities of the world and, indeed, of India, Calcutta is a place of comparatively recent growth. Like Bombay and Madras, its sisters in India, it was founded by British merchants turned administrators, and the city of Job Charnok grew steadily in importance as the gateway of inter regional and international trade. Its status as the capital city of the country till the year 1912 and its position as the centre of a large industrial area have always attracted a steady flow of migrants, most of whom stayed in the city and were slowly submerged in the stream of its cultural and economic life.

The result has been the heterogeneity and anonymity of life in the city. The city provides good material for the social scientist, but unfortunately data on the different socio-economic aspects of life of the people of the city have not been systematically collected at any time. The decennial census published some informations relating to the size and distribution of the population of the city and of its livelihood pattern. While these are no doubt important, they provide an inadequate basis for finding out the social and economic factors influencing the life of the people of the city. However, from 1954, the two Departments of the Calcutta University, Economics and Statistics, have been engaged in carrying out a systematic survey of certain aspects of the social and economic conditions of the people living in this city, aided by a very generous grant-in-aid from the Research Programmes Committee of the Planning Commission. The materials for this paper have been collected from that survey.

## Men and Women

It is well known that most of the cities of India contain a predominantly male population. According to the 1951 census, the overall ratio for cities containing one lakh or more population was 785 women per 1000 men. (The all-India ratio was 948). The proportion of women in the live "millionaire" cities of Bombay, Calcutta, Delhi, Hyderabad and Madras was still lower, being only 693 per 1000 men. The

state wise distribution showed that the male-female ratio is lowest in West Bengal cities, being only 600, while the proportion is invariably high in the cities of South India. In fact, there were in 1951 four cities in India which contained more women than men in their population, and they were all to be found in South India. Among the 75 cities of India, Calcutta contains the lowest proportion of women in its population. Thus it can legitimately claim to be the most male city in India, and most probably in the whole world.

This male-female disparity is usually ascribed to the special character of migration to this city. About 45 per cent of Calcutta's population are migrants, i e, those who came to this city after 1935. and among these migrants barely 13 are women. But most of the refugees from East Bengal have come to the city with all their womenfolk and the sex ratio among them is as high as 856 per 1000 men. These people, however, form only 29 per cent of the migrants and about 1.1 per cent of the population of the city. The proportion is also high among the original residents, being 755 women per thousand men. This is, however, difficult to explain; for one would expect that the men-women ratio among the original residents of the city should be more even and would be equal to the all-India figure. This is, however, nearly equal to the average male-female ratio of the Indian cities.

There is, however, no doubt that among the other migrants (i e, other than displaced persons), the ratio is as low as 295 women per thousand men. The existence of such a high male-female disparity among the other migrants has brought down the proportion of women in the city's population. Why is it that, as compared to all other cities including Bombay, only a smaller proportion of the migrants to Calcutta have brought their families to the city? Such factors as had housing conditions or the forces of custom and conservatism etc are equally present in the case of all cities in India, and there is no apparent reason

for assuming that housing conditions are worse in Calcutta than (say) Bombay or Kanpur; or that the spirit of conservatism is more prevalent among the migrant families residing in the hinterland which supplies a steady flow of men to Calcutta than is to be found in and around Bombay or any other urban area in India. How, then, does one account for the fact that the ratio of women to men is the lowest in the case of migrants from Orissa (about 143 women per 1000 men,) while it is higher among the Hindi-speaking migrants (331 women per 1000 men)? The ratio is still higher among the Urdu-speaking migrants (452 women per 1000 men). How can one explain such community-wise male-female disparity in migration? Certainly the people from Orissa are not more conservative, nor do they suffer from housing difficulties more severely than the migrants from (say) Bihar.

To some extent the flow of migrant families may be dependent on the incomes earned by the migrants in the city. This is shown by the fact that the ratio of women to men is much higher (688) among Gujaratis, Marwaris, Sindhis and other communities generally belonging to the high income groups. But there is no evidence to show that the average income of the Oriya-speaking population is significantly lower than that of the Hindi-or-Urdu speaking population. This is certainly a matter for further sociological study, and would probably throw more light on the causes of migration to the city.

## Single Member Households

The fact that women form a comparatively smaller proportion of the population is responsible for the most important characteristic of social life of the city: the disproportionately large number of single-member households. According to the Gokhale Institute Survey, people living singly formed about 10 per cent of the total number of households in Poona. In Baroda, the proportion of such households is only 11 per cent. In Calcutta, the ratio is more than live times that figure and such people

constitute about one fifth or the city's population. Differences in the interpretation of the word, "household" and possibly some investigator-bias may have had the effect of inflating this figure. But even after making allowance for these factors, there is no doubt that the proportion of such households is quite large in the sample population of Calcutta, much larger than is to be found in other Indian cities, major or minor.

The vast majority of *these* single member households, i e, more than 95 per cent, consists of male members living without, the comforts or the restraints of family life. Only about 5 per cent of these households consists of women, most of whom are engaged in domestic service or in prostitution. Obviously, almost all of them are adults, (if we exclude the students who form a very small part of this population), and about three-quarters of them are migrants to the city. It is, however, interesting to note that the displaced migrants, who are popularly called refugees, form less than 3 per cent of the total number of single households. About 73 per cent of these are non-refugee migrants. More than 61 per cent of these other migrants lives alone. Among the original residents about 15 per cent live in single-member households and more than 70 per cent of the single women belong to this category. The existence of such high proportion of single-member households among original residents of the city is a distressing fact, and one for which it is not easy to find an explanation. The data classify all persons who have come to the city after 1935 as migrants, so that those who migrated to the city in 1934 or earlier have been regarded for purposes of the survey as original residents. It may be that a proportion of those who migrated to the city before 1935 have not brought their families to live with them. But it is doubtful whether the percentage of such individuals would be large enough to provide a sufficient explanation for single member households among the original residents of the city. A breakdown of the single individuals who were original residents showed that 61 per cent of them were non-Bengalis, and this proportion was definitely much higher than that existing both in the total population and among the original

residents of the city. Thus a large percentage of the Hindi-Urdu and Oriya-speaking people still prefer to live a single life in the city, though they have been in Calcutta for at least 20 years.

#### Low Earnings

These people form the poorest section of the city's population. About 17 per cent of them earn Rs 80 or less per month, while 71 per cent are receiving sums varying between Rs 31 and Rs 100 per month. Thus while 88 per cent of these earners earn on average about Rs 60 per month, the proportion is only 50 per cent among other earners. Most of these single earners have to send regular remittances to their dependents left behind in their native places. This will also be evident from a study of the employment pattern of these single earners and of the others. More than 46 per cent of the single earners were found employed as unskilled manual workers, earning the lowest rates of pay as against only 20 per cent of the other earners. About 6.5 per cent of the single earners are employed in various types of clerical jobs, technical or non-technical, whereas the proportion is about three times that figure among other earners. They form only 18 per cent of the men who are engaged in various professional and technical occupations, carrying comparatively higher salaries or incomes. Thus more than 8ft per cent of these single earners are found either in unskilled manual jobs (domestic servants, factory workers), in low-paid semi-skilled occupations, or in petty trading (street hawkers, etc).

The housing conditions in which the large majority of these single households exist are shocking. 83 per cent of these individuals do not have a room of their own and therefore have no privacy. They live on pavements, on roofs or beneath stairs, or are huddled together in disgusting bustees, sharing the same latrine, bath and watertap (if these exist) with 50 or 100 or even more people. Those, who, among them, receive a little more money stay in the cheapest boarding houses, several members to a room about 12 ft by 14 ft in size.

Thus from all points of view,—levels of income, employment pattern and housing, these people represent the submerged section of the

city's population. They constitute Calcutta's lonely crowd,—adults who have been deprived by the force of circumstances of the joys and comforts of a family life. Contact with urban ideas and living conditions has corroded the values which guided them, when they lived in villages or small towns. They suffer from insecurity and are profoundly unhappy.

#### The Town-dweller and His Village

There is no doubt that, to a large extent, most of these people exhibit in their culture and in their way of life the characteristics of a transitional group something midway between a typical dweller of the rural areas and a pure urban resident. This is partly because many of them keep in contact with their village. Of every 100 residents of the city, at least 45 visit their native place at least once a year. This, of course, does not apply so much to people from East Pakistan. But at least one-third of the original residents go to their village once or more often in course of the year.

Contact with the villages has no doubt its beneficial aspects, as the Royal Commission on Labour pointed out long ago. The village home is a refuge and security in sickness and in maternity, in strikes and lockouts, in unemployment and old age. The rural areas also benefit considerably. Money earned in the city has been invested in the villages in buying cattle or agricultural implements. Agricultural income, it is well-known, is subject to large variations from year to year. Remittances from the city sent by the migrants have surely been a welcome addition to the family income. In this and many other ways, retention of contact with the villages by the migrants has in a large measure resulted in stabilising and even improving the standard of living and agricultural productivity in the villages. But, at the same time, this fact retards and often prevents the assimilation of the resident in the social and cultural life of the city. Moreover, the post-1947 abnormal conditions have disturbed this gradual process of the conversion of a rural migrant into a full-scale urban dweller. The flow of refugees from the East in these years has been too rapid and too large for the city to absorb and assimilate, both culturally and economically.

The fact that nearly one-fifth of the city's population lives a lonely life lies at the root of the social and political instability for which Calcutta has earned a good deal of notoriety. Most of these people do not feel that they have a stake in the city, though they have been living here for many years. At heart they are not city dwellers, but only temporary residents. Lacking the comforts and restraints of family life and often forced to live in miserable surroundings, these lonely city dwellers are subjected to serious psychological strains, are undisciplined, and become morally unstable. Consequently there is a higher rate of absenteeism, greater listlessness at work, and lowered productivity. This is also one of the principal

causes of the prevalence of prostitution and other forms of social disease and crime in the city.

#### Further Study Needed

This raises a problem to which no ready answer is possible. It is in the interest of the city that these people should be assimilated into its cultural and economic life. But, quite apart from other aspects, the conversion of single-member households into multi-member units with families and children brought to the city, would create insoluble problems of housing, water supply, transport, public health and education. The industrialist might think that this would stop the flow of urban savings to rural investment and so make larger funds available for industrial development in and

around the urban areas. Even if it happens, it would, however, retard agricultural improvement, and this in turn would ultimately affect the growth of industries. One may, moreover, doubt whether such savings, which are now made under the imperative necessity of supporting a family at home, would actually be available in the changed climate of the city when the whole family would acquire urban spending habits; to say nothing of the high cost of living in the city. There are many other sociological problems involved, and it would require the cooperation of the different social sciences before one would be in a position to suggest a solution to this problem, which threatens the stability of life in the city.



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