



MANGROVES TO METROS: CLIMATE-INDUCED MIGRATION AND THE FEMINIZATION OF CARE WORK IN WEST BENGAL

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

While India's metropolitan landscape has witnessed accelerated urban and economic development over the past few decades, Kolkata has struggled to keep pace with cities like Bengaluru, Mumbai, and Hyderabad. This stagnation is deeply rooted in a legacy of deindustrialization, inadequate infrastructure, and fragmented governance. Simultaneously, the state of West Bengal, particularly its coastal Sunderban region, faces acute climate vulnerability – rising sea levels, soil salinization, and livelihood collapse have forced large-scale male outmigration, leaving women to assume both domestic and economic responsibilities. A significant number of these women migrate to Kolkata and enter the unorganized labor economy, especially in caregiving roles such as domestic help, elder care, and child-rearing. Despite their centrality to sustaining Kolkata's urban households, these care workers remain economically marginalized and structurally invisible. This study, grounded in mixed-methods fieldwork across coastal and urban regions, analyzes how climate-induced displacement feminizes informal labor and exposes the limits of existing welfare programs. It argues that targeted interventions – such as revised eligibility in schemes like *Lakshmir Bhandar* and the introduction of travel-free policies – could not only improve the lives of these workers but also stimulate inclusive urban growth. By centering the needs of care workers, the paper proposes a developmental model that reimagines Kolkata's economic future through gendered empowerment, environmental resilience, and redistributive justice.

Keywords: *Climate-Induced Migration, Unorganized Labor, Care Economy, Feminization of Work, Sundarbans, Kolkata Urban Development*

Introduction

Urbanization constitutes a profound societal metamorphosis, transitioning from a predominantly rural, agrarian structure to an urbanized, industrialized paradigm (Cohen, 2015). This transformative process is marked by the escalating concentration of populations, economic endeavors, and infrastructural resources within urban nuclei, engendering the evolution of intricate and dynamic socio-economic and spatial configurations. (United Nations Population Fund) – toward the making of a city. To thrive in the globalized world, cities must meet several key criteria. Economic competitiveness, driven by attracting foreign investment, fostering entrepreneurship, and promoting innovation, is crucial (Sassen, 2001). This requires robust infrastructure, including efficient transportation, advanced communication networks, and reliable public utilities. A highly skilled and educated workforce (human capital) is essential for attracting knowledge-intensive industries. Effective governance, transparent institutions, and a strong rule of law are vital for investor confidence and economic growth. Sustainability and environmental management are increasingly important for attracting businesses and residents. Finally, a celebration of cultural and social diversity enriches the urban experience and fosters a strong sense of community. However, the urban landscape is dynamic, and cities that once held prominent global positions can experience decline. This decline can be attributed to several factors. The decline of traditional industries can leave cities economically vulnerable. Failure to invest in modern infrastructure can hinder economic growth and competitiveness. A “brain drain” due to limited opportunities can stifle innovation and economic development. Environmental degradation can make a city less attractive to residents and businesses.

Kolkata, India, exemplifies a city grappling with these challenges. Once the capital of British India and a major economic and cultural center, Kolkata has faced significant economic and social difficulties in recent decades. The decline of its traditional

industries, coupled with infrastructure challenges and other socio-economic factors, has contributed to its relative decline on the global stage.

Understanding Kolkata's Historical Downfall

Kolkata, once the crown jewel of the British Empire and a thriving industrial hub, has experienced a significant decline in its economic fortunes over the years. The city's rich history, cultural significance, and strategic location had made it an attractive destination for investment and trade. However, the very forces that initially propelled its rise ultimately contributed to its downfall. The British, while recognising Kolkata's potential, exploited its resources for their own benefit, and in their race to secure imperial dominance, their policies became increasingly "*empiricist and shortsighted*," resulting in insecurity of property, economic depression, and famines (Guha, 1982). The Permanent Settlement, a land reform designed to secure revenue for the East India Company, impoverished Bengal's peasantry and stunted the growth of its agricultural sector. Moreover, the systematic deindustrialisation of Bengal, driven by discriminatory policies that favoured British industries over local ones, crippled Kolkata's manufacturing base (Bagchi, 1975). The continuous transfer of resources to Britain – known as the '*drain of wealth*'—further weakened the city's economic foundation, while the Bengal Famine of 1943, a tragic consequence of British wartime policies that prioritised food production for the Allies, left deep scars on Bengal's society and economy. These historical setbacks laid the groundwork for the challenges West Bengal would face in the post-independence period.

Indian National Congress

Following West Bengal's first Legislative Assembly elections in 1952, Bidhan Chandra Roy of the Indian National Congress assumed leadership during a time of growing socio-political and economic uncertainty. Though Roy is often credited with shaping Kolkata's post-independence urban vision, his tenure coincided with an extended period of economic decline in the state, which deepened through the 1960s. A central feature of this decline was industrial stagnation, particularly in the jute sector, once the backbone of Bengal's economy. The industry had already suffered from the disruptive consequences of Partition, and it continued to deteriorate due to declining global demand, outdated technology, and the state's failure to modernize or adapt to changing international markets. This stagnation also extended to other industries like engineering and coal, which were hit hard by labour unrest, frequent strikes, and absentee investment.

The agricultural sector, long the other pillar of the state's economy, faced its own set of structural crises. Unlike Kerala and Punjab, where land reform measures had some success, West Bengal's attempts were largely ineffective, leaving a vast number of marginal farmers and sharecroppers vulnerable. These structural inequalities were further aggravated by environmental challenges, including floods and droughts, and culminated in the 1966 food crisis, which led to soaring food prices, falling rural incomes, and deepening poverty. Adding to these economic woes was a significant exodus of industrial capital from West Bengal to states like Maharashtra, Gujarat, and Tamil Nadu. These states not only provided a more stable political climate and business-friendly environment but also benefited more directly from central government policies and industrial planning under the Five-Year Plans. In contrast, West Bengal was increasingly marginalized, receiving little infrastructural investment or financial support. The central government's Freight Equalization Policy of 1952 further weakened Bengal's competitive advantage in heavy industries by making raw materials like coal and iron uniformly priced across the country, thus erasing Bengal's locational benefits. Compounding this economic marginalization was a deteriorating urban infrastructure, particularly in Kolkata, which struggled to accommodate the massive influx of refugees from East Pakistan. This population pressure led to the rapid growth of slums, rising unemployment, and a marked decline in urban living standards. Political instability further exacerbated the economic crisis. The Congress government, plagued by internal divisions and unable to mediate between industry and labour, lost the confidence of both investors and the public. By the late 1960s, factionalism had engulfed the party, splitting it into rival camps led by Atulya Ghosh and Siddhartha Shankar Ray. This internal discord was further complicated by the 1969 national split in the Congress, between the Organisation faction (Congress-O) and the Indira Gandhi-led Requisitionist faction (Congress-R), which undermined the party's ability to mount a coherent strategy in West Bengal.

This vacuum was effectively filled by the United Front, a coalition of leftist and regional parties, including the CPI(M), Bangla Congress, and Forward Bloc, which capitalized on popular discontent. The United Front built a strong support base among peasants, workers, and the urban middle class by promising land reforms, better labour rights, and anti-Congress governance. Their victory in the 1969 Assembly elections, with Ajoy Mukherjee as Chief Minister and CPI(M) support, marked a pivotal shift in Bengal's political trajectory. It signaled not only the end of Congress dominance in the state but also the rise of a distinctly left-wing political era that would define West Bengal's governance and economic strategy for decades to come.

Communist Party of India (Marxist)

The Left Front government, which assumed power in West Bengal in 1977, initially garnered popular support through its commitment to pro-poor reforms, particularly in the rural sector. One of its most celebrated initiatives was *Operation Barga* (1978), which sought to secure tenancy rights and ensure a more equitable distribution of land among sharecroppers and marginal farmers. These land reforms led to a temporary boost in agricultural productivity and empowered a significant portion of the rural population. However, despite these early gains, the reforms failed to generate long-term structural transformation or drive

comprehensive economic growth. Over time, the state's per capita income stagnated, a symptom of broader economic malaise under Left rule that persisted until 2011.

A major factor behind this stagnation was the decline of West Bengal's industrial sector. The Left Front's strong emphasis on trade unionism and worker rights – though ideologically consistent with its socialist vision – resulted in frequent strikes, *gheraos*, and labour disputes that crippled industrial output. Several prominent factories, including Dunlop, Jessop, and Hindustan Motors, shut down operations, while major industrial houses like Tata, Birla, and ITC shifted focus to other states offering more investor-friendly environments. Even after India's economic liberalisation in 1991, West Bengal failed to attract significant private investment. Traditional sectors such as jute, tea, and engineering remained trapped in technological backwardness and lacked diversification. Unlike Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, or Karnataka, which capitalized on the rise of IT, manufacturing, and automobiles, West Bengal failed to develop a modern industrial ecosystem. Agriculture, although made more equitable through land redistribution, did not evolve beyond basic subsistence. The sector remained heavily dependent on rice cultivation, with little emphasis on diversification into cash crops or agro-industrial integration such as food processing. Fragmentation of land holdings, a consequence of the reforms, led to inefficiencies and reduced economies of scale. The absence of innovation, mechanization, or coordinated rural development prevented the agricultural sector from becoming a foundation for broader economic progress. Unlike Gujarat or Punjab, where industrial and agricultural growth were interlinked, West Bengal failed to create such synergy. This stagnation triggered a wave of outmigration. As the state's industrial and service sectors were unable to absorb a growing educated workforce, large numbers of skilled and unskilled workers left for cities like Bengaluru, Pune, and Gurgaon in search of better opportunities. This brain drain eroded the human capital necessary for internal development, further weakening the state's economic potential. Infrastructure deficiencies exacerbated these challenges. Kolkata's once-bustling port declined due to siltation in the Hooghly River and competition from newer ports in Gujarat and Tamil Nadu. The state lagged in transportation and energy infrastructure, with poorly developed road networks, insufficient expressways, and persistent power shortages in the 1980s and 1990s – all of which deterred industrial expansion.

The political environment under the Left Front also played a pivotal role in West Bengal's economic downturn. The government's anti-capitalist stance and resistance to privatisation stifled market-oriented reforms, even after liberalisation. Attempts at industrial revival in the 2000s, most notably the Tata Nano project in Singur and the land acquisition for a chemical hub in Nandigram, ended in violent public protests and were met with strong opposition from within the state. These events not only undermined investor confidence but also revealed the CPI(M)'s inability to balance socialist ideals with pragmatic economic governance.

Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress (TMC) effectively leveraged public discontent with the CPI(M)'s economic mismanagement and land acquisition policies. By positioning itself as a defender of farmers and rural livelihoods, the TMC galvanized mass support, especially in the wake of Singur and Nandigram. The resulting political shift culminated in the Left Front's defeat in the 2011 Assembly elections, marking the end of a 34-year regime. By the time the Left ceded power, West Bengal had fallen far behind states like Maharashtra, Gujarat, Karnataka, and Telangana, all of which had developed dynamic manufacturing and service economies. In contrast, West Bengal remained mired in agricultural stagnation, weak infrastructure, declining industry, and a legacy of political ambivalence toward private investment. The failure to reconcile socialist principles with the imperatives of economic modernization ultimately created a vacuum that the TMC capitalized on – ushering in a new chapter in the state's political and economic history.

Trinamool Congress

The precipitous decline in per capita income in West Bengal during the Trinamool Congress (TMC) government's tenure, spanning from 2011 to the present, can be attributed to a complex interplay of factors that have exacerbated the state's economic woes. A pivotal contributor to this decline is the debilitating deindustrialization that has plagued West Bengal for several decades, characterized by a sharp contraction in industrial activity. This downturn is largely driven by a combination of political instability, incessant labour unrest, and a series of ill-conceived policy decisions that have failed to attract and sustain investments. The retreat from industrial growth has had far-reaching consequences, including a noticeable diminution in the state's share of India's GDP, with its per capita income consistently lagging behind the national average. At the same time, the state's economic policies have faced widespread criticism for their inability to address the dual challenges of industrial decline and rising unemployment. Although the TMC government has introduced various initiatives aimed at reviving the economy, these efforts have been insufficient in reimagining the state's eroded business growth and industrial legacy, which is now grappling with a crisis of capital creation. The lack of a robust strategy has left West Bengal in a precarious position, where both domestic and international investors remain reluctant to invest due to concerns over an unstable investment climate.

Inadequate transportation networks, unreliable power supply, and a dearth of modern facilities have collectively deterred potential investors, thereby stifling business activity and exacerbating the state's economic woes. The state's economic environment has been further vitiated by bureaucratic inefficiencies, policy inconsistencies, and perceived political interference, which have coalesced to create an unfavourable climate for investment and growth. Moreover, the state's burgeoning debt

burden, which has ballooned from ₹1,918,350 million in 2011 to ₹3,358,930 million by the end of the 2015-16 financial year, has severely constrained its ability to invest in vital development projects and social welfare programmes, thereby circumscribing its potential for long-term economic growth and improvement in living standards. Additionally, the state's agricultural sector, traditionally the linchpin of its economy, has faced significant stagnation due to small landholdings, antiquated farming practices, and limited market access, which have collectively stymied agricultural productivity and perpetuated economic stagnation. Lastly, the issue of outmigration has played a significant role in the state's economic decline. The lack of sufficient employment opportunities has prompted a considerable outflow of both skilled and unskilled labour, with many people seeking better prospects in other states or abroad. This brain drain has resulted in the loss of valuable human capital, exacerbating the state's economic difficulties and stalling any efforts at revitalisation.

The economic decline of West Bengal is a pressing concern that has been unfolding over several decades. Once a thriving industrial and cultural hub, the state has witnessed a slow but steady decline, marked by stagnant economic growth, declining GDP share, and a massive exodus of talent and capital. The decline of traditional industries, lack of diversification into new sectors, and policy and governance issues have all contributed to this downward spiral, with far-reaching consequences, including a significant decrease in the state's share of India's GDP, from 10.5% in 1960-61 to a mere 5.6% in 2023-24. These interconnected challenges have synergistically exacerbated one another, culminating in a protracted period of economic stagnation. To reverse this decline and foster a more dynamic and sustainable economic future, comprehensive reforms across multiple sectors are imperative. Moreover, reimagining development necessitates exploring the intersections between climate resilience, gender empowerment, and sustainable growth, with a particular focus on the empowerment of marginal women, such as care-workers in Kolkata, who have historically struggled with environmental challenges, thereby underscoring the need for a nuanced reconstruction paradigm that prioritizes the triangulation of gender, environment, and sustainability.

Though the TMC era ushered in a new wave of women-centric policies, climate-distressed, unorganized women caregivers remained invisible – neither at the core nor the fringes of developmental policymaking. Their care work, vital yet unrecognized, was left out of Bengal's welfare script.

Research Problems and Objectives

Existing government initiatives like the 'Lakshmir Bhandar' scheme have taken significant steps toward addressing the socio-economic challenges faced by women caregivers in West Bengal, particularly by providing direct cash support that acknowledges their unpaid labor. However, while such schemes offer financial relief, they often fall short in addressing the broader spectrum of vulnerabilities these women face, including job insecurity, lack of access to healthcare, social protection, and opportunities for skill development. There is a need for more holistic policy interventions that integrate economic empowerment with social support systems tailored to the specific contexts of caregiving. Empowering marginalized women caregivers, especially in urban centers like Kolkata, can play a transformative role in revitalizing West Bengal's economy. By recognizing and supporting their contributions through targeted investments in education, healthcare, digital literacy, and inclusive labor markets, these women can transition from informal, undervalued roles into active participants in the state's economic growth. Mechanisms such as cooperatives, microfinance, and care-based employment programs can create sustainable pathways for their empowerment, ultimately contributing to a more resilient and equitable economy. This study aims to examine the intricate dynamics of West Bengal's political economy since 1960, exploring how the state's economic policies and power structures have evolved over the past decades. Additionally, it seeks to examine the devastating impact of climate change on vulnerable populations, particularly women, and how they are disproportionately affected by environmental degradation. Furthermore, the research will investigate the exploitation of caregiver women, analyzing how their labor is undervalued and often invisible, and drawing parallels between their experiences and the broader development trajectory of West Bengal.

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining primary qualitative data collected through in-depth interviews and surveys with secondary data sourced from government reports and context-specific literature. The primary data collection utilizes convenience sampling, a non-probability sampling technique, to gather data from a readily accessible population (500 Participants) in three specific areas: Canning I, Gosaba, and Jadavpur Railway Station. The survey questionnaire and semi-structured interview schedules are designed to collect data on the research objectives. The collected data is thematically analyzed for qualitative data and descriptive statistics for quantitative data, with findings triangulated with secondary data to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research objectives.

From Coastal Ruins to Urban Care

Coastal regions, home to nearly five million people from structurally oppressed communities—including Dalit caste groups such as the Napit, Kaibarta, Pod, Chandal, Jalia, Tior, Dhoba, Jogi, Suri, and Kaora, as well as converted Muslims from lower-caste Hindu backgrounds and Adivasi groups like the Munda, Oraon, and Santal – are increasingly witnessing forced displacement

due to the compounded effects of climate change and environmental degradation. Over the past decades, rising sea levels, salinization of soil, and the depletion of fish populations have severely undermined traditional livelihoods such as agriculture and fishing (Srinivasan, 2024). A study of three villages in the Indian Sundarbans found that 62% of the workforce has lost their original livelihoods and has been forced to rely on much more uncertain incomes (Zero Carbon Analytics, 2022). The Ministry of Earth Sciences, in response to a question, informed the Lok Sabha, that West Bengal, with a 534.35 km-long coastline, faces the most erosion; in terms of percentage, about 60.5% of the coast (323.07 km) suffered erosion over the period from 1990 to 2018 (Singh, 2022). These changes, coupled with a lack of alternative employment opportunities, have left many in the region vulnerable to displacement. The loss of natural resources and the ongoing impacts of extreme weather events have forced many inhabitants to migrate in search of viable means of survival, with estimates suggesting that 60% of the male workforce (particularly in the Sundarbans region of West Bengal in the year 2015) has left the region in search of employment opportunities (Mandal, Nanady, Roy, Bhattacharya, & Paul, 2025). Many have moved to urban centers across India or even abroad, working as daily wage laborers or in construction and factory jobs.

The mass migration of male breadwinners in search of employment has precipitated a profound shift in the economic dynamics of coastal households, placing an undue burden on women to assume responsibility for household management and economic survival. As remittances from migrant workers frequently prove insufficient to meet the needs of remaining family members, women have been compelled to adapt to these changing economic realities by navigating a precarious landscape of limited livelihood options, debt burdens, and caregiving responsibilities. With limited employment options available, many women are becoming domestic maids to provide for their families; often commuting to cities like Kolkata to provide care work or other domestic services.

Care workers in Kolkata often face significant logistical challenges, impacting both their efficiency and earning potential. Commuting to work frequently involves lengthy journeys, often necessitating either extensive travel or relocating to rented accommodation in the city. This typically entails a multi-stage process: traveling from their homes to the railway station, commuting to Kolkata via local train, and then navigating the city to their respective workplaces. While seemingly efficient, this mode of transport presents several drawbacks. Firstly, it severely limits the geographic reach of these services, primarily confining them to areas within walking distance of railway stations. Secondly, extending services to more distant locations necessitates increased travel expenses – via buses, auto-rickshaws, or other modes of transport – or higher rent costs, significantly impacting the workers' earnings. This spatial disparity creates a significant barrier, restricting the number of potential employment opportunities available to these women. While alternative employment sectors, such as commercial establishments like malls and industries, exist, they often present their own set of challenges. These entities typically outsource their cleaning and maintenance needs to third-party service providers. These intermediaries often extract a significant portion of the workers' wages, creating an exploitative and unsustainable working environment. Furthermore, the city's limited night-time public transportation options severely restrict the availability of care work for night shifts, a crucial requirement for sectors such as customer care, call centers, and IT, which operate around the clock. This inaccessibility effectively precludes many care workers from engaging in these lucrative night-shift opportunities. Even after all this hard work, the monthly income of this group of women usually ranges around ₹8000 - 10000, excluding travel expenses and rent, which isn't a proper remuneration for the services they provide.

Empowering Care, Enabling Growth

A majority of the discussion above focused on the essence of the systems of transportation that seem to be at the helm of the communications between care workers and their clients. However, transportation is also the very thing that is increasing the cost of care work services in part of some clients and decreasing the rate of income in part of some service providers. To mitigate these challenges, a policy shift towards travel-free options for care workers is imperative.

Inspired by successful precedents such as Delhi's "Pink Ticket" scheme (The Economic Times, 2024) and Karnataka's ambitious "Shakti" initiative (Express News Service, 2024), which offers free bus services to women, the West Bengal government could implement similar measures. The estimated INR 40 daily savings per woman would significantly enhance their participation in the care economy, enabling them to access wider clientele and offer more affordable services. Furthermore, the state could explore supplementary initiatives such as establishing free local auto services at key locations, announcing government-sponsored night-time transportation services, and providing free travel on local trains. These measures, in addition to fostering greater economic inclusion for care workers, would likely stimulate consumption activities, thereby generating revenue for the state government through increased Goods and Services Tax (GST) collections, as observed in Karnataka by the state-run Fiscal Policy Institute. The free travel initiative would also wash away the need for living on rent in Kolkata, for this group of women would by then be able to afford a regular journey from their home to Kolkata- a perfect work-life balance. By implementing travel-free initiatives and supplementary measures, the state of West Bengal can create a more enabling environment for care workers and generate a permanent labor force by promoting their economic empowerment and contributing to the state's overall economic growth.

The proposition of rendering transportation services free for marginalized women necessitates substantial fiscal investment by the state. However, in the face of declining economic growth, a pertinent question arises: whence shall the government procure the requisite funds? The solution lies in a judicious redistribution of existing resources, rather than relying on novel or additional sources of revenue. The Government of West Bengal has introduced a plethora of social welfare schemes aimed at promoting the well-being of its citizens, with the “Lakshmir Bhandar” scheme being a notable example. This initiative provides a monthly stipend of INR 500 and INR 1000 to general and Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe women, respectively, between the ages of 25 and 60, who are enrolled under the “Swasthyasathi” scheme (Women & Child Development and Social Welfare Department, 2021). While this program seeks to guarantee a steady income for women, its design can be further refined to align with the principles of distributive justice, as advocated by John Rawls (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2021), thereby ensuring that the most disadvantaged women reap the greatest benefits. The Lakshmir Bhandar scheme’s eligibility criteria, although comprehensive, exhibit a notable oversight. By solely excluding government employees and pensioners, the scheme neglects to filter out women from affluent backgrounds, business owners, and freelancers. This omission can lead to a substantial misallocation of state resources, ultimately undermining the scheme’s primary objectives. The inclusion of women from higher socio-economic strata as beneficiaries can drain the state’s finances, diluting the scheme’s intended impact on marginalized women. To optimize the scheme’s effectiveness, it is essential to introduce additional eligibility filters, ensuring that benefits reach the most disadvantaged women, thereby aligning with the principles of distributive justice.

A nuanced recalibration of the Lakshmir Bhandar scheme’s objectives to ensure equitable resource distribution can be achieved without establishing new committees to reassess eligibility criteria. Instead, the eligibility criteria can be harmonized with the existing guidelines for Other Backward Class-Non-Creamy Layer (OBC-NCL) candidates, which stipulate that applicants’ annual household income should not exceed Rs. 8 lakhs (Ministry of Personnel, Public Grievances and Pensions, 2018). Furthermore, integrating a quick link with the Permanent Account Number (PAN) card, in addition to the required Aadhaar card, can facilitate swift monitoring of income tax filings by candidates. This additional check can provide a robust verification mechanism to ensure that only eligible beneficiaries receive benefits under the Lakshmir Bhandar scheme. By leveraging existing frameworks and digital infrastructure, the state can streamline the eligibility assessment process, promoting transparency, efficiency, and effective resource allocation. Redirecting the “saved money” towards providing free travel for these working women would signify a paradigmatic shift towards ameliorating the socio-economic conditions of marginalized communities. By doing so, the state can foster the development of a stable and permanent workforce, thereby creating a virtuous cycle of economic growth. Moreover, this initiative would also generate employment opportunities for personnel tasked with ensuring the proper eligibility of beneficiaries, thereby further augmenting the state’s workforce.

To, further, mitigate potential misuse of the free travel policy by economically privileged individuals, the state can effectively leverage the newly established eligibility criteria of the Lakshmir Bhandar Scheme. This would involve a rigorous annual assessment of beneficiaries, ensuring that only genuinely eligible individuals, as determined by the Lakshmir Bhandar guidelines, are granted free travel benefits. This measure can be implemented cost-effectively by leveraging the existing infrastructure of Duare Sarkar (Government at Doorstep) (Government of West Bengal). Merging the eligibility criteria of Lakshmir Bhandar and the Free Travel Policy, and implementing them through Duare Sarkar, would create a streamlined framework where eligibility for one scheme guarantees eligibility for the other. This strategic integration would optimize resource allocation, prevent benefits from being misdirected, and ensure the free travel policy achieves its intended goals. By leveraging Duare Sarkar agents, the state can enhance the scheme’s accessibility and transparency, ultimately contributing to the socio-economic empowerment of marginalized women. This consolidation of welfare schemes would also reduce logistics costs and alleviate the burden of multiple verifications for candidates. Moreover, this recalibrated eligibility criteria and reallocation of funds can be applied to other government welfare policies, such as Kanyashree, Shikshashree, and Yuvashree, to name a few. This would create a cohesive and efficient welfare system, amplifying the state’s efforts to uplift marginalized communities.

A potential challenge in implementing free travel services at multiple nodes is the possibility that the reallocated funds may be insufficient to support the initiative. To address this concern, an alternative solution can be explored: waiving fares for local train services. Notably, the Eastern Railways, particularly local trains, have been grappling with a persistent shortage of Travelling Ticket Examiners (TTEs). During peak hours, the sheer volume of passengers renders TTEs ineffective in checking tickets, resulting in numerous passengers traveling without tickets. Despite this, the Eastern Railways have consistently generated profits, indicating that the revenue loss due to ticketless travel is not substantial. The Eastern Railway’s impressive financial performance, with a remarkable 9.97% growth in passenger revenue, yielding Rs 953 crore in the first quarter of the 2024-25 fiscal year, presents a compelling opportunity for the state of West Bengal to formalize free travel for underprivileged and marginalized women on local trains (The Economic Times, 2024). With the Central Government’s approval, this initiative would not only substantively enhance the livelihoods of these women but also reinforce the state’s commitment to developmental welfarism. By capitalizing on the existing phenomenon of free travel on local trains, the state can make a meaningful impact on the lives of marginalized women, fostering their economic empowerment and social inclusion, while solidifying its reputation as a champion of progressive welfare policies.

Reimagining Development

Reimagining development is not merely a recalibration of existing paradigms, but a transformative leap toward prioritizing the needs of the most marginalized, and weaving a tapestry of inclusive growth, where the threads of equity, justice, and sustainability are deeply intertwined. This paper has endeavored to contribute to this visionary approach by devising a strategic framework to address three critical development impediments in the state of West Bengal, with a specific focus on the city of Kolkata, thereby seeking to foster a more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable development trajectory.

Firstly, this research endeavors to create viable income opportunities and promote sustainable development for climate-displaced women in West Bengal's coastal regions, without necessitating a drastic shift in their existing income sources. To facilitate this, the paper proposes the provision of free travel facilities within the state, enabling these care workers to expand their services to remote areas of Kolkata while maintaining the affordability of their services. By streamlining their income routes, this initiative aims to empower marginalized women, enhance their economic stability, and promote their overall well-being. This approach acknowledges the critical role that these women play in their communities and seeks to address the challenges they face in accessing markets, clients, and essential services.

Secondly, this paper presents a comprehensive blueprint for the reorganization of the Lakshmir Bhandar welfare scheme, aiming to enhance the state's effectiveness in promoting the well-being of marginalized communities. By streamlining the scheme, the state can redirect saved resources towards innovative initiatives, such as providing free travel facilities, thereby creating a viable source of income for climate-displaced women. This strategic investment will empower these women and their families to transition from being dependent on state support to becoming active contributors to West Bengal's economic growth. Moreover, formalizing free travel on local trains for these women will reinforce West Bengal's reputation as a welfare state, demonstrating its commitment to social welfare and inclusive development. Ultimately, this paradigm shift will facilitate the transformation of policies from mere welfare populism (Ghosh & Sahoo, 2021) to robust developmental ventures, fostering a more equitable and sustainable society.

Lastly, the strategic engagement of marginalized women in care work services can have far-reaching benefits for the entire societal spectrum. As domestic caregivers, they create a conducive and sustainable home environment, characterized by cleanliness, organization, and nutritional support, thereby enabling household members to focus on their professional pursuits, entrepreneurial endeavors, and salaried employment without the burden of domestic responsibilities. This symbiotic relationship has a ripple effect, contributing to the flourishing of local industries and, by extension, the city's economy. Moreover, as nurturers of future generations, these care workers play a pivotal role in shaping the next cohort of workers, entrepreneurs, and citizens. The care work provided by these women has intergenerational implications, yielding a lasting impact on the social fabric and economic trajectory of the community. Furthermore, as traditional workers advance in their careers, industries experience growth, ultimately yielding benefits to marginalized women in the form of enhanced compensation packages and salary increments. This upward trajectory is further amplified as productivity gains in the city stimulate industrial expansion, propelling economic growth beyond existing thresholds. The ripple effects of Kolkata's expansion will inevitably permeate other regions of West Bengal, fostering the emergence of new metropolitan hubs. This cascading effect will culminate in a transformative impact on the state's economic landscape.

In essence, the strategic integration of marginalized women in care work services constitutes a visionary investment in human capital, yielding dividends that extend far beyond individual households to permeate the broader economic and societal fabric. By harnessing the potential of these women, West Bengal can unlock a virtuous cycle of growth, development, and prosperity.

Findings and Policy Recommendations

This study finds that climate-induced displacement in coastal West Bengal has disproportionately impacted Dalit, Muslim, and Adivasi women, pushing them into precarious caregiving roles in urban centers like Kolkata. As male outmigration continues to rise due to livelihood collapse in the Sundarbans, the burden of both economic survival and domestic care has fallen squarely on these women – many of whom now work as domestic help, elderly caregivers, and support staff in the informal economy. Despite their indispensable contribution to Kolkata's urban households and care economy, these women remain structurally invisible in state welfare frameworks and urban development discourse. Existing schemes like *Lakshmir Bhandar*, while significant in recognizing women's unpaid labour, fail to address the compounded challenges of caste, climate, and informal work that define the lives of these caregiving migrants.

To address this systemic neglect, a series of focused, redistributive policy measures are necessary. First and foremost, the issue of mobility must be tackled head-on. One of the most pressing barriers for caregiving women in Kolkata is the cost and complexity of daily travel. The study recommends that local train services and public buses be made entirely free for women working in the unorganized care sector. Building on the models of Delhi's "Pink Ticket" and Karnataka's "Shakti" scheme, West Bengal can go further by integrating a last-mile solution: free or subsidised auto-rickshaw services in densely populated suburban and peri-urban areas. While many women can cover 1–2 km on foot, beyond this range, reliable and affordable mobility becomes

essential. Such a layered transport policy would drastically reduce commuting burdens, expand access to employment zones, and improve geographic flexibility. With current travel costs ranging between ₹1,500 to ₹2,000 per month, these savings would directly strengthen the financial resilience of care workers and improve their household security. This is not merely a welfare gesture – it is an investment in building a mobile, empowered female workforce central to urban economic life.

Secondly, the study advocates for a recalibration of the *Lakshmir Bhandar* scheme. Eligibility criteria must go beyond simplistic exclusions like government employment, and adopt income-based filters (such as OBC-Non Creamy Layer thresholds and PAN-linked tax data) to prevent the diversion of resources to economically privileged beneficiaries. The funds saved through such restructuring can be redirected to finance free travel initiatives and support care-based cooperative models.

Finally, integrating the *Duare Sarkar* platform to administer these expanded entitlements – combining free travel, restructured cash support, and access to formalised care work networks – can create a holistic ecosystem for the empowerment of caregiving women. These measures must be understood not as peripheral social interventions, but as central to rebuilding Kolkata's labour force, fostering gender justice, and countering the historic marginalisation of Dalit and minority women. Development, in this framework, is not complete until the footpaths, railways, and autos of the city carry those whose labour sustains its very core.

Conclusion

This paper has foregrounded the structural and historical dynamics that have contributed to West Bengal's relative economic decline, particularly Kolkata's stagnation in comparison to India's other rapidly growing megacities. It argues that this stagnation cannot be understood in isolation from the broader ecological crisis unfolding in the coastal regions of the state, especially the Sundarbans, where environmental degradation and climate-induced displacement have fundamentally altered the fabric of rural livelihoods. The depletion of agriculture and fisheries, combined with recurrent floods, erosion, and salinization, has led to the outmigration of male labor and the feminization of survival strategies. In this context, women – particularly from marginalized communities – have become the silent drivers of care economies in urban centers like Kolkata. By tracing their journeys into the unorganized labor sector, particularly as caregivers and domestic workers, this study reveals a critical but undervalued link between climate resilience, urban service economies, and gendered labor. These women, despite facing extreme precarity, enable the functioning of middle-class households, indirectly supporting Kolkata's knowledge economy, salaried workforce, and productivity. Yet their contributions remain invisible in both public discourse and economic policy. The research suggests that the failure to recognize and support this feminized care infrastructure is not just a moral oversight but a developmental miscalculation. Policy interventions—such as free and safe travel schemes, the restructuring of welfare programs like *Lakshmir Bhandar*, and the integration of eligibility criteria with income-verification systems – could unleash profound emancipatory effects. These measures would not only enhance the dignity and agency of migrant care workers but also generate broader economic ripple effects: increasing workforce participation, reducing urban inequality, and stimulating sustainable consumption.

Thus, the empowerment of marginalized care workers must not be viewed as a peripheral welfare concern but as central to reimagining Kolkata's development trajectory. Far from being passive recipients of aid, these women are active agents of economic resilience, environmental adaptation, and social cohesion. In valuing their labor, the state stands to gain not just in moral terms, but in tangible economic dividends through a more inclusive, just, and robust urban future. As India moves into the so-called "Amrit Kaal" of developmental optimism, policymakers must move beyond tokenistic welfare and embrace a transformative vision that places gender equity, ecological consciousness, and human dignity at the heart of economic planning. Scholars, practitioners, and government actors alike must therefore take seriously the intersectional realities of care work, climate vulnerability, and postcolonial urbanity. Only through such a lens can the emancipatory promise of sustainable development be fulfilled – one that not only uplifts women from the Sundarbans but also rebuilds Kolkata itself from the margins inwards.

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