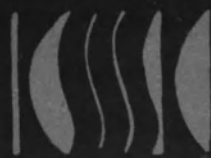


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LIFE AND LABOUR IN A SQUATTERS' COLONY

ASOK SEN

OCTOBER 1992



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I thank them all and bear sole responsibility for my presentation in this Occasional Paper.

Unless otherwise mentioned, all translations of Bengali narratives and other materials have been done by me.

Asok Sen

ABSTRACT

The paper presents our findings about a squatters' colony, viz. Gobindapur Rail Colony Gate No.1, which is located on the lands beside the railway tracks to the east and west of the Dhakuria Overhead Bridge. It is one of the numerous squatters' settlements covering a long stretch of lands adjacent to the railway lines which run from Ballygunge to Budge Budge. While we have already reported in two parts on a case-study of the bindery workers of Daftaripara (Occasional Paper Nos.127 and 128), the present enquiry is concerned with the nature of life and labour among the dwellers of a particular habitat.

The paper has two parts. The first part presents a general review in terms of a resume of the conditions that we can derive from the various sources of information consisting of both structured family records and unstructured individual narratives. This review relates to the location and coverage, early history, work and earnings, dwelling and living, the working of a voluntary community organisation by name Jana Kalyan Samiti and a centre of the Integrated Child Development Scheme.

The second part makes fuller use of the individual life-stories narrated by a number of dwellers of the colony. It turns into a medley of many voices speaking about the background of the particular subjects, their work history, earnings and living, and articulating the traces of community, culture and politics in the squatters' colony.

Life and Labour in a Squatters' Colony

1. A General Review

This paper presents the findings of our enquiry about the people living in a segment of the squatters' colonies which are located in lands adjacent to the railway tracks on the west of the Dhakuria station. While we have already reported on a case-study about labouring people engaged in one specific activity of long standing (Sen 1991), this enquiry focuses on the nature of living and range of activities among the labourers of a particular habitat.

It was not our aim to formulate an aggregative view of the vast labouring masses which work in the so-called informal sector of Calcutta's economy. We tried more to know, in fragments, their specific socio-economic and cultural characteristics and also about any bearing which the organised sectors may have on such particular forms of social-existence of labour.

An agglomeration of squatters' colonies covers a long stretch of lands adjacent to the railway lines which run from Ballygunge to Budge Budge. The settlements preponderate in the areas close to the tracks between Dhakuria and Kalighat stations. The total population of squatters' colonies in the Dhakuria-Kalighat stretch amounts to about thirty thousand. The settlements are equally dense on the northern and southern vicinities of the railway tracks. However, on the west of Dhakuria Overhead Bridge, the density is more pronounced on the southern side.

Location and Coverage

The segment of squatters' colonies, where our case-study was conducted, spreads from the east of the level crossing (Gate 1) to its west almost upto the next level crossing (Gate 2). Gate 1 is the first level crossing on the west of Dhakuria Overhead Bridge. It is very close to the bridge. Standing at Gate 1 we can see an unending row of shacks both on its east and west. The segment selected for our case-study occupies a length of about two furlongs along this row of shacks. It covers a part of the settlements known as Gobindapur Rail Colony. All the shacks are raised on lands which are the property of the railways.

The ground level road on the south-west side of the bridge is the southern approach to the level crossing at Gate 1. The Dakshinapan supermarket, the big multistoried Indian Oil Bhavan and the Lake Police Station are all situated on the western side of this road which stretches to the southern end of Gate 1. Opposite the Indian Oil Bhavan, a right deviation of this road leads to the main entrance of the big multistoried house (Manjusha Building) which is situated very close to the south-western precincts of the bridge. The road then goes underneath the bridge and constitutes an eastern extension of the Gariahat Road South.

Dhakuria Station Road meets this part of the Gariahat Road South at the point it projects eastwards from beneath the bridge. The former stretches from south to north on the south-eastern side of the bridge. There are a large number of buildings both on the northern and southern sides of this segment of the Gariahat Road South. Most of them appear to

have been constructed during the recent decades. All along the small strips of lands lying between the railway tracks and the northern side of this segment of the Gariahat Road South continues the row of shacks which form a part of the squatters' colony.

The area known as Panchanantala lies to the north-east of the bridge and the squatters' colony. Panchanantala Road runs east from the Gariahat Road and then curves towards the railway tracks on the south. Parallel to the Dhakuria Overhead Bridge on its east, there are a number of large buildings (e.g. Niramay Polyclinic, Children's Little Theatre, the multistoried residential building by name Sivnath Bhavan). The short roadway, which provides access to these buildings, ends up again in the shacks of the squatters' colony beside the railway tracks. Panchanantala presents a mix of old and new buildings including some multistoried houses of recent construction, slums and also shacks of the squatters' colony on its periphery.

On the north-western side of the bridge and the squatters' colony are located the Dhakuria Lake (Rabindra Sarobar), Southern Avenue and South End Park. As we go south along the Gariahat Road beyond the Gol Park, South End Park is found to spread from Southern Avenue on the west. It meets Gariahat Road at the point Dhakuria Bridge goes up for the overhead crossing above the railway tracks. South End Park turns south and passes beneath the north-western precincts of the bridge. It terminates at the northern side of the level crossing at Gate 1. All along the western side of this roadway parallel to the bridge, there are good many moderately large buildings.

As we go from north to south and cross the railway tracks at the southern end of Gate 1, the second hutment (21 Gariahat Road West) on our left is the office of the Jana Kalyan Samiti (i.e. People's Welfare Society). It is a voluntary community welfare organisation formed and run by the inhabitants of the squatters' colony which was the area of our enquiry. All the families of this colony are covered by the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) Centre no.44. Its office is also located in the hutment of the Jana Kalyan Samiti. We shall describe in a separate section the activities of the Jana Kalyan Samiti and the ICDS Centre.

To the south of Jana Kalyan Samiti there are the Manjusha Building, Lake Police Station, Indian Oil Bhavan and Dakshinapan Supermarket which have already been indicated in our description of the southern approach to Gate 1. Just opposite the office of Jana Kalyan Samiti is a shrine of the Hindu goddess Sitala, the presiding deity of small-pox, chicken-pox, measles and other epidemic diseases.

Parallel to the railway tracks, a small lane stretches for less than a furlong to the west of the office of Jana Kalyan Samiti. The row of shacks continues on the north of this lane beside the railway tracks. There are a number of two/three storied residential buildings on the lane's south. Thus, the neighbourhood of the railway tracks on the different sides of the bridge shows that the Gobindapur Squatters' Colony Gate 1 is located on the margins of an expanding metropolis with its signs of recent constructions, newly built supermarkets and multistoried structures.

Our enquiry used no schedule for a structured

investigation of families in the squatters' colony. It aimed more at the collection of life-stories narrated by a good many persons of the colony. Such narratives yield information about several experiences of the settlement, the diversities of work and earning, and various alignments of family, social living and culture.

In addition, we could have some data from the ICDS records about the families living in its Centre 44. Every ICDS unit has to maintain a record of all families coming within its purview. The records for Centre 44, which we used, were updated till December 1990 and contained information about the number of families, their age and sex composition, sources of livelihood and levels of earning.

We took account of 153 families in ICDS records. Their total persons amounted to 683. The average family size was about 4.5. The males (both adult and children) constituted nearly 53 per cent of the population. Those below fifteen years of age were about 42 per cent of the population; among them the ratio of males to females was 1.10. All further information in the ICDS records and the narratives collected by us will be presented in the course of this report. We may now deal with some aspects of the origin and growth of the squatters' colonies in the Gobindapur Gate 1 segment.

Early History

The lands adjacent to the railway tracks had only some small fragments of human habitation before the construction of the Dhakuria Overhead Bridge. The Gariahat Road terminated at the northern gate of the level crossing. The road on the south of the railway tracks is known as Gariahat Road

South. The level crossing was the landmark between the city of Calcutta and its south suburban areas like Dhakuria, Jadavpur and so on.

The specifications of land acquisition provide a fair account of what had to be altered for the construction of the bridge. Such specifications were made by the then Chairman of the Calcutta Improvement Trust in his letter of 25th November 1959 to the 1st Land Acquisition Collector, Calcutta. Let me quote from the letter (CIT File LXIV-18-LXXII):

The lands to the west of the existing Gariahat Road should not present any difficulty. In view of a pre-existing Corporation Alignment all the buildings on that side had been set back and the strips we propose to acquire are almost wholly vacant.....

To the east of Gariahat Road there are one or two pucca structures, but the bulk of the land within our acquisition limit consists of a big timber yard standing on premises No.31. The front belt of that land is essential for the construction of our high level and low level roads...

South of the railway line the lands are almost vacant and should not present any difficulty.

Numerous complaints and claims were raised by owners/occupiers of the lands specified for acquisition. There was a very strong though temperately worded objection from a large number of people who had been occupying the timber yard. They were displaced people from East Pakistan (now Bangla Desh) and had taken lease of marshy lands, filled up and reclaimed it, and established a large timber yard. Of the

fifty-eight objectors as many as thirty-three had started timber or carpentry business while the rest ran miscellaneous small-scale industries or trade, such as grocery, stationery, smithy, clay modelling, tailoring, transport, tea houses and even coaching classes for school students.

It appears that even in those days the railway lands were not entirely free from the encroachment of private structures. For example, the presence of twelve huts within the fencing around the railway track interfered with the construction of the bridge. This was reported by the Chief Valuer of the Calcutta Improvement Trust in September, 1961. Four of those huts belonged to families displaced from East Pakistan. As for the rest, it appears that the huts were inhabited by migrants from within West Bengal, mostly from the villages of south 24 Parganas. Thus, the beginning of squatters' settlements by the side of the railway tracks can be traced to years prior to the construction of the overhead railway bridge.

However, the population settled around the railway tracks was quite small at that time. We have information from some earliest inhabitants of the locality where now spreads the dense squatters' colony of our case-study. Their accounts give us several clues to the mode of formation of this settlement. Some elements of organized promotion and political initiative can be read in those narratives of the earliest settlers.

Gobinda Halder migrated to Calcutta from a village in the Diamond Harbour sub-division of 24 Parganas. He came with his family in the late forties. Gobinda was pushed out

of his village in search of a livelihood and requested Abani Mandal, his uncle-in-law, to find for him some gainful work and a place where he could live with his family. Abani arranged for Gobinda a shack at a monthly rent of Rs.10/-. Abani was already holding a number of such shacks that were located on the site where now stands the Manjusha Building. He had a shop in Garia to do the business of recycling old and used up glass bottles and phials.

It appears that Abani Mandal initiated the settlement of migrants in this area. He persuaded the earliest settlers to rent the shacks and hutments which he had already raised on railway lands. His son Adhir Mandal was also a leading figure in the subsequent stages of development of the Gobindapur Rail Colony.

Gobinda Haldar tells us of the period when very few families had settled in this locality. He can recall that the entire Jodhpur (i.e. Jodhpur Park) area had been practically vacant. Gobinda also remembers the big timber yard which had caught fire and was subsequently demolished to enable the construction of the bridge. There were some hutments in the area verging on the boundary of Gate 2.

In course of his narrative, Gobinda Haldar tells us of Haran Manna. Haran Manna and fifteen others formed a committee to organise the process of settlement in the area. They also took up the task of managing the affairs of the growing colony which, notwithstanding its sparse population of those days, had proceeded to extend its encroachment on the railway lands. Adhir Mandal, whom we have already mentioned as a promoter of early settlements, worked in the group of Haran Manna.

Gobinda Halidar remembers that Haran Manna had told him to raise his hutment in one part of the empty spaces adjacent to the railway tracks. Haran measured up the plot of land allotted to Gobinda for his hutment. A site rent of Rs.10 per month was charged to Gobinda Halidar. Haran Manna had a key role in promoting and encouraging the growth of the squatters' settlement on railway lands. According to Gobinda, Haran and his associates had political ties with the Communist Party. Haran joined the CPI (M) after the party split. We are informed by Gobinda Halidar that many associates of Haran eventually secured a fair amount of material success in their later life. Some of them moved to different middle class areas and constructed their own houses.

We interviewed Ashu Das who had come to this locality in the early fifties. He was then merely a boy of seven or eight. Ashu was accompanied by his mother and younger brothers and sisters. They all lived in a hutment rented from Adhir Mandal at Rs.10 per month. Adhir's native village was adjacent to that of Ashu in Diamond Harbour. Ashu's father lived in Belur where he worked in a jute mill. Later, he joined his family and became a resident of this locality. The jute mill where he had been working was suddenly closed down.

The site of Ashu's hutment fell within the purview of acquisition necessary to construct the bridge. Ashu remembers the fire which destroyed a large part of the big timber yard. Since their hutment had to be demolished for the construction of the bridge, Ashu's mother received a compensation of Rs.7000/- from the Calcutta Improvement Trust. She built a new hutment at Selimpur. All this happened in the early

sixties. Ashu did not accompany his mother to Selimpur and decided to stay in the locality where he had been living from his early boyhood.

A local communist (CPI) leader of very long standing told us that Haran Manna, Adhir Mandal and a few more of their type could be identified as 'local vested interests' of the Gobindapur Rail Colony. Further, the local leader observed, 'While being with us (he means the political affiliation) they also behaved like bullies in the squatters' settlement and were involved in various acts of petty graft. Adhir was very clever. He died young around the age of thirty-five. Haran Manna often stole a part of the funds raised by him for the party. We overlooked many such default since it would be difficult to find his replacement as a grassroots leader and organiser of the squatters' settlement. How could we find in the rail colony a fully honest person with Haran's drive and initiative?'

The establishment of the squatters' colonies had been associated with the process of settlement of displaced persons from East Pakistan (now Bangla Desh). During the late forties and the early fifties West Bengal faced a massive influx of persons from East Pakistan. The Hindus of East Bengal migrated in large number. They were despaired of communal violence and insecurity in East Pakistan.

Being not well prepared for meeting such a calamity, the provisions made by government for the rehabilitation of displaced persons were poor in quality and quantity. Very soon large number of migrants started unauthorized occupation of vacant lands owned by government or private landlords.

Thus began 'this process of the settlement of refugees in Calcutta and its suburbs and elsewhere in West Bengal by founding what came to be known as squatters' colonies.' (Chakrabarti 1990, p.35).

The southern suburbs of Calcutta spreading over the entire area from Dhakuria level crossing to Garia and also from the Tollygunge tram depot to its south eastern and western directions had large stretches of vacant lands. The rich land speculators had their own plans of developing the southern suburbs in accordance with the directions along which the city would take its course of expansion. It was among such lands that the masses of East Bengal migrants found the sites suitable for their settlement. The proximity of those lands to the city of Calcutta raised hopes that the settlers were likely to find some means of living. The main difficulty was set by their lack of money to purchase such lands. The establishment of squatters' colonies was a device to obviate this problem.

The urgency of finding some shelter drove the refugees 'under the irresistible pressure of circumstances along a course which was not legitimate but necessary - unauthorized occupation of these lands. Vijaygarh was the first example of such a colony. It had not the sanction of law behind it.' (Chakrabarti 1990, pp.36-37). Many squatters' colonies had the tacit support of Government, though without any written document of authorization. Indeed, though not known to the settlers, the organisers of the Vijaygarh settlement had received some kind of prior government approval of their occupation of lands for establishing the refugee colony.

The urge for establishing squatters' colonies became a widespread phenomenon in the subsequent decades. Many such settlements were founded in the southern suburbs of the city. In course of time most of them were transformed into townships with a mixed population of various levels of the middle class and working people. The perspective of the land speculators also materialized in many areas of more prosperous buildings and their residents. All this indicates the mixed pattern of development of the city's southern suburbs.

The Vijaygarh colony is situated at a distance of about three kilometers from the Dhakuria level crossing. As already noted, since the late forties a large number of squatters' settlements had grown up along the areas spreading from Dhakuria to Garia. The pioneers (e.g. Haran Manna, Abani Mandal, Adhir Mandal and some others) of the Gobindapur Rail Colony must have been influenced by the experience of such growth of squatters' colonies. They were swayed by the idea of seizing lands to find shelter for homeless people. Also, there was scope for personal gains which could be derived from the settlers whom they helped and mobilised in the process of raising the squatters' colony.

It is evident from the composition of the Gobindapur Rail Colony that the settlement was not restricted to displaced persons from East Bengal. The squatters' colony at Gate 1 consists largely of persons from south 24-Parganas, who had been pushed out of their native villages in search of livelihood. The pioneers of this settlement were connected with the politics of the left. The nature of political affiliation was similar to that of the wider movement for the rehabilitation of East Bengal refugees. In course of the decades after 1950, the Communist Party lodged itself in the

leadership of the refugee movement in West Bengal.

Being situated on lands extremely close to the railway tracks, the Gobindapur Rail Colony involved violation of the railway regulations and presented complex problems of control and management for the railway authorities. Let us take note of the various attempts by the railway authorities to do away with these unauthorized settlements. Anadi Bera the present leader of the Rail Colony, could not tell us much about the assaults in the mid-sixties by the railway authorities and of the resistance put up by the people of the colony. He has been a resident of the Rail Colony since the early seventies.

Earlier Anadi Bera lived in neighbouring Panchanan-tala. He started a school for children. From then on he has been known in the entire locality as 'mastermashay'. His own education was a little above the primary level. Anadi's main interest was in producing theatre and opera (yatra) shows. He took part in acting. All this made him popular and well-known in the area. The people of the rail colony inducted Anadi and his family into a hutment of their area.

Anadi Bera started community work as a follower of Adhir Mandal. His all round ability and organisational powers caught the attention of local CPI leaders. Anadi became a member of the CPI. He enjoys the respect and following of the people of Rail Colony Gate 1. A fuller idea of his own experience and work will be included among the accounts of various activities which we shall present in a separate section. At present we can draw on his narrative to know the experience of several struggles for the protection of

the colony against the attacks for eviction.

Around 1965 the Railway authorities moved to build a wall that would encircle the colony. Such encirclement would result in the colony's extinction. Anadi Bera had not yet been a resident of this colony. The people of the colony succeeded in thwarting the attack.

The most resolute action against the colonies had been afoot during the period of the Emergency in 1975. It had the object of complete demolition of the squatters' colonies situated on the railway lands in this region. The operation had its beginning in south Dhakuria. The police force destroyed all the hutments on railway lands in the area stretching from the south of Dhakuria station to Selimpur level crossing. They were then getting ready to proceed towards the Gobindapur Rail Colony.

A very large mass of people of the Rail Colony could be mobilized to assemble at the Selimpur level crossing. Those people confronted the police force and were ready to face their bullets in case of firing. The people's resistance received support from both the Congress and the CPI. Somenath Lahiri, the well-known CPI leader, was then the MLA from this constituency; Siddhartha Sankar Ray was the state's Chief Minister and his wife an M.P. in Delhi. The police action stopped after Somenath Lahiri had talked with the Chief Minister about the serious consequences of an eviction drive on such a large scale.

The move by the Railways was abandoned at the intervention of the State Government. A delegation representing the people of the Rail Colony was assured by the Chief

Minister that some measures would certainly be taken for their rehabilitation at a suitable place. The then Inspector General of Police was assigned the responsibility for spotting an alternative site where the colony's people could be resettled. A big plot of land behind the Bagha Jatin rail station was proposed as a suitable site.

A committee consisting of representations from the police, political parties and local interests was set up to evolve further plans for rehabilitation. Anadi Bera told us that the plan did not materialize because of the indifference and worthlessness of the political leadership. A prominent CPI leader of the locality explained to us that his party lacked interest and initiative in the matter. This was due to the circumstances that the proposed site fell in an area where the CPI had no political influence or following.

The railway authorities made a move in 1983 to put up barbed wire fencing between the land occupied by the squatters and the railway tracks. Obviously, to minimize their operational hazards, the Railways were keen to fix some limits to further encroachments and also to restrict movements by men, women and children across the tracks. However, such fencing would place obstructions at the entry and exit points of most of the shacks and hutments. The people of the colony were therefore opposed to the proposal for the construction of barbed wire fencing.

After they had put up fencing at the A.T. Chatterjee road and North Dhakuria rail colonies, the Railways men proceeded towards the Gobindapur segment. Anadi Bera told us that they visited all the relevant offices of the Railways to explain their difficulties. A Press Conference was

convened with the aim of informing and influencing public opinion. The people of the colony moved in a procession to the State Assembly for expressing their grievances. The leaders of the local and district committees of the CPI gave them all support. A deputation met the Chief Minister and discussed the matter with him.

At the intervention of the Chief Minister, the Railways abandoned their move to construct barbed wire fencing. Anadi Bera and many other people of the Gobindapur Rail Colony Gate 1 are extremely unhappy about the absence of any government measure for their suitable rehabilitation. Whether in 1975 or in 1983, when there is a crisis and confrontation, they are assured at the highest level of a serious endeavour for the resettlement of the people of the squatters' colonies. The plan for the system of circular railways around Calcutta has often been caught up in reflections on the problem of squatters' settlements in the proximity of railway tracks.

Significantly, the organisations, meetings and resolutions of the colonies spreading across the vicinity of the railway tracks have reiterated one key point since the mid-seventies. On this point they declare themselves to be in full accord with the rest of the people of the metropolis. The point relates to the priority of the need for circular railways and quicker and better transport facilities. The dwellers of the rail colonies helplessly continue to live in inhuman misery and distress; the colonies also obstruct the introduction of circular railways. Thus, in the submission of demands by the people of the rail colonies, the urgency of their suitable rehabilitation is inseparably connected with the overall priority of improving the metropolitan transport

system.

The account of protests and movements, which we present above, is constructed to provide the materials necessary for an understanding of the earlier history of this particular squatters' colony. Many other elements of personal and collective reactions, their sense of dissent and acceptance may be revealed in due course when we shall focus on the life-stories of a number of inhabitants, including that of Anadi Bera and Ashu Das.

Work and Earnings

The data on 153 families and their population of 685 persons were available from the records of the Integrated Child Development Centre which works in the locality of Gobindapur Rail Colony Gate 1. These information relate to December 1990. The coverage amounted to a large part of the particular squatters' colony whose total population would be around 1500. The ICDS records furnished details of age and composition of family members, about the occupations and earnings of workers, and about the health and education of the children.

This squatters' colony is largely inhabited by the very poor.-- It should be helpful to take up the indicator of a poverty line for understanding the economic conditions of the colony and the range of differences in earnings among its inhabitants. Considering some related findings (Urban Poverty 1989, Minhas et al 1991) we find that a poverty line of Rs.170 per capita per month may be appropriate for the city of Calcutta in 1989-90.

We could construct estimates of family income and per capita family income for 148 families. They had a population of 652 persons. No sufficient information was available for five families with a population of 33 persons. Thus our findings about poverty and income relate to 148 families and their members.

Since we had no information about family expenditure, the population below and above the poverty line was estimated in terms of its earnings. The per capita monthly earnings of 456 persons belonging to 98 families were found to be below the poverty line. They had an average family size of 4.65. The remaining 50 families had a population of 196 persons and their per capita monthly earnings were above the poverty line. The average size of such families was 3.92. Let us present this information in the following summary form.

Families Below and Above the Poverty Line

	<u>No. of Families</u>	<u>P.C.</u>	<u>No. of Persons</u>	<u>P.C.</u>	<u>Average Fam- ily Size</u>
Below the PL	98	66.22	456	69.94	4.65
Above the PL	50	33.78	196	30.06	3.92
Total	148	100	652	100	4.40

The extent of differentiation was quite pronounced even among the people below the poverty line. The lowest per capita monthly earning among the persons of families in this group was Rs.30 and the highest was Rs.167. Let us break up the families below the poverty line into two groups. In the per capita monthly earning level upto Rs.100, there were more than 55 per cent of families with about 59 per cent of persons below the poverty line. Their average per capita

monthly income was about Rs.72. For the 45 per cent families in the per capita monthly earnings level above Rs.100 and below Rs.170, the share of all persons below the poverty line was 41 per cent. Their per capita monthly earnings amounted to Rs.135.

For per capita monthly earning levels upto Rs.100, the number of earners in the 54 families were 91, while they had total persons amounting to 268. Thus the average number of dependents per earner were nearly two. For families between per capita monthly earning levels greater than Rs.100 and less than Rs.170, the number of dependents per earner amounted to 1.43 on the average. There were 40 female earners in the former group of 54 families. Such women were all employed as domestic servants and mostly earned between Rs.100 and Rs.150 per month. About seven families in the group had no male earners. This was caused either by old age, ill health or by the absence of job opportunities. In one family, a woman deserted by her husband, had been living with her two children, sons aged three and two years.

Among the families in the higher range (i.e. with per capita monthly earnings between Rs.101 and Rs.170) 10 families had no female earners. The remaining 34 families had 37 female earners. One family consisted of a woman and his two daughters. Hence it had no male earners. The woman's husband had left this place abandoning his wife and children. All female earners worked as domestic servants. Their range of monthly earnings had a spread from Rs.50 to Rs.300. Such variation depended on the number of households in which a maid-servant worked through a day and also on the nature of work done by a person. For example those engaged in cooking secured a higher pay than those washing clothes and utensils,

sweeping and cleaning rooms.

The per capita monthly earnings for persons in the families above the poverty line was Rs.324 on the average. There were 92 earners among the total number of 196 persons. There were twenty-two female earners in an equal number of families. While 21 women workers had been domestic servants, there was one case of a young girl working as a private tutor. She is an unmarried girl of twenty-two whose monthly earnings of Rs.100 supplement the income of her father. He works as a labourer in a unit manufacturing parts of sewing machine. The girl could not continue her own school studies above Class IX.

Some families above the poverty line were found to derive earnings from house rent. Five such families reported total rental earnings of Rs.7300 as follows :

Receipt of Rental Income

Sl. No.	Family Size	Recipient (monthly)	Other Earnings (monthly)	Per Capita Monthly Earnings (Rs.)
1.	4	Mother - Rs.2000	2 Sons-Rs.2100	1025
2.	4	Husband - Rs.1000 Wife - Rs.2000	Nil	750
3.	5	Father - Rs. 500	2 Sons-Rs.1800	460
4.	3	Mother - Rs. 600	Nil	200
5.	1	Woman - Rs. 200 of Sixty	Nil	200

Such rental income is obtained from hutments within the colony. The pioneers of the squatters' settlement had

raised shacks and hutments on railway lands and rented them out to a growing number of population who were in desperate search for some shelter. This is how a de facto pattern of land control and rent earnings emerged as a substratum of the illegal seizure of railway lands. Some beneficiaries of this institutional legacy are reflected in the table above. In an important sense all this has no wider legal sanctions. It is a practice standing on the conventions of the squatters' colony from the days of its first inception.

Some signs of carrying over such tenuous rights of rent earning could be found among a few families below the poverty line. A family of five consisting of a widowed mother and her five children reported a rental income of Rs.145 per month. They were living in abject poverty in the absence of any other earnings. Another family of husband, wife, two sons and two daughters, reported that the husband's monthly earnings were derived from work as a helper in various jobs. He also had some income from house rent. The total monthly earnings of the family amounted to Rs.700. This includes the wife's earning of Rs.100 from domestic work. The per capita monthly earnings of the family was less than Rs.120.

The description of occupations as stated in the ICDS records indicated the diversity of sources of earnings. It is apparent that a large number of earners have no stable employment. Most of them are not particularly skilled for any specific work. Indeed, the occupations do not imply categories which are applicable to earners for only considerable duration of a specific employment and income. All this is, in the main, wage-work assigned on a daily basis and holds no assurance of continuity in one fixed job. We

make an attempt below to enumerate the occupations in this sense of broad income opportunities availed by the workers of the squatters' colony.

Sl. No.	Occupation	Number of Workers
1.	<u>Jogar</u> (helpers)	80
2.	Cycle Rickshaw Pullers	12
3.	Motor Drivers	11
4.	Bus Conductors	7
5.	Skilled Labourers	13
6.	Mechanics	6
7.	Watchmen	5
8.	Peddlers and Shopkeepers	8
9.	Others	20
10.	Domestic Servants	98
All		260

Note: This list leaves out the persons whose entire income is derived from house rent. There are six such women and three men.

The prominence of helpers (jogar) among all workers bears out the large extent of casual work as it prevailed in the squatters' colony. Leaving out the 98 domestic servants who were all female, the rest of the workers numbered 162. The helpers constituted half of such workers. They were spread over a wide range of activities like building construction, house painting, pandal making and decoration, shop hands and helpers in minibuses. While the helpers in those activities were subject to chronic insecurity of income and work, more than 40 per cent of all helpers could not even

specify a particular area of work. They were constantly in a position to hire themselves out for any work which would fetch them some earning.

As already noted many women of the squatters' colony worked as domestic hands to secure some earnings for their families. The extremely casual nature of the work done by so many males made all the more necessary the women's earnings of a more regular kind. The squatters' colony is located in the proximity of growing middle class residential areas which raise the demand for labour to do household chores of various kinds. This is where the women of the squatters' colony find scope for work as domestic servants.

Per capita monthly income	No. of families	No. of females	No. of women working as domestic servants
Upto Rs.100	54	125	40
Rs.101 - Rs.169	44	86	37
Rs.170 and above	50	92	21
All	148	203	98

In the group upto a per capita income of Rs.100, 36 families had at least one female member working as domestic servant. There were four families which had two of their members in the particular occupation. Of the 44 families in the income group Rs.101-169, 34 supplied domestic servants from among their members. One of them accounted for three such workers, and another two. The remaining 32 families had one member each in the total supply of domestic servants

from the group. Among the families above the poverty line, 21 provided one member each for domestic work.

It appears that the practice of work as domestic servants is much less among the women of families above the poverty line. For the families below the poverty line, the percentage of those supplying domestic servants was more than 71. The same proportion was only 44 per cent for families above the poverty line. In all income groups most of the domestic servants were above the age of twenty. Among the families whose ICDS records were available for our examination, we found one girl of 12 working as a domestic servant. There were four others between the age of 16 and 18.

The wages paid to domestic servants were very low. The monthly earnings of about 70 per cent of domestic servants were below the poverty line (i.e. Rs.170). Of the 98 persons engaged as domestic servants there were only three who had monthly earnings between Rs.300 and 350. Indeed, an amount of Rs.340 would be barely sufficient to keep a family of two just above the poverty line.

Obviously, women working as domestic servants could provide a meagre contribution to the maintenance of themselves and their families. On the other hand, the recurrent contingency of unemployment of the males in their casual work often pushed families to live in sole dependence on the earnings of females who were domestic servants. We have noted this situation for a fair number of families in the available records. The conditions of abject poverty are evident from our finding that 37 per cent of all families listed in the ICDS records and 41 per cent of persons had per capita monthly earnings within Rs.100. The families

below the poverty line constituted 66 per cent of all and they accounted for 70 per cent of total persons.

We interviewed the women workers in charge of three ICDS centres in the Gobindapur Rail Colony. The nature of their work required close familiarity with the families under their care, particularly with its women and children. The segment studied by us in detail came under the purview of Centre 44. All of them agreed on the point that the women shared more responsibility than men in the maintenance of their families. The men were more prone to doing no work. In some cases, such a situation happened on account of addiction to drugs or alcohol. The women made full use of the opportunities available for work as domestic servants.

Let us then look at some features of the 50 families consisting of 196 persons who were above the poverty line. We find four families in this group who had per capita monthly earnings in the range of Rs.750-1025. One of these families consisted of a mother and his three sons. One son was a mini-bus driver and another a minibus helper. Their mother had a rent income of Rs.2000 per month. Another son aged 13 was not yet in the work force. There was a family of four consisting of husband, wife and two children. All income of this family was from house rent amounting to Rs.3000 per month. Two families of four and three members respectively had an identical income of Rs.3000 per month from the combined business of confectionary and cloth selling. In terms of per capita income, these four families are at the top of the list observed by us.

Another twenty-five families above the poverty line had a total family income of Rs.1000 and above. Their per

capita monthly earnings were spread over a range from Rs.250 to Rs.750. The principal earners of these families were skilled construction workers, drivers of privately owned or office cars and also of minibuses, watchmen, and Class IV workers in some government establishments. A few cases were found where the principal earners were not resident in the squatters' colony. They sent remittances to their families who were dwellers of the colony.

Probably, even for families with relatively higher level of earnings above the poverty line, it is not feasible to move out of the squatters' colony due to the very high rentals of alternative housing accommodation. Moreover, the few families, which live on substantial house rent from the hutments of the colony, may face difficulties in realizing their rental claims if they quit their own traditional habitat. Such problems are inherent in the very nature of their so-called rights over lands which are legally the property of the railways.

Let us sum up the relevant points of this review of work and earnings. The vast majority of people in the Gobindapur Rail Colony Gate 1 have very low levels of earnings. However, some inequalities are observed even in the midst of such absolute poverty. A very small number of families derive relatively large rental income from the hutments of the colony. Some persons enjoy better jobs and earnings.

But for their distinct and differentiated positions, the signs of inequality that we find in the available records are symptomatic of the limited employment opportunities afflicting the core and the peripheries of the economy. Such

opportunities fall far short of providing gainful work for the numerous in desperate search for a livelihood. This is the situation of structural excess supply of labour. Even at the periphery the chances and contingencies of casual work generate a degree of inequality among the absolutely poor at any particular moment.

Further, the question of marginality of the squatters' settlement is not merely a matter of dependence on casual and opaque work opportunities. The point about habitat is critically relevant. We find that most of the dwellers of the Gobindapur Rail Colony Gate 1 had been pushed out of their villages in South 24 Parganas to look for a livelihood in the city of Calcutta. Though much less in number, there had been such influx also from the villages of Medinipur, Haora and Hugli.

Urban marginality is then true in more than one sense. The workforce at the marginal pole is not regularly absorbed in the organised sector of the city's economy. Also the very nature of their shelter and the paucity of urban services which surround their day-to-day living represent another co-ordinate of marginal existence. Thus, urban marginality includes among its features the inability of the market economy, or of state policies to provide adequate shelter and civic services to a growing number of city dwellers.

Dwelling and Living

Our initial description of the colony points to the rows of shacks on the north and south of the railway tracks running from east to west. A shack has tiled roof, walls of matted bamboo-slips and earthen floor. In several shacks the floors are made of brick and cement. There are one or two

windows which are openings cut through the walls of bamboo-slips. A few shacks have brick walls. We found three such units among the 148 families which were observed in the records of the ICDS centre. Two of them belonged to those who had substantial rent income from the shacks which they could let out; the other one is inhabited by a woman with her two children. Her husband is employed in military service and has to stay away for long periods.

Most of the shacks have no space in addition to a single room. There is usually a cheap wooden cot with the bedding kept on it. One or two rope-strings are fixed across the room on one side. The clothings of the family are hung on these ropes. The utensils are left on the floor. The vast majority of families do their cooking in the same room, and at times under the cot. A small suitcase or a trunk was found in most of the shacks. Some more furniture was rarely possessed by a family. On a rough impression, it appeared that about 10 to 15 per cent of families had a watch and a transistor radio. In our lot of 148 families, we could find only two units which had a separate kitchen space and a wooden shelf for keeping utensils. A calendar with the picture of gods/goddesses and hanging along the wall of the shack was a common sight.

The sources of water-supply for the colony consist of two tubewells and a street tap of the Calcutta Corporation. The supply from the latter is restricted to scheduled hours. The shack-dwellers secure water from these sources for drinking, cooking and, as far as possible, for washing of utensils. While some can use the same sources for bathing, the pressure of numbers forces many to use the Dhakuria

Lake (Rabindra Sarobar) for their bath, washing of clothes, and, as and when unavoidable, washing of utensils. For many years, the southern side of the lake has come to be widely used by the inhabitants of the Rail Colony.

The CMDA has built a complex of sanitary latrines for Gobindapur Rail Colony Gate 1. The adult males and females can make use of these provisions. The pressure of excess numbers is also felt in this regard. Thus the use of open spaces near the Dhakuria Lake is still in vogue for at least a part of the adult population. The children are quite often found to defecate on the railway tracks.

For the vast majority of the shacks no electric power is available. Nor are the people capable of going for such consumption. However, in the area stretching from the east of Gate 1 to Gate 3, there are instances of illegal connections from the railways supply line to a few hutments. Such electric power is used for lighting and also playing tape-recorders

Thus, the shacks and their allied infrastructure provide poor human living in bits of space with inadequate ventilation and exposed equally to the hazards of heat, cold and rains. The proximity of this settlement to the newly developed posh middle class areas in the south of the city may have prompted some civic efforts to improve water supply and sanitary arrangements of the area. Some initiative on the part of a community organisation like the Jana Kalyan Samiti and the ICDS centre is also noteworthy. The details about these organisations and their bearing on the colony's life and the people will be presented in the next section.

Notwithstanding such efforts and initiative, the conditions of this settlement are far from meeting the bare requirements of minimum human living. There obtains a kind of stalemate because of the difficulties, legal and otherwise, in developing a settlement so dangerously close to the railway tracks. We have already noted the widespread marginality of occupations among the people of this squatters' settlement. However ill-paid and casual their work may be, some (e.g. domestic servants, cycle rickshaw pullers, helpers in construction work) do provide essential services to the ever-extending metropolis around the settlement. Thus, they do menial tasks which keep the city going but which provide them the meanest of incomes and habitat.

Most adult males and females go out for work in the morning. They have rice cooked overnight and steeped in water. The children also eat the same food in the morning. Those children, who come to the ICDS centre, can eat a drop of corn-soya blend. The centre keeps free provision of this high protein food for all children who attend its scheme. The women return by midday. The children share any food which their mothers may bring from the work place. It is about 3 or 4 in the afternoon that they all have their day's meal. The male members, who stay out of their homes for work, have some food within their means at midday. In some families no full meal is prepared for the day. It is evening cooking and only one full meal for all is provided at night after the return of the males from work. Wheat is not at all popular among these families. Rice is almost always the principal food.

Considering the low levels of expenditure and living, the families have little scope for purchases from the

market. Some shacks arrange creepers to grow from ground along their tiled roof. They provide pumpkins, bottle-gourd (lau) and edible herbs. Pulses, being very dear, are not included in their food. It is a common practice to buy very cheap fishes of inferior quality from the markets at Panchanantala and Dhakuria station. Coal is the common fuel used in kitchen. No doubt the nature and the amount of food consumption which a family can afford is conditioned by its current earnings. There are plenty of instances when a family can do no cooking for days. They try to subsist on the food that the women domestic servants may obtain from their work-places and on a few pieces of loaf which can be purchased with their meagre means.

Many of the dwellers had their own ration cards which could be obtained through the recommendation of the local M.L.A. or the Corporation Councillor. The extreme poverty of the numerous dissuades some of them from entering the formalities of securing ration cards. For weeks some families have no means to purchase their rations. Indeed, we observed cases where the same ration card was used by different persons from one week to another.

Amidst the perpetual state of want and squalor, no clear ideas can be directly formulated about the cultural features of the squatters' settlement. It may be possible to gather various fragments from the patterns of occupation, earnings, dwelling and living. Moreover, the experience of Jana Kalyan Samiti, of its initiative efforts, organisation and leadership should manifest some aptitude and preferences of the settlers in this colony. The individual narratives may also contribute in pieces to the same understanding.

While deferring a fuller view of the settlement till we present all those materials, one moment of leisure in the life of the settlement can appropriately be noted to conclude this section. We have already noted that everyday in the hour between three and four in the late afternoon many families (particularly the women and children) have their meal. The meal is cooked by women after they return from their morning shift of work as domestic hands. By 4 P.M. the entire area along the railway tracks on the east and west of Gate 1 is full of women and children of the colony.

An observer is struck by the mood of relaxation in all of them. It is as if the rail tracks doubly represent a domestic compound and a public ensemble. The women talk among themselves sitting on the railway tracks. Some of them can be seen combing their hair while talking merrily with one another. On the other hand, a number of vendors throng the area during these hours. This is how the tracks turn into a promenade for the children, some of whom are enabled by their mothers to have titbits like very cheap ice-cream, kulfi, fried chick-pea, monkey-nuts and things like that.

Jana Kalyan Samiti

We have already indicated the location of the Jana Kalyan Samiti. It is an organisation founded and developed by the people of the Gobindapur Rail Colony Gate 1. Ashu Das, a resident of the area since the fifties, says that the Jana Kalyan Samiti had its beginning during the late sixties and took a definite shape by the mid-seventies. Ashu recalls the role of Pravat Sangha, an earlier club of the local people, as the precursor of a community organisation like the Jana Kalyan Samiti.

• In the earliest stage of the settlement men like Adhir Mandal and Haran Manna were the undisputed leaders of the squatters' colony. Adhir Mandal owned about 200 shacks in this settlement. They were built at a time when most of the lands around the railway tracks had been lying vacant. Adhir had done something both in terms of money and organisation to provide building materials to those who came to settle in this area. Thus, Adhir and his associates were 'all in all' (as said by Ashu Das) in each and every matter of this squatters' settlement.

Amidst such a state of things, a club like Pravat Sangha represented some elements of broader initiative and participation. Its main interest was in the field of entertainment. Pravat Sangha wanted to present operas (yatra) before the people of the locality. Such operas/theatre shows were presented during the Saraswati and Kali Pujas which the Pravat Sangha organised on a community basis.

Anadi Bera was at first an inhabitant of Panchanantala. He had particular aptitude for producing operas and theatre shows. Anadi was also popular in his occupation as a teacher (mastermashay) of the local children. His performance as an actor and director of a theatre show impressed the younger people of the squatters' settlement and also some local political leaders of the left. Some of them intended to involve Anadi more in the day-to-day social work of the colony.

There was a move to induct Anadi as a dweller of the squatters' settlement. He was in difficulties of clearing rental dues for his hutment in Panchanantala. All this led to his shifting from Panchanantala to a shelter arranged

by some young enthusiasts. He continued teaching, opera/theatre production, and social work. Anadi Bera was a prominent leader of the resistance against the strong move by the railway authorities to eliminate the squatters' settlements during the period of emergency. We have already noted the event in a previous section on 'Early History'.

Such were the circumstances leading towards the development of the Jana Kalyan Samiti as an organization of local initiative and effort. Previously, in social and political matters affecting the settlement, Anadi Bera used to work as a follower of Adhir Mandal. But with changes already mentioned and also after Adhir's untimely death at an early age, we can associate Anadi Bera with the inception of a new leadership and its distinct directions. Anadi recalls 1981 as the year when he had started dwelling in a part of the hutment of Jana Kalyan Samiti.

The following 'Appeal' signed by Anadi Bera as the Secretary of the Jana Kalyan Samiti and circulated in early 1986 gives some ideas about the nature and mode of welfare work sponsored by the Samiti. The 'Appeal' was in Bengali.

* On behalf of the Jana Kalyan Samiti we are planning to open a free homeopathic dispensary and a library in the Gobindapur Rail Colony Gate 1, at the junction of the Gariahat Road South and Gariahat Road West.

There will be a meeting to discuss this matter. The Councillors of Wards 91 and 92, the Officer-in Charge of the Lake Police Station, political party leaders, and some prominent persons of the locality will be present at this meeting on 7.2.86 at 7 in

the evening. I request you all to make this discussion meeting a success with your kind presence and participation.

It appears that the room of the Jana Kalyan Samiti had become the venue for meetings to discuss such issues and to decide upon matters of general interest for the colony. Also the entire appeal points to the participatory mode of decision making. It entreats the people of the colony to join the meeting and to express their position and views.

Thus, some kind of a general opinion of the colony is being considered for taking decisions in matters of common interest. This is a striving to articulate the identity of the squatters' settlement as a community. Further, the assurance of attendance by the Ward Councillors, political leaders, prominent citizens and the local police head is significant. While moving to represent the settlement as a community, its organisation admits the need to secure support from the wider domain of politics, order and civic alignment. All this was equally important for getting things done.

In the narratives of personal lives collected by us, there is frequent mention of the new directions of the Jana Kalyan Samiti since the mid-seventies. Let us present the sequence of events as narrated by Ashu Das, who has always been an active worker of the Jana Kalyan Samiti. Ashu begins by telling us of those days when men like Adhir Mandal and Haran Manna were in leading command of the squatters' settlement. They were connected with left politics. But both in terms of his huge ownership of shacks and his modalities of operation, Adhir Mandal considered the

squatters' settlement to be under his surveillance and control. The people of the colony had little room for their own initiative and effort to resolve any problems.

Ashu Das contrasts this state of things with what had happened along with the development of the Jana Kalyan Samiti. We may quote from his recorded narrative.

Gradually we were more familiar and intimate with mastermashay. He showed us different ways of doing things. Mastermashay advised all concerned to exchange views among themselves and to take positions on local issues. He told us often 'I can decide to attempt things only after listening to what you think about the matter. It is my view that such a course is desirable for any decision about what to do for the improvement of living conditions in the squatters' settlement.'

The Samiti had then been shaping as a place where people at large would come for arbitration in local disputes, or for help and advice in cases of illness, or with the appeal for establishing a charitable dispensary, or for an intervention in somebody's family quarrel and so on and so forth!

Anadi Bera's ideas and style of work evoked a new sense of responsibility and participation among the people of the colony. Anadi's own recollections of Adhir Mandal's style of work give some meaningful indications.

Adhir Mandal did not belong to any party. Later Adhir talked of his affiliation with the CPM. This was mere talk. I could see his opportunistic tendencies as he always sided with those appearing to be more powerful. Adhir Mandal was known as the zemindar of

the Rail Colony. He had about two hundred shacks. There were only a few who would question any of his actions. I was one of them. He tried to appease such dissidents by feeding them muri, rosogolla and tea. Those were the days when displaced persons from East Pakistan had been occupying lands for their settlement in the southern suburbs of the city. The same course was operative in the origin and growth of the Rail Colony, although its composition was largely weighted by migrants from the West Bengal districts.

Ashu Das stressed that under Anadi Bera's leadership, the dwellers of the Rail Colony were all deeply involved in the work of the Jana Kalyan Samiti. The functions of the Samiti were on the increase. It had tasks like the treatment of diseases, the management of small dispensaries and hospitalization for the extremely deserving patients. Such functions gradually shaped into regular items of the Samiti's work. This is evident from the present pattern of activities of the Jana Kalyan Samiti. The Samiti could also cast its effective influence on appropriate authorities to improve the availability of water supply (taps and tubewells) and to build a number of sanitary latrines.

The responsibility for health care finds a traditional expression in the maintenance of the shrine of goddess Sitala. A routine of daily worship is observed with an offering of 100 pieces of 'batasa' (a convex drop of sugar or molasses) to the goddess. Ashu Das says that this cost is borne by Anadi Bera himself.

In the Bengali month of Jaishtha (corresponding to May-June) every year the Jana Kalyan Samiti has its annual celebration of Sitala Puja which lasts for a week. This is

the biggest festival of the colony. It entails a cost of five to seven thousand rupees. The people of the colony contribute to the Puja fund. Some larger amounts are collected from rich donors outside the settlement. The ability to raise such funds depends on the range of contact and acceptability of the Samiti's leadership.

During the week-long Sitala festival, the Samiti often presents a dramatic performance of its own production. Anadi Bera's enthusiasm in this matter is still quite alive. There are years when an external opera/theatre group is hired for the performance. At times, music parties are hired by the Samiti for the presentation of musical context (tarja), gajan song or devotional songs during the Sitala festival. The older leaders do not like to have video shows during this festival. Such shows are usually organised by the younger people during the Kali Puja which is a shorter affair of two nights. Ashu Das tells us of the increasing attraction of video shows which are arranged by young people, as and when they can, at any time during the year.

Another important activity of the Jana Kalyan Samiti is in vogue since its inception. There are cases of serious disputes and conflicts between a husband and his wife, between parents and their grown up children. Such disputes are often settled through the Samiti's arbitration. An aggrieved person comes to the Samiti for redress. There have been occasions when the local police station advises a complainant to seek settlement through the intervention of the Samiti. As appreciated by the local people and society such a move by the police station often does good to all.

An ICDS (Integrated Child Development Scheme sponsored by Government of India) centre is located in the hutment of the Jana Kalyan Samiti. It is a common practice for ICDS centres to find accommodation in the room of a local club or voluntary organisation like the Jana Kalyan Samiti. The scheme has the aim of immunizing poor children against diseases like diphtheria, tetanus, whooping cough, polio and tuberculosis. It also provides some nutrients for those children. A centre is intended to cover children upto the age of six in families (one centre for a total population of one thousand) which dwell in slums or in similar segments of poverty and squalor. The children are also expected to have some pre-primary lessons at the centre.

Apart from story-telling, games, elementary learning of alphabet and numbers, such lessons consist of the making of paper models of flowers, birds etc. and, as and when possible, simple and easy songs and dances. An Anganwari worker (i.e. the woman in charge of a centre) undergoes a course of training in all this before she joins work. In addition to what is done for the children, an ICDS centre has the task of persuading couples to take up the practice of birth control. The Centre sends a woman, who may be willing to use some protective device of birth control, to the family planning unit at the Bangur hospital.

We could gather some useful information from the Anganwari worker at the ICDS centre of Gobindapur Rail Colony Gate 1. Much of our information about families, their composition, occupations and levels of earnings were obtained from the records of the centre. Such records are to be prepared by an Anganwari worker by surveying all

families under the purview of her centre. As stated already the limit of a centre is usually set by a population of one thousand. Since we made use of a part of the data for the whole centre, our coverage of population was about seven hundred. We used this part because the relative data had been brought up-to-date till December 1990. The rest of the records related to 1981.

There are arrangements for the inoculation of children and pregnant mothers as provided in the ICDS rules. This is done by teams of workers either from the Bangur hospital or from the health service wing of the Calcutta Corporation. They come on periodic visits to the area for the purpose of inoculation. The Anganwari worker talked of the inadequate supplies of medicines which the local people expected her to give in case of common ailments like fever, dysentery, cough etc. The medicine for the treatment of worms is received in sufficient quantity. Vitamin A oil is supplied to children and pregnant mothers. This is to prevent any damage to eyes from malnutrition. An average number of 40 to 50 children attend the centre in the morning. Most of them are left by their mothers while going for the morning shift of work as domestic servants. The drops of corn-soya blend are given to the children as their nutrients.

The work of the Jana Kalyan Samiti extends beyond welfare activities alone. A major experience of the colony relates to the struggle provoked by several attempts by the Railway authorities to demolish the squatters' settlements. Anadi Bera is a member of long standing of the CPI. There follows a close alignment of the Jana Kalyan Samiti with the local CPI unit of Dhakuria.

In all instances of a movement against eviction the Jana Kalyan Samiti has invariably acted as the base unit for mobilizing not only the people of the Gobindapur Rail Colony Gate 1, but also of all the neighbouring squatters' settlements around the Ballygunge-Budge Budge railway tracks. The scope of any movement against eviction bears upon 25 to 30 thousand dwellers of such settlements between Dhakuria and Kalighat rail stations. It appears from old leaflets, appeals etc. that the hutment of the Jana Kalyan Samiti and the spot near Gate 1 has always been a central place for large mass meetings attracting people from all over the entire stretch of the squatters' settlements.

Anadi Bera, the Secretary of the Jana Kalyan Samiti, has been a leading figure of the Budge Budge-Dhakuria Rail Colony Rehabilitation Committee in the eighties. The latter consisted of representatives from the base units of the many squatters' settlements and some prominent political leaders of the area. This Committee or some other joint body of similar composition becomes active on the occasion of a movement for the protection of the squatters' settlements.

The last notable movement on a large scale dates back to the eighties when the proposal for the introduction of circular railways around metropolitan Calcutta pointed to the need for the elimination of the squatters' settlements beside the rail tracks. The position of the squatters' movement was expressed in a letter which the Rehabilitation Committee wrote to A.B.A. Ghani Khan Chowdhury, the then Minister-in-Charge of Railways. Since the points mentioned in this letter still represent the dominant attitude of the dwellers of those settlements, let us state their position

by citing some relevant excerpts from the letter which was in English.

We, the undersigned petitioners, have been residing for the last 30-35 years in bustees built on railway land by the side of Ballygunge-Budge Budge line. Among us are refugees from erstwhile East Pakistan and landless people from South Bengal. Having lost everything - means of livelihood, land and even homestead, we had to come to Calcutta to eke out a living and in search of shelter, and fighting against various odds we are keeping our body and soul together.

Along with other citizens of Calcutta we are also keen on promulgation of North-South line and Circular Railway and for that strengthening and extension of the Ballygunge-Budge Budge Section Railway Lines and offer our fullest cooperation in this work.

But we are mostly day labourers and household help, living below the poverty line. We have somehow built a shelter of our own. If our homes are broken and we are evicted from the shanties, we have no where to go. On a previous occasion in 1975 such a move by the Railways was abandoned on the intervention of the State Government of which you were a Minister, pending suitable rehabilitation of the inmates, of which we were assured by the then Chief Minister....

We would therefore earnestly request you to provide us with suitable alternative homestead, if it becomes absolutely necessary to shift us from our present dwellings for the sake of extension and strengthening of the Ballygunge-Budge Budge line with a view to introduce Circular Railway.

* * *

This paper has developed its positions from four main sources. The ICDS records provide information about

work and earnings of a large number of families in the Gobindapur Rail Colony Gate 1. The Anganwari worker of the ICDS centre gave us further information about their conditions of dwelling and living. As regards the accounts of early history of the colony and of protest movements against eviction we depended on the narratives of individual life-stories collected from some inhabitants of the colony. The squatters' colony had been growing since the late fifties and its earliest stage coincided with the period of construction of the Dhakuria Overhead Bridge which had its inaugural in 1966. Hence, some information from the old files of the Calcutta Improvement Trust relating to the construction of the bridge were useful for tracing the early history of the colony. A general review takes shape in terms of a 're-sume of the conditions that we can derive from these sources of information. Though not always telling the same thing, the different sources have a degree of commonness about the items of information regarding the origin and present conditions of the squatters' settlement. Our general review is based on such common items of information.

The general review does not make full use of the life-stories collected from several inhabitants of the squatters' colony. As a particular dweller of the colony narrates one's life-story, it manifests the individual's perception of grievances and conflicts and also articulates the subject's own view of the course and nature of life in the Rail Colony. We can see how some elements of the process of living matter to the subject, and some do not.

Further, when we collect a fair number of such life stories, it is possible to have a medley of many voices,

each saying the same thing or different things on themes like that of the background which pushed one to seeking shelter in the squatters' settlement, the conditions of work and earning in a life close to the subsistence margin and its vagaries, the growth of social being in the colony's course of life, and the spectre of eviction. All this will constitute the next part of our report on this case-study.

2. A Medley of Many Voices

The life-stories of about thirty dwellers of the colony had been recorded in our case-study. The same set of issues did not have equal importance for all of them. However, we can select a number of themes and put together the views which are expressed on such themes in the life-stories of individuals. All the stories and their subjects may not bear upon each and every theme selected by us. We have already noted that the themes were not exactly the same in all life-stories. The themes under which we break up and present the narratives are A. Background, B. Work History. Earnings, and Level of Living, C. Community, Culture and Politics.

A. Background

Sudhir Karmaker, who is now aged around forty, comes from the village Chowdhuri Chak which is situated at a distance of nearly seven miles from Mathurapur in South 24 Parganas. He gives the following description of his life in the village and of the circumstances in which he left for Calcutta.

My father died when I was a child of one year and a half. He had about 150 beeghas of

land. After his death one of my uncles was responsible for losing a lot of those land holdings. This uncle was addicted to alcohol and tawdy. What was still left amounted to about 12 beeghas and it contained a pond of the size of one beegha. Our joint family broke up in the year '77 (i.e. 1377 B.S.) when I was nearing twenty.

We were four brothers. My eldest brother had already moved to Calcutta. He worked at a stationery shop in Behala. Our mother lived with us in the village. Our third brother lived with an uncle who brought him up. I lived together with my mother and second brother. We used to cultivate 7 to 8 beeghas of lands taken on agreement. My second brother stayed at a grocer's shop in Magrahat. Our eldest brother had difficulties of sending money to us at home. It meant his virtual separation from our family.

I got married in the year '83 (i.e. 1383 B.S.). Two years later. I set up my separate household. There occurred an increase in the scale of my cultivation of lands taken on agreement. I had my own bullock for drawing the plough. A second crop of paddy could be grown on lands close to a pond or any other source of irrigation. I had this opportunity for a part of the lands cultivated by me.

In the year '86 (i.e. 1386 B.S.) I was in trouble in regard to about ten beeghas of land which I had taken up for cultivation. There was a feud between the Muslim owner and his uncle over the title of the land. I was debarred from completing cultivation on which a lot of labour and other resources had already been expended. I faced a serious setback.

I had thirty-four bags of paddy in my village home. My mother-in-law lived in this Rail Colony Gate 1. She died in an accident. My father-in-law took two bags of paddy for the sradh of my mother-in-law. This sradh

required my presence for two weeks in Calcutta. I left the bags of paddy in others' care. A part of this stock was damaged in the process. I was then badly cheated by the husking units to whom many bags of paddy were given by me for processing into rice. They did not give me even one kilogram of rice. I had no documents. All this was given by me in good faith.

I was in severe difficulties. There was no point in living on loans from others. I came over to this colony and rented a room. Before leaving the village I completed on borrowed resources the cultivation of seven beeghas of land. It was my hope that things would change in case of a good harvest from those lands. I went for reaping the crop and found to my dismay that the lands yielded no paddy for the particular year.

* * *

Bimal Adak lived his childhood at Dighirpar, his native village near Bakultala of South 24 Parganas. We may present the account of his early life in his own words.

We had about seven beeghas of land, plough and bullock. My mother died when I was fourteen. Three years later our father had his second marriage. We were five brothers and sisters. My younger brothers and sisters had serious discontent over our father's second marriage. His second wife bore no children.

I read upto Class IV. As I had been growing up, it became clear to me that our entire family could not go on living on the returns from the seven beeghas of land. We could grow only one crop (i.e. aman) a year. In those days the yield per beegha did not exceed twelve maunds. This was not enough

for meeting the needs of our whole family. My elder brother had already married and left the family. He earned his living by bits of cultivation and mainly working as a day labourer. Seeing all this around me and feeling the burden on our family, I requested a friend of my village to find some work for me in Calcutta. I left for Calcutta in the company of this friend.

There was a gap of about three years between Bimal's coming to Calcutta in search of work and his settlement in the Rail Colony Gate 1. However, this part of his life-story pertains more to the theme of work history.

* * *

Abhoy Sardar comes from the village Bhatia of Mathurapur police-station in South 24 Parganas. He is aged about forty years. Abhoy narrates the experience of his former rural life.

My father was a cultivator. He had twenty beeghas of land. We were five brothers, four sisters, parents, grandmother and an aunt (father's sister). My eldest brother is still in our village home. He is a cultivator and also a petty dealer in rice and paddy. The second brother now lives in neighbouring Panchanan-tala and works as a labourer in lorry transport.

I am the third brother. Our family could live on returns from agriculture. The elder brothers joined work in due course. I had love for music and singing. I wished to form my own group for singing songs about the life-cycle of Radha and Krishna (harinam kirtan). At the age of thirteen I learned

singing from a teacher who stayed in our home to give me lessons. My father bore all the expenses. When we had earnings from our performances in various places which we visited for this purpose, the income was shared among the group.

Those early years of my life were lived in reasonable comfort. We had two big ponds. There would be plenty of fishes in each of them. One pond was kept for having fishes for our family consumption. The other was leased out to fishermen for cash returns. My music teacher stayed for a week as and when he came to give me lessons. He was maintained in all care and comfort. A cash amount between Rs.50 and Rs.100 was paid to him. The teacher was a gifted khol player.

Our family lands had to be sold for meeting the expenses of our sisters' marriage. It started when I was fourteen years old. My eldest sister had been married in that year. Two beeghas of land were sold on the occasion of each sister's marriage. The youngest sister's marriage was arranged by me after I had come to live in this Rail Colony. I was married at the age of eighteen. My elder brothers had married earlier.

There occurred gradual deterioration in the financial condition of our family. My elder brothers went for separate establishments. We had much of discord and discontent in the family. My music party was no longer fetching any income. I took resort to a particular way of earning. I would purchase a bag of paddy and then husk it dry at home and in small quantities. This gave a better rate of conversion of paddy into rice. It covered the cost of the bag and left a margin of extra rice of about Rs.10 to Rs.15. This is how I lived with my wife and children in severe distress.

I am living in the Rail Colony for about twelve years. Earlier I came to Panchanantala where lived persons from our village. My visits were then intended for seeing the city

of Calcutta. For the last twelve years or a little more I have been staying here to earn a livelihood for my family. The family consists of myself, my wife and four children. Two children were born after we had settled in the Rail Colony.

* * *

Sadhan Samanta was born in his native village of Khordonoula in the Diamond Harbour sub-division. He appears to be aged between fifty-five and sixty. He cannot state his exact year of birth. His father was a cultivator. Sadhan had a number of elder brothers. He was specifically asked about the conditions of his life in the village. Sadhan replied that they lived in reasonable comfort. In narrating his life-story, Sadhan seemed inclined to give us a few surprises. This was expressed in what he said about the range and flexibility of his own work. He begins from his discontinuance of studies in school.

In the mid-forties I left school. I was then a student of Class VI. I read in the high school at Matur where lived my sister's husband. My first work was rice cultivation. The lands which had been cultivated on an agreement or on a share-cropping basis amounted to about thirty beeghas. My elder brothers also worked in agriculture.

I got used to several types of work. It started with cultivation and its subsequent processes like threshing etc. I could knit socks, a craft which was learned by me at Matur; then in the next cropping season I would be back for work in paddy cultivation. This was followed by parching rice in hot sand. I worked to thrash boiled paddy into flattened rice (chira). I made molasses. So I did many types of work! I worked to dig ponds and earth, and even carried bags of

paddy from one place to another. It means that I did all sorts of work.

Sadhan Samanta was emphatic that he did all this for further improvements. There was still no pressure of want in the family. Sadhan's two elder brothers had been working at India Fan in Calcutta. He gave some explanation for his migration to Calcutta.

I left my village in a rush of anger. The elder brothers decided to have separate establishments. Our family broke up. I felt shame to face questions from village people. As the brothers had their separate kitchens, I was even asked by some people, 'Where do you have your food?' I came to Calcutta and joined a hosiery mill at Maniktala. My knowledge of knitting socks proved helpful.

Sadhan Samanta had lived in many areas of Calcutta before he settled in Rail Colony Gate 1 at Dhakuria. Some pieces of that part of his life-story will feature in our presentation of the theme of work history.

* * *

Badal Das comes from the village Jumainaskarer Hat in South 24 Parganas. The village is ten to fifteen minutes walk from a point on the 89A bus route which spreads alongside the Lakshmikantapur line. Badal is now aged a little more than thirty. His life-story does not indicate an agricultural background.

We never had any lands. There were ten to twelve members in our family. We were six brothers. My father had a small business of

trading in potato. Potatoes used to be brought from Burrabazar Posta market and sold in weekly markets (hat) of the locality. Such a hat was scheduled for different days of the week in the neighbouring areas. Indeed, one hat or the other would be active on each day of the week. Our family had no other source of income.

A lorry came from our area to Calcutta for taking the purchases to us. This lorry was used by many other traders of our locality. The arrangement reduced our expenses of transport to practically nothing. The returns from business were sufficient for the maintenance of our family.

I was the first member of our family to leave for Calcutta. At first there were no differences in the family. The shape of things was satisfactory for some time. All the brothers used to attend the shop by turn. This led to lack of trust among ourselves as some had been stealing money from the shop's cash box. It led to an unceasing discord. We fell apart.

It is now more than ten years that I have been living in this colony. I read upto Class VI. My friend Aswini Purkait came earlier to this place.

* * *

Aswini Purkait comes from village Nakali of Kulpi police station in Diamond Harbour sub-division. The narration of his rural background is brief and it indicates that Aswini left his village for Calcutta in search of a livelihood. The increasing economic crisis of their family is evident from Aswini's narration

We had ten to twelve beeghas of arable land. Our joint family consisted of twelve members. I was the only child of my parents.

My father had two brothers. He was the eldest of them. The pressure on our small holding of land resulted in tension and discord and the joint family broke up. The partition of arable lands and homestead was no solution of the pervasive crisis. The shares were much too tiny to meet the basic needs. Our homestead lands were spread over the area. I lived with my parents at a place known as Puai Naskarer Bazar which was adjacent to the river. One year our arable lands were flooded. This reduced the fertility of those plots to one or one-and-half maunds per beegha. That flooding enhanced the salinity of the soil.

I was then about twenty-five. I had married earlier. The situation in our family was most distressing. A woman of our village worked as a maid-servant in one house at Bhowanipur. The head of that household was a factory owner. I had never been to Calcutta. I requested the woman to take me to her employer so that I could pray to him for some job. The woman helped.

* * *

Anadi Bera, whom we already know as a key person of this colony, was born in his native village Kanjiya in Contai sub-division of Medinipur. Although he cannot exactly identify the events, it is apparent that his childhood spanned through the days of repression following from the 1942 movement, the severe cyclone of October 1942 and the Great Bengal Famine of 1943. In Anadi's own words,

I remember my mother took me with her as she went to hide for the night in a thick wood of plants and fibre. It was during British rule.

There was a terrible flood. It was water flowing everywhere. A very sharp gale

was blowing. I remember the heaps of coconuts. We had to stand for hours in water and clung to big trees for safety.

Then followed the famine when my father died. He was a teacher and a matriculate of those days. I have no other memories of my father's love and care for me.

It appears then that Anadi Bera was born around 1940. After his father's death, Anadi's elder brother, who was an employee of the Bangalakshmi Cotton Mill in Calcutta, looked after the family. Anadi received primary education at Kanjiya Pathsala and then got admission to the neighbouring Manikhasan High School. He got through the annual examination of Class V. Anadi had no strong inclination for studies. He states his own position.

I was attracted to opera plays (yatra), and left the High School after one year. I moved about with opera parties. After several amateur performances, I was for a long time associated with Bhargavaranjan Opera, a renowned group of Medinipur. All this prompted my elder brother to shift me to Calcutta.

Thus, Anadi's migration to Calcutta was not caused by economic difficulties. The role of Anadi's aptitude and inclinations had its influence on his work history and experience. This will be clear in our reflections on the theme of work history.

* * *

Baren Debnath comes from Golahat which is six miles to the west of Nabadwip. Golahat was Baren's birth-place. He is the second son of his parents and fourth among

all the brothers and sisters. His father was an agricultural labourer. Baren migrated to Calcutta all of a sudden at a time of extreme economic distress in consequence of a flood. In his own words,

I was about ten years old at that time. There was a big flood. We had no food at home. A government relief centre was set up at Phulerhat, a station next to Nabadwip. One small potful of gruel made of rice and pulses per each ration card was being distributed from this centre. We had about four cards. My parents were ill. I had to go to collect the gruel. After going for miles in waist-deep water I found a long queue of people waiting for the gruel at the relief centre. Instead of standing in the queue, I suddenly decided to get into a train and reached Haora station in due course.

I had with me only a pot, a metal plate and the ration cards which were intended for receiving and carrying the gruel home from the relief centre. I had to sell the utensils at Haora station to meet my expenses.

This is Baren's narrative of his first entry into the city of Calcutta. His whole life-story gives us the account of many twists and turns including a short period of return to Nabadwip for some time. Some salient points of the rest of Baren's story are likely to feature in his work history. In any case, this sudden journey of ten year old Baren to the city of Calcutta had a decisive influence on how his life was shaped in subsequent years.

* * *

We collected many more life-stories from some other dwellers of the squatters' colony. But they had little of

real significance in regard to the background prior to their settlement in this squatters' colony. Ashu Das came with his mother at a very early age and began living in the slum which was then situated under the present bridge. Dhiren Manna and Hena Mandal are related as brother and sister. They were born in this locality. Hena, a widow, lives with her daughters in the squatters' colony. They work as maid-servants.

We have the examples of Biman Mandal, Ajit Pandit and Mani Chowdhury. At the age of two or three Biman came with his mother to this locality. His father was a share-cropper. Their native village is Naoshoa in Diamond Harbour. After his father's death Biman's mother was pushed to the city in search of a livelihood.

Ajit Pandit has no memories about his village home. He spells out his narrative entirely in terms of his life and experience in this squatters' settlement.

Mani Chowdhury comes from village Naoda in the Falta police station of South 24 Parganas. He is aged about fifty. Mani's father was a worker at a jute mill in Kidderpur. Their joint family had an arable holding of four beeghas. For about 8/10 years after his father's death, Mani stayed in his village and worked as an agricultural labourer. He decided to migrate to Calcutta in the hope of better earnings than what was received in agriculture.

In addition to Hena Mandal mentioned above we had the life-stories of nine women who worked as maid-servants. Their narratives were always short and almost fully confined to a description of their present woes and worries. We find

cryptic references to their childhood spent in rural poverty or in some other slums of the city. In most cases they have come along with their husbands to this settlement.

As for the persons whose life-stories have been cited in excerpts above, we see that economic distress has pushed most of them out of their villages. The pressure of increasing family size on a small and limited holding of land was a frequent influence on such migration. Obviously, employment opportunities outside agriculture are extremely scarce. Family feuds, break up of joint families and partitioning of small properties appear to be matters of common occurrence in the rural life of South 24 Parganas.

B. Work History, Earnings and Level of Living

There are dwellers in the squatters' settlement who have no clear memory of any background other than a sense of constant struggle for bare existence. They present sequences of moving from one work to another and of their continuous living in abject poverty. For example, Rajen Halder tells us that he can recall nothing about his early life in a place named Keneghari of Lot 18 which can be reached in about two hours by a cycle van from the Lakshmi-kantapur railway station. Rajen holds that political conflicts among the various parties like the Congress, CPI(M) and SUC deprived his father of the possession of some lands which had been allotted to him. Rajen left his village since he had found it extremely difficult to live on the meagre wages of the arduous work of agricultural labour and earth-digging.

Rajen came with his family to the Rail Colony about

seventeen years ago. We asked him that how could he be sure of securing a livelihood and shelter in this area. His answer gave us some ideas about the early days of this colony and of its features of settlement.

It was a common practice among the people of our native place to come to this place in Dhakuria. During the construction of the bridge we came to find work and were employed for piling work by a man named Shanti Mandal to do piling work. This locality had only five to six hutments in those days. One of my cousins (son of my father's elder brother) settled in a shack of this area. We stayed with him for two to four days. I rented a shack at the rent of Rs.20 per month. It is now seventeen years that I had first settled in the colony. The present rent of the same shack is Rs.35. It is owned by Bharat Mandal who has nine shacks.

We find a few gaps in Rajen's narrative. The bridge was completed in 1966. Rajen's visit to Dhakuria and his work under the supervision of Shanti Mandal was much earlier than his settlement in this colony. A period of seventeen years as stated by him implies that Rajen started living in this colony in 1971 (the interview was recorded in 1988). There are then no clear indications in Rajen's narrative of what happened during the years which elapsed between his days of work for the construction of the bridge and his eventual settlement in this colony. Obviously, for Rajen, life is a continuous wandering for mere subsistence.

Rajen is now nearing sixty. He tells us of his work history.

My family consists of my wife, a son, his wife, and their two sons, one aged three years and another four months. A younger brother (aged about 55) of mine lives with us. He works as jogar (helper) in various activities and can make a monthly contribution of Rs.100. My wife earns Rs.50/- as a domestic servant. She does not keep well these days. My son is a helper in building construction. If he gets work, my son can earn Rs.18 a day. I have worked for many years as a helper in the building of huts. I have lost the physical ability to do heavy work. My present occupation is that of a helper to a chief cook who takes charge of catering to ceremonies like wedding, annaprasan, sradh etc. This work is seasonal and I often remain without any work. Just now I have no work for about two months.

Rajen and his entire family live in abject poverty. Their per capita average earnings per month are about Rs.80. They share one single room where a bunk of very cheap wooden plank has been put up to provide additional accommodation for Rajen's son and his wife.

* * *

We have already noted in the observations about the 'background' that Biman Mandal came with his widowed mother to this locality. He was then a kid of only two and half years. This was in the forties. Biman says that he was in his early twenties at the time of the construction of the bridge. Bimal's present age is nearly fifty years. His work history proceeds as follows.

There was a timber yard in the area now under the bridge. We lived in a shack close to the timber yard. My mother worked as a domestic servant to maintain our family. At

the age of thirteen I first joined work in an eating shop by name 'Ukiler Hotel' near the level crossing. I had to wash utensils. No definite pay was fixed for me. I was given my meals. My hands and feet had sores on being continually drenched in water for the kind of work that had to be done at the eating shop. I could do this work for a few months only. My mother did not allow me to continue this work.

A young neighbour worked as a mason's helper. He took me to Behala for work in the same line. For some time I used to live with this man in Behala. The work that I did was that of a helper carrying bricks, sand and other materials for building construction. I came home to my mother once in a week. I did not know anything about my dues for this work. The neighbour, who had introduced me to the contractors, received my dues and paid the money to my mother. For some time I shifted to the work of loading lorries. It did not suit me. I was not tall enough to do such loading work.

Biman's eldest brother was a mason and he lived in his separate establishment. The second brother worked in a ration shop. He lived with his mother. They had two sisters. The eldest sister had been married to a person in Panchanantala. This man was a fish seller at the Gariahat market. Biman was still in search of a stable occupation. At a time when the bridge was under construction, Biman worked as a helper for one contractor who was a rod supplier. Biman tells of this experience.

I had to carry big and heavy rods. The daily wage was Rs.3. This work was exacting and tiresome. The hours were inconvenient. No time could be spared for having regular meals. All this impaired my health. I could not work for a long period.

Biman went to work in a decorator's shop. He is still a pandal worker. The decorators' business has the common name of 'pandal company' among the dwellers of the squatters' settlement. Let us then take note of Biman's experience of this work in his own words.

I started work at a wage of Rs.3 per day. There have been several upward revisions of the wage rate through the years. The role of the union is noteworthy. Currently, the daily wage rate has reached a level of Rs.18 to Rs.20. I get Rs.19 a day when there is work.

There are lean periods in the decorators' business. These are the months when no major pujas are scheduled in the almanac. Further, Hindu wedding is not permitted in several months of the year. In the absence of such ceremonies no demand comes up for the decorator's service. The workers have to look for alternative means of earning. Biman also works in colour painting of buildings. A painter initiated Biman to brush work. Biman tells us how he can now combine the two types of work.

I go for colour painting when no work is available in the decorator's business. It is now two weeks that I have been engaged in colour painting. The previous weeks kept me busy in pandal work. I can do distemper and plastic painting. I am also capable of painting the outside walls of a building. I cannot work with Plaster-of-Paris. It involves heavy toil. The leader of the labour gang in which I work does not usually take up assignments involving the use of Plaster-of-Paris. The daily wage rate in colour painting is at least Rs.30. For plastic painting on piece rate a day's earning may go upto Rs.45.

However, I cannot hope to get work in colour painting throughout the year. There is little work during the rains. Further, I am afraid of working for the high-rise buildings which are so prominent among new constructions. I feel unsafe to climb so high and then stand on the scaffolding while working at such heights.

I find another point of attraction in pandal work. It has more scope for overtime work. I have never worked overtime in colour painting. Further, in case of overtime work through a whole night in pandal business, the employer provides cooked meals for the workers.

Biman's wife worked earlier as an ayah in a nursing home at Ganguly Bagan. The marriage was arranged by Biman's mother. Now with no one to look after the children, Biman's wife has given up her work. Biman earns on the average Rs.600 per month from pandal work. This is at times supplemented by work in colour painting. The family consists of Biman, his wife and three daughters. It appears that in terms of per capita monthly earnings, Biman and his family may be placed just above the poverty line only in case of adequate supplementary earnings from colour painting.

* * *

Ajit Pandit starts his narrative with the words 'I got married ... I had to work for earning my daily bread.' He has no memories of his childhood and native village. Ajit was brought up in his maternal uncle's house. They were all very poor. Ajit cannot say anything definite about his age. It appears on some indirect evidence that Ajit is now aged between sixty and sixtyfive. While Ajit is unable to tell us the name of his native village, he refers to south

Jaynagar as the area wherefrom he came to Dhakuria. He came before the construction of the Dhakuria Overhead Bridge. Ajit's account of his work history is full of abrupt twists and turns and not at all free from elements of incoherence. Let us note the course of events narrated by Ajit Pandit.

I worked for some months as a helper in masonry. The daily wage was between two and half and three and half rupees. I could get work for three to five days in a week. After doing this work for some months I shifted to colour painting of buildings. Such work of painting was more in demand in New Alipore.

I had to do any work that would fetch me an earning. I did the work of earth-digging, harvesting of rice and its threshing. The payments were four to five rupees for a whole piece of work. Still those were the days when I was happy. My age was between twenty and twenty-five. One could always get some work to make an earning. The pressure of so many men had not yet made a gainful work so scarce as it were these days. As a helper in the work of masonry or colour painting I used to get assignments from a shop in Dhakuria.

All his life till now Ajit has worked as a helper either in masonry or in colour painting of buildings. It is now about three years that he has been doing no work. He is too old for arduous manual work. His wife still works as a domestic servant in two houses and earns about Rs.100 per month. One of Ajit's sons is a minibus driver. But he lives separately and does not offer much of any assistance to his father.

It is then not very clear how Ajit meets his minimal living expenses. He was known as a man of occult power. According to Ajit such powers cannot be wielded by a man

who is old and toothless. Thus, Ajit is no longer capable of having any earnings from the use of his so-called occult power. The answers we could get from Ajit in reply to our questions about his present sources of livelihood contradicted the earlier information he had given us about his retirement from work.

I still do some work as a helper (jogar) in miscellaneous activities, sometimes helping a mason, and at times in gardening. The latter suits me more even though such work is rare. It fetches a daily wage of Rs.20 plus food. My sons-in-law, who work as colour painters of buildings, help me in cases of illness and also provide my clothings.

Thus, Ajit Pandit continues to live in abject poverty. He is not in a position to explain cogently to us the sources of his present livelihood. This is how he lives an old age of hand-to-mouth existence along with his wife.

* * *

In our observations about the 'background' we presented the story of dramatic migration of Baren Debnath from Nabadwip to Calcutta. He was then a boy of about ten. Even as a small boy, Baren, the son of a very poor agricultural labourer, worked as a domestic servant and also in a tea shop. Later, Baren's mother was also pushed to Calcutta and worked as a domestic servant. Baren developed a tiny business of selling vegetables at the Gariahat market. His younger brother joined him in the same business.

They lived in the very spot of their business. Their mother also came to live with them. They could

purchase a plot of land at Ghutiari Sharif and set up their own hutment. Baren married a girl with whom he had fallen in love. His eldest brother also married. All of them started living in Ghutiari Sharif. Being unable to live in accord with the rest of his family, Baren left with his wife and settled in the Gobindapur Rail Colony Gate 1. His mother-in-law was an old resident of the colony. It was around this time that Baren suffered from a chronic chest pain which stood in the way of his continuous work. From this point Baren gave his narrative as follows.

I could not do regular work due to my intermittent chest pain. My connection with the vegetable business had already ceased because of family discord. At times I worked as a helper in masonry. This involved the heavy work of carrying bricks and bags of cement to the second or third floors under construction. I also had to mix sand and cement for the work of the masons. Because of chest pain I left this work. For about a year I tried to work as a cycle rickshaw puller. I could not continue for more than a year because of the recurrence of my chest pain.

If I could get it directly, the helper's work fetched me an income of Rs.5 per day. In case I had to go through a contractor, he gave me Rs.4 after deducting his commission. Rickshaw pulling required that I would keep a deposit of Rs.25 with the owner. I had to pay Rs.2 as hiring charge per day. My earnings were between Rs.9 and Rs.12 per day. Since my chest pain did not allow me to continue in rickshaw-pulling I had to persuade 'mastermashay' to secure for me the job of a watchman.

I was assigned to a building near Mallikbazar. My monthly earning was Rs.225. I was soon transferred to the Birla Planetarium. The work was that of a security guard to manage the queue of those waiting to buy tickets. I could work for two days only. A

racket of pickpockets and other miscreants had been creating trouble. They had an understanding with the watchmen. They threatened me with razors and knives.

I was then transferred to a small fan factory near Piyasi Cinema at Behala. My monthly pay was increased by Rs.25. After serving for about eight months, I was asked to work in double shifts. The other watchman, who was from Bangla Desh, left the job. I continued to work in double shifts for some time. I had to quit this job because of my illness.

I started a petty tea shop in an open strip of the locality. The spot was adjacent to a new building under construction. I earned what I could from this tea shop for about two years. Meanwhile the building was completed. I could persuade the men concerned to appoint me as a watchman of this new building. My present pay is Rs.400 per month. Two of the other watchmen being absent for some time, the rest of us are sharing their work. This fetches me five to six hundred rupees per month. My wife works as a domestic servant in one household and earns Rs.100 per month.

Baren Debnath's narrative tells us of a lot of movements from one work to another since his boyhood. No serious ailment was diagnosed by doctors who examined Baren for his chest pain. Baren says he had an injury in his childhood due to a fall while bathing in the pond. This pain, in Baren's view, lingers as a trace of that injury. Baren's family consists of five members including a son and two daughters. Considering the monthly earnings of Baren and his wife, it appears that their income capability is not sufficient for living above the poverty line.

The local Anganwari worker informed us that Baren's

mother-in-law had been working as a helper at the ICDS Centre for many years. We get a different picture of Baren from the Anganwari worker. Baren is very lazy and also heavily addicted to drinking. His wife has to work hard for the maintenance of their family. Thus, Baren's long narrative may have many elements and nuances which he devised for concealing some truths about his life and apathy to work.

* * *

Shefali Makal was born in Roydighi. The place is located in lot 24 of South 24 Parganas. Her father was a marginal peasant-cum-share cropper. She came to the Rail Colony after her marriage. Her husband was a hand-cart puller. Before coming to the Rail Colony Shefali had worked as a domestic servant in some flats of the government quarters in the Shyambazar and Sealdah areas. Shefali's narrative puts together her own work-history with that of her husband.

My husband did not earn more than ten to twelve rupees per day. He pulled a hand-cart carrying vegetables from the Sealdah to the Jodhpur (i.e. Jodhpur Park) market. It is now about six years that my husband is no longer a hand-cart puller. He now works as a helper in cooking for wedding ceremonies.

Shefali is now aged between thirty and thirtyfive years. Her eldest son is eleven years old. She has two more sons and a daughter. The daughter is just one year old. Shefali began working as a domestic servant about seven years ago when her husband had an attack of tuberculosis. In her own words.

I started working as a part-time maid servant in three houses in Panditia Road. In

one house I worked only in the morning. My monthly pay was Rs.60. In the two other houses I worked in two shifts both in the morning and evening. I got a monthly pay of Rs.80 in one house and of Rs.60 in another. My work was that of washing utensils and clothes, grinding and rolling spices etc.

I went out at six in the morning. The children went with me. I could return home at noon between 12 and 1-30. It would be about three or four when we had our meal after I could finish cooking. In the places I worked they gave me tea and snacks. I gave some food like muri (parched rice), pieces of loaf, or chira (pressed rice) to my children who accompanied me.

Shefali had to give up work when she was in a state of advanced pregnancy. She started working again a year after the birth of her daughter.

I work for the family living in the ground floor of this house (Shefali points to a building near the hutment of the Jana Kalyan Samiti). The other house where I now work is in Dhakuria. My work relates to washing of utensils and clothes, carrying drinking water from the nearby tubewell, sweeping of rooms and rubbing their floors clean with water. I work in two shifts (morning and evening) at the Dhakuria house. I am paid Rs.65 per month. I work only in the morning at the house in this neighbourhood. My monthly pay is Rs.40. In addition to pay I am given tea and some snacks.

Shefali's husband had an attack of tuberculosis seven years ago. It was a desperate situation. The local people helped in his treatment by raising funds from the dwellers of the Rail Colony. The treatment was in major part free of cost. He had his treatment at the Bangur Hospital and then at the Chittaranjan Hospital, Park Circus.

At times, Shefali had to buy medicines which were quite expensive and had gone out of stock in the hospital. Her mother-in-law helped them. Shefali says she had to beg even in those critical days. Their eldest daughter (2nd issue) died of tuberculosis at the age of three and half years. The fourth son also suffered from the same disease.

While describing the present state of things, Shefali tells us again about her husband. Her husband works as a helper in one unit of catering business. This is what she described elsewhere 'as a helper in cooking for wedding ceremonies.'

The 'caterer owners' helped during my husband's illness. I could get some money on going to them. They also gave me some food (e.g., fish, meat, vegetables) from their stock.

My husband had a daily wage of Rs.15. He now gets Rs.20 per day.

My husband has again fallen ill. He is having medicine.

Even when my husband is fit to work, there is no certainty of getting work everyday. The catering business is extremely seasonal.

The narrative of Shefali Makal presents a family in utter distress. It appears that the serious illness of Shefali's husband is dangerously mixed up with their having further children. Her husband is often debarred from any work due to an aggravation of his illness. Shefali had to work at home and outside from six in the morning to nine in

the evening for earning a livelihood and the maintenance of the family. Even then her earnings as a domestic servant are extremely insufficient to meet the minimal needs of a family of six including four children and an adult male who remains liable to a relapse of his tuberculosis.

* * *

Bela Dasi was born in Simla, a village in the Diamond Harbour sub-division of South 24 Parganas. She has very few specific memories of her childhood. Her father was a bidi-worker and migrated to Calcutta when Bela was just a kid. They lived in the settlement which had to be demolished for the construction of the Dhakuria Overhead Bridge. Bela's father received some compensation and returned to his native village. He came back to Calcutta to live with his family in the Rail Colony. Bela was married at the age of fifteen. Her husband was a mason.

Before her marriage Bela worked as a domestic servant in one house at Babubagan. She received a monthly pay of Rs.30. Her husband did not allow her to work outside their own home. He was a mason and received a daily wage of Rs.25 in those days. Bela had to work again as a domestic servant after her husband's death. He died about nine years ago. Bela's account of her own routine of work runs as follows:

I work in two houses at Hindusthan Park. They are in the neighbourhood of Jyoti Basu's house. I get a monthly salary of Rs.70 from each house. Washing of utensils, grinding and rolling spices, fetching drinking water from a nearby tubewell, bringing milk from the local booth, miscellaneous day-to-day shopping -such

are my chores in both the houses. I go for work in the morning between 7 and 7-30. I can return home by 10-30 and do the cooking. My afternoon shifts of work begin around 3-30. I can finally return home by 6 in the evening. My afternoon work consists of washing utensils, rubbing the rooms and kitchen clean with water.

I have continued work in the two houses and at the same salary for all these years. I am now unwell. My sister is working in my place. She will quit as and when I get fit for work. I went to the dispensary to have medicine for my ailment of fever. The doctor gave medicine. I was advised to have rest for three months. The doctor said that I had been suffering from anaemia.

I have no desire to change the houses where I work as a domestic servant. These people maintain good relations. My sister assures that I can return to work on getting fit. Earlier on one occasion I could not work for a month. Still I was given the full month's payment. During the Fugas my present employers give me pairs of saris, petticoats and blouses.

Bela Dasi's youngest son lives with her. He is still too young to do any work. His eldest son works in a sports goods' shop. The second son pulls a cycle-van for the delivery of various consumers goods at shops. Both of them are married and live in separate establishments. Now during Bela's illness, her eldest son gives her some assistance. When she is fit and working, Bela tries to manage on her own. Since her earnings are not even Rs.150 per month, Bela is in continuous debt to meet the bare living expenses of her son and herself. Usually, she borrows an amount from her sister at the end of a month and repays the loan in the beginning of the next month. This is the position

of Bela Dasi at the age of fifty.

* * *

Some of the women interviewed by us could give no elaborate narratives. They were all working as domestic servants. Let us then present brief sketches of their position.

Menaka Naskar gives her birth-place at Lot 9 near Kakdwip in South 24 Parganas. She was married to a man who was much older than Menaka. He was incapable of hard work. Being in extreme distress, Menaka came to Calcutta and started work in a house at Bhowanipur. Her children lived on the pavement. She rented a shack in this Rail Colony for their accommodation. Her children work in a shop. The elder son gets Rs.15 per month and the younger Rs.10. They are twelve and ten years old respectively. Menaka gets a monthly payment of Rs.50 plus her food.

Sarala Naskar comes from the village Dakshin Matilal in Lakshmikantapur of South 24 Parganas. After Sarala's marriage, she accompanied her husband to this Rail Colony. As a helper in masonry work her husband earns Rs.15 to Rs.20 per day. He gets no work on many days. Sarala works as a domestic servant in two houses at Dhakuria. Her monthly pay is Rs.80 in one house and Rs.30 in another. They have three daughters, the eldest aged eight years and the youngest one and half year. Sarala goes on saying 'We are extremely poor. It is awful distress!'

Suniti Barman refers to Lakshmikantapur as her native place. It is about 18 years that she had come to this Rail Colony with her husband. Her husband works as a helper

in carrying bricks, sand and earth. When he gets work, a daily wage of Rs.20 is received by him. Suniti says, 'I work as a domestic servant in one house. My work is to wash utensils and clothes, sweep rooms and rub their floors clean with water. I get a monthly pay of Rs.50. Formerly, I worked in five houses. I have cut down work because of my poor health.' They have five children. The eldest daughter has been married. Suniti is not definite about the total monthly earnings of their family. It all depends on the frequency of her husband's work. Suniti says, 'We can somehow manage to meet our minimum needs.'

Sabita Sardar's native village is Kalikapur. Her father-in-law's place is in Haldarer Chawk. Both these villages are in Lakshmikantapur. Formerly, her husband was a daily commuter to Calcutta from Lakshmikantapur. He worked in a transformer factory on a monthly pay of Rs.300. Sabita says, 'This amount was not enough for the maintenance of our large family. My husband left the factory and joined the work of a helper. We settled in this Rail Colony. My husband then became the victim of a disease. In summer heat he gets rashes all over the body. His hands, legs and feet are swollen. He is then incapable of any work. I work as a domestic servant in four houses. My mother-in-law has long been a full time resident domestic servant in a house. She helps us in many ways. My mother gets from her employers the clothes for my two daughters. She comes daily from Lakshmikantapur to do domestic work in two houses. This is how we go on living in poverty and distress.'

* * *

Hena Mandal was born in Panchanantala. Her father

worked as an electrical mechanic. Hena's mother worked as a cook in one household of this locality. Her father died when Hena was only three years old. They were two sisters and two brothers. The elder sister had been married before their father's death. The elder brother was a fish-seller in the Gariahat market. Hena and her next brother (Dhiren Manna whose own account will be separately presented) were very young when their father died.

Hena read for some years in Jagriti Vidyapith, a free school sponsored by the Marwaris of the locality. The school had a short life. It was situated at a site where now stands a huge multistoried building. Hena did not go to any other school. She remembers the big fire in Panchanan-tala. It destroyed the slum which sprawled along the lands beneath the present overhead bridge. A large timber yard was gutted.

Hena was aged thirteen years when she married a man of her own choice. This man, Atul Mandal, was a rod mechanic. Hena and Atul had been in love since the days of their early meetings at a place near Hena's school. Hena's mother and elder brother were opposed to this marriage. However, Atul's mother was ready to solemnize the marriage at her own place. This resolute stand scared Hena's close kins. Her mother and elder brother then accepted Atul as the groom. They performed the wedding ceremony in their home. Hena started working as a domestic servant after her husband's death in 1981. Let us present her account from the earlier point when she had become a resident of the rail colony after her marriage.

The bridge was then in the last stage of its construction. Two years after our marriage the bridge was opened for vehicular traffic, and a year earlier 'electric trains' had been running on these tracks.

In the process of his work, my husband moved from one building under construction to another. He got a daily wage between Rs.3.75 and Rs.4. For about fifteen days in a month my husband did not go for any work. My mother-in-law had her returns from a business. In view of this source of income my husband thought it unnecessary to work for more than fifteen days a month.

Hena was asked about the nature of her mother-in-law's business. She lowered her voice and said

My mother-in-law sold country liquor. This was one reason of my mother's opposition to my marriage. My mother-in-law made a daily net earning of Rs.100 to Rs.150 from this trade. It was so arranged that she could pick up the bladders filled with liquor which were thrown from the running train. My husband thought that even without his earnings the family would face no difficulties. His mother's trade income was quite sufficient. This was behind his apathy to work. The police knew about this business. They arrested none and left with some payment between Rs.30 and Rs.50. On some occasions the 'excise people' would arrest my mother-in-law and drag her for further interrogation. While being taken to the police station, she was always accompanied by her younger sons.

Hena's first daughter was born within a year after her marriage. There was then a wide rumour that the rail colony would be demolished. Hena's mother-in-law rented a room near Ramlal Bazar and removed most of the goods in the household to that place. As desired by her mother-in-

law, Hena shifted to the same room and lived there with her daughter. On a very hot summer day Hena bathed the child in plenty of water. This led to a severe attack of fever and the child died on its way to hospital. Let us then note the course of events in Hena's own words.

After my daughter's death I lived for sometime with my mother at Panchanantala. My mother-in-law wanted my husband to set up a separate household of his own. She rented a hutment for this purpose and told me, 'Live with your husband in a separate household. Tell me in case of any need. I'll help you. Don't tell my son about this assurance of help. He will then remain his lazy self.' Her design worked well. My husband was no longer a shirker. He did regular work as a rod mechanic. I do not remember his daily earnings during this period. He died suddenly in 1981 leaving me with four daughters who were born between 1972 and 1973.

After my husband's death I lived for about two years on the savings left by him. I had never worked before as a domestic servant. My husband did not like it. The introduction of 'electric trains' stopped my mother-in-law's liquor business. The bladders could no longer be thrown from the running train. They would burst in the process due to the higher speed of the 'electric trains'. She did not shift to any other work or business. My mother-in-law owned a number of shacks in the Rail Colony. She received rent from their occupiers. My husband was her eldest son. Among her three other sons, one is a watchman, one a cycle-rickshaw puller, and the youngest works at a factory in Diamond Harbour.

I could see how my holding of money was being depleted. Three of my daughters were

in the school, I decided to work as a domestic servant. This would enable us to meet our bare living expenses. It was my desire to continue the education of my daughters. I requested my mother-in-law and husband's brothers to help me with Rs.150 per month so that my three elder daughters could continue their studies. None of them had a positive response to my request. I went to work along with my daughters.

We asked Hena Mandal whether she had to get her work through someone's help and contact. Hena replied that on her request, some women, who had already been in domestic service, gave her the necessary information. She commented that one could always get work in domestic service through such a network of information and contact. It is however possible to introduce only those persons who are known to be fully dependable and trustworthy. Hena proceeded to give the account of her own work.

I started work at a Marwari household in Maharaja Thakur Road. It was a first floor flat. Very soon I got work on the second floor of the same building and then in a neighbouring house. My monthly pay was Rs.50 in each household. I had to wash utensils and clothes, sweep the rooms and wipe their floors clean with water and fetch drinking water. My two daughters aged nine years and seven years helped me in this work. The two younger ones stayed at home. Since I had no experience of such work, it became my need to have the help of my daughters. I went out between 6-30 and 7 in the morning and could return home around 1-30 at noon. It would be about three to four in the afternoon when we had our day's meal after cooking. I had to go again for work around this time. There was less work in the second shift. It was only washing of utensils and sweeping rooms.

In the beginning I was very slow at work. After some time I got used to it and worked faster. In all the households where I worked, the employers were nice in their behaviour with me and my daughters. It is still an occasional pleasure for me to visit those houses although I left their work many years ago. I worked for three years in those houses. An ailment forced me to leave work. I had a severe pain behind my neck and my right arm and hand ached when I did the washing of utensils and clothes.

I took up the work of tending a baby. I joined work when the baby was only three months old. The mother of this baby was a college teacher and the father a lawyer. Their house was in Dhakuria. The parents needed a person who would take all care of the baby when they were out of their home for professional duties.

As I had joined this work, all my pains of the neck, hands and arms were cured. I did not go to any doctor. Obviously, the strain of washing utensils and clothes was the source of my trouble. I got a monthly pay of Rs.215 plus one meal for tending the baby. My usual working hours were from eight in the morning to seven in the evening. I stayed for some time even after the baby's mother had returned home in the afternoon. I had my bath and mid-day meal in that house. The snacks and tea for the evening were prepared by me. I took the baby round in open air for sometime towards the late afternoon. My main work was to take care of the baby, do its bathing and wash its clothes. In addition I did some cooking and sundry shopping for the household.

Hena worked for three years in this household. The 'baby' grew up and began going to school. There was no need for an ayah to tend a baby. Hena is now engaged in cooking in two nearby houses. Her total monthly earnings are Rs.250.

I go to one of these houses, at seven in the evening when the resident couple returns home from office. I do their cooking at night. In the other house I cook in the morning. I go at seven in the morning and finish cooking before the couple, who dwells in the house, leaves for their day's work in offices. I get a monthly pay Rs.125 from each house. My second daughter does sweeping in a photo studio every morning. She also goes to school. Her monthly earning is Rs.60. The eldest daughter works in two houses of the locality and earns Rs.150 a month. My husband opened a tea shop sometime before his death. I now get a monthly rent of Rs.50 for this hutment.

Hena Mandal is aged about forty years. She became a widow more than ten years ago. Since then she has been working as a domestic servant in various assignments. She has four daughters. The two elder ones have been sharing Hena's work-load from their very early life. Both of them are earners. One works at two houses in the neighbourhood of the Rail Colony. The second daughter sweeps the floor of a photo studio. Hena has arranged to send her third daughter to a free boarding school near Magrahat. She reads in Class V. The second and the youngest daughters are students of the local Ram Roy School.

The total monthly earnings of this family of four amount to Rs.510 including the hut-rent of Rs.50 received by Hena. Their per capita monthly income is below the poverty line. While giving no impression of any affluence, Hena's account indicates no condition of abject poverty. All their earnings are exhausted in meeting the family's food requirements. Still Hena does not talk much about their poverty and shortages. She mentions that their clothing needs are met from what she and her eldest daughter receive from the

houses where they work.

* * *

Susama Samanta comes from a slum area of Shyambazar in north Calcutta. They are two brothers and four sisters. Their native place was in Mathurapur of South 24 Parganas. Susama's father migrated to Bardhaman. He was a seller of parched rice (muri). They moved to Calcutta when the family had been passing through severe economic hardship. Susama was born in Calcutta. Her father had then taken to pandal work for decorators. Susama is the youngest of their sisters. They lived in a slum-like settlement of Mohanbagan Lane in north Calcutta. Susama had to join domestic service at a very early age. She narrates the nature and circumstances of the work during her childhood.

Our father suffered from mental derangement for several years. We were in extreme economic distress.

My mother worked in domestic service for several houses. Our eldest sister, who had assisted my mother, was married at an early age and left for her father-in-law's place in the Sundarban region. During our father's serious illness, the second sister started working in our house at a monthly pay of Rs.25. She had been living in the Bally-Uttarpara area. The third sister was fixed by our mother to work at a house in Mohanbagan Lane. She received a monthly pay of Rs.25. All this was devised to cope with the rising economic pressure caused by our father's illness.

I was then aged about ten years. My mother arranged that I could stay with a family in a house near the Hedua tank. No payments were made for my service. I had my food and received clothings. My work was

light. It related to petty shopping and minor errands. I stayed with this family for two years. This was my first experience of domestic service.

Among Susama's brothers, one was the youngest of them all. He was too young to do any work when their father had that attack of mental illness. Their elder brother always lived in the native village of Mathurapur and worked as a marginal cultivator and wage labourer. After prolonged treatment their father was cured of his illness. He joined pandal work again.

My mother called back all her daughters from domestic service. The second and the third sisters were married on the same date. Their husbands were inhabitants of Mathurapur. One of them worked in cultivation and the other was an electrical mechanic who came regularly to Calcutta for work. As stated by Susama, while living in Calcutta, their family had links with Mathurapur where they went for seven to ten days on the occasion of pujas and fairs.

Susama was married at the age of fourteen. This marriage was arranged by a sister-in-law of her elder brother. Susama's husband was a distant cousin of this woman. The marriage was performed in her place at Mathurapur. Susama's father-in-law had his native place in Diamond Harbour. All her in-laws were present at the marriage. However, it later became clear that they had reservations about the marriage. There was a furtive sexual relationship between Susama's husband, a cycle rickshaw puller, and the woman who arranged this marriage. They lived together in a shack of the Rail Colony. Susama was brought to live in the same shack after

her marriage.

Susama had to bear with a lot of torture and persecution by her husband. Once she attempted suicide by having poison. She was advised by all to have patience. Even that woman moved to set up a separate household for Susama and her husband. She told Susama's husband to assume the proper responsibilities of a married man. Still he took some more time to stabilize his own marital life. Susama gives her account of how his husband was changed and of their life thereafter.

We had a daughter in the second year after our marriage. This brought about a change in my husband. He ceased to be drawn to that woman. For about three years after our marriage he continued to work as a rickshaw puller. It is now seven years that my husband has been working as a helper in a minibus. Our daughter is now aged seven years. We have a son of five years.

My husband does not like my working outside home. I follow my own wish in this matter. I like to have things of my own choice. The children have their needs. All this cannot be met without my earnings. My husband has never given me either an ornament, or a fine cloth. The necessity for some good things of life, as I like them, prompts me to work. I contribute no more than Rs.50 towards day-to-day family expenses. My husband would like to have larger contributions from me. I don't yield to his persuasions.

I started working in one apartment of the Manjusha building. The monthly pay was Rs.70. I had to do all household chores except cooking. Due to ill health I could not continue after five months. Recently I have started working again in two houses. One is situated

behind the bus stand, and the other near the Kali temple. I do all household chores except cooking. My monthly pay is Rs.100 from each house.

I go out between 6 and 7 in the morning. The work in the two houses is over by 10-30. Sometimes I return home for half an hour after the completion of work in one house. Taking both the houses, it takes me an hour to complete my work in the late afternoon shift. My husband bears the responsibility for providing the daily needs of the family. Not that I don't give anything for such purchases. But most of my earnings go to buy my medicine and also to provide for the sundry needs of the two children.

Susama's earning is distinct in the sense that it is spent to have things which are not essential for the bare maintenance of their family. She talks of her own needs of better clothings and other fancies. No less important is her concern for fulfilling some needs of children's liking. The per capita monthly income level of the family is Rs.300. Some more implications of this pattern of income and expenditure should be revealed when we take account of the broader cultural features of Susama's life story in the next section.

* * *

Dhiren Manna is the younger brother of Hena Mandal whose account has already informed us of their childhood in Panchanantala. Their father was an electrical mechanic, and mother worked as a domestic servant. Dhiren describes how he seized upon the end of her mother's sari and followed her nagging for a few paises while she had been on her way to the work place. If he got one paise, Dhiren

could buy a loaf. His mother always tried her best to give him something before she left for work in the morning. Dhiren started working in a house at Kankulia. He was then aged about ten years.

I did not have much work. My work related to fetching milk in the morning, dusting the doors and windows and a few other errands. I had a monthly pay of Rs.10 to 12. They gave me food. I stayed in that house. This marked the end of my studies. We had no money. I was pushed to manage my livelihood by working in the houses of habus who engaged domestic servants.

My brother-in-law (sister's husband) told me that such work was demeaning and without any future. He got me the job of a helper at one lathe workshop in Bhowanipur. I was paid a daily wage of twelve annas (i.e. 75 paise). This enabled me to cover my transport and tiffin expenses. The workshop manufactured sockets for the Usha fan. I was then aged about sixteen years. After working for some time I requested the owner to raise my wages. The owner told me to learn more work.

I started spending about four annas a day for the mechanic whom I helped. This amount was meant for the mechanic's tea and snacks. He lived in Subhasgram. When the mechanic went to have tea, I had my practical exercise of running the machine. The employer could see how I had been learning the mechanical operations.

On an attack of chicken pox, the mechanic went on a long leave for about one month and a half. The employer asked me to work as a substitute for the mechanic. I made it clear that my rate of outturn would remain below that of the mechanic. The employer said such lowering of production would not matter. I broke the drill. The employer did not rebuke

me. On the first day of my new assignment I cut about twenty units less than what could be done by the mechanic. Gradually I got well set for all kinds of work. Beginning my machine work on a wage of twelve annas for one shift of eight hours, I could advance to a monthly pay of Rs.150. I can still recall that after my first day's work at the machine, the employer gave me ten rupees and told me to offer puja at the Kali temple before coming for work on the next day. I worked for six years and left this job because of differences with the employer over the issues of increasing my salary and bonus payments.

Dhiren adds that before joining the lathe workshop, he worked for some time in a tea shop. He cannot recall what he was paid at the tea shop. He was aged about twenty-two years when he left the job at the lathe workshop. His elder brother started fish selling at the Gariahat market. Dhiren helped in laying out the selling spot everyday. He says that their family was in a better state during the period of this fish business. It is now about sixteen years that his elder brother set up a separate household after his marriage.

As advised by Dhiren's brother-in-law (Hena's husband) they raised a shack of their own in the Rail Colony. Dhiren's mother and elder brother made the necessary provision of money. Dhiren was then without any work. He sold his gold ring and contributed its proceeds towards the cost of raising the shack. Let us take note of the stage of Dhiren's life without employment.

After leaving my job I spent my time in the Rail Colony in the company of groups playing cards. I got one to two rupees a day

by sweeping the floor of a nearby decorator's shop. I was still a bachelor and could have my food at home. A rupee per day was enough to meet my expenses for seeing cinema shows, I did not look for a job elsewhere.

One of my friends took me to a man in Moulali-Sealdah area. This man had the intention of starting the business of lathe machine operation. I told him that if he could bring the machinery, the rest of the arrangements for setting up a unit might be left to me. Alongwith a few others whom I called from my former work-place, the workshop was organised by me in all details. It was ready for starting work. After I had initiated some local young men to the work of lathe machine, the employer said that it would not be possible to keep us employed at the salary fixed for us. I declined to continue work under such circumstances. I was back to my gossip and card-playing corners in the Rail Colony. Since I had no income, it was really a state of unemployment. Still I had a sense of pride. Having the necessary skill, I would refuse to accept any offer of work without proper payments.

Dhiren did occasional work as a helper in building construction. He learnt more about the use of rods. There was however no regularity of getting work. Dhiren was not at all happy about this state of things. It was at this stage that Dhiren got the offer for a job in an entirely new line of work.

One evening when I had been moving round the area adjacent to Gate 1, one friend of mine approached me with the offer of a job. The land on the immediate south-east of the hutment of the Jana Kalyan Samiti was then an open space. I

was required to act as its watchman. The point was to prevent any encroachment by illegal occupants. In case of any such threat, I was to pass the information immediately to the office of the estate-owners. I accepted this assignment at a monthly pay of Rs.80.

In course of my work as a watchman, this land was sold to a new owner. I came to know of this from the earlier owner's office where I used to go every month to receive my pay. The new owner tipped me twenty rupees on his first visit to this site and assured me that I would continue in my present work. The new owning company called me to their office and gave an appointment letter which specified a monthly salary of Rs.150. I was very happy about this rise from Rs.80 to Rs.150.

It was in 1976. I had married a year earlier. We were in love before marriage. My present monthly pay is Rs.274.

The multi-storied Manjusha Building was constructed on this site. The representative of the company which conducted the construction was always nice to me and helped me if I had fallen in any trouble. He left after the completion of the building. The new occupiers took possession of the apartments. I was told that my services were no longer required. I was dismissed.

It was then that we took a move from the Jana Kalyan Samiti. We were guided and advised by 'mastermashay'. It was our demand that the Manjusha Building should recruit its watchmen from among the young men of this locality. Indeed, through all these years, in addition to myself some more young people of the locality had been appointed as watchmen of the construction site and the building under construction. We all faced dismissal. There were tension and conflicts over the issue of our continuance in work. Eventually the residents of

the building agreed to place our jobs under a company whom they entrusted with the maintenance of security. Since then we have been working under the security company.

For some time after our marriage my wife did not work outside home. She wished to work when our needs increased in result of the birth of several children. Working in two houses she has a total monthly earning of Rs.150. I make some additional earnings by washing and cleaning cars. We have, two daughters and a son. They are all in schools. The eldest daughter also does a lot of household chores as her mother has to go out for work.

Thus, Dhiren Manna continues to work as a watchman and car-cleaner. It appears from his narrative that Dhiren learned with considerable effort the skill of operating the lathe-machine. When we asked him about his removal from skilled mechanical work, Dhiren justified his decision to quit the first factory. There was no scope for diversification in that unit which only manufactured sockets for Usha fans. Dhiren extended his perspective of skilled work to wider areas. He has got no opportunities. On the other hand, Dhiren's work-history, as presented in his own words, also gives an impression of a man who, in his younger days, was rather unconcerned about getting a job in the sphere of his reported skill.

The total monthly earnings of the family amount to Rs.650. This includes Dhiren's casual earnings from tips at the Manjusha building. The family consists of five persons. Their per capita income ability falls below the poverty line. Dhiren says that the total family earnings are just enough to meet the minimum food needs. In case

of any emergency needs like that of costly medicine or even for the purchase of clothings he has to incur debts. The usual sources of credit are the employers of his wife and himself or some neighbours of the Rail Colony.

* * *

We have noted earlier the rural background of Badal Das and the circumstances which pushed him to Calcutta in search of more earnings. He gives an account of his subsequent work-history.

I have said that my friend Aswini Purkait came earlier to Calcutta. At first he introduced me to the owner of Chakrabarty and Company where Aswini worked. This company was doing work for the Metro Rail. I began work on a daily wage of Rs.12. The company was closed after some time.

The manufacture of studs provided a very important structural component of the construction of the Metro Railways. It involved fabrication, cutting and welding. In all this work at the Chakrabarty and Company Aswini was the mechanic, and I served as his helper. I learned all this work from Aswini Purkait.

After the closure of the Chakrabarty and Company, one of its partners started a new company to supply orders for the construction of the Metro Railways. We worked first at the spot opposite the Indian Museum on the Chowringhee Road. We moved then to the Hazra Road junction. The latter work was done by Sarkar and Company. I had a daily wage of Rs.16. This company was also closed after some time. At this point I was separated from Aswini Purkait. We did no longer work together at the same place.

Badal Das went to a new company. In reply to the employer's query about his level of skill, Badal Das said that he was perfectly capable of welding and gas-cutting. As for his fast acquisition of skill Badal states in his account.

Those who had joined with me as helpers still remained at the same level. I learned welding and gas-cutting within six months. Further, take figures, or, in other words, if you place all kinds of drawings before me, I'll be able to read them rightly through observation. I have received no extra help from anyone. Frankly, I have more 'outknowledge'! I can retain in mind what is once seen by me.

I started working in the new company on a daily wage of Rs.16. This employer had appropriated the company where he once worked as a supervisor. I had a nasty accident in 1982 when my four fingers were amputated. My employer took charge of all my treatment in a nursing home. He had also provided for labour insurance, I have not yet got the money on this account. The employer paid my family expenses to the extent of Rs.80 to Rs.100 every week. I was in the nursing home for thirteen days and then treated at home. All expenses were borne by my employer. I joined work after three months. No difficulties were faced by me. However, this company was closed after another year.

I joined Mitra Mechanical Instrument Corporation at Asutosh Mukherjee Road in Bhowanipur. It supplies orders for tools and instruments from larger construction units. It is now five years that I have been working in this company. My present daily wage is Rs.24. I am now paid for all holidays. However, no payment is received for sundays. I am paid at twice the usual rate if I work on a holiday. In the

busiest months the volume of my overtime work goes upto seventy or eighty hours.

I have joined no union. This deprives me of casual leave and medical leave. But I enjoy some flexibility about the hours of attendance. The union members have no such advantage. I get a lump sum bonus of Rs.300. This year I have pressed for a higher payment.

The average total family earnings of Badal Das are reported as Rs.750 per month. He is the only earner. The family consists of four members - Badal, his wife and two sons. The younger son is aged a few months. Badal's work history is that of a fairly successful mechanic. He maintains links with his village home and shares with other brothers the maintenance of their old parents.

According to Badal their family expenses can be managed within his earnings. Badal's work history is replete with the experience of chronic mortality of small engineering units.

* * *

We have noted in the section on 'background' how Bimal Adak left his native village to find work in Calcutta. He was then a boy of fourteen and came with a friend who knew more of Calcutta. Bimal's work history in Calcutta began with the job of washing cups and dishes in a tea shop.

I got a monthly pay of Rs.12 plus food. The work-load was very heavy. I had sores on my hands and feet. After two months I was inclined to return to my village home. My friend dissuaded me from this course. He

said that I would make myself a laughing-stock by such a retreat from Calcutta. My friend's efforts got me a job in one very old tea shop of Gariahat. I worked in this place for eleven years and could move from dish-washing to the technical assignment of a cook. My monthly pay increased from Rs.16 to Rs.85. Knowing of all this my father hastened to arrange my marriage. I was not quite willing to marry at an early age. But my father paid no heed to my point.

Returning to my work at the tea shop I could see that the prospects of any improvements were extremely meagre. This would never enable me to live a regular family life. I had left my wife in the village. Before joining this tea shop I had a brief experience of working as a helper in masonry. The daily wage was Rs.3. It was not possible for me to continue in that work since I had been required to move widely, say from Maora, Sibpur, B.E. College to some place on the Tarakeswar line, then to Dakshineswar and so on and so forth. This is why I did not remain in the field of masonry.

In the new circumstances after my marriage I decided to work again as a helper in masonry. My favourite contractor was Jiunandan Singh, who worked also as a head mason. He wanted to train me up in masonry. I hesitated since such work was not in keeping to my lineage. Jiunandan initiated me to holding the trowel. Thus began my work as a mason. My daily wage was raised to Rs.4. I went on learning the techniques through actual work. Jiunandan Singh helped me in learning all that was necessary.

Jiunandan saw that I had developed proper understanding of the plans and also of the various problems of building work. He went home leaving a few unfinished constructions in my charge. I was told that he would return after a month. He

came after three years. I took care of all work during his absence. I am still in his team of workers. My daily wage has got up to Rs.50. I do the work of mosaic-tile flooring. I have today returned at four in the afternoon after completing the layout of a 4000 sq.ft. area in Behala.

I am now both a contractor and a labourer. There is work on all the days of a month unless I decide to take rest for a while. I never encroach upon my master's area of business. There are people who come directly to me for their work. I do such work with the assistance of helpers. Such labourers are available at the Kankulia, Dhakuria and Jadavpur rail gates. Every morning you find them waiting in those spots in search of work. Some are attached to me as regular helpers. I pay them Rs.18 per day while charging Rs.20 for each helper. A labourer working casually with me for one or two days is paid Rs.20 per day.

Bimal Adak then explained in detail his gains from any work done on contract. In the construction of a structure at the cost of Rs.120 (excluding cost of materials), he pays Rs.40 to a mason and Rs.20 to one helper. Bimal's own share amounts to 50 per cent of the total labour cost charged for the work. This includes his transport cost and other contingencies. As a mosaic-tile worker, Bimal's daily wage is Rs.50. In other masonry work he charges a daily wage of Rs.40.

Bimal Adak has been living in the rail colony for eighteen years. He has two sons and a daughter. One son is a minibus conductor earning about Rs.600 a month. He read upto Class V. The second son read upto Class IV in Ram Roy School. He has recently joined work as a minibus helper and earns about Rs.350 per month. Formerly, Bimal's

wife worked in two houses as a domestic servant. The sons have now dissuaded her from such work. They have promised to meet all her sundry needs. It is now eight years that Bimal's daughter has been married. She now lives in Surya Babu's Lot, a village to the south of Roydighi in South 24 Parganas. Her husband is a cultivator.

Bimal Adak does not state his total monthly earnings. It may lie between Rs.1200 and Rs.1500 as indicated by his points on daily earnings. With a per capita monthly income around Rs.500, their family is fairly above the poverty line. This is a case of rising from humble beginnings to a life free from any trace of abject poverty. Bimal has achieved this much through his own hard labour and ability to make good use of some opportunities for acquiring the skills of masonry.

* * *

Some features of the early life of Aswini Purakait in his native village of Nakali have been presented in the previous section on 'background'. He came to Calcutta with a woman of their village. She worked as a maid servant at one house in Bhowanipur. Her employer was a contractor giving supplies for the construction of Metro Railways. He appointed Aswini as a darwan-cum-attendant in his workshop which was engaged in fabricating supplies for the Metro Rail. This was the beginning of Aswini's work in Calcutta.

I got a monthly pay of Rs.150. I lived and had my food in that employer's house. There was a cow. It was left to my care. A mechanic of the workshop pointed to the

inadequacy of my pay at Rs.150 and gave a suggestion. I might stand by his side while he was working and thus learn as far as possible the processes of welding and gas cutting. My hours of work were from eight in the morning to five in the evening. After doing morning chores at home I went to the workshop with my employer. He drove the car himself. I carried his brief-case. I would again return with him after the day's work and checking up all the things. The workers were not reliable. In case of no vigil the clocks and regulators would be missing.

After working for sometime in such conditions I requested my employer to increase my pay. He was angry on knowing that I had learnt a part of the mechanical work without his knowledge. I was rebuked for wasting materials like rods and gas.

I joined then the Roy Engineering Works in Brabourne Road. They were engaged in processing studs for the Metro Rail. I received a daily wage of Rs.9 and overtime payments. The need for overtime work was quite frequent. A tiffin allowance of Rs.1.50 was paid to each labourer for work after six in the evening. In case of work after ten at night a labourer received a meal allowance of Rs.5. I had no lodging. A relative of my mine lived in a shack of this rail colony. I left my very few clothings with him and spent the night on a sackcloth spread by me in front of the Jana Kalyan Samiti. There was a limit to bearing such hardship. I rented a shack in this settlement. The monthly rent was Rs.25.

I used to send Rs.100 to my village home every month. I went myself to give the money. My wife had always been keen to come to Calcutta and live with me. She suggested that her earnings from domestic service could be of help in the payment of monthly rent for the shack. It is now fourteen years that I have been living in this settlement. My wife came within four years after my renting of the

shack. In the beginning she worked in one house at a monthly pay of Rs.30.

The Roy Engineering Works was closed after two years. They shifted to Asansol and opened a new business. I had no fixed place of work. There were many contractors and sub-contractors processing and supplying various parts of the requirements of the Metro Rail. I moved as a casual labourer from one such unit to another. There was no regularity of work. I have got no further opportunity for a stable job after the days of my work at the Roy Engineering Works. In course of such casual work I had once been the victim of a serious accident. You can see that my fingers had to be amputated. I was then working at the Park Street section of the Metro Rail. My employers were Sarkar and Company. They bore the expenses of my treatment and also provided for the maintenance of our family during my disablement. This company was closed after the completion of their work for Metro Rail. They shifted to transport business.

These days no work is often available in mechanical processing. I have therefore started doing some work in masonry. For example, my present work relates to the construction of the shade of a cloth mill in Lake Town. This has been undertaken by a contractor who is an old friend of mine and once used to work with me in welding and gas-cutting. He is able to work as a contractor with the initial money left by his father who died two years ago. There is another contract for the construction of the shade of a jute mill in Budge Budge. I get a daily wage of Rs.20 in masonry. I am not certain of continuous work in masonry. Last summer, in the Bengali months of Chaitra, Baisakh and Jaistha, I did pandal work. I may join it again during the puja season.

I go occasionally to my native village to work in cultivation. My own lands and that taken on sharecropping amount to about

six beeghas in all. But the returns from agriculture are very poor in our area. There is the problem of salinity in water. I believe most of the migrants from our part to this settlement could go back to their village homes in case of plentiful provisions of water from shallow tubewells throughout the Diamond Harbour sub-division.

Aswini Purkait acquired mechanical skills through arduous efforts of his own. He has found no stable demand for his skilled labour. In one previous account, Badal Das refers to his joint work with Aswini. Badal said he learned work from Aswini. But Aswini's account mentions nothing about all that. His account presents several examples of small and medium engineering units which have no inherent stability and act only for some quick gains. They are in the habit of moving from one quick-earning business to another. For his livelihood, Aswini has to combine his skilled mechanical work with masonry, pandal work and even with some marginal cultivation in his native village.

We don't get a clear picture of Aswini's monthly earnings. Aswini has four daughters and a son. Two daughters live in their village home. Aswini has to bear part of the expenses of the village household. It appears that he has to give at least Rs.100 a month to his parents in the village. The monthly earnings of his two daughters and his wife from domestic service are Rs.150. Aswini's monthly earnings are likely to be between Rs.700 and Rs.800. We can guess that the family lives above the poverty line.

* * *

Nanda Mandal comes from the village Bhadrapara in Lakshmikantapur. He gives his age as thirty. His

neighbours of the Rail Colony say that Nanda is much older and also report about the marriage of Nanda's daughter to a man in Lakshmikantapur. This man deals in fruits at the Dhakuria market. Nanda's account turns on his occupation of collecting car-parking fees.

I collect 'car parking' fees in the Lake Market segment. Firstly, it is necessary to submit a tender to the Corporation. After the acceptance of the tender, we can go for the collection of fees. Some other young men work with me. I started work under a unit by name Sur Company. The parking charge was 20 paisa for the first half an hour and it would be 40 paisa thereafter. We were given a commission of 15 paisa per rupee. When I had begun work in 1971, the earnings amounted to accruals for about three hours. The current rate of commission is a rupee per hour. My hours of work were from six in the morning to twelve noon. We have now formed our own cooperative. I worked in Sur Company for eight years.

Our working team consists of twelve persons. In the days of the previous company we had a daily commission of eight to nine rupees per person. There was a crisis of our work when the segment under our purview was declared a 'one way' road. This was due to the construction work of Metro Rail. We had to move a lot for the allotment of a segment where we could make our usual earnings.

The first cooperative was formed in the New Market-Dalhousie region. The collectors of the Gariahat area followed. We required fifteen members to form the cooperative which was founded after the Gariahat unit had started operation. Most of our young men are from the Jadavpur-Tollygunge areas. I am the only member from this locality. The cooperative has been functioning for six years. We get monthly payments on the

basis of actual work at the rate of Rs.40 per day.

Once when the Sur Company was closed, I worked for some time as a helper in the colour work of buildings. I have four children. The eldest daughter helps her mother in her domestic work at two houses in Lake Road. The other children are in Ramchandra and Binodini schools. My wife has a monthly earning between Rs.100 and Rs.150. I have been a resident of the Rail Colony for about twenty years.

The account of Nanda Mandal tells us of a rather unusual occupation. The terms and conditions are not always clear in his statements. It is not possible to form a definite idea of Nanda's monthly earnings. The family does not appear to be far above the poverty line. Formerly Nanda Mandal had some regular links with his village home. These days he has ceased such relations because of some sharp differences with his brothers.

* * *

In our reflections on the 'background' we have observed how Sadhan Samanta left for Calcutta after their joint family in the village had broken up. He joined work at a hosiery mill in Calcutta. Thus began his work history in Calcutta.

I was paid on a piece rate which varied between Rs.1.50 and Rs.3 per one dozen socks. I could produce 2 to 3 dozens a day. My daily income was Rs.5 on an average. The employer allowed me to stay in his house. After some time I joined another hosiery company at a monthly pay of Rs.40. I left this job

very soon because of low wages.

I moved to Behala and stayed with my elder brother who provided my food. My field of work oscillated between colour painting of buildings and lathe machine operation. I worked for a brief period at Indira Engineering Works in Behala on a monthly pay of Rs.28. I had already learnt the work of painting buildings. A maternal cousin, who drove the car of a building contractor, informed me of the work relating to the construction of the Priya Cinema. I got the work of a colour painter at a daily wage of Rs.2.50.

This work involved much hardship. The head mistry of the team doing colour work at the Priya Cinema put me in contact with a person who took me to the Lotus Cinema. I got the job of an Air Conditioner operator. Losing one finger in a nasty accident I shifted to the work of a gate keeper. The middleman who secured me the appointment at the Lotus Cinema used to take away a major share of my pay. I went back to colour work for buildings.

I could then get an appointment in the big factory of Brown and Miller. Some money had to be given to the secretary of the labour union for securing this appointment. It was 1958. I had a daily wage of about Rs.15. My first posting was in the canteen where I could have free mid-day meal. I worked in the production branches of the factory in course of the subsequent years.

After working for three years I was due to be absorbed in the factory's permanent staff. A medical examination was necessary. I had been living in the house of the canteen manager and did a lot of domestic work including cooking in his household. On being made permanent, I would be shifted to another unit of the company. I came to know that the canteen manager had managed to delay my medical examination. I left the job in anger. My elder brother rebuked me

for the hasty move. I knew in due course that in a permanent job, my starting salary would be Rs.500 per month. I did very much repent then the thoughtless decision to quit this job.

During the period of my work at Brown and Miller I went occasionally to my village home and found no economic distress in our family. My eldest brother was a very active cultivator. Most of the family's needs were met from own production. As for food items, some spices and oil were the only necessary purchases.

After leaving Brown and Miller, Sadhan Samanta shifted again to colour work in buildings. It was at this point that Sadhan became a resident of the Rail Colony. An engineer living in the neighbourhood gave Sadhan an opportunity of working at a small tools workshop in Haora.

The unit used to manufacture tractor parts. Its name 'General Machinery Works' was changed to 'Quality Tractors'. I worked in this workshop for seven years. My monthly pay was about Rs.300, inclusive of overtime earnings. Nehru died when I had been working at Quality Tractors. I remember this day when the factory was closed after tiffin. I left this job because of the employer's strong disapproval of my occasional absence from work. It was around 1965 that I married a girl of our village. She used to live in this settlement before marriage. I took again to the work of colour painting of buildings.

The manager of 'Quality Tractors' called me to his new workshop at Joka. I worked for some time in 'Bharat Metal' on a daily wage of Rs.5.

Sadhan worked also as a mason in the Border Security Force. He came in contact with a Security Officer who was

also an engineer. Sadhan worked as a colour painter in the Theatre Road office of this man. He was pleased with Sadhan's work. This was the background of his appointment as a mason in the Border Security Force.

Sadhan Samanta Spoke of a few other assignments which he had done. Once he went to Haldia to do roof-casting work. His present work is that of a colour painter of buildings. Sadhan said that, according to the availability of work, his monthly earnings would vary between Rs.200 and Rs.1200. On more probing he informed us of an average monthly earning of Rs.700.

Sadhan has two daughters and two sons. The son aged about eighteen years is a minibus helper. He earns about Rs.500 per month. The eldest daughter works as a domestic servant. She spends on her own clothings and other needs. Sadhan's wife makes a monthly earning of Rs.200 from domestic service. The other daughter does household work. She has read upto Class II. The son of about ten years reads in Class IV.

As reported by Sadhan Samanta, their family appears to live fairly above the poverty line. His entire work history is full of too many shifts and changes. There is a touch of eccentricity in many of the decisions made by Sadhan to move from one work to another. Indeed, in his own words, Sadhan mentions some of his moves as 'whimsical'.

* * *

Abhoy Sardar and his family have been living in this settlement for about twelve years. They were pushed out of their village home by extreme economic difficulties.

We have noted in the previous section Abhoy's account of his family background, of his aptitude for music, and also about their growing economic distress.

For a brief period I lived alone in Panchanantala. I earned Rs.10 to Rs.12 a day from my work as a helper. I had my meals in an eating shop. After my mother's death I rented a shack in this rail colony. I worked there as a cycle-rickshaw puller. By this time my family came to live with me in this settlement. It consisted of my wife and two children. We now have four children.

My work as a helper in building construction work fetched me a daily earning of Rs.14 per day. After meeting my own expenses I could send home an amount between Rs.100 and Rs.150 every month. For regularity of work one would be better placed under a contractor who received a cut-back of Rs.2 from the wage of the worker. I worked in this line for a short period. The work was quite strenuous. It involved carrying of bricks and sand.

I shifted to cycle rickshaw pulling. It was possible to earn Rs.15 to Rs.20 a day. This is when I brought my family to this colony. The shack was rented at Rs.20 per month. After a year I joined pandal work. The daily rate was Rs.8. I tied ropes and fixed poles. The decorator's shop was in Park Circus. I could see that the employer was charging at least Rs.15 on my account in the bill realized from his customers.

I left pandal work and started selling fried gram and peas on the pavement. I chose a spot near the high-rise building by name 'Meghamallar' in Gariahat, I had to keep a burning coal-stove so that I could sell things warm and crisp. An amount of Rs.100 was needed to start this business. I could provide it from my savings. My daily earnings were between Rs.10 and Rs.12. This

was just sufficient for the maintenance of my family.

One problem was to see that the edibles were not strewn with too much dust and dirt from the pavement. The occasional police raids were troublesome. They would haul up the hawkers on the pavement. I did not know the escape route through bribing the police. Whenever arrested, I had to pay a fine of Rs.5 to Rs.6 at the court for my release.

I was a pavement vendor for one year. Dhananjay Burkait worked as a labour contractor in the decorators' business. He was an elderly person who initiated many young men of this settlement to 'pandal' work. Dhananjay himself was an expert worker. He asked me to work with him. He taught me to do all the finer works of decoration like making designs with cloth and fixing of such designs on bamboo frames. I worked in this line for seven years. I began on a daily rate of Rs.13. There was a lot of overtime work. I received part of my payments on a daily basis and the rest after the end of the particular month. My total monthly earnings were about Rs.700.

After working for five years in this line I felt that my life was being wasted in 'pandal' work. With a piece of drawing before me, I could produce the design of a man or a peacock in cloth or thermocol. But my skill did not have its right recognition or reward in 'pandal' business.

I took the decision to take up motor driving. While doing 'pandal' work, I started attending the training school in the early morning. A sum of Rs.650 had to be spent to learn driving and then to have the driving license. I got my first appointment through the contact of a number of drivers who would assemble in the basement of a four-storied house near Tyagaraj Hall. I accepted a monthly pay of Rs.300. The daily hours of duty were twelve. My salary was much less than the market rate of Rs.600. Still

I agreed to do this work. It was essential to acquire some experience in motor driving. During those days I got some help both from my father and father-in-law.

I am now the driver of a car which belongs to the fleet of one big newspaper house. My direct employer is a top officer of the Personnel Department of this business house. He draws Rs.2200 per month on my account. I have a monthly salary of Rs.700. Moreover, I am paid for all my contingencies including medical assistance. I am very fond of the little son of my employer. I am allowed to do one part-time work at Keyatala. There I get Rs.400 per month by working for two hours on two days a week.

Abhoy's family consists of his wife, two daughters and two sons. His wife earns Rs.150 per month from domestic service. Abhoy learned sewing during his work in the pandal business. He has a sewing machine at home and earns between Rs.100 and Rs.200 a month by selling readymade garments. Abhoy Sardar has a life full of various work experiences. Their family earnings are sufficient for living fairly above the poverty line. Abhoy gives the impression of being happy with his present earnings and conditions of work.

* * *

Sudhir Karmakar was pushed out of his village by economic distress. The account of crisis which he faced in agriculture, has already been presented in the previous section. We may now follow his work history from the point he had come to this settlement.

I began work as a day labourer for loading and unloading lorries. This work

was very heavy and extremely strenuous. The rate for one trip was Rs.7. We were a gang of six. Imagine how many trips were necessary for an earning of Rs.18 for each of us! After working for two years in this line I shifted to colour work in buildings. In case of no work in colour painting I worked as a helper in masonry. One day I carried bricks on piece rate payment. Another day I might get work on a daily wage of Rs.10. There were many contractors. The rates varied between localities. Building construction was a widespread activity in so many areas like Golf Green, Tollygunge, Dhakuria and Ballygunge. On a few occasions I went as far as Sealdah and Dum Dum.

Once or twice in a month I go to my village to work in cultivation. In all I cultivate about two beeghas of land either on sharecropping or on agreement. Three labourers at a daily rate of Rs.20 are employed for three days to prepare the soil, do the ploughing and sowing. For harvesting in the Bengali month of Agrahayan I require twelve man days of labour for reaping and storing the crop. My income from cultivation is low. This year I got Rs.400 after meeting all costs. This was more than the usual accrual. It may be attributed to the high price of straw.

For more than a year I have been working as a watchman of the Christian Cooperative building which is close to Gate 1. We are five from this settlement. 'Master-mashay' has secured this job for us. There are two non-Bengali watchmen working in our team which has a total strength of seven. We manage among ourselves and ensure the attendance of at least four watchmen at night and three during the day. In any shift, some remain free to go for other work to supplement their earnings. This is how I combine the work of a watchman, with daily labour in construction work and colour painting and also cultivation. When no other work is available, seven of us can be present as

watchmen.

Sudhir gets a monthly pay of Rs.400 in his watchman's job. We get no definite information about his earnings from other sources. It appears that in his calculation of income from agriculture, Sudhir leaves out the accruals for own consumption. Sudhir has two sons and a daughter. The eldest son of ten reads in a school. Neither his daughter, nor his wife works as a domestic servant. While Sudhir's account emphasizes the amount of hard work done by him, it is not unlikely that with some earnings in kind from agriculture, he and his family can afford to be above the poverty line.

* * *

We have noted in the section on 'background' that Mani Chowdhury came to Calcutta from his native village in Falta. He was looking for better earnings. One fellow villager of Mani had his betel-leaf business in the Gariahat market. He fixed up Mani as a helper in a shop selling chira murki (flattened rice and parched paddy mixed with molasses). Thus began the working life of Mani in Calcutta.

The shop was located in the old Ballygunge market which occupied the lands beneath the present Kasba flyover bridge. I received a monthly pay of Rs.15 plus food. I had the work of loading and unloading carts which either delivered goods to the shop or took deliveries from it. I also attended the buyers at the shop and put their purchases in the paper bags (thonga) for delivery.

The mid-day meal for all workers of the shop was brought from the owner's house. I stayed in the shop at night and cooked my

own food. The cost of my food was borne by the shop-owner. In course of time I learned how to make murki and patali (discoid or rectangular solid pieces of molasses) and sugar-candy. My monthly pay rose upto Rs.25.

It was 1960. A gentleman, who frequented our shop, told me one day that the Health Department would recruit some people. He advised me to make an application. This man had a very friendly attitude to me. Seven or eight months later I was called for an interview at the Central Medical Store in Moulali. I got an appointment letter six months after the interview. It was the job of a stretcher-bearer. My hours of work were from eight in the morning to one afternoon. I was posted in an outdoor section of the Medical College Hospital. The monthly pay was Rs 65. I still stayed in the shop and did his work for the rest of my time. I had my mid-day meal at eating shops in Moulali and Ballygunge.

Mani Chowdhury married after getting the job of a stretcher-bearer. His two younger brothers were reading in schools. Mani's sister had been married and his mother lived with his brothers in their village home. Mani describes the conditions in his village home.

On the whole the state of things was not bad. We had a pond. My mother and the two brothers could meet their essential needs. I used to visit my village home twice a month. My marriage took place four years after my getting the job of a stretcher-bearer. My maternal-uncle knew about this settlement at Gobindapur. He worked in hutment-building (gharami). At his suggestion I rented a shack in this settlement and started living here with my family in 1965. My present monthly pay is Rs.1200. The usual duty hours are from 6 to 8 in the morning.

I do no other work these days. My eldest daughter is married. Our family in the Rail Colony consists of my wife, two children and myself. My wife does no work for earning.

The work history of Mani Chowdhury is quite straightforward. He got a government job through a close contact. It has enabled his family to live without any experience of critical poverty.

* * *

Ashu Das has been a resident of this locality since the early fifties. He has grown up from his early boyhood in the areas around the railway tracks. We have noted earlier his accounts of the origin and growth of the Rail Colony. Ashu's work history begins with the activity of selling fuel wood which was collected from the rural areas in the neighbourhood of Dhakuria.

I was then about fifteen or sixteen. My mother worked as a domestic servant and earned about Rs.20 a month. With some earnings added by us we could barely meet the minimum needs of living. Our earnings were made from selling wood for fuel. The construction of the bridge had not yet started. We had been hearing about such plans. There was a large timber yard spreading from the western end of the Panchanantala Road to a part of the lands beneath the present bridge. We saw people buying waste wood from the timber yard and selling at spots by the side of the railway tracks.

We took to the same business. Very soon it became impossible to have supplies of waste wood from the timber yards of the locality. It was then that I used to go with my

father to nearby villages and even more distant ones to collect wood by cutting down trees. The main trunk of a tree was purchased by the timber yard. This covered the cost of our cartage. We cut the branches into pieces which were sold as fuel wood. Our business came to an end with the changes following the plan for the bridge. Also we had to face eviction from the slums situated on the lands that had to be acquired for the construction of the bridge. My mother received a compensation of Rs.7000 from the Calcutta Improvement Trust.

My next place of work was the Star Company which occupied a part of the lands where now stand the new government quarters on the Gariahat Road. The daily wage was Rs.2.50 and the hours of work amounted to eight per day. My grandmother arranged my marriage when I had been working in this company.

My mother knew one gentleman (babu) who was a storekeeper of the Martin Burn Company. He gave me an appointment in their Kidderpur godown. I lived in that gentleman's house where I was given my food. My monthly pay was Rs.75. I found it insufficient for meeting our needs. On every working day I had to spend eight annas for my transport. My wife lived in a shack in this settlement. The construction of the bridge was then in full swing. I had a quarrel with Adhir Mandal, a prominent person of this rail colony. It led to my living away in Bosepukur for about two years.

I got the information that the Star Company had been recruiting men for some work outside Calcutta. I took their job and went to Dandakaranya where I remained in their employment for two years. In this job I came to know the use of a vulcanizer. Some of us worked as helpers of some Japanese mechanics. The daily wage was one rupee and some paisas. There was plenty of overtime work and payments. The workers

did their own cooking. Our monthly earnings were Rs.300 to Rs.400 per worker. Some of us decided to quit this job after a serious accident. From the top of the hills, where our work-place was located, we had to come down for marketing. One day the lorry carrying us turned upside down on the hilly road. I had injuries.

The Japanese mechanics told us that plans were being made ready for our permanent appointments. We agreed to return on receipt of such appointment letters. Indeed, they sent us letters by registered post. My mother was very much against the acceptance of the Dandakaranya proposal. She told me 'You left soon after your marriage. You must not go again.' There was no one else from this settlement who had been with me at Dandakaranya. This was the end of my working outside Calcutta.

I had to live without any work for some days. Dhananjay Purkait was well-known for his proficiency in pandal work. He had initiated several young men of this settlement to Pandal work. As advised by him I joined this line.

The decorators' business takes up the building of temporary pandals for receptions and ceremonies in connection with the various pujas, marriage and other social, religious and cultural festivals. Ashu Das gave the details of such pandal work. It is now about eighteen years that he has been working in this line.

I work as a helper. It is beyond me to make floral or any other designs with cloth. This is done by the skilled labourers. We can only set up the structure and fix up plain cloth. I could learn this part of the work. I started work on a daily wage of Rs.1.75. There was an understanding

between the workers and their employers that wages would increase every year. My present daily wage is Rs.18.

The Bengali months of Pous, Bhadra and Chaitra are extremely lean periods of work for the decorators' business. The busiest month is Agrahayan. Our system of overtime works as follows. It is one and half day from 8-30 in the morning to 6 in the evening with half an hours break for tiffin. A worker will be paid for twelve hours for this length of work. It will be two days when work continues upto 10 at night. Another half day will be counted for work upto 12 midnight. It will be full three days if work continues from midnight to four in the morning. Thus at Rs.18 per day, I can earn Rs.54 by working for this entire duration. Some additional allowances are received for work after six in the evening. This is meant to cover our tiffin and meal expenses depending on the duration of work. An allowance for one full meal is received when we work after ten at night.

A skilled labourer has a daily wage of Rs.30. I have worked in two shops. The first shop where I began work declined after the original owner's death. I can say that over all these years, the rates charged to the customers have increased in the decorators' business but not without corresponding increase in the payments to workers.

The estimate of 'three days work' pertains only to the busiest months. There are periods when we have to share among all of us, say twelve men, the volume of work which can be done by six only. This is a device to keep all of us going during the lean periods of pandal work.

There are fifteen labourers in the shop where I am currently employed. They are both skilled and unskilled hands. In case of executing an order we go in a team of one or two skilled workers (head mistry) and a number

of helpers as required by the job. The materials are carried in a hand-cart by two pullers. The latter are not employees of the shop.

Ashu Das talked of seasonal fluctuations in the volume of pandal business. He earns wages of about forty to forty-five days (i.e. including overtime payments) in the month of Agrahayan. On the other hand, in lean months the volume of work goes below twenty days or even less. At times the earnings reach such a low level that some workers have to incur debts for meeting their bare subsistence needs. They usually take from their employers advances which are to be adjusted against wage payments on account of future work. As regards differences in wage rates Ashu says,

Our daily wages are different according to the relative levels of skill. For example, I cannot make any floral design, nor am I capable of elegant wire-work. My daily rate of Rs.18 is the lowest. The daily rates have a range from my level to that of Rs.30 for the most skilled worker. However, most of the workers are paid at daily rates between Rs.18 and Rs.22.

A large number of people engaged in pandal work are daily commuters from Jaynagar, Mathurapur and Diamond Harbour. I can mention many other places. Given due notice, they are ready to stay overnight for even 'three days work' as explained by me.

Ashu Das moves then to his experience of another work. We have already presented the account of Dhiren Manna. Dhiren referred to some difficulties in maintaining his job as a watchman of the Manjusha Building. Some

collective efforts by a section of the young men of the Rail Colony had been necessary to influence the employers. Dhiren Manna spoke of some tensions and conflicts. Ashu's account gives more details in this regard.

When the construction of the Manjusha Building had been completed, we thought of our claims to be appointed as its watchmen. One day three of us went to talk about this matter with the new residents of the building. They said that the task of watch and ward had been assigned to a security company. It was the responsibility of this company to appoint watchmen for the building. Dhiren Manna, a resident of the Rail Colony, worked as a watchman of the particular site even before the construction of the building. He continued in his job during the period of construction. He faced dismissal as the security company took over and appointed its watchmen for the completed Manjusha Building.

We caught hold of a security guard and gave him a good beating. They were warned by us not to come again for work in the Manjusha Building. Our threat worked. These men expressed their inability to continue work in this building. The security company and the Manjusha residents called us for negotiation. We got advice and guidance from 'mastermashay'. Also he talked on our behalf in course of those negotiations.

The security company agreed to appoint two of us as new watchmen. They decided to have four watchmen. Dhiren Manna got back his job. The fourth man was also an old employee who had come from Medinipur. I was one of the two newly appointed watchmen. It is now five years that I have been working at the Manjusha Building in this capacity. I had a starting pay of Rs.240 per month. It is now Rs.274.

I can combine this duty with my work as

a helper in the pandal business. The watchmen work in three shifts, six in the morning to two past noon, two in the afternoon to ten at night and ten at night to six in the morning. Through mutual understanding among ourselves we change our shifts between day and night after each fortnight. For example, I work for a week in the morning to afternoon shift, then for a week in the afternoon to night shift, and then for a fortnight in entirely night duty. During the fifteen days on night duty I can go for pandal work from eight in the morning to nine at night. In the busiest seasons of pandal work I take leave from the watchman's duty. All this is done by mutual adjustments among ourselves. We have to take caution that none is continuously absent from the watchman's work.

We are employees of the security company. The Manjusha residents do not entertain any of our complaints and grievances. Recently a resident assaulted one of our colleagues. We have to seek the intervention of the security company in the settlement of such matters.

Ashu Das' account presents a long experience of many types of work done by him. His present combination of two activities is certainly an attempt to make for the seasonality of pandal work with a regular monthly pay from the watchman's job. Being one of the earliest residents of the locality, Ashu gives a work history which has significant alignments with the development of the Rail Colony and of its wider surroundings.

Ashu's wife earns Rs.150 a month. She works as a cook in two apartments of a high rise building at Gariahat. They have four children. The eldest daughter has married a man of his own choice. She lives with her husband in the Rail Colony. Ashu's own monthly earnings are about Rs.700

on the average. Their family income is sufficient for living above the poverty line. Ashu Das is a prominent person of the Rail Colony because of his active role in many matters of general interest. He is an important follower of Anadi Bera, commonly known as 'mastermashay', who has the position of a leader in the Rail Colony.

* * *

In the previous section on the 'background' we cited excerpts from Anadi Bera's life-story which narrated the circumstances in which he came to Calcutta from a village in the Contai sub-division of Medinipur. The account of Anadi's rise to the leadership of the Rail Colony constituted an important part of the general review that we presented in the first part of this report on life and labour in a squatters' settlement.

From his early youth Anadi was inclined not to go for any job of a routine or arduous kind. This is evident from his own account.

My elder brother had influence on a gentleman whom he requested to get me a job in the railways. I went to see this man named Das Gupta. He told me that I would work part-time as a domestic servant in his house and my other assignment through the day was that of pulling the bellows at the Railways workshop. The work was exacting. Returning home on the very first day I told that gentleman's mother of my unwillingness to do this work. My next assignment related to work at different spots on the railway tracks. One day my clothes were torn in course of the work.

I went again to Das Gupta's mother and told her that such had been the coarseness of my work that my clothes were torn. The gentleman was annoyed and arranged to place me at the store. I had no fixed hours and could go to and leave the office at my will. I had to live in the house of a police officer whom I disliked. I left this house and also the job.

By this time I got a permanent appointment in the railways. I was the third man in the panel of those selected. I was first posted at a place on the Dankuni line and then transferred to Petrapol. There I fell very ill and stayed at the Railway hospital. I then went to my elder brother's place. Since no medical certificate had been submitted by me, I was dismissed from the job.

My marriage was fixed in the early sixties. It took place in our native village. I came to Calcutta with my wife soon after our marriage. I could get no jobs, not even a single one. The regulations for fish control came into operation by that time. I did some work to secure licenses for fish sellers, filled up the forms and wrote the necessary papers. I came to settle in Panchanantala, rented a hutment at Rs.15, and started a 'pathsala' for giving lessons to children. This was a device for some earning as a teacher. My attempts to do rice trading failed due to police trouble.

These were my days of extreme economic distress. On two or three occasions, we were turned out of our hutment. Our things were thrown out. There was a big fire. A large part of the timber yard and the adjacent slum were gutted. I joined doing relief work. Ranen Sen of the CPI was then the local councillor. He helped us in many ways. Somenath Lahiri, another CPI leader, was also helpful.

The subsequent events in Anadi Bera's account relate to his presentation of opera plays (yatra), the growth of his identity as 'master mashay' and as a man with the capability for social work and leadership. He is currently employed in the work of a porter in one large bookshop of the CPI. Anadi has serious complaints about the management and conditions of work in this shop. He has very close association with the communist movement and is reputed as a prominent grassroots leader of the squatters' settlement in the Rail Colony. Anadi told us about another work for his earning.

Every morning I go to Dhakuria Service Station and Petrol Pump to do the work of washing and cleaning a number of minibuses and taxis. At present such washing and cleaning covers twelve minibuses, one bus and three taxis. Previously, I had more vehicles in my charge. The number had to be reduced because of the growing pressure of my other work. Two to four young men work as my helpers in car cleaning. They are paid by me from what I receive from the owners of those vehicles.

Anadi Bera's account gives no details about the amount of his present earnings and level of living. It appears that he does not suffer from any serious economic distress. In the earlier part of his account Anadi appears rather fussy about sticking to any job calling for regular attendance and work. Anadi was perhaps more attached to his initial urge for producing operas, theatres etc. His own histrionic aptitude was no less prominent. In his experience at the Rail Colony Anadi's role in the realm of opera shows turned to be complementary to his wider initiative for social work, political mobilization and the articulation of a community in the Rail Colony. We have already

dealt with some features of this squatters' settlement which pertain to various activities of Anadi Bera. Some more observations will follow in the next section.

C. Community, Culture and Politics

The individual narratives consist of specific events and experiences which have a much larger background. A part of it relates to the past life of the dwellers of the squatters' settlement. In a previous section, we have already observed that their migration to Calcutta was frequently connected with a search for some livelihood. Available for any work because seldom getting an offer of one job, the migrants are often unskilled or unqualified for a non-agricultural activity. They can look for employment only as the product of chance.

However, the work histories provide examples also of people who are subject to sudden lay off and unemployment even after having considerable skill and experience of a particular line of activity. All this reveals the inability of the economy's capitalist nucleus to absorb the numerous who are seeking gainful work. Obviously, the large background is then embedded in such conditions of duality that can assimilate only a small part of the population into the economy's capitalist nucleus, the rest being abandoned to peripheral wilderness.

It is within such an overall scheme of things that the dwellers of the squatters' colony have to move from one casual work to another. They live at the marginal pole and in the lower depths of metropolitan Calcutta. The occupations available to them have no stable access to the basic

resources of production. The earnings are largely derived from tertiary activities like that of petty trading, watchmen, cycle rickshaw pullers, car cleaners, drivers, and domestic servants. Even when an activity is not casual per se, the mechanism of organisation holds out no assurance of secure employment.

A man like Rajen Halder was an agricultural labourer in his village. Coming to Calcutta in search of better earnings, he works first as a day labourer in piling work, then as a hut-builder (gharami) and finally in his old age as a helper of one chief cook who takes charge of catering to social ceremonies like wedding etc. Rajen is always in abject poverty. A number of persons are found to move between the fields of masonry, colour work in buildings and pandal-work. Most of them begin and end as helpers. They can rarely stay in a work long enough to acquire its relative skill and expertise.

There are some skilled workers among the dwellers of the Rail Colony. In an account of the previous section, Bimal Adak presents his experience of rising from the position of a helper in masonry to a fully skilled worker. Bimal's specialisation relates to both masonry and mosaic-tile flooring. He can now take up big contracts which are executed with the help of hired labour. The account of Badal Das provides the example of a fairly skilled mechanic who succeeds in continuing his work of tools manufacturing. While moving from one unit to another, Badal could remain in the line of work for which he had acquired skills in the beginning.

Badal Das had his initial training from Aswini Pura-kait. However, Aswini's account presents a sharp contrast to that of Badal Das. Aswini found no stable demand for his skilled labour. His ways of earning consist in continual shifting from mechanical work to masonry, pandal work and even to some marginal cultivation in his native village. Dhiren Manna, the case of a skilled lathe machine operator now working as a watchman, also appeared among the foregoing accounts of individual work histories.

The rise and fall of 'pandal work' in the decorators' business illustrate the elements of uncertainty in the occupational conditions of the squatters' settlement. For some time past 'pandal work' had been a prominent source of livelihood for the colony dwellers. Through the recent decades, as the population of the southern suburbs of the city had been expanding at a fast rate, the demand for the decorators' service went on rising to meet the increasing needs of community festivals (e.g. pujas) and social ceremonies (e.g. wedding). In several accounts of individual work history (e.g. Ashu Das, Abhoy Sardar), the subjects referred to their dependence on 'pandal work' as a source of good earnings.

Even then the decorators' business was subject to sharp seasonal fluctuations. A more recent interview with Ashu Das gave us the information about some abrupt changes in the decorators' business. He is no longer engaged in 'pandal work'. The business faces a serious crisis of decline. Many new houses in the entire region from Dhakuria to Garia are now being rented out for the accommodation of social ceremonies. This had led to a fall in the demand for

decorators' service, particularly in the scope and need for 'pandal work'. We get an example of the dependence of workers at the marginal pole on residual activities which are liable to be replaced by alternatives having superior command over basic resources of production.

The work histories of women indicate that their returns from domestic service augment total family earnings. Further, the casual nature of the work done by males increases the need for the women's more regular earnings from domestic service. There are many cases where a woman is practically the sole earner because of her husband's old age, or serious illness, or even sheer apathy to work. The widows work as maid servants to earn the means of surviving with their children. Amidst all this, Susama Samanta presents one rare example of working as a domestic servant to earn the means of fulfilling her requirements of 'luxury' spending on herself and her children.

The dwellers of the squatters' settlement have their own differences and differentiation. As an example, we can take account of the difference in earnings between the family of Bimal Adak (a per capita monthly earning of Rs.500/- and that of Rajen Halder (a per capita monthly earning of Rs.80). Some families derive sizeable rent income from their ownership of shacks in this settlement. We have commented earlier on the dubious legal status of such ownership. But for the quite infrequent arbitrations by the Jana Kalyan Samiti in disputes over rent fixation and payment, we found little evidence of any conflict between the so-called owners and occupiers of the shacks.

Again, the success of a few dwellers in having more secure earnings can be taken by the rest merely as a matter

of chance or good fortune. For the vast majority, unemployment and intermittent employment at very low levels of living produce an overwhelming economic pressure which even tends to prohibit their protest against what is intolerable. It is beyond them to think of any measures to change the world outside their habitat. The evidence of the work histories shows that the workers from the Rail Colony are rarely involved in union activities. Indeed, most of their work places are much too informal to afford any scope for the promotion of trade unions. The demands and protests of the colony dwellers turn almost invariably on the defence of their habitat and can extend, at the most, to its immediate surroundings which they identify as their own locality.

The habitation of this shanty settlement generates a sense of community among its dwellers. Many of them are aware that the shacks are unlawful on the Railways lands. It makes the dwellers liable to a perpetual possibility of eviction. The dwellers are therefore all concerned over the constant necessity for a united mobilisation against any move to eliminate the Rail Colony. This is evident in the experience of several struggles through the recent decades. We can also read from the life-stories recorded by us how a sense of belonging pervades the squatters' sentiments and ideas about sharing a space for their shanty settlement.

Ashu Das, a member of the Rehabilitation Committee, expressed his feelings in a statement made to us. He said, 'The squatters on this entire stretch of land around the railway tracks from the Dhakuria to Kalighat stations represent a single family. We must not distinguish between the displaced persons from East Bengal and those from the

villages of West Bengal. We don't want to persist in violating the Railways regulations. They must provide us with some alternative site for rehabilitation in case it becomes imperative that we quit this settlement. We have no other place to build our homes. These lands have remained in our collective occupation for so many years. This is the basis of our claim to a space for our own homes.' Ashu added that along with 'mastermashay' he was among the vanguards of each and every movement against the railways steps to demolish the Rail Colony.

Badal Das, a skilled mechanic, said, 'We live in the face of the tiger!' Badal means by tiger the perpetual threat of eviction. He added, 'Jyoti Babu assured us that we would not be evicted from this settlement without some alternative provision for our rehabilitation. In case of the return of Congress to power, there may be attempts again to evict us by deploying CRP. I am used to this place. I find it so convenient and congenial. We are always united to resist any such move. There lies our strength.'

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Aswini Purakait, whose work history gave us the account of combining the work of a skilled mechanic, masonry, pandal work and marginal cultivation in his native village, said, 'I wish to spend the rest of my life in Calcutta. I'll not return to my village.' He holds that even a Congress government cannot go back on the assurance of rehabilitation given to the dwellers of the Rail Colony. While Aswini is rather indifferent to taking part in meetings and processions, he clearly expresses a sense of belonging to the Jana Kalyan Samiti. In his own words, 'We thought of a place where we could meet after a day's work. This is

how the Jana Kalyan Samiti had taken shape. We used to play carom in this room. This shrine of Sitala is our making. All this has been organised by the youth of this Rail Colony.'

We have mentioned the point about the demands of the Rail Colony on its immediate neighbourhood. This was manifest in the manoeuvres and negotiations made by Ashu Das, Dhiren Manna and others to secure the jobs of watchmen in the Manjusha Building. Indeed, the same attitude is expressed in Sudhir Karmakar's account of getting the job of a watchman in another building. He received mastermashay's help in this matter.

Ashu's demarcation of their own locality is noteworthy. He told us, 'We don't cross the limits. You reach a different locality on the other side of the bridge. The new buildings there should be left to the youth of that locality. Here you see one building, then another, and one is now under construction. No more space is available for new construction. In about four or five new houses of our locality some eight to ten men from the Rail Colony have secured the work of watchmen.'

We find brief references to the problems of eviction and politics in the life accounts of four women. For example, Susama Samanta said, 'When an attempt had been made to put up barbed wire fencing, the women stood in the front line of resistance. We followed the instructions of 'mastermashay'. This could stop the extension of barbed wire fencing to the Rail Colony. I have heard of the threat of eviction. Is it possible? We are so many people dwelling in this settlement. Can they evict us all?' Shefali Makal knew they were living

on railways lands. She mentioned the role of movements and mastermashay's leadership. Others like Hena Mandal and Bela Dasi had similar views and talked of leaving all responsibility in such matters to 'mastermashay'.

Dhiren Manna described his memories of the movement against the railways steps to put up barbed wire fencing that would close the entry and exit points of the shacks. In his words, 'As I could see the men getting ready to start the work of fencings, I brought it immediately to the notice of 'mastermashay' and others. We collected a large number of people and did all that we could do to stop their work. I was in the front to face those men. We also went in processions and deputations to several offices. The pressure of our movement stopped the move to raise barbed wire fencing.'

As regards the threat of eviction, Dhiren Manna talked of the role of the 'Rehabilitation Committee' in protecting the interests of the settlement. He observed, 'The danger is there. But we remain ready to launch our movement of protest and resistance. We have grown our own courage. It assures us that we cannot be evicted from this place without some alternative provision for our rehabilitation.'

However, Dhiren Manna expressed his unhappiness about dwelling in the Rail Colony. Since his daughter's death in a bus accident in 1984, Dhiren has lost all liking for this place. He added, 'It is an economic compulsion! The children have to grow up in an unhealthy atmosphere. We live amidst unceasing quarrel, words of abuse and trouble.'

It would be better to live in rural surroundings in one's native place.'

Bimal Adak has a flexible attitude to the question of dwelling in the Rail Colony. He said, 'I go from this place to do all my work. So does my son. Our neighbours are all well-wishers. Still I have a desire for returning to my native village. I live here in a rented shack. With some savings I can build my own house in the village. Building construction is now an expanding activity in the rural areas. So I shall find work with my skill in masonry. I also wish to take up some cultivation. My son can be a daily commuter to Calcutta for his work.'

Bimal Adak set out the perspective of a man of means. In spite of his association with the Jana Kalyan Samiti, Bimal expressed some doubts about the possibility of living forever on the Railways lands. He also said, 'I do no longer consider myself just a labourer. I am now a contractor. If I can procure a suitable site, it will be nice to set up my own store of building materials. I can then have ready supplies for my work.' Bimal added, 'No question of my return to the village would arise, if I had sufficient means to build my own house in Calcutta.'

Among those interviewed by us, Susama Samanta was the only woman who expressed her general views about social life in the Rail Colony. It is nearly a decade that she has been living in this settlement. The account of her work history has been presented in the previous section. We have noted above her attitude to the threat of eviction. Before her marriage Susama lived with her mother in a slum

of north Calcutta. She expresses her dislike for the Rail Colony as follows: 'There is no friendliness among the dwellers of this settlement. They have the habit of talking behind your back. I find none to be frank and straightforward in their dealings. The conditions were far better in the place where I lived with my mother.'

The narrative excerpts, which we have cited above, are expressive of both similarities and differences in the accounts of various individuals. All of them do not have the same attachment for the Rail Colony. Nor do they have equal confidence about the strength to resist eviction. We find a few like Bima! Adak whose material success in course of time leads to the idea of shifting to some better accommodation. However, they felt uncertain of finding within their means a suitable alternative in Calcutta. Some others like Dhiren Manna and Susama Samanta expressed their dislike for the conditions and surroundings of this settlement. They were not in an economic position to think of any alternative.

In any case, the vast majority of the dwellers of the Rail Colony looked upon themselves as 'members of a single family' who were utterly marginalised in their conditions of socio-economic existence. This marginal situation implied that they had no stable work, nor a lawful shelter for their living. The growth of the Rail Colony bears out the story of a settlement of people who had no initial capital, no technical qualification or special skill, no education, no money, no premises and no stable connections with the core world of the city. The settlement then evolved as a community of those negations. It

had the sole resolution of occupying a space to accommodate the shacks reeking of poverty and squalor.

We have discussed elsewhere the role of the Jana Kalyan Samiti and its modalities of work. This is where the leadership of Anadi Bera, commonly known as 'master-mashay', became significant in various matters of crucial importance for the Rail Colony. Indeed, most of the life accounts recorded by us refer to the contributions of 'mastermashay' in one field or the other of the Rail Colony's life. We have sufficient evidence of such references in the narrative excerpts cited throughout this paper.

Anadi Bera's political affiliations with the left influenced the dwellers of the Rail Colony. The nature of this political element in their experience, understanding and deeds was expressed in several life accounts. The response of the dwellers to Anadi Bera's mediation and also to that of the local CPI leadership of Dhakuria revealed some features of the margin's cryptic association with the politics of the city. We shall come to this part of our observations after describing some cultural features of the settlement.

The proportion of literates did not exceed 30 per cent of the total population. The percentage of literates among women was about ten. Most of them had merely an elementary knowledge of the alphabet and they could just sign their names. The percentage of women who could write letters was five only. While many parents tried to send

their children to schools, the rate of drop-out was very high because of poverty and the need for some earnings by children. However, the extent of child labour was not very high in Gobindapur Rail Colony Gate 1. Still there were boys of the age between ten and fourteen years who worked as helpers in tea shops, car cleaning and washing, and motor repairs garage. The girls were often compelled to do household chores since their mothers had to go out for their work as domestic servants.

The life accounts had very few references to the patterns of spending leisure time. Shefali Makal said that she spared no time to watch the TV pictures in the houses where she worked. Her main concern was to finish her scheduled work on time. Her visit to a cinema show was extremely rare. She saw devotional films only.

Susama Samanta, whose work history indicated her willingness and ability to spend for things which she liked, said that she saw both Hindi and Bengali films. She remarked further, 'I don't like violence in films. I see Bengali films quite often. I cannot sort out my likes and dislikes. The yatras, particularly the performances of our locality, are not to my liking. Once I saw a yatra at the Southern Park. I liked it.'

Dhiren Manna spoke at some length on the kind of films he liked, 'I like films with a lot of fighting and violence. Amitabh Bachchan and Mithun are my favourite actors. I am now more fond of Hindi films. But an actor like Ranjit Mullik is improving the tenor of Bengali films.' Dhiren does not like to see video shows sitting with a crowd

and noise around him. He looks for the opportunity to see video shows in someone's house. Dhiren is a regular worker of the Jana Kalyan Samiti. He holds that a yatra organised and presented by the Jana Kalyan Samiti is 'a form of education.'

Rajen Halder, whose work-history gave us an account of abject poverty, talked about TV and cinema shows, 'Very occasionally I have glimpses of Ramayan and Mahabharat on the TV in the house of one Marwari gentleman. I have no money to see cinema shows. Formerly, the yatras were different. A performance lasted from night to about eight on the following morning. Compare the present day performances! You say these are yatras! They are just some mishmash! And you have to pay for all this!'

We know from the work histories that Abhoy Sardar was happy working as a motor driver after a long and varied experience of diverse activities for earning. He talked as follows about TV and cinema shows, 'But for the features turning on family life, I don't see TV at all. I have no liking for Hindi films. Every Thursday there are shows of devotional films in the Gol Park Ramkrishna Mission. When it is possible for me to spare time, I go to see these films. I don't go to cinema halls these days.'

In our reflections on the 'background', there was a description of the musical talent of Abhoy Sardar. He concluded his life account with these words. 'It is impossible to live on music without plenty of paternal support in money. Still I love music. I often play tabla in my spare time and also do some singing. The kirtan pieces are my

favourite songs.'

About 20 per cent of the families in the Rail Colony had transistor radios. The males were used to gossip and card playing. The elderly men had no liking for TV. Their visits to cinema shows were also very rare. The preferences are different among the younger people. In one of our conversations, Ashu Das told us of the craze among the youth for video shows and noisy music.

The celebration of Sitala Puja is the most important community festival of the Rail Colony. It is organized by the Jana Kalyan Samiti. Ashu Das said that it still marked an occasion when the traditional norms of the colony were duly observed. Ashu expressed concern over the habits and fancies of the younger people. He saw perversity in their ways. All this, in Ashu's view, was full of dire portents for the future of this settlement.

No dealings in country liquor or drugs came to our notice in the Gobindapur Rail Colony Gate 1. Some workers of the Integrated Child Development Scheme informed us of heroin addicts and dealers in the segments adjacent to the Rail Colony Gate 1. Also we were told about a shack where country liquor was regularly sold without license. Such developments might have a bearing on Ashu's views about the worsening of things.

The spatial identity of the Rail Colony is of prime importance for its dwellers. In its cultural features however, the settlement was subject to an overbearing influence of the metropolis. This followed from the very location of

the settlement. The dwellers had daily experience of the brutal impersonality of casual work relations in a metropolis. In course of this desperate search and wandering they could hardly escape the cultural traces of those core media like radio, TV, film hoardings and cinema shows. Probably due to the constant hazards of their marginal existence, many dwellers, particularly the older people, had little interest in those media.

Such exposure begins to grow with the duration of the settlement, which has now a life of about forty years behind it. Further, the city and its nature and means of culture have changed through the recent decades. It has now a more desultory and bewildering state of things. Ashu Das, a dweller of this colony, since its inception, disapproves some tendencies of change in the settlement and blames the youth of the colony for what he describes as their lousy, vulgar and noisy entertainments. Ashu's reference to the 'traditional norms' observed during the festival of Sitala Puja, really reminds us of the content of an earlier exposure to the wider metropolis. The yatras produced by the Jana Kalyan Samiti had borne the reflections of the same influence. One point is of crucial importance. The squatters' settlement had to seek its legitimacy by conforming to the order and culture of the city. We shall find more instances of such conformity in the political orientation and alignments of the Rail Colony. We have discussed earlier how the origin and formation of the Gobindapur Rail Colony Gate 1 had been influenced by the growth of numerous squatters' settlements associated with the influx of displaced persons from East Pakistan since the late forties. The movement for the rehabilitation of uprooted persons from East

Bengal became a major plank of communist politics in West Bengal. The squatters' settlements in the southern suburbs of the city had the same political alignment and support.

The initial political affiliation of the Gobindapur Rail Colony has been described in our general review of the features of this settlement. Its links with the Communist Party shaped into closer and more regular ties along with the leadership of Anadi Bera and the working of the Jana Kalyan Samiti as the colony's community centre. The main focus of this political following has always turned upon the protection of this settlement against any move for its elimination. The broader meaning and directions of such politics are relevant to our understanding of the Rail Colony. We may proceed then to a resume of the social attitudes and political orientation of the dwellers, as expressed in their life accounts.

Bimal Adak, who has secured notable success in the work of masonry and mosaic-tile flooring, told us that he did not directly participate in the movements against eviction. As regards his organisational links, Bimal said, 'I am a member of the Jana Kalyan Samiti and respond to its call for any work.' Bimal expressed his party links in a mood and tone as if he was mocking at his own position, 'Having no other proper dwelling place, we are in occupation of the railway lands. It follows that I must be with the CPM. This is my position for more than a decade. Previously, I was least concerned about any political party.'

We do already know the work history of Aswini Purakait.

Though a skilled mechanic, he has no stable work in his own line and often moves between masonry, marginal cultivation, and pandal work for his livelihood. Aswini is explicit about his support for the Left Front. He said, 'We are assured of protection so long as the Left Front is in power. I used to move in the company of the "master" (i.e. "mastermashay" Anadi Bera) and became a follower of the Left from the very beginning of my arrival in the Rail Colony. We were CPM supporters in our village. We considered Congress to be the party of the rich, and CPM the party of the poor. Such political views are a part of our family heritage.'

Badal Das, whose work history gave us the story of a fairly successful skilled mechanic, expressed his apprehension about the danger of eviction in case of a Congress government. Badal agreed with the local CPI leader who recalled the instances of past resistance directed by the party and emphasized its role in the protection of the Rail Colony.

Ajit Pandit's work history informed us of his daily labour as a helper in masonry and colour painting of buildings. Due to old age he gave up regular work about two years ago. We got no clear ideas about the present mix of ad hoc work which fetched Ajit his livelihood. Ajit spoke to us in the presence of the local CPI leader. Recalling the successful resistance to the move for fixing barbed wire fencing between the shacks and the railway tracks, he said, 'The dadababus (i.e. the CPI leader and his associates) did everything to stop the move. We went in procession upto Dharmatala.' Ajit spoke of hooliganism in broad daylight by 'Congress goondas'. In his words, 'This new police

station has done us good. It has brought peace to our locality. The CPM people look after us.' Ajit could not say whether his 'dadababu' belonged to the CPI or CPI (M).

As described in his work history, Rajen Halder lived in abject poverty. Though not at all clear and cogent in his statements, Rajen made several observations about matters of political implications, 'We come from Fatharpratima. There were many peasant movements in my boyhood. I have no clear memories. The squatters' colonies in our locality are full of families from South 24 Parganas. They had to leave their villages because of continuous oppression by big landholders and Congressmen.'

As Rajen talked about his son's marriage to a girl of Kakdwip, we raised questions about his caste discrimination. He replied, 'It has been all right. We are Poundrakshatriyas, so is my daughter-in-law. Now in the Kaliyug, there is intermarriage between the Hindus and the Mussalmans. Who will be responsible for defiling my caste? God alone!'

As regards his present political position, Rajen said, 'We are in the club (he means the Jana Kalyan Samiti) and the party. I had no idea of what was going on. Anadi Bera called us to meetings. We could not follow the written papers which were signed by us. They also raised subscriptions for the Sitala Puja.' Rajen pointed to the local CPI leader and said that he was ready to respond to any direction from this babu 'who loves us and provides relief in our distress.'

In the previous section, we have presented the work history of Dhiren Manna who found no stable job in lathe

machine operation despite being skilled in the work. Eventually he moved to the work of a watchman at the Manjusha Building. Let us take note of Dhiren's political position in his own words, 'I don't understand much about the party. In the beginning, Birenda (i.e. the local CPI secretary) came to our club (Jana Kalyan Samiti) to discuss affairs of local interest. During the early seventies we had to pass through the terror and oppression of Congress goondas. It was our aim to achieve CFM's victory in the elections since that might restore peace in the area. I worked as a volunteer helping people to reach the polling booths. I also told them about the right course of casting their votes.'

Dhiren said that he had no trust in the role of the police in general, even though the establishment of the police station near the Rail Colony improved the conditions of this locality. As regards his experience of the Left Front government, Dhiren observed, 'They have done pieces of good work. But some signs of corruption can now be seen among their workers.' For Dhiren, 'Congress victory implies the return of the rich men and their money to power. They have no consideration for the demands of the poor for higher wages.' Dhiren himself appeared to be in a mood to go on strike along with his co-workers with a demand for higher pay in their work as watchmen.

Abhoy Sardar stated a distinct point about problems of party loyalty, 'A local political leader did not keep to his promise of giving me a job. I was denied the job because of my different political position. I make no secret of my support for a particular party. I know that some people get away by telling lies about the party for whom

they have voted. I cannot do so. It is as if I am to name as my father a man who is not so.'

Abhoy said more, 'Most people support the winning party. The sides are changed if the same party loses on the next occasion. At present, the CPM commands a good position in our locality. The toilers get a better deal from the CPM. I have my own way of understanding the difference between Congress and CPM. Suppose an elder brother (dada) allots one crore of rupees for a particular locality. The Congress would misappropriate three-fourths of the amount. The extent of filching is not so large in case of CPM.'

Sudhir Karmakar, another dweller of the Rail Colony was present at Abhoy's interview. He appeared to be in disagreement with Abhoy. The points of difference were not clear. Perhaps, Sudhir felt that the extent of CPM's misuse of funds was larger. His understanding of the difference between Congress and CPM rule focused on a different direction, 'Formerly, the rural people did not know the way to Calcutta. It was enough if one could come upto Mathurapur or Baruipur. Now a boy of five comes to Sealdah and returns to Lakshmikantapur with a day's earning of Rs.25.'

We have observed earlier how Ashu Das worked as a close collaborator of Anadi Bera for the promotion of the Jana Kalyan Samiti. He was also an active participant in all the movements against any move for the demolition of this squatters' settlement. He spoke on the nature of his party connection, '"Mastermashay" put me in contact with the party office. I joined several demonstrations in violation of Section 144 and was arrested on two or three occasions. All

this brought me no advantages. I spoke to the people at the local party office on this point. It is necessary for poor men like us to earn our living. Without any material returns, how can I spend my time for the meetings and processions organised by the party? The leaders told me of their extremely limited means and resources.'

Further, Ashu said, 'I was not at all clear of the implications of so many parties. Some are in CPM, others in Congress, again a few in RSP. All this appeared to me as a mystery. I was in a fix to find reasons for supporting any particular party. "Mastermashay" told me about the soundness of communist principles. He gave me Bengali books about Russia. I found them interesting and liked the accounts of struggle against oppression. However, I could see that party work would not help me in finding some means of livelihood. So I gave up regular visits to the party office.'

We had the reactions of Ashu Das to the new constructions in areas near the squatters' settlement and the growth of the affluent middle class population. He said, 'Some women of our colony render domestic service in those houses. We seek amiable relations with the rich families of the neighbourhood.' As for the disparities Ashu remarked, 'They can spend much more money for their children's education. We have no reasons to be angry about it. Our children are to be brought up within our scarce means.' Ashu indicated that he was among those workers who had no facilities of paid leave, puja bonus or medical benefits.

Our interview of Ashu Das led to a dialogue between

several dwellers of the colony. The participants were Ashu Das, Dhiren Manna and Ananta Halder. The theme related to the question of caste discrimination and it arose out of Ashu's observations about how he wanted to arrange the marriage of his eldest daughter. Ashu said, 'We are Mahisyas. I have to marry my daughter with a Naskar or a Halder. She can neither be married to a Brahmin, nor to someone of the lower caste like Pod and others. There may be suitable young men among the lower castes. But I cannot agree to my daughter's marriage with anyone of the lower caste. Our common sense gives us no strong feelings about caste distinctions. It is more a matter of respect for our forefathers.'

Subsequently, Ashu's eldest daughter married on her own choice a young man of the Rail Colony. Ashu had nothing against his son-in-law. Still he appeared not fully happy about this marriage.

Both Ashu Das and Dhiren Manna said that in case of party work one could disregard caste distinctions. They touched upon the question of dining with Mussulmans. Ashu said, 'I have mixed with Mussulmans. We had tea from the same glass. The world outside is different.' Dhiren Manna complemented, 'We can do many things outside our home. But the home is subject to different considerations.'

Ananta Halder, a helper in construction work who has to go to many parts of the city for earning his livelihood, said, 'The women obey those rules. We cannot. In Muslim areas, the eating shops have separate corners for the Hindus. No beef is served in that part of the shop. The Muslims also have their meals at the pavement shops owned and managed by Hindus. My work often requires that I obey no barriers of caste and religion.'

The dialogue ended as follows,

Dhiren : All our caste considerations have much less force in the squatters' colony.

Ananta : We obey not even a fraction of what prevailed in our native place.

Ashu : The women have more concern.

Ananta : We don't care for such things.

Dhiren : No males can be rigid about all that.

Time and again in course of this presentation in two parts, we have described the manifold activities of Anadi Bera and their bearing on the life of the Rail Colony. Anadi Bera read upto Class VI at his native village in Medinipur. He has been a dweller of the Rail Colony since the late sixties. Earlier Anadi lived in Panchananatala and started a 'pathsala' to earn his livelihood. This is how he came to be commonly known as 'mastermashay' in the locality.

We already know from the accounts of Anadi Bera that he had always been among the foremost leaders of the struggles since the seventies for the protection of this settlement. Indeed, the role of 'mastermashay' in those movements and also in the founding and development of the Jana Kalyan Samiti featured prominently in a number of foregoing accounts narrated by several dwellers of the Rail Colony. Ashu Das was particularly emphatic about the new directions of mastermashay's leadership to secure wider participation of the dwellers in matters of common interest for the settlement.

Anadi Bera's dramatic talents contributed to his

popularity. He produced and acted in operas (yatra) which received the admiration of all including the local communist leaders. In the beginning Anadi Bera collaborated with men like Adhir Mandal in social work of the locality. It appears that Anadi proved himself capable of grasping the proper modalities of mass mobilisation. Also he had the tact and intelligence for negotiations with the appropriate authorities. The connections which he could build up with the local police station, the Dhakuria branch of the CPI, and also the relevant municipal bodies were of lasting benefit to the Rail Colony. However, some excerpts from Anadi's own life account and observations express a sense of despondency in his own view of things.

You may say it is unlawful for us to occupy the railway lands. Have some human consideration! We don't want to remain on railway lands. Provide an alternative so that we can quit the railway lands.

Those in power always deceive us. They care little for us. All are the same. Can you tell me of any party with genuine concern for the poor? Their only interest is in our votes!

The people of the Rail Colony are usually bogged down in indifference and inaction. They are lazy and have no initiative. The babus are their masters. Most people are bent on pleasing the babus from whom they get occasional help. The babus are also an important source of loans. These days the attraction of TV drives many to utter submission. It is in the hope of being favoured to watch the TV in those houses.

I have worked for many years in the CPI. I am now disillusioned by the spread of corruption within the party. My experience of working as a porter in the party book shop is

appalling. They exact heavy and arduous work from you in the name of the party. Ask for a rise in wages. The same management will tell you about business considerations.

The Rail Colony has effectively resisted all authoritarian assaults for its demolition. There is no acute water scarcity in this settlement. It has an ICDS centre, which is located in the hutment of the Jana Kalyan Samiti, to provide some amount of health and medical care for children and pregnant women. The Centre also tries to disseminate among the women of the colony an awareness about the need and devices of family planning. The Jana Kalyan Samiti continues its work addressed to the common problems of the Rail Colony.

Still it should be possible to find the clues to Anadi Bera's despondency as expressed in the foregoing excerpts from his own life-story. A number of squatters' settlements in the southern suburbs of the city had been converted into legalised townships through the decades since independence. These settlements were composed of displaced persons from East Pakistan (now Bangla Desh).

Like several other shanties and squatters' colonies in some parts of the city, the Gobindapur Rail Colony Gate 1 is the outcome of a steady influx of rural population from West Bengal districts. They are pushed out of their villages in search of a livelihood. The Rail Colony is full of such persons from South 24 Parganas. Its occupation of railway lands has no legal sanction. There is the obvious problem of validating such settlements that are in occupation of

railway lands and situated extremely close to the railway tracks.

We were told that the proposal for rehabilitation on lands free from such hazards was first made by Siddhartha Ray, the then Chief Minister of West Bengal, at a meeting with one deputation from the Rail Colony in the mid-seventies. Also the Inspector General of Police suggested a site near the Bagha Jatin railway station for the purpose. All this did not materialize in any more concrete plan for rehabilitation.

Again, according to Anadi Bera and other dwellers of the colony, Jyoti Basu assured in the eighties several deputations from the Rail Colony that the existing settlement would not be demolished without the allotment of a suitable site for rehabilitation. No move is yet on sight for such rehabilitation. It is against this state of things that Anadi Bera reacts in his caustic comments on deception by political parties and their lack of genuine concern for the poor.

The desire for a stable habitat was expressed in most of the life accounts recorded by us. This was true of the colony dwellers irrespective of their income levels. There were a few families (less than 5 per cent) whose per capita monthly income levels were Rs.500 and above. The income-earners of these families were skilled mechanics, one or two shopkeepers, Class IV government employees, and a few in miscellaneous better paid services like car or minibus driving, or helpers in organised private sector units. There were two rentier families having large income. Such rent income was derived from shacks within the colony.

Notwithstanding the mix of various occupations, income disparities and the conditions of abject poverty in which the vast majority lived, the Rail Colony had a sense of community, neighbourly concern and a good deal of fellow feeling among its dwellers. The prohibitive cost of any alternative accommodation prevents even the families in the higher income groups from going for any change of residence. Their interest in protecting the Rail Colony, or in securing a more suitable alternative site for rehabilitation, is no less than that of the poorest dwellers. Thus, the settlement grows its sense of community around the question of a secure habitat.

The life accounts reveal that the large majority of dwellers were supporters of communist politics. Many of them spoke to us about their experience of oppression and hooliganism by Congress musclemen prior to the coming of the Left Front to power. They emphasized that the poor had a better deal from the left. However, their involvement in politics seldom reached beyond voting in elections. The experience of struggle had been invariably related to the cases of resistance against several moves for their eviction from the squatters' settlement. The Rail Colony had close connections with the Dhakuria office of the CPI. Still very few were aware of the difference between the CPI (M) and the CPI.

In the life accounts, many subjects explained their political support for the left by characterizing the CPI(M) as a party of the poor. The links with politics were often conceived as the route of obtaining benefits from outside the colony. Ashu Das, a veteran resident of the Rail Colony and an active worker of the Jana Kalyan Samiti from its

inception, said in his life story that he could not do regular party work since it gave him no means of livelihood. Above all for many dwellers of the settlement, it appeared to be a source of disappointment that the rule of the Left Front for so many years had not yet secured a stable habitat for them.

While expressing his bitterness of such disappointment, Anadi Bera mentioned in the same breath the laziness and lack of initiative of the colony dwellers. He also pointed out their habit of demeaning submission to the babus for petty returns. The foregoing accounts may bear out that the dwellers of the Rail Colony could hardly confront an alien world of the larger city. They were submissive before the forces which they had neither the means of challenging, nor even of understanding in all their fragments and alignments. The only sign of protest was evident in case of an assault on their habitat. This is where organised urban politics also came to support the Rail Colony, perhaps in the hope of conserving their own vote banks.

All this indicates an admixture of residential, occupational, cultural and political marginality among the dwellers of the Rail Colony. It is noteworthy that such existential positions did not seal off the metropolis and its periphery from each other. Their spaces intersected in the problems of the Rail Colony to maintain its habitat and in the search of its dwellers for a livelihood mainly among the casual and residual activities of the metropolis.

As for the cultural features of the Rail Colony we

have little evidence to represent a distinct culture of the urban poor at the margin. No doubt the dwellers featured the constraints and wretchedness of extreme poverty among their vast majority. Most of them came from villages searching for a livelihood in Calcutta. Their economic position often touched the marginal pole which was produced by the city's course of growth within an overall structure of hybrid capitalism. However, the marginal persons of the Rail Colony lived with their striving for a stable habitat, regular earnings and orderly family life which could enable their integration with the city.

The tendencies of conformity with the overarching metropolitan culture changed content over time. We have already referred to the kind of disapproval expressed by Ashu Das about the growing craze for video shows among the younger people of the Rail Colony. Anadi Bera criticized the dwellers of the colony for their abject submission to the babus. Anadi said such servility was prompted, among other things, by their desire to watch televisions in the houses of those babus.

In an important sense, the attitudes of Anadi and Ashu present a problem of generation gap. Through the sixties and the seventies, men like Anadi Bera and Ashu Das carried on their endeavour to protect the squatters' settlement and to improve its conditions of living. Along with others they founded the Jana Kalyan Samiti as a community organisation to look after the welfare of the colony. They organised the annual community festival of Sitala Puja which lasted a week and included in its programme operas (yatra), theatre shows and popular devotional songs.

Indeed, such efforts conformed to the norms of popular entertainment in the metropolis of those days. Further, the Rail Colony had many features of suburban surroundings prior to the construction of the Dhakuria Overhead Bridge. All this changed during the twenty-five years between 1966 and 1990. A new generation of younger people has grown up in the Rail Colony. They respond to the changing modes and content of cultural entertainment which now prevail in the metropolis. While showing respect for yatra as a form of education, Dhiren Manna expressed his liking for the newer types of entertainment. Although the modes and content are different, both the generations express the same striving for some sort of convergence with the cultural directions of the metropolis.

In their precarious, unstable and incoherent conditions of living, the dwellers of the squatters' colony are perpetually debarred from achieving a legitimate and secure place in the metropolitan order. Among other things, this holds true of their bare shelter and means of living. Their striving for convergence is then reduced to servile acceptance of a critical social void.

Meanwhile, the metropolis of Calcutta has become more manifestly a city of crisis and decadence since the partition of Bengal on the occasion of independence. I say 'more manifestly' because many of those problems were inherent in the history of the city which had grown for centuries in the typical colonial pattern. The phenomenon of decadence has grown out of excessive pressure on livelihood opportunities available in metropolitan Calcutta and its adjoining districts. This has also resulted in a perpetual increase of the 'informal' sector in the metropolitan

economy. Such informal activities are widespread among the segments of marginal men and women in the metropolis.

Trapped in the continuous experience of extreme indigence and no gainful work, a growing number of the urban poor are drawn to smuggling, pilfering, snatching, robbing, black-marketing in cinema tickets and other clandestine activities which often yield considerable ill-gotten earnings. Amidst its growing crisis, the metropolis may tend to rope in the periphery as a complement to its chaos and decadence. Thus, the despair and discontent of the urban poor may burst out in devious ways of unseating the disciplinary norms of law and order in the metropolis. There appears the phenomenon of a combine of clandestine activities and mafia command coming to prevail in the city.

By its nature and composition the Rail Colony does not yet appear to be a ready material for such deviance. However, things may be quite critical among the growing population in numerous shanties and slums of metropolitan Calcutta. The extreme poverty at the marginal pole does not invariably lead to crime. However, what may happen will be largely influenced by the ways of metropolitan Calcutta to move out of its decadence. The outlook for any recovery from this state of things cannot remain indifferent to the segments of marginal men and women abounding in the metropolis.

The politicization of the Rail Colony has remained feeble, even though most of the dwellers are supporters of the left. The two major problems of rehabilitation and regular livelihood are much too complex to be amenable to

any short-term solution. Indeed, no political forces come forward with a programme for the removal of the barriers to regular employment and earnings. There are no signs of any lead towards socio-economic changes which may obviate the endless suffering of the squatters' colonies. Poverty exists as a kind of reality that allows its victims no glimpse of a reasonable exit. What is worse, in their contest for spheres of influence, politics often seek alliance with local toughs, mafias and their followers.

Anadi Bera's leadership and the activities of the Jana Kalyan Samiti have maintained an orderly state of things in the Rail Colony. Earlier, Panchanantala, which is located on the north-eastern side of the railway tracks, was notorious for its criminal proclivities. It has changed through the recent decades. At present, Panchanantala shows little evidence of criminal activities. The Lake Police Station has been established in the immediate neighbourhood of the Rail Colony. Many of our informants, including Anadi Bera, expressed satisfaction with the work of this police station.

The politics of the Rail Colony appear to be supportive of order and peace. A departure takes place only in cases of resistance to moves for its demolition. The rule of the Left Front for more than a decade may have influenced the attachment of the Rail Colony to the government in power. In their conditions of extreme poverty and squalor, most of the dwellers have an ambiguity about such attachment and often express a kind of fatalistic acceptance. In terms of not mere political support, but of the wider socio-economic directions, the things are being frozen at a level where further stagnation may even push the urban poor to the veritable chaos we have mentioned above. We must not

ignore Anadi Bera's sense of a bitter frustration about the nature of prevailing politics.

Let us end the paper on this point of a freeze and its ominous possibilities. We have dealt with the specific case of the Gobindapur Rail Colony Gate 1 and its particulars. We make no attempt to generalise from one case-study. Any dissatisfaction with what then remains unsaid is welcome if it leads to further detailed investigation of many other cases in the metropolitan city of Calcutta.

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