

Why Do The Poor Remain Poor? Rethinking Poverty Through Everyday Choices: The Kolkata Bus System Paradox

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Mobility is a fundamental determinant of economic opportunity, yet for Kolkata's urban poor, everyday travel decisions reinforce cycles of deprivation. Despite a minimum fare of ₹10 for the first 4 km and ₹2-₹5 for each additional 4 km (marginal rate around ₹0.50/km), systemic barriers, including unpredictable costs, overcrowding, and fragmented services, keep low-income commuters trapped in poverty.

The Illusion of Affordability

Kolkata's marginal rate of ₹0.50/km is lower than Maharashtra's ₹0.90/km and Karnataka's ₹0.51/km. However, 55% of Kolkata's bus riders earn under ₹5 000 monthly, with average monthly income of ₹4200 reported in the 2025 survey (Shreeparna05, 2025). Thus, a daily round-trip fare of ₹20-30 consumes 12-18% of monthly income, far exceeding the World Bank's recommended 5% threshold for transport affordability.

Furthermore, fare inconsistency is rampant: 40% of respondents experienced conductors charging more than the official slab, often without issuing tickets. This unpredictability forces low-income commuters to overbudget, compromising expenditures on food, healthcare, and education.

Commission-Based Exploitation

Private operators pay conductors on a commission basis rather than fixed salaries. This incentivizes revenue-maximizing tactics:

Fare Skimming: Up to 20% of passengers pay off-record fares, splitting revenue with conductors. Many low-literacy riders cannot verify distances, leaving them vulnerable.

Overcrowding: To increase sales, buses regularly exceed 150% capacity, creating unsafe, dehumanizing "livestock transport" conditions, particularly during peak hours when 65% of respondents reported standing throughout their journey.

These practices disproportionately affect the poor, who lack alternatives and seldom report grievances due to low trust in authorities.

Spatial Exclusion and Mobility Traps

Low-income households predominantly reside on Kolkata's periphery: Barasat, Sonarpur, and Howrah, areas with limited economic opportunities. Key corridors feature bus stops every 160 m, causing frequent acceleration and braking, reducing average speeds to 12 km/h. Consequently, a 10 km trip consumes over 50 minutes.

When West Bengal Transport Corporation cut daily trips from 900 to 700 in 2022, 72% of affected riders reported longer wait times exceeding 20 minutes, prompting many to walk up to 2 km to alternate stops or pay auto-rickshaw fares of ₹60-₹80 per trip. For a worker juggling two part-time jobs, these delays and extra costs severely limit income potential and job flexibility.

Systemic Constraints and Shared Responsibility

Although exploitation is evident, operators face real economic pressures. Between 2021 and 2022, diesel prices rose from ₹84 to ₹110 per litre, a 31% increase. While regulated fares remained static. A government proposal to raise the minimum fare to ₹12 was shelved to protect poor commuters, forcing operators to slash services, defer maintenance, and impose surcharges.

Passengers also contribute to service friction. 28% of survey respondents admitted to boarding without valid tickets, slowing boarding times and provoking conductor-commuter confrontations over small fare differences (e.g., ₹12 vs. ₹10). These disputes not only disrupt schedules but also foster adversarial relationships that degrade overall service quality.

Toward Inclusive and Sustainable Mobility

Kolkata's bus system exemplifies how short-term fare suppression can entrench poverty. To achieve both affordability and sustainability, a multipronged strategy is essential:

Integrated Smart-Card Transfers: Capping daily expenditure (e.g., ₹50/day) would protect low-income riders on multileg commutes and smooth transfers across modes.

Fixed-Salary Conductors: Transitioning from commission to salary would remove perverse incentives, reducing fare skimming and overcrowding.

Dynamic Subsidy Schemes: Implementing means-tested subsidies, delivered via smart cards. Ensures support reaches the poorest without undermining operator viability.

Service Quality Audits: Regular, independent audits of overcrowding levels, fare compliance, and route efficiency, coupled with public dashboards, would enhance accountability.

Last-Mile Infrastructure: Improving pedestrian pathways, lighting, and safe shelters at stops reduces reliance on costly alternatives and enhances security for low-income commuters.

Transportation is not merely a cost but an investment in human capital. Without reliable, dignified, and affordable mobility, Kolkata's poorest remain tethered to poverty traps. Unable to seize employment, education, and healthcare opportunities beyond their immediate neighbourhoods.

By rethinking fare structures, operational incentives, and infrastructure, Kolkata can transform its bus system from a cycle-perpetuating constraint into a powerful lever for poverty alleviation and inclusive urban growth.

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