

Francesco Della Puppa · Dipsita Dhar ·
Nicola Montagna
Editors

Migrant Labour in the Gig Economy

The Intersection of Migrant Labour, Platform
Capitalism, and Resistance

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Editors

Francesco Della Puppa
Ca' Foscari University of Venice
Venice, Italy

Dipsita Dhar
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi, Delhi, India

Nicola Montagna
University of Salerno
Salerno, Italy

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Transversal Unionism: Resisting and Navigating a Neoliberal City Through Identity and Labour Power

Dipsita Dhar^{}, *Ashique Ali Thuppilikkat*^{},
and *Soham Bhattacharya*

1 INTRODUCTION

This city doesn't treat us as their own, yet they also know they can't survive without us. So we do what needs to be done, do your job with honesty and unite where you see you are being wronged. Both have to be done together, *continuously*.

Ali Jabbar, a migrant gig worker organizer, December 2023.

D. Dhar (✉)

Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India

e-mail: dipsita.dhar@gmail.com

A. A. Thuppilikkat

University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

e-mail: ashique.thuppilikkat@mail.utoronto.ca

Jabbar (name anonymized) is one of the many thousands from West Bengal who have migrated to Bengaluru, Karnataka—the so-called Silicon Valley of India in search of a better future. Hailing from a village in Murshidabad, West Bengal, he represents a generation that is forced into precarious urban work by the gradual erosion of agricultural jobs and state neglect (Mistri, 2021; NSO, 2019). Following the footprint of the people came earlier, he relied on the social network from his village and district, people who had already moved here, eventually securing work as a rag picker in Bengaluru—an occupation in which Bengali Muslims are disproportionately represented across Indian metropolizes (Chakraborty et al., 2022; Paul, 2023). Soon after settling, Jabbar brought his wife and children to live in a slum near Bengaluru’s Whitefield, one of many Bengali migrant hubs in the city.

Across Bengaluru, one can find distinct ghettos or unauthorized settlements formed by the different migrant communities. There are people from within Karnataka, including Dakhini speakers from regions such as Kalburgi and Bolar; Telugu-speaking people from Andhra Pradesh and Telangana; Bengali-speaking Muslims from Assam, Tripura, and Bengal; and a large number of Hindi-speaking migrants from the Hindi heartland. The people from Bengal who live in these enclaves are spatially clustered according to their place of origin, i.e., the districts. For example, workers from Nadia and Murshidabad districts primarily live in Kundalahalli, working in garbage collection, domestic work, and construction. Migrants from Howrah (Amta and Jagatballavpur) are concentrated in Varthur, employed mainly as gold artisans or zari workers. Meanwhile, those from Medinipur have clustered near Kaggadasapura, where painting work is their main occupation. These workers, many who are Muslims, face persistent discrimination and suspicion due to the language that they speak; branded as “infiltrators,” “ghuspetiyas,” “illegal immigrants,” and “Bangladeshis,” with their religious identity and place of origin in India’s porous eastern borderlands mutually reinforcing the optics of scrutiny, suspicion and exclusion. Despite over 1.3 million Bengalis in Bengaluru, lower-class Bengali migrants inhabit a distinct geography of survival and

sociability, centred around their labour *bastis* (informal settlements), while being denied dignified social citizenship.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, many rag pickers—already suffering the hardships of informality—lost their jobs under the guise of physical distancing, hygiene, and safety measures, often exacerbated by classism and casteism. In this context, many shifted to location-based digital labour platforms (DLPs), such as food delivery services like Swiggy and Zomato, and care services like Urban Company. On these platforms, workers experienced selective formalization of their workflow, including features such as standardized rates (rather than negotiated payments with clients) and the direct deposit of earnings into linked bank accounts (Bertolini et al., 2023). For many, it was a way to supplement their income; for some, it even became their primary source of livelihood. Yet, for migrants enduring ethnic, linguistic and communal discrimination in the city, the centralization and control of work through DLPs (Abílio, 2023) provided not only an entry point for employment but also opened new doors to exploitation, a lack of voice, and powerlessness. In this context, this chapter examines how Bengali migrant workers in location-based DLPs in Bengaluru navigate multiple axes of marginality and organize themselves within the city.

2 TRADITIONAL TRADE UNIONS AND ORGANIZING THE UNORGANIZED

Traditional trade unions have a rich history of formally representing the collective interests of workers in industries, large business establishments, and the public sector and demanding state regulations to protect workers' well-being and rights. Their organizational form and leadership are structured, operate according to systematized rules and procedures and usually permit voluntary membership. However, from the 1980s and 1990s, globally, there was a marked decline in traditional trade union membership, political influence and bargaining capacity against employers and state (Kelly, 2015) mainly due to the informalization and fragmentation of the production process through subcontracting, outsourcing and massive adoption of temporary and part-time employment structures.

In the Global South, the triumph of the neoliberal economic policy regime (and the withdrawal from the import substitution industrialization) and the global mobility of capital in search of cheap labour has led to the enormous shrinking of the formal sector, where traditional trade

unions faced a huge decline in membership (Visser, 2019, p. 19), and the rise of the informal and unorganized sector with high work participation by women and migrant workers as well. Therefore, the traditional trade unions confronted not just the challenge of weakening social security and declining employment opportunities in the formal sector but the difficulty of representing the growing diversity of workers' interests and attracting union membership in the "new forms of work," where "large workforces, with identifiable common interests and employers, and [workspace] which are physically and geographically bounded" (Doherty & Franca, 2020, p. 126) did not necessarily exist. Therefore, they had limited success in organizing the peripheral workers, those outside the permanent and full-time job contracts in industries and enterprises largely deploying migrant workers, and informal, part-time, and temporary/casual labour (Hyman, 2002, p. 13).

The failure of traditional trade unions to organize precarious workers in the informal sector, attend migrant workers, and the gig economy, partly because of the sole dependence on class-based universalistic approach and changing nature of work and workspace (Kulkarni & Datta, 2024), also invited an outcry for trade union revitalization and rethinking of strategies (Bensusán, 2019; Fine, 2011). This also led to experimentation of new forms of labour organizing for collective bargaining and worker representation, including the worker centres among immigrant labourers (community-based labour mediation and support institutions), worker associations and networks, informal unionism, hybrid and networked unionism, social movement unionism, forming different kinds of cooperatives (Chesta et al., 2019; Dhar & Thuppilikkat, 2022; Marrone & Finotto, 2019; Salvagni et al., 2022; Thuppilikkat et al., 2024; Webster & Forrest, 2019; Webster et al., 2021). Many of these new forms of unionism have challenged hierarchical leadership structures and re-evaluated the role of external organizers, a practice that traditional trade unions typically adhered to. Furthermore, some of the emerging associational formations of workers did not even formally engage in collective bargaining with employers (Mosco, 2008, pp. 33–35), and focused on issues beyond the workplace. Recent studies, particularly on digital labour platforms, exploring cases outside of digital labour platforms, have also highlighted that migrant identities and ethnic connections play a key role in fostering cultures of solidarity and collective action, both online and offline (Zhou, 2024; Zhou & Pun, 2024). Grohmann et al. (2023) identified how WhatsApp groups of Brazilian riders in the UK, built on shared

ethnicity, foster digital spaces for DLP workers to address work issues and organize collective action. Similarly, studies have highlighted how migrant status generates shared experiences, fosters communities, and even enables resistance (Mendonça et al., 2022). In this context, researchers have called for exploring migration as a source of workers' social power, examining its strength and limitations (Zhou, 2024).

However, if we zoom into the Indian scenario, particularly after neoliberal economic reforms from the mid-1980s, unions are faced with the struggle to organize new regimes of work. Many have argued that traditional trade unions need to focus on emerging industries such as the IT and Business process outsourcing (BPO) sector, their success in organizing these sectors has been limited (Sundar, 2006). Even in the early 2000s, IT employees in Indian cities like Bangalore formed groups like the IT Professionals Forum but largely distanced themselves from unions. This was due to factors such as a desire to distinguish themselves from blue-collar workers, coupled with many employees' direct access to higher-ups and efficient communication systems (Sundar, 2006). Nonetheless, trade unions also have struggled to organize lower-class migrant workers, predominant in the informal sector. Scholars have examined the internal dynamics of traditional trade unions to understand their lack of inclusivity towards the migrant labour force. They have highlighted factors such as challenges in aggregating workers' interests, where unions carried assumptions of worker homogeneity (Menon, 2020; Sundar, 2007, 2019). Furthermore, the dominance of local majorities within unions in respective provinces has further marginalized migrant workers (Sundar, 2007). Furthermore, particularly in the case of lower-class migrant labour, their distinct spatio-temporalities, such as mobility and temporary residency, is also identified as hindering unionization efforts (Rogaly, 2001). Evidently, the traditional strength of trade unions, rooted in their ability to engage in bipartite or tripartite wage bargaining between labour, employers, and the state—particularly when employers violated workers' rights enshrined in laws and procedural norms—has eroded, as such clear agreements are largely absent in the informal sector. With the rise of digital labour platforms, where weak state regulations, labour misclassification (e.g. “partner”/independent contractor) and opaque algorithmic management defined the work atmosphere, unions are encountering similar challenges in advocating for workers' rights and representation. Nonetheless, recent studies indicate that trade

unions have diversified their strategies, shifting from a class-based, universalistic approach to incorporating a more particularistic approach that acknowledges the ethnic, linguistic, and cultural differences of migrant workers (Kulkarni & Datta, 2024). With this shift, unions also started extending support beyond the workplace, addressing issues in workers' broader social environments (Ibid). However, existing literature lacks an examination of how unions concretely address these ethnic, linguistic, and cultural differences. Similarly, there is also evidence of traditional trade unions' organizing attempts among IT workers and digital labour platform workers (Thuppilikkat et al., 2024; Thuppilikkat et al., 2025). In this context, we explore a scenario where a traditional trade union in India organized both lower-class migrant workers and workers on digital labour platforms, with tech workers playing a crucial role. We examine how the union framed strategies that went beyond class universalism, incorporating the unique needs and identities of these diverse worker groups.

3 BENGALURU: THE MIGRANT CITY

Bengaluru, often referred to as the city of aspirations, drew energy from India's liberalization policies in the mid-1980s, positioning itself as a hub for IT firms from the global North seeking low operational costs and access to a growing pool of skilled, affordable labour. This led to the rapid growth of IT, software industries, and Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) sectors, and Bengaluru soon earned the label of India's Start-up Capital (Heitzman, 1999; Parthasarathy, 2004; Patni, 1999; Saxenian, 2002).

With the IT boom, skilled human capital from both within India and abroad flocked to Bengaluru. The city actively encouraged the influx of migrant tech workers, drawn by opportunities to work for global giants like Infosys, Wipro, Google, and Microsoft. Bengaluru's welcoming atmosphere, combined with promises of long-term career growth and access to robust healthcare and education systems, made it an attractive destination for tech professionals seeking career advancement and stability. However, alongside their expertise and the flow of capital and technology, the contributions of lower-class migrant workers—from rag pickers, construction workers and sanitation workers to domestic workers—were equally vital in facilitating the city's expansion both vertically and horizontally. This rapid transformation led to significant changes

in the “human-nature-space” of the city (Vakulabharanam & Motiram, 2024), prompting the expansion of urban boundaries and the conversion of areas once considered part of the *mofussil* or deemed “uninhabitable”—such as water bodies and forests—into urban spaces (see Table 1, Appendix).

While lower-class migrant workers supported the social and reproductive needs of the “white-collar” class and tech workers, they often found themselves navigating the harsh realities of informality. These workers were unable to aspire to a quality of life that included decent housing, basic sanitation, access to safe drinking water, healthcare, fair working conditions, and a fulfilling social life (Zabeer et al., 2019). In a city producing 5,000 tonnes of solid waste daily, where migrants make up 51% of the population, working populations such as rag pickers forced to live in informal settlements not only endure unhygienic conditions but also face constant threats of dispossession by authorities. Most migrant workers remain trapped in a cycle, oscillating between the dehumanising conditions of urban life and the economic hardships of their villages, with no reprieve in sight (Muktiar & Sharma, 2024).

Since 2014, Bengaluru’s urban landscape has also been shaped by the growing presence of digital labour platform (DLP) workers, many of whom are migrants providing essential services like transportation, care work, and food delivery. Similar to the domestic work sector, which absorbs a large portion of rural and semi-urban migrants, location-based DLPs have become a major source of employment for these workers (Tandon & Rathi, 2023). While DLPs play a crucial macroeconomic role by absorbing migrant labour and enabling their mobility through simplified onboarding and tech-mediated workflows (e.g., GPS and algorithmically managed tasks), they also exploit racialized and caste-determined migrant labour flows, leveraging their precarity to impose long hours and further entrenching inequalities (Van Doorn & Vijay, 2024; Katta et al., 2024). Notably, the migrant workers in digital labour platforms (DLPs) exhibit high tolerance for degraded working conditions—an imposed position due to their structural vulnerabilities (Zhou, 2024).

Urban economic growth has clearly relied on the exploitation of low-paid migrant labour, with workers’ rights systematically denied through extra-legal and informal labour market mechanisms (Jayaram & Varma, 2020). Typically engaged in subcontracted jobs and digital labour platforms, where employer accountability is often obscured, these workers are

excluded from labour laws and state oversight, resulting in severe exploitation (Jain & Sharma, 2018; Jayaram, 2019). In this context, our case study will explore how traditional trade unions have organized migrant workers, despite the fact that many of these workers lack direct employer accountability.

4 BACKGROUND: BENGALI MIGRANTS AND ITS QUEST OF BUILDING A “HOME”

Bengaluru has seen significant migration from eastern Indian states such as West Bengal, with many migrants choosing the city due to the hostile social environment in northern and western India, as well as the relatively higher wages offered in southern India (Chakraborty et al., 2022; Reja & Das, 2019). Unlike educated and high-income Bengali migrants who often bring their families, most lower-class migrant workers face conditions that prevent family relocation, with Bengaluru’s rag pickers being a critical exception (Chakraborty et al., 2022). Many of these migrants also move across different destinations, navigating uncertainty along the way (Ibid). Furthermore, West Bengal, with its long border with Bangladesh and shared Bengali ethnicity, hosts many Bangladeshi migrants, who, while not facing significant divisions locally, are often seen as infiltrators elsewhere in India, affecting mainly lower-class migrant lives (Shamshad, 2017). With the rise of Hindutva politics, undocumented Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants are increasingly seen as threats to national security, making life particularly difficult for Muslim migrants (Ramachandran, 1999). Notably, with the passing of the Citizenship Amendment Act under the Modi regime, migrant workers, particularly those living in Bengaluru’s informal settlements, became highly vulnerable, often facing eviction without notice and facing power and water disconnections by authorities (Chandran, 2020). For example, in 2020 the Bengaluru Bruhat Mahanagara Palike (BBMP) razed a labour settlement at Kariyamma Aghara to the ground, with Bangla-speaking Muslims being labelled as Bangladeshis (Bhat, 2020).

5 DATA AND METHODOLOGY

This paper draws on qualitative field data collected in December 2023, which includes participant observation, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions conducted in various Bengali *bastis* in Whitefield

and Electronic City, Bengaluru. In total, 13 participants took part in the in-depth interviews, including five worker-organizers and eight union members. The interviews were conducted at union offices and in Whitefield, one of the largest Bengali slums in Bengaluru, with one worker-organizer interviewed via telephone. Additionally, four focus group discussions were held, with each group consisting of 20 to 30 participants. Two of the groups consisted exclusively of young men; one group comprised only women; and the fourth was a mixed-gender group. To complement these primary data sources, we also analysed social media content, such as union Facebook pages and Facebook posts by union members, with their consent, to understand the chronology of events and track the unions' routine activities.

| <i>Name of the Organizers</i> | <i>Sex</i> | <i>Caste/Religion</i> | <i>Native</i> | <i>Occupation</i> | <i>Union</i> |
|-------------------------------|------------|-----------------------|---------------|--------------------------|--------------|
| 1. Sumit | M | UR/Hindu | West Bengal | Engineer | AIITEU, IMFK |
| 2. Dipak | M | UR/Hindu | West Bengal | Engineer | AIITEU, IMFK |
| 3. Jabbar | M | OBC/Muslim | West Bengal | Rag Picker-Urban Company | IMFK, AIGWU |
| 4. Palash | M | SC/Hindu | West Bengal | Engineer | AIITEU, IMFK |
| 5. Alok | M | SC/Hindu | West Bengal | Scientist | IMFK |
| 6. Samrat | M | UR/Hindu | West Bengal | Engineer | AIITEU, IMFK |
| 7. Surmaiya | F | OBC/Muslim | West Bengal | Domestic Labour | IMFK |
| 8. Ganesh | M | SC/Hindu | West Bengal | Zomato/Swiggy | AIGWU, IMFK |
| 9. Sanaya | F | OBC/Muslim | West Bengal | Urban Company | AIGWU, IMFK |
| 10. Hari | M | OBC/Hindu | West Bengal | Urban Company | AIGWU, IMFK |
| 11. Abdul | M | OBC/Muslim | West Bengal | Zomato/Swiggy | IMFK |
| 12. Sadiya | F | OBC/Muslim | West Bengal | Domestic Labour | IMFK |
| 13. Parveen | F | OBC/Muslim | West Bengal | Care Work | IMFK |

6 THE ALIENATED TECH WORKERS AND BENGALI SUB-NATIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS: CIVIC INTERVENTIONS & TECH-WORKER ORGANIZING

Bengali migrants, particularly tech workers and the educated Bengali middle class—many of whom are from privileged-caste backgrounds—enjoy access to a vibrant associational life in Bengaluru. The city is home to over 120 Bengali associations (DHNS, 2019), celebrated for fostering Bengali culture in Bengaluru. Events such as Durga Puja, a quintessential Bengali festival, are prominently celebrated and occasionally attended by chief ministers and other prominent state politicians, who commend Bengali tech workers and educated migrants for creating a “slice of Bengal” in the city (Ibid.). In stark contrast, lower-class Bengali migrant workers are often met with suspicion and discrimination in their daily lives, particularly from administrative authorities. Nonetheless, while tech workers and educated migrants leverage their skills for higher incomes in multinational corporations, many also engage in civic actions within the city, particularly among the lower-class Bengali migrant workers, striving to foster a sense of purpose and social belonging beyond their professional aspirations. For example, during our field study, we got to know about an organization in Bengaluru named “Pother Dabi,” a name popularized in West Bengal through the novel by Sharatchandra Chattopadhyay. Established in July 2018, the organization identifies itself as a youth-led initiative with the motto, “Serve the oppressed, serve the country.” It explicitly states that it is not a non-governmental organization (NGO) or a corporate social responsibility (CSR)-funded organization, instead they appeal to the Bengali residents in Bengaluru to contribute financially and engage their families in its activities. Through this community-driven approach, the organization aims to undertake social initiatives, such as providing education to Bengali migrant children in sites such as Kundalahalli, Bengaluru. Our participants involved in the Pother Dabi initiative indicated that their social action was primarily a response to the alienation they experienced as first-generation migrant tech workers in Bengaluru.

Palash, our participant said:

“Bengaluru for me was strictly a workplace. I didn’t have many people to socialize with. Monday to Friday you act like a Corporate *Majdoor*. Wake up, work and come back exhausted to sleep. We have nothing much to do on weekends as well. How much partying can one do? You will start to feel the hollowness. Back there in Kolkata we had a vibrant political

culture. *Meeting, Michil* (rallies) were like a part of our life, here you don't see all that happening."

The opportunities for civic, social, and political engagement that they had in their home state were absent in Bengaluru, where they felt reduced to migrant labour within multinational corporations. In an effort to reclaim a sense of social citizenship, they identified the lower-class Bengali migrant workers community in Bengaluru as a critical site for community action, enabling them to reconnect with their ethnic identity and language while engaging in meaningful social work. These workers' recognized an opportunity when they discovered that, despite the affordability of nearby government schools, the mandatory use of Kannada as the medium of instruction posed significant challenges for lower-class migrant children, leading many to become early school dropouts. Even children who had received preliminary education in West Bengal were unable to continue their education in Bengaluru due to the language barrier. As a result, during the weekends, the tech workers and other educated Bengali youth began holding regular educational classes for lower-class migrant children in subjects such as Maths, Science, English, and Bengali, with the aim of empowering them and providing opportunities for learning.

Initially focused on weekend teaching, their initiative gradually expanded to include organising blood donation camps, lake cleaning drives, and cultural programs for lower-class migrant workers, all aimed at improving their social habitat and making it more livable. As our participant Dipak stated, "Many of our friends, who were never part of any union or organisation, started joining us for the school. There was a sense of community." Therefore, the Pother Dabi initiative also provided an avenue for tech workers and the educated Bengali class to find a community for social action. On Saturdays and Sunday evenings, from 3:30 to 5:30 pm, they found fulfilment in volunteering for marginalized Bengali children, taking on the roles of *dada* (elder brother) and *didi* (elder sister).

Furthermore, in addition to the vulnerabilities, insecurities and exploitation within the corporate tech world, many Bengali tech workers became involved in tech-worker organising. On January 6, 2018, the All India IT and ITeS Employees' Union (AIITEU) was founded, offering membership to any employee working in the Information Technology (IT), Information Technology Enabled Services (ITeS), or computer/software-aided industries in the state of Karnataka. This included workers

employed directly, through contractors, or on work-based contracts, among other forms of employment. The intent behind the unionization was to fight for better and fairer working conditions for all employees in the IT and ITeS industry, regardless of their background or area of service. As one of our participant Sumit explained, around 40 million personnel work in the IT sector, it remains largely unmonitored. Some states exempt the IT sector from the Shop and Establishment Act, resulting in no specified working hours, no provision for overtime pay, and the ability for employers to hire and fire at will.

Similarly, as Samrat said:

“My CTC (cost to company) on paper is 10 lakh per annum. Out of which 5 lakh is basic and 5 lakh is variable. But, my company will deduct 50% of the variable though it is not running in any loss. So, I would get $(5 + 50\% \text{ of } 5)$ 7.5 Lakh per annum, which is in direct violation of the contract I had. But, there is no one to raise the voice.”

While wage-related issues and the degradation of work-life quality became key drivers for tech-worker organising, Bengali tech workers played a critical role in setting up the union, similar to their counterparts from Kerala in the city. This reflects the political temperament inherited from their home states, shaped by the ongoing legacies of parliamentary communism and trade union involvement in provincial politics. Many of our participants had prior engagement with Left-wing political parties and their youth and student fronts from their college days. This involvement shaped their political consciousness, which they carried into their work in the tech sector and their efforts in unionising. However, unions like the All India IT and ITeS Employees' Union (AIITEU), affiliated with traditional trade union Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), were not region or ethnicity-specific. As our participant Sumit explained, “To fight an multinational corporation (MNC), the struggle must be national. If we protest locally, tech companies will just move operations elsewhere, making the fight pointless.”

Also, for many migrant tech workers, organising was not just about addressing workplace exploitation; it was also a means of building associational culture and power, and creating a sense of community for an otherwise alienated workforce. As Sumit explains:

“When the AIITEU was formed, and we had to campaign or take part in the marches, I felt a certain connection to the city and the space. It seemed like a continuation of the past life. So we proactively found time for Union work, even during office hours too, breaks were used to

connect workers with the union members. And since Union was not a thing back then in our trade, there was a thrill doing it. It's like you are using the time, space and salary provided by the company to organise against them only."

Similarly, Dipak stated:

"We unite to make work in the technology sector enjoyable, meaningful, socially useful, and personally fulfilling." Thus, our participants, Bengali tech workers, were involved in civic actions with lower-class Bengali migrant workers communities as well as unionization efforts within the tech sector. Many of the tech workers had overlapping engagements in both areas. These efforts were primarily aimed at navigating the alienation they experienced as tech workers, while also fostering a sense of community centred around rights and social citizenship.

Nonetheless, the Bengali tech workers' involvement with Bengali lower-class migrants living in the *bastis*—initially through civic interventions and later, as we show in the subsequent sections of this chapter, through sustained efforts to unionize them into the Inter-state Migration Federation of Karnataka (IMFK) and the All India Gig Workers Union (AIGWU), both affiliated with the traditional trade union CITU—also revealed an inherent contradiction, not just solidarity. The tech workers were relatively privileged, not only in terms of class status but also within the caste hierarchy when contrasted with lower class migrant workers living in *bastis*. Yet, they continued their efforts to organize these workers.

As described by our participant Samrat:

"Even though we get a 6 digit salary, wear nice clothes, but don't forget we are also nothing but petty labour. Maybe we are a bit sophisticated. The hire and fire regime in the corporate world has made every job insecure now, these workers, rag pickers also have the same insecurity. The only difference is we still have some place to raise our voice, they have nothing. If I demand for job security these people should also have that platform too right? they cannot be simply jailed because of suspicion [as illegal citizens] right?"

While many members of AIITEU earn better wages and identify with both professional roles and tech management, the labour conditions they face expose their proletarianized reality. This contradictory class position (Wright, 1980), coupled with the absence of meaningful civic and socio-political participation in the host city's formal structures, pushed these workers to seek solidarity and collective action as a means of

asserting their rights and visibility. However, when they also foster solidarity with other marginalized and precarious workers—specifically, those who share their ethnic and linguistic background, this solidarity is not solely born from a labour stand point, but also because they interpreted the frames of migrant labour precarity through cultural frames. As Dipak expressed when asked why, as a tech worker, he engages with the lower-class Bengali migrant workers in the *bastis*, “The kind of injustice and hard life that they go through, I feel compelled to contribute in my limited capacity, however possible. They are my people, after all.” Therefore, the Bengali sub-national consciousness shaped their socio-political engagements within Bengaluru city.

7 UNIONIZATION THROUGH MIGRANT ENCLAVES: FROM CIVIC ENGAGEMENT TO POLITICAL RIGHTS

As Bengali tech workers sought a platform for civic and community action, their experiences and identities as migrants led them to connect with fellow migrant workers from the Bengali sub-national region. As Palash said “it is easy for us to connect with them; we speak the same language, and we all come from the same land.” For Bengali tech workers who do speak Kannada, engaging with lower-class Bengali migrant workers was also a matter of convenience. As a sub-national community, they also felt a need to uplift Bengali lower-class migrant families, through initiatives such as Pother Dabi. However, this rediscovery of sub-national community unfolded within the spatial fixity—defined as the “convergence of commodities, information, multifaceted human and non-human interactions, norms, customs, and social practices in a bounded geographical place” (Thuppilikkat et al., 2024)—found in the unauthorized settlements and labour *bastis* of lower-class Bengali migrant workers. These *bastis*, which house Bengali migrant rag-pickers, gig workers, and others engaged in informal labour, have become enclaves within the city, with its own rhythms and markers of identity.

As urban lower-class migrant enclaves, these *bastis* are surrounded by towering buildings that seem to erase their existence. Yet, within this enclave, everything needed to feel at home is present. During our participant observation, when we walked through these settlements, we passed by workers here who have carved out homes from rusting tin boxes and tarpaulin sheets, creating a semblance of stability in a city that offers little. Within it, there are tiny saloons, women managed small grocery shops,

sites where men gather after long workdays to play carom game, small shops with TV set playing Bengali news channels in the evening, and films or sports at night, and streets lined with second-hand motorcycles, bicycles, and makeshift stalls, each contributing to the vibrant, albeit humble, life in the basti. We also identified a tea shop with Bengali music playing in the background, a fritter shop serving Bengali-style snacks like chop, and a mobile repair shop cum CD parlour where Bengali songs echo nonstop. In one corner, we observed a small Kalimata Mandir (a Hindu temple), where fresh flowers were placed every day. Above the tin roofs, we spotted bottle gourd vines climbing up, nurtured by the women of the family—lau, a vegetable beloved in Bengal, symbolising both their connection to home and the continuity of life in this alien city. Inside their small single room huts, posters of iconic Bengali figures like Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose and Rabindranath Tagore decorate the walls, a silent testament to their cultural pride. These workers knew they were not welcome in the city; their status as informal labourers left them marginalized. However, they are also acutely aware that the city desperately needs their cheap labour as much as they need the city to survive. In this precarious existence, they have forged an uneasy pact with the city—a city that does not fully acknowledge their presence but cannot function without them. For now, though, these workers remain rooted in the city, staying as long as their labour is needed and as long as they can send money back home to their families. The basti is their home, not by choice, but by necessity—a testament to their resilience in the face of exclusion and hardship.

Critically, the engagement of Bengali tech workers within the life-world of migrant Bengali lower-class workers unfolded through their regular access to the *bastis*, which enjoyed spatial fixity. This provided tech workers a grounded connection to their social space and their multi-layered livelihood struggles. Notably, the *bastis* display a deeply rooted struggle over social citizenship—an existential fight that the tech workers and educated Bengali migrants, who have found their place in the city's corporate landscape, never had to face. With most of these workers being Bengali-speaking Muslims were routinely subjected to illogical harassment, random identity checks, and a societal witch-hunt that labels them as illegal citizens or Bangladeshis, and city administration's threat of eviction of the *bastis*, many of Bengali tech-worker and educated migrant volunteers discovered that many of the workers in these bastis, whose children they teach on weekends, face imprisonment at the hands of local authorities when they are unable to satisfy official demands or clear doubts

about their citizenship status. Therefore, the spatial fixity of the *bastis* was not merely a site where Bengali tech workers and educated classes found a space for civic intervention; it was also a learning site where, unlike tech workers, lower-class Bengali migrant workers faced significant challenges beyond workplace issues.

For example, on December 3, 2018, the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP), the city administration, issued a notification to evict the slum dwellers in Kundalahalli, which sparked massive mobilization by the residents, supported by the traditional trade union CITU, lawyers, and other human rights organizations, alongside tech workers navigating these spaces. On December 6, a stay order was issued by the Karnataka High Court, temporarily halting the eviction. This event fostered the development of political trust between the slum dwellers and the traditional trade unions, as well as other supporting actors. From that point onward, Bengali tech workers, as part of AIITEU, became involved in sustained political mobilization of the slum dwellers, including their participation in the all-India general strike organized by trade unions in January 2019.

On February 13, 2019, in Munnekollal, Bengaluru, 25 homes of migrant workers from West Bengal and Tripura were bulldozed. Armed goons attacked and ransacked the homes, injuring a woman and a child. The workers suspect the attack was orchestrated by the local MLA, driven by Hindutva politics, with the intention of targeting these individuals as “illegal immigrants from Bangladesh.” When traditional trade unions and tech workers who had been organising the slum dwellers, approached the Labour Department for support, officials dismissed the incident as a petty land dispute rather than acknowledging it as a labour issue. This context paved the way for articulations of migrant labour organising around the right to the city and the demand for dignified social citizenship.

In India’s labour organizing context, which is deeply entangled with partisan politics, focusing on social citizenship also carried significant political implications. As Sumit said;

“During the effort of eviction we got to know it was the local BJP MLA who sent his musclemen to attack this slum people. The Hindutva goons are always behind these people [Muslim migrant workers], this can’t be solved with one protest or two protests.. It needs continuous political intervention for longer period.”

Similarly Dipak said:

“The workers are seeing what Hindutva groups are doing. In *bastis* it’s not just Muslims. They know who wants to push them out. They will carry this back home as well. Like labour, the struggle against Hindutva is also multi-sited.”

Therefore, these tech workers, with partisan ties to the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI (M))—once the ruling party in West Bengal but now challenged by the All India Trinamool Congress (AITC) and the rise of Hindu nationalist party like the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—saw organizing migrant labourers as a critical site of political resistance as well. Organizing lower-class migrant workers was their way of channelling efforts to contribute to not just labour solidarity, but also to the political movements of their home state.

Nonetheless, in March, as the pandemic hit, 30 people from Dinajpur, West Bengal, stranded in Kattamanallur near KR Puram, received support from Bengali tech workers, Pother Dabi volunteers, and the traditional trade union CITU (many of them are native Kannadigas, Malayalees), who provided them with 15 days’ worth of rations. As the crisis deepened, the number of volunteers increased, with many being tech workers who were working from home. They took the initiative to support lower-class Bengali migrants during COVID-19, using their personal vehicles to deliver essential mutual aid and food. By collecting money from friends and with the help of Gyan Vigyan Samity, they reached out to those in need, ultimately feeding 20,000 workers across Bengaluru. As Hari shared, “We started off with 2–3 people and two bikes. Later we had 18 people, 6 four-wheelers, and three bikes. From Bommanahalli to Yelahanka, even Ramnagar, we were reaching as many people as possible.” Some also expressed the futility of donating to union government funds, as they felt the state was neglecting migrant workers. As Dipak expressed “People were giving [donations] to PM Cares, but they are not feeding anyone. So we had to.”

During the pandemic, lower-class Bengali migrant workers also felt the need to raise demands to their home state. As our participant Jabbar explained:

“COVID taught me a lesson. I have only one demand from the home state government: if we die and our bodies need to be returned to Bengal, it costs 20,000 rupees. Do we have that money? No. Many of our brothers are cremated in this foreign land. If the government could at least take on that responsibility, I would be happy.”

In this context, where the labour issues faced by lower class Bengali migrant workers in *bastis* intersected with social citizenship and livelihood crises beyond the workplace, and with the growing realization of the need to articulate demands to the State—both in their home province and the host province—the continued civic and political mobilization of Bengali tech workers paved the way for the formation of the IMFK on September 19th, 2019. Affiliated with the traditional trade union CITU, they continued their organising efforts in various other lower-class Bengali migrant workers *bastis*, delivered union membership card distribution, asserting the identity of migrant workers as rights-bearing individuals in the city, further strengthening their collective presence and advocating for the rights and welfare of the workers. By the end of July 2021, the IMFK's union expanded to *bastis* such as Munnekollal and Brookfield, further solidifying its presence and influence in the migrant worker communities.

8 GIG WORKER UNION AND THE MIGRANT BASTIS: THE TRANSVERSION OF MIGRANT NETWORKS INTO GIG WORKER NETWORKS

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, rag pickers and other informal workers living in lower-class migrant labour *bastis* faced severe unemployment and state neglect. While many of them had relied on informal kith and kin networks to find work, the pandemic and ensuing lockdown exacerbated their already precarious situation, leaving them in dire conditions. This led many in the *bastis* to opt for location-based DLPs, either to supplement their income or as full-time work. As our participant Hari said:

“...I also have to send money home. The pandemic made life difficult, so I took up a job in Swiggy [food delivery platform]. I used to rent electric bikes from the stand, do my duty, and then put it back. Now I got a second-hand motorcycle.”

Among our participants, many lower-class Bengali male migrants entered location-based DLPs for food delivery and ridesourcing, either by renting electric bikes or finding agents who sold Uber IDs and cabs in exchange for fixed rent or commission. As lower-class migrants, they often did not own their vehicles, so they had to rely on third parties to manage their access to these resources, facing not only fees and commissions to

platforms, but also to other intermediaries. This created conditions for double exploitation, with platform and beyond platform. Furthermore, many women from these *bastis* entered location-based DLPs such as Urban Company, working as beauticians and domestic workers. However, their onboarding process was far from easy as many had anticipated. As our participant Jabbar explained:

“Many people here want to do app-based work. But how will they do it? To register in Urban Company you have to submit a lump sum amount of money in the beginning. Most of the people here don’t have that kind of money. The only place that they can borrow money from is the *Jhuggidar* (often another Bengali migrant who has taken the land on lease from a local and is now renting it to the other Bengali workers), but if you don’t pay him in time, the torment will be unbearable. They will throw you from your home also.”

Therefore, many of our participants, the lower-class Bengali migrant workers, were dependent on intermediaries to secure jobs due to their vulnerable economic position. However, because of their reliance on informal networks, these intermediaries often came from within the Bengali migrant community itself. This created a cycle of dependence, where the lack of income from location-based DLPs could lead to further dispossession or additional challenges, such as housing eviction, as the workers navigated these informal, interconnected systems. Moreover, racialized imaginaries also pose challenges to migrant workers, particularly women, when it comes to onboarding with DLPs. As Ganesh explained:

“I work with Urban Company, but my wife works at people’s homes. We both clean their dirty bathroom. Back in the village I was a farmer, I didn’t let my wife work. But here it’s necessary, you can’t run a family alone. If only she knew beauty parlour work, she could also join an urban company, we could have earned double. But entering that section is difficult. Nepali girls are more in number, they are all fitfat (tidy-presentable) my wife dont stand a chance. (laughs).”

Nonetheless, despite such difficulties, these *bastis*, particularly after the post-pandemic period, have been serving DLPs with labour supply. One of the significant challenges migrant workers face is the lack of knowledge about the cityscape and the local language. If they find work outside DLPs, this lack of knowledge makes them dependent on stand-based auto drivers, who tend to charge higher fares. At least in the initial period of migration, most of our participants had difficulties using public transportation. The algorithmically dictated workflow and reduced human

interactions in DLPs, was hence a blessing for many migrant workers. However, it did not eliminate their workplace challenges, as Samrat said:

“The main problem here is language, we speak bangla. I can understand Hindi a little bit, but Kannnda was very difficult to understand. Problem is if we face some issue with our customer, we can’t really argue much. They will start speaking in Kannada.”

While working in DLPs was their critical reliance, these migrants faced crises and exploitation within and beyond the workplace, such as reliance on intermediaries, threats of eviction, and harassment. Moreover, political forces driven by bigotry and insider-versus-outsider discrimination further compounded the severe challenges faced by many of these migrant DLP workers. Responding to the harassment and nativist rhetoric from sections of Bengaluru’s population, one of our participants, a DLP worker Jabbar, remarked:

“These people call us outsiders, Bangladeshis, and what not. But just look around—take any food delivery boy from the streets. How many local people will you find?? So, our labour is not an outsider, only our body is an outsider?”

Therefore, due to their multiple axes of marginality suffered by Bengali-speaking lower-class migrants in Bengaluru, these workers, often with the sustained efforts of tech workers who had long engaged with them, were mobilized not only into the IMFK but also into the AIGWU, often with dual memberships. Along with unionization the migrant basti found their own strategies of micro-resistance or bypassing the algorithmic control using their social network. Our respondent Jabbar interestingly told:

“I started working in Urban Company as a sanitation worker from 2022. After the covid other business was down, I also became a father so needed extra money. The work was doing fine, but the job was very draining. I could do maximum one job a day. So, I devised a strategy: I will take along one person from the Basti. Though I am the only one registered with the company. Since two people will work, I can save up energy and time and get more orders. I usually do a 50-50 but days I can’t work right I can do 40-60 as well. In this way daily I can get 3 orders now. During the holiday season I even have taken two more people with me looking at the demand of the work, if you do the work right, people don’t complain. Though at times I get scared that what if the company finds out, but benefits everyone. The client, me and other workers. Not everyone can join apps like that no, so many got their ids blocked without

a reason. What will these people do? Remain unemployed? They also have families to feed. I do this much sin, I hope Allah will forgive me after looking at my intention.”

They mindfully dodge the algorithmic surveillance of DLPs, relying on members of their *bastis* to generate additional employment and support through informal, under-the-radar networks that operated beyond the digital panopticon. Thus, even before unionising with gig worker union, the well-established labour networks within IMFK and the spatial fixity of the *bastis* provided lower-class migrant gig workers with breathing space to find workarounds against the exploitative nature of DLPs.

While organising workers in algorithmically enforced, spatially dispersed workforces, such as those in location-based DLPs, has often proven challenging for unions (Dhar & Thuppilikkat, 2022; Thuppilikkat, 2024), in this context, the spatial fixity of lower-class migrant workers *bastis* provided a unique entry point. It allowed tech workers to step in as external organizers, leveraging these anchored spaces to build solidarity and mobilize workers not only for workplace issues but also for broader livelihood struggles.

Notably, the effort by tech workers to organize gig workers navigating DLPs was also a conscious political decision, taken up by their AIITEU union. On the one hand, gig workers were critical infrastructures supporting the lives of tech workers in the city. On the other hand, it represented an experiment in finding converging points between tech workers and gig workers, both navigating tech-mediated workspaces. As Palash explained:

“We could see them being exploited every day. In Electronic City, where I live, half of the population is either part of these gigs or dependent on them. Many bachelors come here who don’t have the time or skills to cook, but they have money. What do they do? They order. For groceries, you can have home delivery, and for transportation, you can take an auto or bike through an app. Going out, finding an auto, and bargaining with the driver in a foreign language for the fare is like a massive task. But with the app, you’re free from all those hassles. So, gig workers are part of our everyday life.”

Furthermore, as tech-worker Sumit argued:

“If you are politicised enough, you will understand how the corporations that send you abroad on business trips are actually exploiting you. It is natural that you would understand the precarity these people [Gig

workers] are going through. So, it was a thoughtful attempt from the union's side to think in this direction."

Therefore, as politicized tech workers, they experimented with linking the struggles of tech workers and gig workers. However, while they were able to organize them, it did not result in successful, sustained labour agitation in most parts of the city. The tech workers like Palash reflexively recognized their limitations:

"The workers lose interest due to the lack of results from the movement. The lack of results is because the protests are localised. These big firms [DLPs] don't actually care if 500 workers from a certain area stop working. Their scale is so large, and for the movement to succeed, mobilisation has to be on that scale. Sporadic movements here and there are not going to help the cause."

While the lack of results from agitations in the initial stages partially explains the limited political success of gig workers' struggles, it is crucial to recognize that the immediate livelihood challenges faced by migrant Bengali workers in the city are not solely in contradiction with the DLPs. They are also shaped by a multiplicity of actors—from intermediaries to the state—and by the struggle to navigate issues of illegality in citizenship, as well as the challenge of surviving within the ebb and flow of city life itself. The lower-class migrant working population is a fluid community that moves between cities, adding layers of complexity to the challenges of unionising these workers. Nonetheless, the spatial fixity and spatial organization of the *bastis* endure, preserving collective memories of past and present struggles. These anchored spaces offer entry points for organising, as they provide a sense of stability and solidarity amid the transitory nature of migration.

9 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Transversal Unionism: How Identity Intertwined with Class Position Creates a Rubric of Resistance

As our study indicates, responding to multiple axes of marginality—shaped by lower-class migrant workers' spatial anchorage in unauthorized settlements, the politics of suspicion fuelled by anti-Muslim phobia and illegality of their citizenship, and the vulnerability and exploitation faced as labour—the social context of Bengali sub-national consciousness played a formative role in the mobilization of migrant social classes inhabiting

the urban peripheries of Bengaluru. Notably, workers primarily inhabiting contradictory class locations, such as tech workers—many of them privileged-caste Bengali Hindus—found converging points with lower-class Bengali migrant workers in support of their livelihood causes. This led to a scenario what we identify as “transversal unionism,” where polyphonic practices of collective action and organising, mediated through Bengali sub-national consciousness and unfolding through the spatial anchorage of migrant labour *bastis*, paved the way for inter-class solidarity manifested through three distinct but fraternal unions: the AIITEU, the IMFK, and the AIGWU. While these unions are sites of class mobilization, not confined solely to sub-national politics, the lower-class Bengali migrants was drawn into unionization through the overlapping mobilizations of sub-nationalism and livelihood issues, accessed through the spatial fixity lower-class migrant labour *bastis*. This highlights how migrant workers’ agency apart from labour also carries both spatial and temporal implications (Rogaly, 2009).

***Organising Beyond Workplace: Imbedding Labour Power
into the Spatial Dynamics***

One of the significant challenges faced by traditional trade unions in contexts like India is the opaque relationship with employers, compounded by the erosion of the spatial fixity of the workplace, as seen in the case of DLPs. This shift creates challenges in (a) navigating collective bargaining through established contracts and institutionalized structures, and (b) reducing the access that external organizers from traditional trade unions have to workers, making it more difficult to engage and mobilize them, especially as they are dispersed across various locations. However, our study indicates that organising efforts, particularly reliant on external organizers, can explore and identify spatial fixity beyond traditional workplace scenarios, when they are absent. Similarly, focusing on demands beyond the workplace—such as social citizenship and right to city—can bring in cohesion amongst lower-class migrant workers engaging in heterogeneous work relations. Such entry points can be found in spaces such as unauthorized residential settlements where migrant labourers live, which, despite being outside formal work environments, serve as key sites for mobilization and solidarity. Particularly for migrant workers, their labour struggles are not necessarily disconnected from their struggles related to social citizenship.

Moreover, with the decline of the factory-based industrial working class and the emergence of an economy where 90% of the total workforce is highly unorganized and informal, or even spatially dispersed, or if the choke points of production relations are opaque, the city itself could become the site of resistance. Migrant labour is critical infrastructure that sustains the city. They make the city productive, not only sustaining it but also reproducing its social and economic fabric. They help “position residents, territories, and resources in specific configurations, where the energies of individuals can be most efficiently deployed and accounted for, driving the city’s growth and functioning” (Simone, 2004). Any breakdown in this labour force is unaffordable to urban economies. Therefore, traditional unions should attend to the lower-class migrant labour force, by considering the city as the choke point, where production and consumption flows are structured.

Also, in the cityscape of Bengaluru, shaped by neoliberal imaginaries and the accommodation of labour from a diversity of cultural contexts to meet the needs of capital, these labour flows often intersect with cultural conflicts, such as “son of the soil” debates, over who gets to work or live in the city. Migrant workers, particularly Muslim minorities as in our case, are highly vulnerable targets, facing heightened oppression from far-right politics. Organizing lower-class migrant workers’ in such scenarios also opens up new frontiers of political resistance, demonstrating the interconnectedness of struggles against Hindutva in multiple provinces, as seen in our case. Therefore, organising efforts must address the subjective vulnerabilities and insecurities of migrant labour, considering cleavages such as ethnicity, caste and religion as well.

Bengali Tech workers’ supported organising efforts such as IMFK and AIGWU signify a creative exploration of engaging with migrant labourers’ social and cultural subject position alongside their objective condition of labour. Therefore, the composite nature of labour, which embodies a heterogeneity of social, political, cultural and economic contradictions, needs not be seen as something to be absolved into a singular class framing. Instead, organising efforts could engage with and navigate these contradictions, shaped by cleavages such as ethnicity, caste and religion, opening up lateral avenues of solidarity and action that reflect the complexity of workers’ lived experiences. Therefore, the engagement of

Bengali tech workers with lower-class Bengali migrant workers,' rather than being sectarian, is an exploration of informal spatial avenues for the mobilization of labour, by leveraging the cultural content of labour. This serves as an entry point to mobilize otherwise difficult and dispersed class constituencies, while also being integratable into the broader universe of class solidarity.

APPENDIX

See Fig. 1 and Table 1.

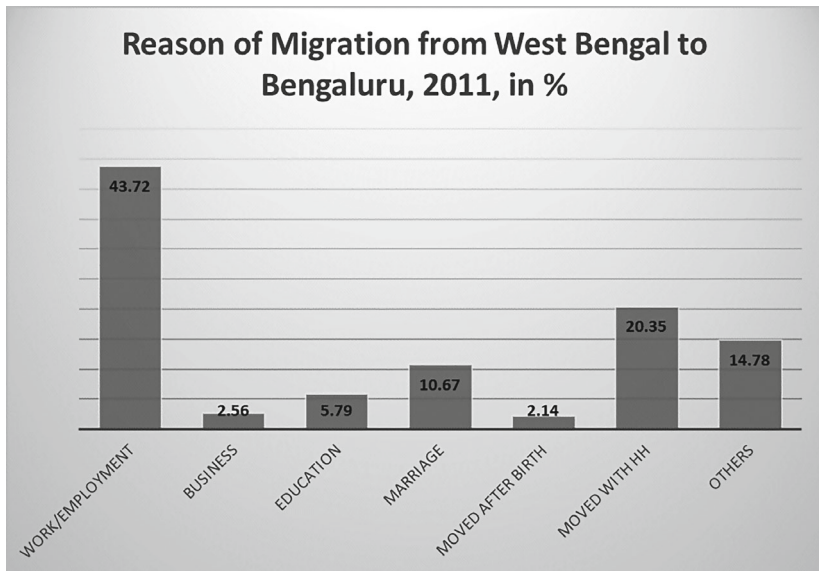


Fig. 1 Reason for Migration from West Bengal to Bengaluru (2011)

Table 1 Expansion of Bangalore City Agglomeration, 1971–2011

| <i>Census Years</i> | <i>Bengaluru Agglomeration Area Extended To:</i> | <i>Economic-Morphological Identity</i> |
|---------------------|---|---|
| 1971 | Bangalore Municipal Corporation (BMC) and City Improvement Trust Board (CITB), BEL Township, HMT Township, Jalahalli, HAL Township, ITI Notified Area | Public Sector Undertaking Tier I Phase of City-Scape |
| 1981 | Baiyyanahalli-Hebbal-Kengeri-Krishnarajapura-Lingarajapura-Yelahanka-Koramangala | Tier II inclusion as a subservient to Tier I |
| 1991 | Banaswadi-Byatanaryanapura-Benniganahalli-Bairasandra-Mahadevpura-Nagavara-Peenya | Private Sector Undertaking: Tier I Phase I of Cityscape |
| 2001 | Herrohalli-Pattanagere-Uttarahalli-Bommanahalli-Konankunte-Gottikere-Kothnur | Private Sector Undertaking: Tier I and Tier II together: Phase II |
| 2011 | Whitefield-Global Village-Bellandur-Electronic City-Madiwala | Revamped Tier I and Renewed Tier II: Phase III |

Source Author's addition to Shashidhar (2003), based on Census 2011 data

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