An Analysis of the Socio-Economic Conditions of Homeless Population in parts of Kolkata, West Bengal, India

Dr. Md. Mustaquim[1]
Md. Ismail[2]
[1]Assistant Professor, Department of Geography, Aliah University, Kolkata
[2]Research Scholar, Department of Geography, Aliah University, Kolkata

Article Info

Abstract

Persons who do not live in buildings or census houses but live in the open on the road side, on pavements, in large sewage pipes, under flyovers, at places of worship, on railway platforms are referred to as 'homeless' (Census of India, 2001). They constitute a significant proportion of a city's population and are steadily growing in number creating a serious imbalance in the functions and morphology of a city. They lead a very poor life with in fact no possessions. Often, the homelessness is caused by multiple and interrelated physical, social, economic, political and environmental factors. On this backdrop, the present study endeavours to explore the socio-economic conditions of homeless population living in the central part of Kolkata.

Introduction

The term 'homeless' is actually a catch word, a misnomer that focuses our attention on only one aspect of the individual's plight: his lack of residence or housing. In reality, the homeless often have no job, no function, no role within the community; they generally have few social supports. They are jobless, penniless, functionless, and supportless as well as homeless (Lipton and Sabatini, 1984). The concept of *home* is at the heart of the term homelessness (Mallet, 2004). The term 'home' has been used by various disciplines (sociology, anthropology, psychology, architecture, history, geography, philosophy) to define a structure, a place or dwelling, a family or group of people, a country or birthplace, an organization or building, a place that defines a person's sense of self, a refuge from the outside world, a haven. This view of homelessness emphasises the person's alienation and lack of social support networks (Baum and Burnes, 1993).

The term *homeless* includes people whose primary night-time residence is a shelter at an ad-hoc housing situation (Veness, 1993). More recent definitions refer it to a basic lack of shelter, including people living in public and private shelters and institutions providing temporary accommodation (Daly, 1996). Homeless people are those who are unable to get and maintain regular, safe and sound houses or face a lack of a fixed, usual and adequate night-time residence (Allred, 2006).

Homelessness describes the condition of people without a regular and secure dwelling within every type of economic setup in the world particularly in urban areas. However, the legal definition of homeless varies from country to country, or among different entities or institutions in the same countries or regions.

According to United Nations, homeless households are without shelter that would fall within the scope of living quilters. They carry their few possessions with them, sleeping in the streets, in doorways or on piers or in another space, on a more or less random basis (United Nations, 2005). A *homeless* person is defined into three categories based on the type of accommodations —

1. a publicly supervised or privately operated shelter designed to provide temporary living accommodations (including welfare hotels, congregate shelters, and transitional housing for the mentally ill);
2. an institution that provides a temporary residence for individuals intended to be institutionalized; or
3. a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings.

Factors contributing to Homelessness

A wide array of factors contributes to homelessness, but they can be thought of as falling into one of two categories: *structural problems* and *individual factors that increase vulnerability*. The former includes lack of affordable housing, changes in the industrial economy leading to unemployment, inadequate income supports, de-institutionalization of patients with mental health problems, and erosion of family and social support. The second one includes physical or mental illness, disability, substance abuse, domestic violence and job loss.

Homelessness in India

With a population of well over 1 billion people, India is the second most populous nation in the world. According to UN-Habitat (2010), India is a home of about 63% of all slum dwellers in South Asia. This amounts to 170 million people, i.e., about 17% of the world's slum dwellers. India's per capita income, although rising, rank's 124th in the world. This low per capita income is one factor that marks the sharp divide between India's wealthiest and poorest citizens. Approximately 35% of India's 260 million people (a group almost equal to the entire population of the United States of America) still earns $1 or less a day. Furthermore, according to the United Nations, 70 million people earn less than $2 a day. As India continues to grow in economic stature, there is much debate over the country's ability to tackle poverty and urban homelessness. The 2001 Census reported that 78 million people across India were living without a home, many in overcrowded urban environments.

Kolkata Scenario

Within the city core, 33% of the total population was living in their own houses and nearly 51% of them lived in rented houses. On the other hand, 56% of the total population in Greater Kolkata lives in houses owned by them, and 36% in rented houses. In Kolkata Municipal Corporation area, 49% houses are one-roomed while 8% of the houses had five or more rooms. In Greater Kolkata, single-room houses amount to 37% while multi-room houses 9% as a large number of populations belong to the low income group. In Kolkata Municipal Corporation area, in 32% of the houses, the per capita floor space is only 30 sq.ft. In Greater Kolkata, the same space is available in only 23% households (Mukopadhyaya, 2006).

Literature Review

Elliott and Kriuo (1991) believed that in Third World countries rapid population growth due to urbanization, industrialization and migration results in increase in homeless population who live in slums, pipes, tents, caves, cars, vans, under flyovers, along roads or railways lines, with their relatives in inadequate or dilapidated facilities. Charles (2002) observed that in western countries a majority of homeless are men (75% to 80%). Vissing (2004) analysed that the homeless student is also at a disadvantage when doing school work, mainly due to a lack of access to computers, libraries, and class materials. Novac (2006) stated that homelessness is a visible problem that stigmatizes individuals or families with alcoholism, drugs, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) like HIV-AIDS, crime,

mental ill-health, domestic violence, sexual assault, stalking and creates threatening conditions that relate to violence against a member of the household. Yonge (2007) stated that homelessness is evident in both industrialized and developing countries like USA (700,000) and Great Britain (175,000). It was estimated that 1.2 million Western Europeans are homeless or live in precarious accommodations. Jim (2011) recognized the importance of study about those populations residing in temporary, insecure or physically ruined sub-standard accommodation.

The Study Area

The study area, where the field survey has been conducted, falls within the central part of Kolkata district. This district, besides being a hub of informal sector activities has a population density of 24,252 persons/km^2, which is more than 23 times the overall density of West Bengal which is 1,029 persons/km^2. In 2011, this district had a population of about 4,486,679 in an area of about 185 km^2. Homeless slums appear to abound in this area transporting people over short distances along the internal streets and by-lanes, and also to nearby places across the border.

Objectives of the Study

Keeping in view the importance of homeless population and their socio-economic conditions in Kolkata, the study is carried out with following objectives to analyse their demographic characteristics, to assess their socio-economic conditions, and to find out the problems they encounter.

Methodology

To fulfill the objectives of the study the researchers have taken a total of 60 samples equally distributed and randomly chosen in four areas of Central Kolkata, viz., A. J. C. Bose Road, Haji Md. Mohsin Square Rafi Ahmed Kidwai Road, Dharamtala and Park Circus (15 homeless households/area). While selecting the sample, two points were kept in mind firstly, they have different occupations, and secondly, their income level varies. A suitable questionnaire was prepared for this purpose and included personal details of the homeless slums and her / his family namely, her / his name, age, caste,

religion, number of family members, number of workers, total household income, food availability, household expenditure, family sizes, dependency ratio, place of residence and education level. The information was collected through field survey in 2011. Simple statistical methods were used for analysis of the data, such as proportions, ratios and correlations.

Socio-Economic Status of Homeless Population

(a) Social Composition

According to primary survey, majority of them (45%) are from Bihar, followed by Uttar Pradesh (26.67%), Orissa (11.67%) and others (10.00%). The remaining (8.33%) are from different parts of West Bengal. Normally, the migrants are coming from the regions close to West Bengal (Table 1). Further, out of the total respondents, as many as 45% happen to be Hindus and the remaining (55%) Muslims. Among the Hindus, 66.37% belong to the SC / ST group and the remaining (33.63%) belong to the OBC. The majority of the dwellers are young, belonging to the (15 59) years age group (49.82%) (Table 2). The average age is slightly lower among the new migrants than among the old residents.

(b) Family Structure, Age and Sex Composition

The average family size ranges between 4 and 5 members / household with no significant variations (Table 2). On an average male percent is marginally higher than the female percent, but female percent surpasses the male percent both in Park Circus and Haji Md. Mohsin Square - Rafi Ahmad Kidwai Road area. Age structure is typical with working percent larger than the child percent. Aged percent is close to 12% only in AJC Bose Road area and below 9% in the remaining three areas. Hence dependency ratio ranges between 48.33% and 52.63% with an average of 50.18%. This is attributed to the fact that almost all the able individuals have to work hard for sustenance.

(c) Educational Status

The educational attainments among the sampled homeless dwellers are extremely poor on an average, only 20.73% of them are literate. Literacy is highest in the Dharmatala area followed by AJC

Bose Road area (Table - 3). Interestingly, female literacy is twice the male one in AJC Bose Road area and Park Circus area and is identical in Haji Md. Mohsin Square - Rafi Ahmad Kidwai Road ara. Male literacy is more than the female one only in Dharmatala area. There is no PG students in any area; however, there are some with UG degree in Haji Md. Mohsin Square - Rafi Ahmad Kidwai Road area. In Madhyamic and HS levels, proportion of households lie well within 4%.

(d) Occupational Structure

One can reasonably surmise that if the migrant homeless respondents had had a stable and lucrative employment other than cultivation back in their villages, they would not have come to Kolkata. As high as 42.9% of the migrant respondents were unemployed before they came to Kolkata. The previously employed persons were mainly daily wagers and poorly paid activities at the village level. About 76.4% of the migrant homeless dwellers had been living in Kolkata for 6 10 years when the survey was conducted, the rest (23.60%) have been residing here for varying durations of less than 6 years. The highest proportion of workers are engaged as different types of hawkers in the city (25.26%) followed by hotel assistants (18.95%), coolies (14.74%), other (21.06%), daily labourer (13.68%) and shop assistants (6.32%) (Table - 4).

(e) Level of Income

The average income of the homeless dwellers is low. Their daily earnings range between Rs. 100 and Rs. 500. Their income depends on the nature of their occupation. The female vendors selling vegetables and engaged in household servants earn the lowest (Rs. 50 - 150 per day). The hawkers are involved in their activity throughout the week. Working hour varies from 9 10 / day. On an average, the distribution of monthly income is positively skewed with the highest proportion (38.33%) earning less than Rs. 3000/month and lowest (3.33%) above Rs. 9000/month. Among the four areas, those in Dharmatala area seem to be comparatively rich (Table -5).

(f) Food Availability

Food is the basic need of every living being in the world and food security is an important indicator of socio-economic development. The study reveals that on an average, 49.17% of the households afford 1810 2399 kcal, followed by 31.25% (below 1810 kcal) and only 19.58% (2400 kcal +) in the study area (Table - 6). Basically, availability of food depends upon the level of income and hence, in Dharamtala and Park Circus area per capita calorie intake is significantly higher than the average of the four areas. Malnutrition and starvation is a common feature in AJC Bose Road and Haji Md. Mohsin Square - Rafi Ahmad Kidwai Road area.

(g) Household Expenditure

Close to four-fifth of the households spend on food, followed by education, health, clothes, shelter and others (Table 7). It is highest in Park Circus area (80% +) and lowest in AJC Bose Road (77% +). On education, expenditure is very meager as their income is often not sufficient for two proper meals a day (average=6%). However, it is highest in AJC Bose Road area and lowest in Dharamtala area. On health also, expenditure is very low (below 6%), being highest in Park Circus area and lowest in AJC Bose Road area. On shelter, their average expenditure is below 3%, being highest in Dharamtala area and lowest in Park Circus area. On clothes, they spend on an average a little above 3% on an average, being highest in AJC Bose Road area and lowest in Park Circus area.

Correlation Analysis

A correlation matrix has been drawn up with six selected socio-economic variables as family size (x_1: no. of members), literacy (x_2: %), worker (x_3: %), income (x_4: Rs), food availability (x_5: cals per capita/day) and expenditure (x_6: Rs) (Table 8). It shows that family size is significantly positively correlated with literacy and significantly negatively correlated with monthly income. Literacy is significantly positively correlated with monthly expenditure and family size while significantly negatively correlated with worker and food availability. Worker proportion is significantly positively correlated with food availability but significantly negatively correlated with literacy. Monthly income is significantly negatively correlated with family size and food availability. Employment level is significantly positively correlated with food availability but significantly

negatively correlated with literacy. Monthly expenditure is also significantly positively correlated with literacy and negatively correlated with food availability.

Conclusion

Thus, the fact emerges that the homeless dwellers in the study area are socio-economically very poor and backward. About 50% of them are dependents; only a fifth are literates ith higher female literacy; sex-composition is roughly balanced; they are employed mostly in low-income informal activities. It is also observed that they have very poor income with more than two-thirds of the households having monthly income less than Rs. 5,000 and only 3.3% Rs. 9000 and above. Thus, they can save a little and often suffer from malnutrition.

Recommendations

The homeless population in the study area are evidently socially and economically poor and backward. Their life can be changed and upgraded with the following recommendations

1. as most of them are migrants through 'rural push', their influx can be checked by creating various employment opportunities in rural areas.
2. Govt. can make provisions for night shelters, sanitation and housing facilities for them.
3. measures should be adopted to provide basic facilities to the slums to make it more habitable.
4. slums located in congested and unhygienic areas where equitable distribution of space is not feasible should be cleared in favour of tenements.
2. wherever neither tenemental scheme nor in-situ development is feasible, rehabilitation and resettlement in tenements in nearby locations should be arranged.

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Personnel Worlds of the Poor, *Political Geography*, Vol. 12, pp.319-40

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Table - 1: Distribution of Migrant Homeless Population by Places of Origin

Place of Origin / Last Residence	Sampled Households (%)
Bihar	45.00
Uttar Pradesh	26.67
Orissa	11.67
West Bengal	8.33
Other places	10.00
Total	100.00

Source: Field Survey, 2011

Table - 2: Distribution of Sample Homeless Dwellers by Family Size, Age Structure, Sex Composition and Dependency Ratio in Kolkata, 2011

Sample Area	Age Group (Years)			Sex Composition (%)		Average Family Size (No. of Members)	Dependency Ratio (%)
	0 – 14	15 – 59	59 +	Male	Female		
A	36.67	51.67	11.66	50.00	50.00	4	48.33
B	46.25	48.75	5.00	47.50	52.50	5	51.25
C	41.03	51.28	7.69	58.97	41.03	5	48.72
D	43.86	47.37	8.77	45.61	54.39	4	52.63
Average	42.18	49.82	8.00	50.91	49.09	-	50.18

Source: Field Survey, 2011
A= A.J .C Bose Road,   B = Haji Md. Mohsin Square - Rafi Ahmad Kidwai Road,
C = Dharmatala   D = Park Circus

Table - 3: Distribution of Sampled Households byEducation, 2011

Sample Area	Level of Education among Literates					Literacy Rate (%)		
	Below V	V – VIII	IX – XII	Upto Graduation	Upto Post Graduation	Total	Male	Female
A	13.33	5.00	1.67	-	-	20.00	6.67	13.33
B	6.25	7.50	2.50	1.25	-	17.50	8.75	8.75
C	11.54	10.26	1.28	-	-	23.08	13.36	8.50
D	12.28	7.02	3.51	-	-	16.67	5.13	11.54
Total	43.40	29.78	8.96	1.25	-	20.73	9.46	11.27

Source: Field Survey, 2011
A= A.J .C Bose Road,   B = Haji Md. Mohsin Square - Rafi Ahmad Kidwai Road,
C = Dharmatala   D = Park Circus

Table - 4: Distribution of Sample Households by Occupational Structure, 2011

(%)

Sample Area	Hotel Workers		Shop Assistants		Coolies		Daily Wagers		Hawkers		Others	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
A	12.0	8.0	12.0	-	16.0	-	12.0	4.0	12.0	8.0	8.0	8.0
B	9.5	4.7	9.5	-	19.0	-	9.5	4.7	9.5	4.7	14.3	14.3
C	15.3	3.8	3.8	-	11.5	-	7.6	3.8	26.9	11.5	7.7	7.7
D	13.0	8.7	-	-	13.0	-	4.3	8.7	21.7	4.3	13.0	13.0
Average	12.6	6.3	6.3	-	14.7	-	8.4	5.2	17.8	7.3	10.5	10.5

Source: Field Survey, 2011 M = Male F = Female
  A= A.J .C Bose Road, B = Haji Md. Mohsin Square - Rafi Ahmad Kidwai Road,
  C = Dharmatala D = Park Circus

Table - 5: Distribution of Sampled Households by Monthly Income, 2011

(%)

Sample Area	Monthly Income (Rs.)				
	Below 3000	3000 - 5000	5000 - 7000	7000 - 9000	9000 +
A	40.00	26.67	20.00	6.66	6.67
B	46.67	33.33	20.00	-	-
C	20.00	33.33	26.67	13.33	6.67
D	46.67	26.67	20.00	6.66	-
Average	38.33	30.00	21.67	6.67	3.33

Source: Field Survey, 2011
  A= A.J .C Bose Road, B = Haji Md. Mohsin Square - Rafi Ahmad Kidwai Road,
  C = Dharmatala D = Park Circus

Table - 6: Distribution of Sampled Households by Food Availability, 2011

(%)

Sample Area	Food Availability (kcal/capita/day)		
	Below 1,810	1,810 − 2,399	2,400 +
A	31.67	50.00	18.33
B	26.67	60.00	13.33
C	40.00	33.33	26.67
D	26.67	53.33	20.00
Average	31.25	49.17	19.58

Source: Field Survey, 2011
A= A.J .C Bose Road, B = Haji Md. Mohsin Square - Rafi Ahmad Kidwai Road,
C = Dharmatala D = Park Circus

Table - 7: Distribution of Homeless Households by Expenditure, 2011

(%)

Sample Area	Heads of Expenditure					
	Food	Education	Health	Shelter	Clothes	Others
A	77.72	7.78	3.21	2.01	3.45	5.83
B	79.29	5.88	4.57	2.60	4.16	3.50
C	74.83	4.99	6.23	3.09	3.06	7.80
D	80.41	5.34	7.53	1.98	2.13	2.61
Average	78.06	6.00	5.39	2.42	3.20	4.94

Source: Field Survey, 2011
  A= A.J .C Bose Road, B = Haji Md. Mohsin Square - Rafi Ahmad Kidwai Road,
  C = Dharmatala D = Park Circus

Table - 8: Correlation Matrix

Variables	x_1	x_2	x_3	x_4	x_5	x_6
x_1	1					
x_2	**0.30**	1				
x_3	-0.20	**-0.37**	1			
x_4	**-0.66**	-0.00623	0.15	1		
x_5	0.20	**-0.36**	**0.29**	**-0.59**	1	
x_6	0.16	**0.80**	0.14	0.08	**-0.42**	1

Source: Computed by the authors   (**bold**) = significant at 0.05 level
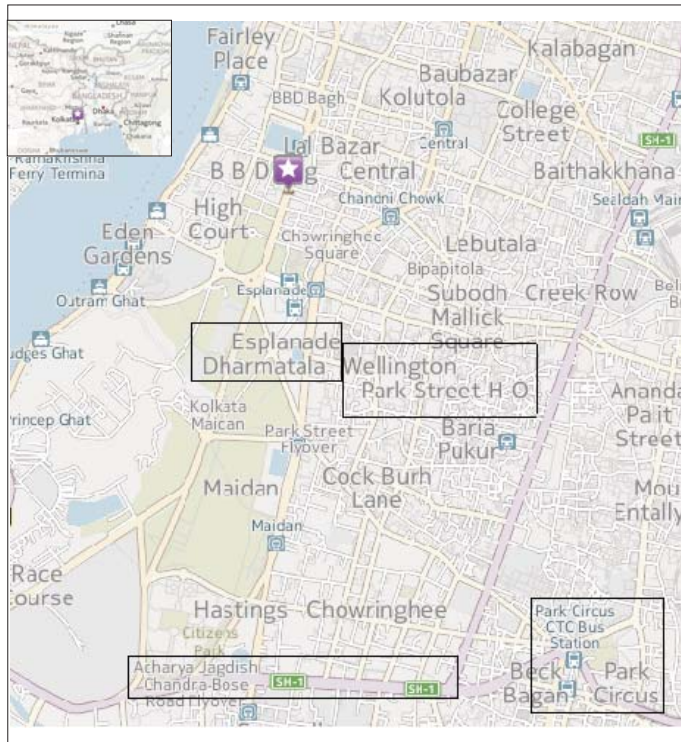
Fig. 1:Location of the Study Area
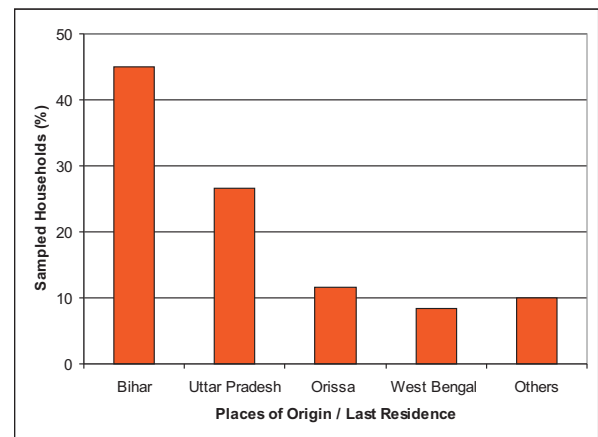
Fig. 2:Homeless Population by Places of Origin
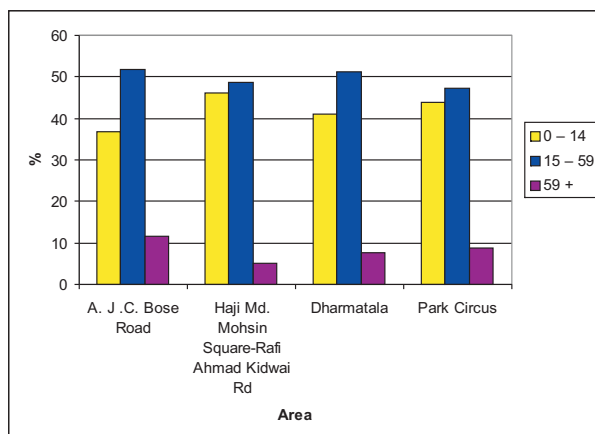
Fig. 3: Age Composition of Homeless Population
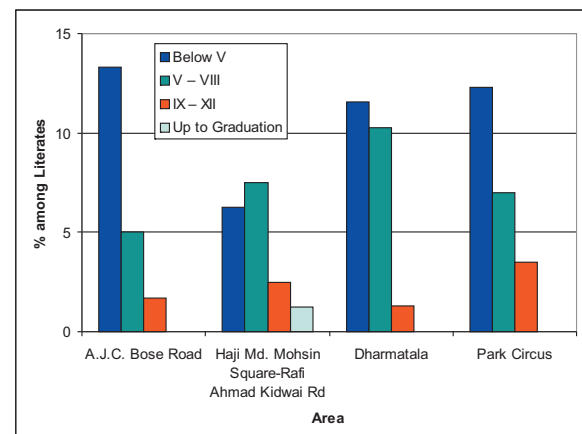
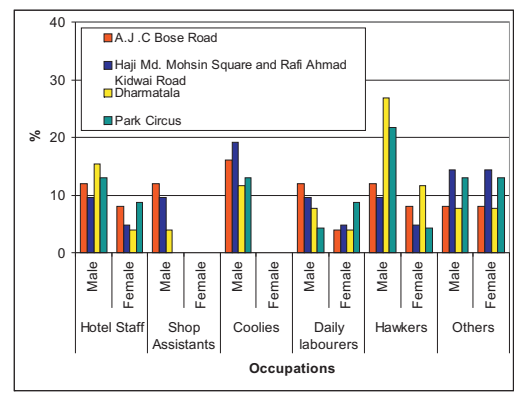Fig. 4:Level of Education among Literates
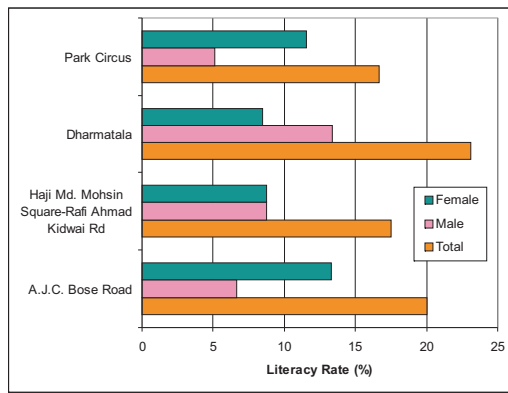
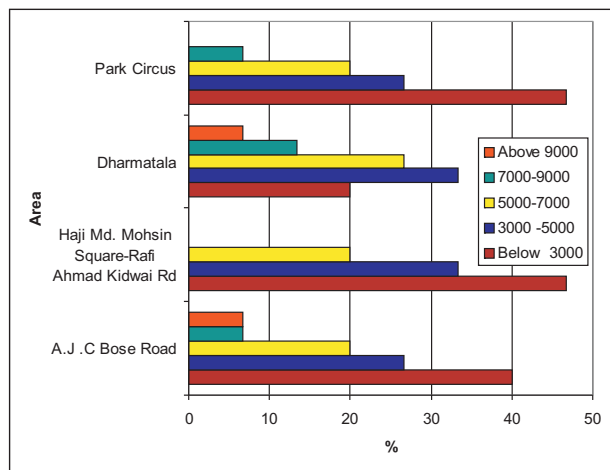Fig. 5: Pattern of Literacy

Fig. 6: Occupational Pattern

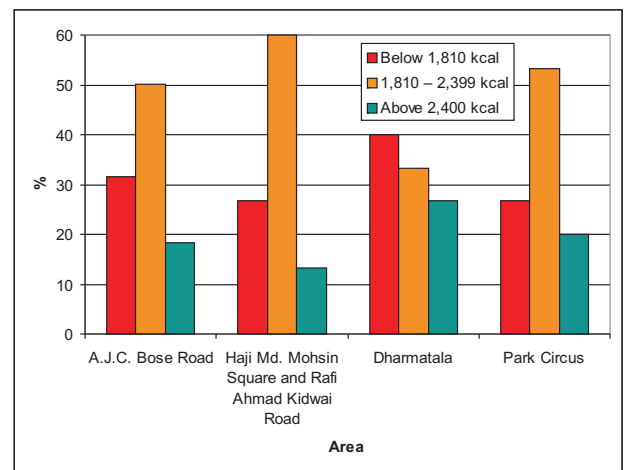Fig. 7:Distribution of Households by Monthly Income

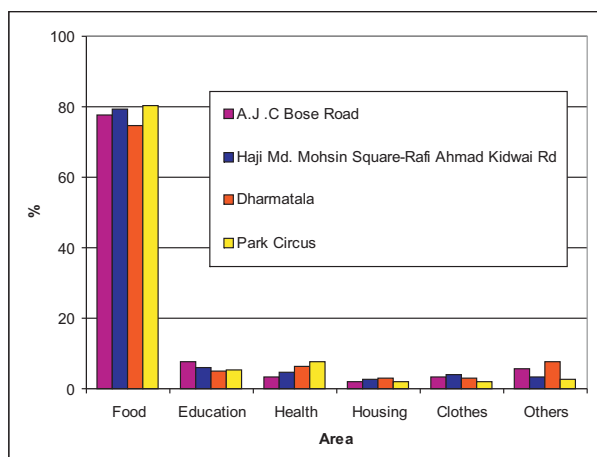Fig. 8: Distribution of Households by Food Availability

Fig. 9: Distribution of Households by Head of Expenditure

Dr. Md. Mustaquim
Assistant Professor, Department of Geography
Aliah University,
EN - 69, Sector - V, Salt Lake, Kolkata - 700 091
Email: mustaquim.md@gmail.com

Md. Ismail
Research Scholar, Department of Geography
Aliah Universit,
EN - 69, Sector - V, Salt Lake, Kolkata - 700 091
Email: ismailmohd1983@gmail.com