

*OCCASIONAL PAPER*

89

**Women in the City: The Commuting  
Public of Early Post-colonial Calcutta**

Anwasha Sengupta

Simantini Mukhopadhyay

Supurna Banerjee

March 2026



**INSTITUTE OF DEVELOPMENT STUDIES KOLKATA**

**DD 27/D, Sector I, Salt Lake, Kolkata 700 064**

**Phone : +91 33 2321-3120/21 Fax : +91 33 2321-3119**

**E-mail : [idsk@idskmail.com](mailto:idsk@idskmail.com), Website: [www.idsk.edu.in](http://www.idsk.edu.in)**

# **Women in the City: The Commuting Public of Early Post-colonial Calcutta**

**Anwasha Sengupta<sup>1</sup>**

**Simantini Mukhopadhyay<sup>2</sup>**

**Supurna Banerjee<sup>3</sup>**

In the immediate aftermath of British India's partition and independence, the gender profile of the commuting public in Calcutta changed rapidly. Women, particularly those who belonged to Hindu Bengali refugee families, joined various services and professions, and became increasingly visible in public transports. Consequently, public transports emerged as a site where women and men, who were unrelated to each other, came in proximity, albeit for a brief period. This was a novel experience for most of them. Trams, buses, and trains, therefore, became potent spaces of anxieties, tensions, as well as camaraderie and friendship across gender lines. Public transport emerged as a site of identity formation, and making and unmaking of gender boundaries. This paper attempts to understand this process of boundary making and transgressions within the confinement of public transports - where encounters were fleeting, in the historical context of early post-colonial Calcutta. We begin with elaborating the historical context and then move to the raging public debate around reservation of seats for women in trams and buses that ensued at that time. The final section of the paper focuses on how public transport simultaneously produced a social that allowed both inter and intra-gender kinship and solidarity to prosper, and the patriarchal anxieties around it.

---

<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor, Institute of Development Studies Kolkata. Email: [senguptaanwasha@gmail.com](mailto:senguptaanwasha@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup> Assistant Professor, Institute of Development Studies Kolkata. Email: [simantinihalder@gmail.com](mailto:simantinihalder@gmail.com)

<sup>3</sup> Assistant Professor, Institute of Development Studies Kolkata. Email: [banerjee.supurna@gmail.com](mailto:banerjee.supurna@gmail.com)