

GENTRIFICATION IN WEST BENGAL: PERI-URBAN ENCLOSURES, ECOLOGICAL FRONTIERS AND INFRASTRUCTURAL DISPLACEMENT

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ABSTRACT:

Urban change in West Bengal is often described through “development” and “modernisation”, yet the social costs of upgrading remain unevenly distributed. This article examines gentrification in West Bengal as a set of interlinked processes, peri-urban land conversion, infrastructural clearance, and ecological enclosure, rather than only as inner-city “renovation.” Drawing on a qualitative review of peer-reviewed scholarship, planning documents, statutory texts, and investigative environmental journalism published before May 2025, it maps four sites where displacement pressures are most visible: Rajarhat-New Town, canal-side resettlement under the Kolkata Environmental Improvement Project, the East Kolkata Wetlands, and the tourist-real-estate frontier around Bolpur-Santiniketan. The analysis shows that state agencies, parastatals, and private developers jointly reshape land values and everyday livelihoods, while formal protections (for wetlands or resettlement) frequently lag behind market momentum. The article concludes with practical safeguards aimed at reducing dispossession without freezing necessary urban improvements.

KEYWORDS: Kolkata; Rajarhat-New Town; East Kolkata Wetlands; displacement; peri-urbanisation; Santiniketan

INTRODUCTION:

Gentrification is commonly introduced as the upgrading of older neighbourhoods accompanied by the displacement of lower-income residents, often through rent increases and redevelopment (Chatterji). In West Bengal, however, the sharper edges of “gentrification” frequently appear outside the classic inner-city script, in places where land is being urbanised for the first time or where public projects trigger relocation and informal-market restructuring (Ghertner). This article uses “gentrification in West Bengal” as an umbrella term for a family of changes that produce similar outcomes, rising land values, altered land use, and social exclusion, even when the mechanism is land acquisition, enclosure of commons, or infrastructure-led clearance rather than boutique renovation (Ghertner). The focus is not to declare every urban project “gentrification,” but to show how Kolkata and its extended region have become a mosaic of upgrading and displacement, with distinct pathways and uneven protections (Kundu; Mallik).

METHODOLOGY:

The study adopts qualitative document analysis and a structured literature review of materials published before May 2025, emphasising peer-reviewed articles, government or statutory texts, and official planning documents, supplemented by investigative reporting where it documents otherwise hard-to-access land-use change and livelihood impacts. Sources were selected through keyword searches combining “gentrification”, “displacement”, “Rajarhat”, “New Town”, “East Kolkata Wetlands”, “KEIP”, and “Santiniketan/Bolpur”, with priority given to works providing institutional details, timelines, or empirically grounded claims. Given the absence of a consolidated, state-wide dataset explicitly labelled “gentrification”, the analysis treats gentrification as a concept to interpret documented changes in land tenure, land use, and livelihoods rather than as a variable measured through a single index.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

Rethinking gentrification in India

Ghertner argues that standard gentrification theory, built around reinvestment in previously disinvested inner-city property, fits unevenly in India, where displacement often comes from “urban revolution”, enclosures, and coercive transformations of land and tenure. This framework is relevant for West Bengal because the most visible “upscaling” since the 1990s has been driven by peri-urban expansion and large projects (for example, New Town) rather than a single inner-city return of elites.

Rajarhat and peripheral urbanisation

Ethnographic and political-economic work on Rajarhat–New Town describes a planned township built through land acquisition and uneven incorporation, producing “villages in the city”, informal intermediaries, and layered forms of “displacement in place” (Kundu). Das adds that Rajarhat’s development politics cannot be understood without attention to caste and local power, showing how narratives of “global city” building coexist with dispossession and the reshaping of social relations. Mallik’s survey-based study of fringe villages affected by Rajarhat’s land acquisition documents livelihood shifts and occupational downgrading among land-losing households, connecting land dispossession to distress-driven rural transformation.

Infrastructural displacement in Kolkata

Shaw and Saharan analyse “urban development-induced displacement” in Kolkata through the Kolkata Environmental Improvement Project (KEIP), demonstrating how relocation decisions and post-relocation outcomes depend on unit size, distance from livelihoods, and the terms of resettlement.

Ecological enclosure and the wetlands frontier

The East Kolkata Wetlands are recognised as a Ramsar site (12,500 ha) and described as a multiple-use system that treats wastewater while supporting fisheries and agriculture (Ramsar Sites Information Service). West Bengal's East Kolkata Wetlands (Conservation and Management) Act, 2006 establishes an authority and restricts land-use change without prior sanction, reflecting an explicit attempt to contain encroachment pressures from settlement and real estate (Government of West Bengal). Journalistic investigations nevertheless document rapid land-use conversion within parts of the wetland region, suggesting a recurring mismatch between legal protection and on-ground enforcement.

Small-town touristification: Bolpur–Santiniketan

Outside the Kolkata metropolitan fringe, research on Bolpur-Santiniketan notes post-1950 urban growth, housing projects promoted by local authorities and private companies, and built forms that are widely perceived to clash with the place's cultural landscape (Sen and Guchhait). A national business daily also reported a surge of real estate projects and land deals around Santiniketan in the early 2010s, signalling an amenity-driven property frontier whose pressures resemble gentrification through rising land prices and changed everyday use.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS:

1) Rajarhat-New Town: upgrading through enclosure and uneven incorporation

Rajarhat-New Town illustrates how peri-urban land becomes a field for urban consumption and investment while older settlements persist as enclaves inside the planned grid (Kundu). A key feature is the selective inclusion of village clusters and “service” functions, where low-income workers are implicitly expected to reside,

alongside gated high-rise housing and IT-led imaginaries of a “smart” city (Kundu).

The statutory planning vision is visible in WBHIDCO’s Land Use and Development Control Plan (2012), which specifies Action Area sizes (Action Area I: 677 ha; II: 1310 ha; III: 783 ha; CBD: 183 ha) and projects a resident population of 10 lakh and floating population of 5 lakh.

Planning texts also acknowledge that urbanisation has “spilled” into adjoining areas “in a haphazard manner”, and propose zoning and control to guide rural-urban transition, reflecting a technocratic framing that can sit uneasily with how land markets and informal power operate in practice.

The political economy of this transition becomes clearer in livelihood data: Mallik’s 2010–11 survey of villages affected by Rajarhat-related land acquisition finds mean ownership holding declining from 3.63 bigha to 0.66 bigha and mean operational holding from 5.22 to 0.56 bigha among land-losing households, alongside a rise in landlessness.

The same study reports that compensation spending concentrated on housing/improvements (35.66%) and consumption uses (29.69%), with only 3.26% allocated to “productive assets”, pointing to why many households struggled to convert one-time payments into stable post-agricultural livelihoods.

Occupationally, the study finds large-scale movement away from skilled agricultural work toward elementary/manual occupations and a pattern where nearly half of workers experienced downward occupational mobility after land acquisition, especially among pure tenants.

Together, these findings fit Ghertner’s warning that “gentrification” language can understate the foundational shift occurring when land is enclosed and commodified, because the issue is not simply higher

rents but the transformation of land-based livelihoods into precarious urban work.

2) Infrastructural projects and canal-side clearance: KEIP as “improvement” with mixed outcomes

In Kolkata, displacement can also be triggered not by private redevelopment but by infrastructure and environmental improvement programmes that treat informal settlements as impediments to sanitation and drainage (Shaw and Saharan). Shaw and Saharan describe KEIP (2000-2014) as an Asian Development Bank-funded programme that included canal improvements and anticipated relocation of thousands of households, with resettlement shifting over time from land plots or cash to one-room flats of 17.65 square metres under housing schemes.

Their Churial Khal case shows how the change in resettlement terms and the distance of relocation sites reshaped household choices: some residents refused to move, prioritising proximity to work and the possibility of incremental home expansion, while others accepted flats for improved sanitation and legality. The study’s longer-term findings complicate a simple “before/after” narrative by showing improved sanitation satisfaction among resettled households but persistent livelihood stress, especially for poorer households affected by distance, transport gaps, and constrained living space.

For gentrification debates, the point is not to equate KEIP with luxury-led redevelopment, but to note how “environmental improvement” can raise the value and governability of urban space while shifting the burdens of adjustment to people with weak tenure.

3) East Kolkata Wetlands: ecological gentrification and the contest over “protected” land

The East Kolkata Wetlands represent an unusually explicit intersection of ecology, livelihood, and urban metabolism: the Ramsar listing records a 12,500 ha site where wastewater-fed fish ponds cover about 4,000 ha, supporting food production and livelihoods. The East Kolkata Wetlands (Conservation and Management) Act, 2006 frames the wetlands as regulators of water regime and wastewater treatment and recognises growing settlement pressure leading to filling up of wetlands, empowering an authority to restrict land-use change and require restoration when violations occur.

Despite this statutory architecture, reporting on the wetlands documents real estate-driven filling of water bodies and land conversion in specific mouzas, including a detailed study in Bhagabanpur where land under water reportedly dropped sharply between 2002 and 2016, alongside a rise in population between the 2001 and 2011 Censuses.

The same reporting notes institutional weaknesses, overlapping land records, limited enforcement capacity, and reliance on police complaints, which helps explain how a legally “protected” landscape can still become a speculative frontier. In gentrification terms, this resembles ecological enclosure: as land becomes scarce near the city, the wetlands are treated as “real estate in waiting”, and those whose work depends on wastewater-fed fisheries and farming face displacement pressures that are not captured by rent-based metrics.

4) Bolpur–Santiniketan: amenity-led upscaling beyond the metropolis

West Bengal’s gentrification pressures are not confined to the Kolkata fringe, and Bolpur–Santiniketan offers a different pathway: cultural amenity and tourism create demand for new housing, hotels, and commercial forms that alter the everyday landscape (Sen and Guchhait). Sen and Guchhait describe post-1950 urban growth and note housing projects and developments involving both public authorities and private companies, alongside critique that many new

multi-storied buildings and projects do not align with Tagore's architectural and cultural ideals.

A business press report from 2011 described dozens of real estate projects and frequent land deals within a 10 km radius around Santiniketan and suggested that escalating prices were pushing changes even within core localities, indicating a market-driven re-sorting of who can stay and invest. While the evidence base here is thinner than for Rajarhat or KEIP, the pattern underscores that gentrification-like outcomes in West Bengal may be driven by "place brand" and second-home investment as much as by formal inner-city redevelopment.

CONCLUSION:

Across West Bengal, gentrification is best understood as a spectrum of dispossessive urban change rather than a single inner-city phenomenon, because peri-urban land acquisition, infrastructure-led clearance, and ecological enclosure repeatedly produce exclusionary outcomes. The West Bengal case also shows how statutory and planning instruments can simultaneously promise inclusion (mixed-income visions, rehabilitation language, ecological protection) and yet allow uneven enforcement and livelihood loss when market logic, parastatal power, and informal intermediaries converge. A careful use of the gentrification concept, sensitive to land tenure, ecological commons, and extra-economic coercion, helps connect these sites without flattening their differences.

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