

A census first for third gender

The team of officials led by Purnendu Banerjee, deputy registrar general (census), prompt the person shifting self-consciously on the plastic chair. "Go on, tell us what you do for a living. We have to fill up the column."

More silence. Finally, a curt reply: "Don't you already know that?"

Similar prodding is required for Lali Singh, who has to be reassured over and over about the secrecy of her identity. Her six-year-old "son", Vishal, shouldn't find out that she is a transgender and couldn't possibly have been his biological mother. "Please, I don't want to be known as a eunuch," she pleads.

[Transgenders](#) are being included in the [census](#) for the first time. And people like Rekha, who "guessed" she must have been born in 1962 or 1965, weren't impressed.

Days of counseling by the local South Dum Dum Municipality had made the small community living at Gorai and Manashipara agree to these "tedious" sessions. But the transgenders, used to being shunned by society, were very suspicious indeed when D-day came on Sunday. Hated being asked "personal" questions, they wondering if these visits would be followed by police harassment.

The officials scanned the census codes. Branding them as "others" was no big deal. Neither was noting down a guessed age. In fact, many of the 26 population-enumeration questions were answered with ease. But some queries were best left unanswered.

"Sir, shall we call them entertainers, then?" wondered Keka Ghosh, assistant director, census. Rekha lapped up the classification. "Yes, call us dancers," she said, pointing at the various poses struck in expensive frames that hung all over the cramped walls, one of which sports a huge LCD television. Rekha has left her lucrative career as a bar dancer in [Delhi](#) to become a professional eunuch, but still manages to live comfortably. Every day, she takes a bus to report to her "head office" at Shyambazar, before moving on to her Baranagar "work area".

Lali Singh, too, works. Her jurisdiction is Howrah's Pilkhana. Little Vishal, who studies in a local English-medium school, bids his mother goodbye every day, thinking she has gone to office. "We will keep your identity a secret," promised the deputy registrar general, who has come from Delhi to supervise census 2011 in West Bengal.

Banerjee continued softly: "Since you have a child, we must ask you the 27th, 28th and 29th questions, which relate to fertility, married, widowed or divorced status etc." Lali stares blankly before saying: "Please write whatever is good for my child."

She and the others in the "others" category have been described as "marginal workers" since they are employed for less than 150 days a year. Yet, all of them sustain families. Rekha, for instance, has "adopted" Chhutki, a 31-year-old eunuch. She also supports Burima, the domestic help who is too frail to work now.

Downstairs lives the slender and feminine Puja, who would have continued successfully in [Mumbai](#), had the dance bars not shut down four years ago. Fluent in Marathi and Bhojpuri, the 35-year-old has recently learnt to sign her name. When she takes the Metro to M G Road every afternoon to reach her "work area" Burrabazar, no one can guess that she is a member of the third sex. "When I get a voters' card, I will call myself a woman," she says.

Nayna Mondol, living in the nearby Manashipara, however, asks a pertinent question, a question which hangs on many people's lips: "What use will this (the enumeration) be? Will we ever get voters' cards?"