

Management and Mediation of Workers in Everyday Markets: A Study of Loaders in Old Delhi.

***Abstract:** India's informal labor situation remains unchanged despite state policies, legislation, and protocols for coordinating and promoting labor welfare. The majority of informal labor is denied sufficient wages, employment security, management systems, safety standards, social security, and other benefits. In many cases, such conditions also lead to conflict and problems among the workers and their employers within industrial units and factories. There have been instances where the requisite skilled and unskilled laborers have been unable to contact their employers in need. These urgent market and labor conditions, insufficient government procedures, outdated laws, and regulations in informal sectors led to worker self-management as an alternative project. Though self-management of workers evolved, its usefulness is still contested. Amid this emergence of self-management among workers, a new class of workers leading, recruiting, managing, firing, and incentivizing the workers came into existence in India. Thekedars, sardars, sarkars, and others are the names used to address them in India. Labor mediators supply a suitable labor force in the labor market supply chain, which is essential to industrial and urban expansion. Labor mediation networks and labor mobility aided in the formation of ethnic, religious, and caste groups in urban markets. These modifications permitted additional labor ghettoization, favoritism of the employers and mediators, gender prejudice against women laborers, wage discrimination among the workers, and other transformations in the Indian labor class structure. This labor mediation strategy dominates loader labor management in Old Delhi and across India. This paper studies and maps the lives of loaders in Old Delhi to emphasize worker self-management or labor mediation and clarifies their working mechanisms, importance, and changes as a result of their presence in the Indian informal labor class.*

Key words: Informal Labor, Indian Labor Class, Self Management of workers, Labor Mediation system, Loaders, Informal economy.

Introduction:

More than fifty percent of India's population works in the informal sector. Most of them are bereft of proper wages, fixed employments, insufficient earnings, support-systems and social-economic securities. As a result, many informal workers are subjected to bad living and working conditions. Along with the increasing population, the numbers of workers working in the informal sector have also increased in India. Srivastava argues that in India though the workers in India have been delineated as working in the formal and informal sectors, the condition of the workers working in both the sectors are the same. Workers are bereft of basic facilities, decent working conditions, wages and other benefits (Srivastava, 2012). Due to less work and monetary opportunities in the rural areas migration from rural to urban areas has been a rampant scenario. Many workers move to the cities on their own (individually) while the others with their friends or in groups and a large number of workers are also brought to work in the urban areas by mediators. Large groups of workers, their management and their essential needs to find work, connect with city people, acquire profitable tasks and deals gave birth to the class of mediators.

Mediators form the middle layer of workers between the working class and the capitalists in India. They perform vital functions of coordination, hiring, task allotment, group allocation, conflict management, firing laborers and others. Mediators possess a lot of power, represent the interests of the labor class, mediate the matters between the laborers and the capitalists, exercise immense power over the laborers working under them and control all relations of task allocation and work acquisition in the markets or their respective areas of work. These mediators are addressed with different names like *thekedars*, *sardars*, *sarkars*, *lalas*, *up-thekedars*, contractors and others in India. In the specific case of Old Delhi the mediators who manage the workers in the markets are called *thekedars*. They are present in all markets of Old Delhi. They behold power, respect and experience in the markets and have a great command over loaders. This paper articulates the process of mediation of workers at large in India by specifically studying the case of *thekedars* in Old Delhi. It primarily investigates and sheds light on the emergence and functioning of this class of mediators in Old Delhi. It studies the composition, role, status, control, selection and functions of these mediators. It also focuses on their management mechanism, working conditions, occupational stratification and other significant issues within the informal market setup in Old Delhi.

I

Area of Old Delhi: History to Present

The majority of Delhi is located in the final portion of the Aravalli range. As the capital of India, this city has long drawn expert artisans from around the country and even from abroad. The Mughals relocated to Delhi and set the groundwork for the city of *Shahjahanabad* when they attained their strongest position in an era of enormous tax and trade gains from agriculture. The city eventually became a commercial hub. By 1648, *Shahjahanabad*, now known as Old Delhi, had established itself as a centre, with skilled artisans working from their homes in *karkhanas* to serve royal residences. Delhi developed into a thriving handicrafts centre specializing in *zari*, *zardozi*, brocade, embroidered, and ivory work. By 1846, a total of 576 *mohallas* (neighbourhoods) existed within the city's fortifications. The decline of the Mughals deprived the industry of state support, resulting in the decline of handicrafts. As a result, the East India

Company's trade laws hindered the development of handicrafts not only in Delhi, but throughout the nation.¹

The reorganization of craft production, which was supported by the arrival of the British in the nineteenth century, affected the transition from domestic sale to market-based modes of distribution. Three engineering businesses and iron foundries were founded in Delhi between 1872 and 1879, ushering in the modern era of industrialization. Between 1883 and 1889, two cotton mills were built. In the nineteenth century, the establishment of a new flour mill in 1891 and a biscuit factory in 1898 spurred industrial development. The move of the capital from Calcutta to Delhi in 1911 resulted in a high rate of industrialization.

After 1920, the industrialization process accelerated. Hosiery, lace, and embroidery factories sprung up within a few years. Chalk, colored pencils, paints, glassware, cement tiles, and other industries were built in Delhi during this time. Delhi's industrial development received a new lease on life with independence. To rehabilitate themselves, displaced individuals from Pakistan developed small-scale industries. Migration as a consequence of the division contributed significantly to economic upheaval.

Recently, the urban transformation of Delhi under colonialism has received scholarly attention. As Stephen Legg has demonstrated, the development regime of independent India embodied many traits of 'colonial modernity,²' and so was not discontinuous with the colonial past. The rapid growth of Delhi and nearby areas has been due to expansion of employment in the three sectors of the economy- the public sector, manufacturing industries and trade and commerce which together provided employment to 80 per cent of the workforce in urban Delhi in the last two decades of the twentieth century. Many of those are informal workers and loaders in several cases.

Curbing the rapid growth of Delhi, through dispersal of the growth to the satellite towns and rural regions of the neighboring states, is a central objective of planning for Delhi. The growth

¹Gazetteer of Rural Delhi Edited by Dr.Uma Prasad Thapayal (Delhi; Gazetteer Unit Delhi Administration, (1987) p149

²Anjali Bhardwaj Datta, "Genealogy of a partition City: War, Migration and Urban Space in Delhi,"*South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 42, no.1 (February 2019): pp.3

and physical expansion of the city has affected the land use, the ecology and the economic and social life of the surrounding areas profoundly. Delhi due to its prosperous markets, industries and constant import and export always beholds a demand of hiring labor for various kinds of work. Hence, laborers from all parts of India migrate to Delhi in search of jobs and money. In the specific case of the area of Old Delhi it is one of the most popular spaces in Delhi. Surrounded by historical monuments, old alleys and structures, the area of Old Delhi has always been the first choice of tourists visiting Delhi. Along with the rich cultural and historical heritage that it beholds, Old Delhi is also known for its famous markets where the import and export of goods takes place throughout the day and night. It has multiple markets selling various commodities like spices, cloth, daily use items, kitchen ware, gold, silver, household items and others.

Old Delhi uniquely underlines its identity due to its traditional set up with lanes that are still recognized by the specialization of the household products or food commodities that they sell. Such traits of culture not only endorse the rich cultural social significance of the place but also support the economy of Old Delhi. Identity of each lane, by lane and shop stimulates the demand of the associated commodity with it. Visitors and buyers recognize the spaces with the name of the products that they sell in turn boosting the demand side for that product within the market. This facilitates the import and export activity within Old Delhi making it the center of most of the business activities within Delhi. This demand for goods aids the functioning of the markets, but the traditional and conventional styles of buildings, narrow lanes and go-downs make it impossible for machines to shift these goods to different places. It is due to this reason that there is an indispensable need of manual workers called loaders in the markets.

Loaders are the workers who manually carry loads on their heads, backs and through handcarts from one place to another. They play vital roles of managing and delivering goods to different places. Their tasks get complicated and challenging due to traffic, low ceiling staircases, crowding and others. Most of the loaders working in Old Delhi are migrant workers from different parts of India. These loaders come to Delhi in large numbers either themselves or are brought to Delhi by labor mediators. This constant need and presence of loaders in large numbers in the markets further facilitated the emergence of a class of 'mediators' that sprung up to manage, allocate work and represent the interests of the loaders within Old Delhi.

II

Methodology

The paper majorly uses qualitative research techniques that provide detailed description and analysis of the quality, or the substance, of the human experience. The primary focus of the extensive fieldwork study was conducting interviews with the *thekedars* and loaders. Methods like case studies, in-depth interviews, oral histories and narratives have been used. These methods have been supplemented by informal market discussions and the participation of various business associations. Interviews with the *thekedars*, loaders, shopkeepers, transporters, labor leaders and other market vendors helped us to draw insights regarding employment, labor, market relations and many other factors.

Our core informants also included civil society organizations, regional corporate social responsibility offices, intermediaries and other agents involved in this incredibly complicated economic structure. These discussions and interventions by various stakeholders further helped us to comprehend the tactics and strategies employed by the *thekedars* to manage the labor force in Old Delhi. Although individual interviews with many informants comprised the bulk of our research work, additional observational methods have also been employed by us.

Along with primary sources, a variety of sources like old newspapers from the archives such as the Pioneer, Hindustan Times, Amar Ujala, Dainik Jagran, Jansatta and others have been used. We have also consulted the writings of Alessandro Mezzadri, Srivastava, Alam Ghayur, Dipesh Chakravarti, Rajnarayan Chandravarkar, Shafi, Chitra Joshi and others to understand the general working class behavior and structure in India.

III

Mediation: The Thekedari System in Old Delhi

Mediators play imperative roles of management, task allotment, work acquisition, relationship building, conflict management, labor recruitment, bringing labor from rural to urban areas, firing of laborers and others. They are an important thread connecting the laborers and the capitalists. In the case of Old Delhi mediators are popularly addressed as *thekedars* and *lalas*. Due to the constant demand and supply of goods in the markets manual loaders are present in the markets in

large numbers. Management and control of these workers is a challenging task. Hence, loaders are usually distributed in small groups and these groups are governed and managed by *thekedars*.

Thekedars are selected in different ways either chosen by the transporters or shopkeepers, some inherit the positions of their fathers while a few are chosen by loaders themselves. It is due to this reason that loaders in Old Delhi prefer to be in the good books of the shopkeepers, transporters and the *thekedars* hoping that someday even they would be elevated to the position of being a *thekedar*. *Thekedari* is a form of vertical upward mobility among the loaders as it provides a higher position in the market hierarchy subsequently resulting in more authority and control over other loaders.

It is because of these settlement and management roles that *thekedars* form the middle layer of workers and mediate work and employment relations between the shopkeepers and loaders. For the services that they perform for their groups they cut an additional share of income for themselves apart from the distributed income to the group. They claim their additional income for the tasks of work acquisition, relationship building and for their responsibilities towards the loaders of their group. When in the company of loaders *thekedars* only mention about their worries regarding the concerns of the workers and how their positions are as weak as the workers to look as one among the workers and to cover the facilitation of 'concealed exploitation' caused by them.

This system of concealed exploitation is largely a part of the everyday exchange and labor activities within the markets where the *thekedars* make loaders carry heavier loads for long distances, do extra work, for more hours and at low prices. Involvement of *thekedars* with the shopkeepers deprives the laborers of basic facilities like decent working conditions, proper management of prices and carrying of goods and other rights. Since, the labor representation is weak in Old Delhi and their group-leaders indulge in corrupted price fixing and task acquisitions there is little scope for labor upliftment. Though, there are cases where a few honest *thekedars* stood up for the interests of the laborers however their voices were either suppressed or pushed away from the markets and their groups were not given any work. Hence, those are believed to be infamous *thekedars* in the markets. People do not talk about them and their names, roles and cases are rarely discussed.

IV

Thekedars: Roles, Labor Recruitments and Conflict Management

Each *thekedar* has loaders varying from five to fifty in a group. In most of the cases caste, religion and region based bonding are considered very important while selecting a loader in a group. For example, a muslim *thekedar* prefers to recruit a muslim loader and vice-a-versa. Precisely, confirmation of being chosen increases if the region of the *thekedar* and the loader are the same. Along with recruitment religion, region and caste based bonds also make a visible difference in cases of conflict. If required *thekedars* favour the loaders with similar backgrounds as theirs in thefts, disputes and conflicts.

In cases where thekedars share some kinship connection with the loaders they also provide advances and loans, financial help during emergencies and medical issues to the concerned loader. For example: the cases of theft are very common in the market. The loaders responsible to deliver the goods in most cases have to bear the loss caused due to theft. However, if loaders from the same region or with some kinship connection with a *thekedar* are involved in any such case then; they are given special favors and the loss is quickly divided among all group members. Sometimes *thekedars* also mediate matters by advocating no payment at all. Not many but there are few cases in which *thekedars* have successfully mediated the losses without any payment at all only with an apology. But all of this entirely depends upon the will of the *thekedars*.

Thekedars also play important roles in conflict management. Conflicts whether between groups or an individual matter of one or a few loaders in the market are all resolved and redressed by the *thekedars*. In issues of group conflict *thekedars* of both groups gather along with some old *thekedars* of the markets. Each party puts forward its concerns. Eventually the old *thekedars* of the market and the two *thekedars* of the respective groups resolve the issues and peaceful informal verbal agreements are made. Certain terms are mutually decided and abiding by them is considered very important for both the groups. Failing to obey the market decisions can lead to a situation of violence in the group. Individual cases are also addressed by *thekedars* and are settled with formal commitments from the loaders. *Thekedars* ensure that the loaders in their

group agree to the decided terms and any deviance is dealt with firing the worker, in extreme cases such loaders are handled with violence and then by boycotting them from the market.

The code of everyday conduct is very strong in the market cases of damage caused naturally to the cargoes are resolved peacefully and mutually between both the parties but theft and cheating are dealt with physical violence. *Thekedars* consider it important to take such actions for the management of workers to prevent them from stealing and cheating. *Thekedars* maintain a sense of control, authority and fear among the workers that refrains them from indulging in any such act. Disciplinary measures and informal protocols imposed by the *thekedars* in the market are followed strictly by all workers and in any trivial situation the decisions of *thekedars* and the shopkeepers are considered final. For example: In a case in Khari Baoli when a loader who stole some boxes worth three to four thousand rupees (convert into dollars) was found he was left to the 'market justice system'³. He was beaten badly and then the *thekedar* called his family to take him. All this exhibition of power and violence is openly done in the market to instill fear in the minds of the other loaders and market persons.

V

Class of Thekedars: A Critical Analysis.

Many *thekedars* are chosen due to their bonding, rapport and understanding with the shopkeepers. This kind of 'understanding' is facilitated by the commission system in Old Delhi. Commission system includes an informal settlement between the *thekedars* and the shopkeepers. In return for these commissions *thekedars* manipulate the interests of the workers. They suppress any kind of rebellion against the shopkeepers. They also accept tasks where the goods are heavy and the payments are low. Since the negotiations are mediated by the *thekedars*, there is little scope for the workers to deny. Only in rare cases workers disagree to carry loads, most of the times work allotted by the *thekedars* is fulfilled by the workers.

Any kind of rebellion either leads to firing a worker or suspending him out of work for some time depending upon the intensity of the conflict. Since, *thekedars* represent the workers their

³ An informal system in Old Delhi devised by the local *thekedars*, loaders and the shopkeepers. The system has its own punishments and rules though the protocol is not stated formally but for certain common crimes and issues the norms have been pre-decided. While, for other issues *thekedars* and shopkeepers make on spot decisions that are considered as the final word.

decisions are accepted in most cases by all workers. This leads to a situation of triumph for the shopkeepers as their works get done in less prices and without any conflict only with some settlement with the *thekedars*. This commission settlement also allows *thekedars* to maintain good relations and rapport among the shopkeepers. As a result they are able to get more work for the group.

Therefore, in the market hierarchy *thekedars* hold superior positions to the loaders but they follow the orders of the shopkeepers, transporters and the market committees. Even in the cases of representation, *thekedars* prefer to choose a middle path and not go against these capitalists since market rapport holds immense significance in acquiring work. Rebellion of any kind usually incurs them a bad reputation and eventually an economic exclusion with no work for their groups. There have been cases in the market where strikes have also taken place for wage increment per cargo and for proper sitting space for workers. Such strikes usually take place after two to three years bringing a marginal increase in prices per cargo. Strikes for other issues and barely addressed or are resolved with a small token of concern from the side of the capitalists in the markets.

For example: Even for resting or sitting space the loaders or *thekedars* in Delhi never protested however the first case of protest regarding this issue rose during covid times when most of the workers went home and the left over workers were also displaced from the markets of Old Delhi. Loaders were told that their carts and collective presence was barring the urban planning in Old Delhi. Hence, all of them were forced to move in the outer areas of the markets. This displacement outraged the workers and they protested collectively. In this case loaders were mostly led by their labor *thekedars* and informal labor union leaders. After the protest most of the workers were re-located in one of the old parks in Old Delhi, some returned to the markets while others randomly occupied some spaces outside the markets. But, the major chunk of workers still remain clueless as to where they should go, park carts and sit while waiting for work.

Apart from this case of protest regarding sitting and parking space there have been no cases of *thekedars* ever representing workers for other demand whether for medical support, social or for financial security. Hence, the workers working in Old Delhi have always remained deprived of basic facilities like resting, sitting and cart parking place, no drinking water, no fixed working

time and others. The fear of not being chosen for work, lack of collective consciousness, no labor class solidarity, scared of being boycotted from the markets and other such reasons have further weakened the voices of the loaders and the *thekedars* preventing them to protest for their interests.

VI

Mediation Systems in Delhi and the Case of Old Delhi Thekedars: A Contrast

Saradari system or the mediation system is one of the most common labor management and allocation systems in India. Studies by Kaur and Singh, Mezzandri, Krishnamoorthy and others cite the presence of sardars, mediators and contractors in various industries, factories, markets and other spaces. Work by Singh and Kaur (2004) shows that more than 90 percent of the manufacturing and unskilled workforce consisted of male immigrants from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar until the latter half of the 1990s. These two states are among the poorest in the Hindi Belt. They elucidate the case of a *tolli*, also known as an organised group of workers, was brought into the workplace by thekedars. They usually worked as day laborers and temporary employees, which meant that their shifts were unpredictable and lasted for varying amounts of time. This included handing over control of managing labor to particular operators, who were sometimes referred to as *thekedars* or labor contractors in northern India. In this way, the exporter was absolved of any responsibility for the payment of wages to workers who were not 'his'. The production of garments was carried out in a fairly unstructured manner.

Another instance comprising of the study by Mezzandri⁴ (2020) demonstrates that in another area in Delhi known as the Okhla Industrial Area there are many similarities as well as dissimilarities with the Old Delhi region. Here, workers in the garment industry are either hired directly by the companies that make the garments or by independent contractors. They are recruited from the surrounding community, either at the factory gate or in the contractor's place of business. For these recruitments in order to fill the available positions, factories either use local bulletin boards, gate announcements or just spread the word verbally. Employers seek out

⁴ Mezzadri, Alessandra. "The Sweatshop Regime: Laboring Bodies, Exploitation and Garments Made in India." (2020).

potential employees through many methods, including advertising, posting notices, and word of mouth.

In India, contractor-based hiring is currently governed by the Contract Labor (Abolition and Regulation) Act. According to which, liscensing and registration of contractors as well as the registration of businesses that intend to make use of contractors is mandatory with the department of labor. However in a setup like Old Delhi where these *thekedars* and shopkeepers are very powerful they do not allow any association to emerge and do not follow any regulations directed by the Government of India. They conduct the labor management, market and market processes as an independent entity without following any protocol.

In Mezzandri's study in Okhla the contractors are further subdivided into two groups: those who provide employees who work under the supervision of the company, and those who are in-contractors who produce clothing inside the facilities of the company on a piece-rate or commission basis (Mezzandri, 2020). While in Old Delhi these *thekedars* have not developed any category as such, the workers are categorized as unskilled and therefore their situations are more volatile and without any safeguard.

At Okhla the contractors who provide outside labor may also function as in-house employees, taking control of entire departments or even the entire shop floor and performing piece rate labor for the proprietor of the business. There is not a clear delineation that can be made between the three different forms of labor supply that are associated to contractors. Production managers or accountants of a firm may operate autonomous fabrication facilities where they can undertake subcontracting work for both the parent company and other businesses. Meanwhile, they may also serve as dummy contractors for the company they work for (Mezzandri, 2020).

However, the system within Old Delhi is unorganized where there is no documentation, permanence or claim at all. In case of injuries and accidents *thekedars* deny the presence of wounded loaders in their groups in order to escape any medical expense, claim or liability and no other worker raises any protest on such denials. Loaders have a precarious nature of their jobs and they do not risk any kind of a rift in their relationships with the *thekedars* because of fellow loaders or others. This strengthens the powers of the *thekedars* in Old Delhi and they continue to govern, discipline and manage the workers in their own ways.

VII

Conclusion

The study of the *thekedars* in old Delhi provides a broad perspective on the mediation system in India. It underlines certain imperative things subsuming that the class of mediators in India emerged as a result of increasing migration, demand and supply, task allocation and dire need of management of workers. It is also true that thekedars perform vital roles of labour management like selecting, firing, task allocation, dispute settlements and assistance to the workers. But, this class of managing the workers that rose to protect, manage and defend the rights of the workers as petty labor leaders rather shows cases of surrendering or susceptibility to the larger capitalistic system.

Such indulgence and merger with the interests of the bourgeoisie has further weakened the situation of the loaders and instead has established an informal system of petty lords or leaders of the labourers. The mediation system in Old Delhi has not only created new power positions of control in the markets it has also refrained the scope of collective consciousness. Since most of the *thekedars* are elevated from the status of being loaders, any voice of rebellion is immediately reported to the shopkeepers or is suppressed by the *thekedars*.

Lack of labor consciousness and solidarity are the main reasons of this suppression and exploitation of workers in Old Delhi. *Thekedars* under the excuse of developing and maintaining a good reputation end up in exploiting the workers for their personal benefits. The systems of market justice, concealed exploitation and commission settlements are exploitative in nature and have further oppressed the position of the loaders in Old Delhi. Though, there have been a few cases of strike and agreements between the two parties shopkeepers and loaders, there are no other cases of providing medical, job or social securities, substantial wage increments and others.

Mediators in Old Delhi never support the loaders in protests, raise voices in their favors, create representations to advocate labour rights, regulate wages, timings of work and other issues. Therefore, the genesis of this middle layer of the workers called the thekedars which began with a ray of hope to manage the workers and their interests has become a direct class of exploitation of the loaders forcing the workers to surrender to the larger capitalist system.

