

# INVISIBLE PEOPLE AND ARCHITECTURES OF DELHI: STORIES OF A SHIFTING WORKFORCE

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Walking down the street in the urban village of Kilokri of Delhi most days of the year, gives me a wonderful sense of the seasons. The area is full of street vendors of different kinds. Carts loaded with seasonal foods, both cooked and uncooked. Vendors walking around with triangular bamboo stands with more food. Cycle vendors who call out with their characteristic calls and offer to sharpen knives and scissors, or sell all kinds of cleaning equipment like brooms etc. The flute seller who leaves beautiful melodies floating effortlessly behind him, as he walks by. And vendors who sit by the side of the street with their wares on little plastic squares. There are vendors who are there every day with different articles for sale, depending on the time of the year. And then there are those who are from far away areas, and visit occa-

sionally. All these micro entrepreneurs create the structures of their mobile stores and their lives themselves, and carry them around, setting up and dismantling their stores every day.

With a recorded history from the 12th century onwards, Delhi is one of the oldest inhabited cities with a population of 20 million people. A city with a population explosion of 47% between 1991-2001 and of 21% between 2001-2011.<sup>1</sup>

Surrounded by other growing towns like Noida, Gurgaon, Faridabad and Ghaziabad, all of which along with Delhi form the National Capital Region [NCR], its population

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<sup>1</sup> See Census of India 2011, which can be checked online at [https://censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-results/data\\_files/delhi/3\\_PDFC-Paper-1-tables\\_60\\_81.pdf](https://censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-results/data_files/delhi/3_PDFC-Paper-1-tables_60_81.pdf), accessed on October 30<sup>th</sup> 2020.



density is almost double than those of Tokyo or New York city, and crime rate is less than half of New York City.<sup>2</sup>

With families that can trace their lineage in the city to well over a hundred years, it is a city with stability and growth. It is also an invisibly shifting city. Much of its working class population comes from outside the city and nonchalantly hops in and out of the city on crowded buses, trains, jeeps, trucks and informal ride shares on the highways leading out of the city. Visible, settled Delhi often does not notice or acknowledge this structure of Delhi that provides many of its essential services.

As the largest commercial centre in North India, Delhi's GDP estimates were \$96 billion in 2017-2018.<sup>3</sup> The reasonably priced services and products made in the city are in a large part due to these migrant workers. Most of them earn less than the minimum working wage declared by the Delhi Government, which is USD 202.00 per month for semi-skilled labour.<sup>4</sup> In 2001, Delhi received 1.7 million net

migrants [accounting for inflow and outflow of migrants] which was 16.4% of its total population at the time.<sup>5</sup>

Mobile vegetable and food vendors, tailors, plumbers, masons, construction workers, cycle rickshaw drivers, newspaper vendors, domestic workers, gardeners, garbage collectors, recyclers, car cleaners, delivery people, small entrepreneurs and rideshare drivers are some of the people who contribute to this shifting architecture of the city. Except for domestic workers, it is a very gendered world, constituted mostly by men.

People who come from places near the city, go back home as frequently as once a week. Others come and go every harvest season to work on their family land. Others still come and go about 4-5 times a year. There are people who have been living in the city for years and whose families are here with them. They go back for community weddings, government benefit schemes and to vote in elections. Many people live and work in Delhi only part of each year and go back to their villages to farm their lands during the rest of the year.

Like their presence in the city, their homes are also somewhat temporary and shifting. Most of them live in one of the many urban villages of the city, or in 'unauthorised colonies', in which a large percentage of the population of the city lives. These colonies start by people taking over tiny pieces of land and making temporary shelters for themselves. They expand and contract by greasing the palms of

<sup>2</sup> These statistics were compiled in preparation for the 13th Urban Age conference by LSE Cities, a research centre at the London School of Economics and Political Science, and Deutsche Bank's Alfred Herrhausen Society, held in Delhi on 14-15<sup>th</sup> November 2014. See the editorial in *Mint*, published 14<sup>th</sup> November 2014, <https://www.livemint.com/Politics/Zt73mwOmPPbVmlNoecuBP/Delhi-more-densely-populated-than-New-York-Tokyo-study.html>, accessed online on 30<sup>th</sup> October 2020.

<sup>3</sup> See Highlights of Economic Survey of Delhi 2017-2018, made available online by the Delhi government at <http://web.delhi.gov.in/wps/wcm/connect/ebac160044d712cf8532873726e205c9/HighEng.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&lmod=1042919677&CACHEID=ebac160044d712cf8532873726e205c9>, accessed on October 20<sup>th</sup> 2020.

<sup>4</sup> See the data regarding current minimum wage rate published online by the Labour Commissioner, Government of NCT of Delhi, at <https://labour.delhi.gov.in/content/current-minimum-wage-rate>, accessed on October 20<sup>th</sup> 2020.

<sup>5</sup> See the article on migration made available online by the Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India: [https://censusindia.gov.in/Ad\\_Campaign/drop\\_in\\_articles/08-Migration.pdf](https://censusindia.gov.in/Ad_Campaign/drop_in_articles/08-Migration.pdf), accessed on October 30<sup>th</sup> 2020.



the police and other officials in the area. It's a constant battle to protect these homes, which start out as temporary structures with plastic sheets as roofs and gradually become tiny concrete structures. Yamuna Pushta is an area which had hundreds of thousands of people living by the banks of our forgotten once mighty river, the Yamuna. These people took over land by the side of the river and farmed, or just lived

there. They would move to higher grounds with tents when the river flooded during the monsoons and moved back down to the river when it came back to its earlier level. About 4,00,000 people from here were relocated to the borders of the city by the government between 2004 and 2009 (Menon-Sen and Bhan 2008)

Construction workers often make basic bamboo frame structures with plastic sheets as covers. Or use the bricks which are on site for construction and pile them into temporary structures on the site itself. Once the construction nears the end, they dismantle their own homes and use the bricks for making the houses they are constructing as a team.

There were about 3,00,000 street vendors in Delhi in 2011, all without registration (Bhowmik and Saha 2012: 38). We had about 6,00,000 rickshaws employing a million people in 2013. Only 99,000 of them were officially licensed.<sup>6</sup>

In 2010 about 7% of the Indian workforce was organized. 93% belonged to the unorganized sector and accounted for 50% of India's GDP (Salve 2013). The situation has not changed dramatically since then. Most of this sector, including self-employed individual workers and small enterprises, struggle to work with little to no State support or benefits.

In sector after sector, the story is the same. We have little to no formal registrations by the city, and no social security net for the people in all these sectors. They provide inexpensive services and everyone including the State pretends as if they don't exist. They are at the mercy of the police, and their employers with no mechanism for redressal. Since there is

<sup>6</sup> See the info provided Intercultural Resources and Human Resources Development Foundation (PT 2013).





## ASHRAFI LAL

Asharfi Lal Ji lives in near the Agra Firozabad border about 235 km from Delhi. He has worked in Delhi for about 25 years and came here at the age of 19. He is a tailor who worked for others earlier, and now runs his own workshop with seven to eight tailors where he works against contracted orders. He goes home every other weekend to meet his 5 children and wife. He would like to bring his children to Delhi, but he is unable to afford the rent for any sort of room in the city. He and most of his workers stay in his rented tailoring workshop for which he pays 125 USD a month. In a room of 315 square feet, with their sewing machines, a room to keep the fabric they are sewing and other equipment, there is not much space for them to sleep.

His unit is in Tuglaqabad extension area, which is an unauthorized neighborhood. He is fortunate enough to have a toilet which is reserved for his rented space, unlike many others who live and work there. They cook inside the workshop in a small room that is also their office. His smartphone helps him get many of his orders and saves him several trips to his customers, as he can send them photos of his work. His workshop is near Okhla Industrial area, which is one of the few official industrial areas in the city, and where a lot of his customers are situated. Getting back to work after the lockdown has been very hard for him and orders are less than 50% of what they were earlier.

Living in his workshop helps him save on some time and effort to commute. He travels in the city using buses, the metro and his trusted old cycle.

no registration, they often have to pay bribes to officials who patrol the streets. With very small earnings, and no formal acknowledgement of their existence, they live vulnerable lives that are perpetually on the edge.

Documented below are the outlines of the lives of some of these invisible people, based on interviews with them.





He likes being in the village with his family, but has no source of income there. He has also been a social worker in the village, helping people file ‘First Information Reports’ with the police. It is not easy to file such documents, specially for underprivileged people, as once filed, the police are legally obliged to follow up on this report. Given that he stands his ground socially and does not back off, he

has been in serious trouble. In this regard, part of his being in Delhi is also for his own safety. Coming from a Scheduled caste, he is expected to know his place, and being political and feisty as he is does not help. The anonymity of the city helps people reduce the importance of their caste, even if it can’t be completely erased. He enjoys the anonymity of Delhi and the camaraderie with his co-workers. The biggest problem of running his own enterprise, as with most Indian enterprises of every size, is that his customers may not pay him. With an overburdened judiciary, there is no way to ensure redressal for small legal problems like this.

### NOOR MOHAMMAD

Noor Mohammad Ji’s village is in District Chhapra in Bihar which is about a thousand kilometres from Delhi. It is telling that despite living in Delhi since 1999, he still refers to his village as home. He goes back home at least twice a year. If he is unwell, he goes back additionally for treatment. He drives a cycle rickshaw in which he transports materials and finished products, between production units and factories in Okhla industrial area.

After working in Delhi for a few years, he brought his family here, but had to take them back to the village since they could not afford to live here. The rents and food prices were too high for them. Another very important factor was the fact that they are Muslims and he felt insecure leaving them at home in Delhi during the day while he went to work. Over the years, attacks against Muslims, specially underprivileged Muslims, have increased





a lot. Both costs and fear led him to take them back to their village.

He earns between 135 and 170 USD a month and pays 14 USD rent for a room that is 5 feet x 6.5 feet. He shares this room with his eldest son, who is learning to run a lathe machine in a factory in Okhla. Their unauthorized residential area is called Amarjyoti camp. With such a tiny room, they can only use the room to sleep side by side close to each other. They cook, bathe and for all practical purposes live outside their door step, as there is no space inside for any of these activities. Their section of the camp has a set of 10 toilets for men and 10 for women, which they share with 5000 other people. They have access to water from tankers that visit the camp between 6.30-7.30 am. They line up with others to fill their small share of water in buckets every day. There are also shared taps, which provide water for short periods of time during the day.

Noor Mohammad Ji is one of the hundreds of thousands of people who walked back home during the stringent Covid-19 lockdown in India. He left Delhi during the heat of Lockdown 3 in early May along with his son and fourteen others in his residential camp. It took him seven to eight days to get back home. They walked most of the way and took paid shared rides for the rest of the way. October has come and he is still in the village, as he is scared to come back to Delhi. Many people in his residential camp have got Covid-19 owing to shared toilets and high density living.

The same problems that drove him from his village to the city exist today. There

is very little work in his village, and he can't earn enough for all of them there. He has been going to the nearest small town to work as a casual construction worker, but is unable to find work for more than 5-7 days in a month, as there are too many people who have returned from the cities to villages in Bihar. There is not much construction going on, as people don't have money at the moment. Right now he and his family are surviving on the free and subsidized food provided by the Bihar government as a relief measure against the Covid-19 pandemic.

He has his own home in the village on 100 sq yards of land. Even though it is temporarily made with bricks and a tin roof, it is home and saves them rent. His younger boys are about 10 and 12 years old. They go to school and supplement the family income and nutrition by grazing 2 goats that the family owns for milk and meat. Noor Mohammad Ji likes that people are too busy to trouble him in Delhi and the anonymity that Delhi provides him. People with not enough work in his village try and harass him in different ways. He really enjoys the variety of food available in Delhi, even though he can only occasionally treat himself to something out of the ordinary, like fruit.

### **AYODHYA SINGH**

Ayodhya Singh Ji is from Gaya district in Bihar. He came to Delhi 15 years back and works as a car cleaner during the day and a guard in a big bungalow, during the night. He cleans between twenty-two to twenty-five cars every day from 6 to 11 am. He stays in Hari Nagar in south-east Delhi, which started out as a refugee camp

after the partition of India and Pakistan. He walks about four to five kilometres every day between his different jobs. He earns about 240 USD per month and spends 12 USD per month on a room that he rents and shares with four other people. The room is about 15 x 12 feet and they cook and spend most of their time in the passage outside. He shares a toilet with twelve other people and has access to water in the early morning. After coming to Delhi and earning here, he has improved the construction of his village home and has got two of his children married. His thirty-year old son lives with him in Delhi and works as a guard in a security company. He would like to get his twenty-two year old son also to Delhi but he says that there are no new jobs available after the lockdown, in particular as a guard.

He goes back home at least thrice a year. He enjoys sleeping at night when he goes home. Earlier, he used to farm on a small piece of land he has in his village, but it was too much work and not enough return. At the moment, he rents out his farm land to share croppers who put in all the effort and half the investment for seeds and things alike. They get half the value of the crop that they grow and give him half. Coming from a higher caste [Rajput], he has a concrete house and it is socially relatively easy for him in his village, as well as in Delhi.

This large work force, which lives between rural and urban India, forms communities in Delhi in which they speak their rural languages and cook and eat their traditional food. They see their village as home and the city as their workspace, even after living here for more than twenty-five years. With no re-



Ayodhya Ji

gistration of any kind, there are not any real figures regarding their number. It was only during and after the lockdown, when they headed back home in every possible (and impossible) way, that people somewhat did realize how they kept the city going, as there were no ser-

vice providers available for most kinds of work after they left.

Invisible Architecture is said to consist of buildings “that are constructed to become invisible for city inhabitants. They not only blend with their surroundings and do not disturb the space in any way—they also disappear, in a way,

from the cities using latest solutions and technologies” (Infuture Hatalaska Foresight Institute 2017: 28). The individuals in this article give shape to the invisible architecture of the city, which is ever changing. The specific individuals change, but the work that they do constitutes the backbone/frame of this city and there is no way the city can run without them.

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