

Global Issues

Communal Violence and Informal Labour: The Case of North East Delhi Carnage, 23–28 February 2020

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The communal violence in Delhi that took place between 23 and 28 February 2020 targeted Muslim minorities and their livelihood in the wake of ongoing protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act and National Population Register. It is widely believed that these protests symbolised the state-led attack by a right-wing neo-liberal government on the rights of Muslim minorities, many of whom work in the informal sector, especially within North East Delhi. Hence the Delhi violence has to be seen as an important political occurrence in the context of the larger neo-liberal majoritarian project.

The General Elections of 2019 returned the Modi government with a numerical majority, beginning an era of overarching authoritarian control in every sphere of life. Within days of coming into power, the new government used its brutal strength to silence dissenting voices which had been mobilising public opinion against the unconstitutional legislation put forward by the ruling classes. Several such measures were taken right from the first term of the present Union Government, which hastened the process of diluting protection for workers, minorities and women by bringing about certain legal changes within the existing framework. The resultant economic distress and downturn was offset by diverting the discourse through communal polarisation and targeting by both mainstream and fringe right-wing Hindutva organisations.¹ Needless to say, these forces worked with and in favour of big businesses to ensure that concentration of wealth took place at an appropriate scale, much of which also benefited those aligned with the ruling classes.

The emergence of a rich right-wing political stratum, whose influence has only grown since 2014, has important implications for the working class. First, the pace of economic reforms speeded up manifold, leading to an employment crisis and a preponderance of informal labour. Second, the growing inequities made the most vulnerable the targets of all sorts of harassment and violence. Increasing instances of violence against migrants, minorities and women should also be seen in this light. Third, the lack of tolerance for any democratic opposition to the neo-liberal Hindutva project grew with the brute majority. This has been accompanied by an aggressive push towards changing the basic fabric of the Constitution which laid down the framework for fundamental rights including citizenship rights, which could not be determined on the basis of caste or creed but were determined on a secular principle. The repeated targeting of Muslim minorities through several measures like the abrogation of Article 370 in Kashmir, and the passing of the Citizenship Amendment Act on 14 December 2015 should be seen as a part of this larger attempt by a majoritarian government to redefine the concept of a “nation” whose foundation was the modern secular principle in the aftermath of the freedom struggle.

¹ Hindutva is a political programme to establish majoritarian rule and dominance; the project is led by Rashtriya Swayam Sewak Sangh, the Bharatiya Janata Party and their affiliates. These forces are currently in power in the Union Government and many other states.

Seen in this context, the impact of the Delhi violence was felt most by Muslim informal workers (both men and women), many of whom had migrated to seek a livelihood in the City. The violence not only targeted their livelihoods, but also led to uprooting their entire lives. For example, Jannati and Ishtiaque's daughter was to get married on 19 March 2020 and their house, in Gali No. 5 Khajoori Khas East, was full of materials collected for the marriage. Ishtiaque, who owns a small stabiliser factory, had spent lakhs of rupees to gather the material. Their two-story flat house had been refurbished for the wedding. On the night of February 23, the family realised that a commotion was going on in the main road. This was the time that Muslim businesses were being targeted by mobilised mobs, but no one in the residential streets believed that the riots would spread to the residential area. Despite this, the violence started from the night of 24 February 2020 and continued till 26 February 2020. Jannati and her family ran away to the Fatima Masjid behind their lane, but their factory and the entire house was ransacked and looted. Petrol bombs were hurled and Ishtiaque's factory was totally destroyed. His daughter finally got married from a relative's house, but only because of help from relatives and the groom's family (Interview, Jannati and Ishtiaque, 17 March 2020).

Jannati's story is not a unique one; rather it is replicated in almost every single lane where targeted violence was afflicted on Muslims in North East Delhi between 23 and 28 February 2020. For instance, the women of Gali No. 4 in the same area relate heart-wrenching stories of the destruction of their sewing machines, which were their only source of livelihood. Most of the men in the area were informal-sector workers – tailors, daily wage labourers, rickshaw pullers, contract workers, self-employed technicians, street hawkers, etc. As in the case of so many women informal workers in India, home-based work provided important supplementary income to the families.² Women reported that many of them had two or three sewing machines in the house and made clothes on order, often earning INR 150–200 (USD 2.00–2.60) per dress.³ Some reports also estimated that a large number of women had lost savings to the tune of INR 30 000 (USD 395) or above, which had been saved through home-based work in Shiv Vihar, another epicentre of communal targeting. Furthermore, evidence of widespread and violent attacks on shops, homes and means of livelihood are available through scores of media and fact-finding reports.

As has been the trend in the case of targeted communal violence, it is reasonable to surmise that the destruction of livelihoods has been one of the prime objectives of the Hindu nationalists. In order to understand the full impact of this behaviour, it is important to situate these testimonies in the structural transformations in the local economy of North East Delhi. According to the latest Economic Census of Delhi, only about one-third of the working-age population is classed as a “worker” who is engaging in some economic activity. The rest of the working people may be categorised as undocumented workers, many of whom are self-employed. Many of the enterprises in the area are home-based and employ less than two people. Another 45 per cent of the enterprises work from sheds outside the house. Only 5 per cent of the businesses could be classed as “shops and establishments”, of which about one-fifth were owned by Muslims (Government of Delhi, 2013).

A recent study of informal labour in the region showed that the average monthly income of a household where there was home-based work was INR 5 000 – 10 000 (USD 65–130). However, even this meagre income was very important for survival, since a majority of the men were daily wage labourers with an erratic income. Therefore, the supplementary income provided by family members in the form of home-based work has been very important. The same study also showed

² Information gathered during a visit to the area, 17 March 2020.

³ Using a conversion rate of INR 76 to USD 1, which was correct on 24 May 2020; figures are rounded.

that women home-based workers earned less than the average daily income, which was INR 150–300 (USD 2–4) per person who had to be helped by the unpaid work of children to meet their targets.

Another group with precarious livelihoods was the street hawkers, whose total number is not easily accessible. Comrade Kushwaha, the treasurer of the Delhi Rehri Patri Khuncha Hawkers Union (affiliated to the Centre for Indian Trade Unions), reports that in Kardampuri Municipal Chowk (Plaza) alone there were at least sixty to seventy hawkers providing food to office-goers (Telephonic interview, 7 April 2020). The income of these people could vary from INR 500–1000 per day (USD 6.5–13) depending on the place at which the hawkers were standing. Many of them reported that they earned most of their income between 2 p.m. and 9 p.m. at night when the offices broke for lunch or when the working day was over. Their total investment to set up their carts was from INR 20 000 – 25 000 (USD 260–330). Many of them also lived in rented accommodation and were migrants who had come to Delhi for lack of any other opportunities. Between 24 and 25 February 2020, most of these carts were either broken or burned. As Comrade Kushwaha narrates, a mob of people from outside the local area came and destroyed the livelihoods of all these hawkers, 80 per cent of whom belonged to the Muslim minorities. Many of the hawkers fled home after this incident since they did not have any hope of reinstating their lives in Delhi.

Contextualised in this precarious livelihood scenario, the Delhi riots will have a long-term impact on the livelihood of these workers in more than one way. First, the destruction of homes also results in the destruction of all means of livelihood, because of the large presence of self-employed and home-based workers. In its preliminary assessment, the interim report of the Delhi government estimated that only 122 homes had been destroyed. Perhaps the definition of the “home” was restricted to the building, and not the loss of assets and all belongings. Hence, a family whose building was not destroyed but who had lost all their belongings, received a mere INR 25 000 (USD 330) for damages. A visit to some of these areas shows that though this preliminary assistance had been received by most of the victims, it could not meet even their immediate survival necessities. Apart from this the Delhi government declared that it would give INR 0.5 million (USD 6 600) to house owners whose houses were totally destroyed and INR 0.25 million (USD 3 300) to those house owners whose houses were substantially damaged, and INR 0.015 million (USD 200) for “minor damages”. One-fourth of this compensation would have to be shared with the tenants and the rest of the costs of reconstruction. If we consider this situation in the case of Shiv Vihar, it is evident that in these “mixed localities” many of the houses are owned by “Hindus” and rented out to “Muslim tenants”. Many of them were running small businesses from their houses and were unsure of getting compensation. Further, the eviction and abandonment of tenants is not taken care of by the compensation scheme. So, in these mixed localities, it is evident that non-Muslim landlords would benefit from compensation to a greater extent than their Muslim tenants, many of whom may have been self-employed and might have lost many days of work.

Second, the conception of what constitutes a “livelihood” is rather narrowly defined in the relief and rehabilitation package. The package largely covers loss of assets and takes little note of the loss of work that has occurred in the area. The interim report of the Delhi government identified 301 vehicles and 322 shops as having being destroyed in the riots (*The Federal*, 2020). These were categorised into uninsured shops and other commercial establishments with compensation up to a maximum limit of INR 0.5 million (USD 6 600); the loss of a cycle rickshaw would get compensation up to INR 0.025 million (USD 330) and an automated rickshaw INR 0.05 million (USD 660) (Government of Delhi, 2020). Though the form for compensation is vague and undifferentiated in terms of trade undertaken, it is not clear whether any supplementary income being earned by the home-based workers has been left out of this compensation package. Further,

a compensation package of INR 1000–5000 (USD 13–65) has been declared for the street cart owners. However, as Kushwaha points out, this is not only grossly inadequate but most hawkers will not be able to access this compensation because they are undocumented workers (Telephonic interview, 7 April 2020). Under the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act of 2014, the Delhi government was meant to carry out a survey of hawkers and street vendors, but since the survey has not been started in this region, street vendors and hawkers have no proof of their occupation. This is likely to hamper their access to the meagre compensation that is being offered (Kushwaha, interview, 7 April 2020).

Third, in line with above reasoning, it is important to point out that individuals and families without assets have been more or less left in the lurch by the current compensation package. Though the Delhi government has attempted make a comprehensive compensation package, it is still not clear how the days of labour of daily workers which have been lost will be compensated. This means that those who sell their labour power for survival will have to rebuild their lives.

Fourth, one of the most difficult issues is the challenge of dealing with the insecurity of the riot victims, who feel that any attempt at setting up businesses again will invite targeted attacks by the Hindu nationalists. This is largely because the political mentors of the main perpetrators of the riots are now in power in the Union Government and also control the Delhi Police. An example of this is provided in *Frontline* magazine which, among many, quoted a provision store owner who said that he would require over Rs.2 lakh (roughly USD 2 650) to rebuild and restart his provision shop (Rajalakshmi, 2020). He said that he was fearful that the police would pick him up, as they had been randomly arresting people from the area. Another daily wage worker, who earned INR 300–350 (USD 4.00–4.60) per day, had not had work for months, and many of his compatriots, who were migrants, had been forced to abandon their homes. The fear of not returning home has become one of the biggest stumbling blocks to rebuilding livelihoods.

The case of the 2020 Delhi violence gives us an insight into the impact of fascism and majoritarianism on informal labour. The recent contemporary history of India gives us some clue towards this, where the targeting of livelihoods and businesses of Muslim minorities should be placed in the context of the track record of the Hindu nationalists who adopted a similar strategy in Gujarat in 2002 and in Muzaffarnagar in 2017 and 2019. In both these instances, Muslim minorities with some access to means of production were targeted and their long-term economic boycott ensured that they could not recover their economic status. The rise of communal violence is necessarily predicated on the destruction of livelihoods so that the minorities cannot recover their social and economic status. In all cases this necessarily leads to the greater marginalisation of the minorities in particular, and of those working in the informal sector in general. Hence the Delhi riots can be placed in the context of the growing assault on the livelihoods of the most vulnerable sections of the society through a right-wing communal and majoritarian agenda. Any economic rebuilding will only be possible if this link is contested, both socially and politically, and where the spirit of reconciliation is combined with justice for the victims. The events in Gujarat in 2002 have shown us that if justice is not done, and seen to be done, then the reconstruction of the life of informal labour will become one of the most difficult tasks in any context of targeted violence.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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