

Bearing the Burden: Human Rights, Working Conditions and Health Hazards of
Head-load Workers in Azadpur Mandi, Delhi

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Abstract

Nearly 90 per cent of the workforce in India is employed in the informal sector, which, despite its diverse occupational typologies, is characterised by inadequate social protection and significant job insecurity. While considerable attention has been paid to the challenges and coping strategies of workers in both traditional informal occupations and emerging forms of employment such as the platform economy, head-load workers in particular remain underrepresented in scholarly discourse. This paper addresses this gap by providing an in-depth examination of the living and working conditions of head-load workers (*palledars*) in Azadpur Mandi, Delhi, the largest wholesale fruit and vegetable market in Asia. These workers are engaged in physically demanding tasks involving the manual transport of goods, typically by carrying heavy loads on their heads and backs. Particular attention is paid to the health and safety issue associated with the nature of their labour and to the limited legal and institutional protection afforded to them. By situating head-load workers within the broader context of informal labour, the study highlights their socio-economic vulnerabilities, and reveals the human rights dimensions of their marginalisation. The paper concludes with policy recommendations designed to strengthen legal safeguards, improve occupational health standards and advance the dignity and rights of this overlooked workforce.

Keywords: Head-load Workers, Palledars, Human Rights, Health Hazards, Azadpur Mandi, Informal Labour

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Introduction

Casual labour and the precariousness of their working conditions remains a prevalent phenomenon since the beginning of selling one's labour and time in exchange for money. After various resistances from workers worldwide, especially after the Second World War, the standard employment relationship (SER) was established in the industrial set-up at a larger level. However, the advent of neo-liberalism from the 1970s onwards marked a decisive shift in economic governance, systematically eroding workers' rights and welfare provisions in favour of profit maximisation and market deregulation. The expanding influence of neo-liberalism has significantly weakened this employer–employee relationship, even within the organised sector. In the contemporary global landscape, and particularly within developing economies such as India, the proliferation of precarious employment has emerged as a critical crisis. There is a notable paradox that occurs in environments where capital becomes increasingly concentrated and organised, as evidenced by the entry of large corporate houses in the production of basic commodities and the delivery of services. However, while the business structures are consolidating, the workers integral to these production processes are being systematically excluded from formal employment frameworks. Scholarly analyses of neo-liberalism illuminate the ideological foundations that have driven this erosion of workers' rights and welfare. Palley (2004) examined the neo-Keynesian critique of neo-liberal thought, which held that a reduction in nominal wages would lower prices, thereby increasing the real value of money holdings and stimulating consumption spending and aggregate demand. Embedded within this framework was the contention that institutional mechanisms protecting workers, such as trade unions and minimum wage laws, were economic rigidities responsible for unemployment, and therefore obstacles to be dismantled. Harvey (2007), in contrast,

identified the concrete policy manifestations of this ideology, characterising neo-liberalism by its systematic attack on workers' terms and conditions, the rolling back of the welfare state and sectoral subsidies, and the increasing privatisation and expansion of market forces. Together, these frameworks reveal that neo-liberalism was not merely an economic policy but a deliberate ideological project that repositioned labour as a cost to be minimised rather than a right to be protected, a shift with profound consequences for informal workers such as the palledars of Azadpur Mandi. These developments have resulted in an increase in the informal employment system across the world in general and India in particular.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) report (2018), *Women and Men in the Informal Economy: A Statistical Picture* states that more than 61 per cent (two billion) of the world's working population is dependent on the informal sector for its livelihood. The proportion of informal employment is 85.8 per cent in Africa, 68.6 per cent in the Arab States, 68.2 per cent in Asia and the Pacific, 40 per cent in the USA, and 25.1 per cent in Europe. The report further shows that 93 percent of the world's informal employment is in developing countries (ILO Report 2018). Closer home, Naik (2009) reported that the average annual growth rate of informal workers was 3.16 per cent between 1999–2000 and 2004–05, whereas, in the same period, the growth rate of formal workers was negative, which was -0.10 per cent. Additionally, the Economic Survey (2018–19) found that India's informal sector constitutes almost 93 per cent of the workforce and 50 per cent of the total national product (Maitra 2020). Thus, highlighting the crucial role, the informal sector has played in the development of India. It significantly contributes to the national GDP and provides employment opportunities to a huge population of the country. However, despite their significant contribution to the progress and economic stability of the country, as various pieces of evidence show, informal sector workers continue to face serious problems such as social insecurity, occupational hazards at work and low wages.

The paper seeks to explore various dimensions of the lives of head-load workers, including the ways in which their working conditions shape their daily existence, their socio-economic backgrounds and the health hazards they encounter. In addition to analysing the challenges faced by head-load workers, the study provides actionable recommendations for improving their working and living conditions. These measures seek to mitigate the hardships experienced by this vulnerable labour group and promote their overall welfare. The paper also highlights the human rights challenges based on the evidence collected during a year-long field study in Azadpur Mandi, officially renamed Ch. Hira Singh Fruit and Vegetable Market in 2004, New Delhi from 2019–20.

The Field: Azadpur Mandi

Azadpur, situated in the North Delhi district, lies in close proximity to the North Campus of the University of Delhi. The locality is bordered by Shalimar Bagh and the Wazirpur Industrial Area, factors that contribute to a significant concentration of the working-class population in the region. It serves as a major hub for migrant labourers, reflecting the area's economic and demographic dynamics. Azadpur Mandi is the largest fruit and vegetable market in Asia (Ekta, et al. 2021). It is strategically located between the Azadpur and Jahangirpuri metro stations. Adjacent to the market is a railway station that facilitates the transportation of goods, reinforcing the locality's role as a key node in the city's trade and supply networks. Due to its high population density and the intensity of commercial activities, the area experiences substantial traffic congestion, making it one of the most densely populated and economically active zones in North Delhi.

Azadpur Mandi was set up by the Delhi Development Authority in 1977. In 2004, it got the status of Market of National Importance (MNI). Azadpur Mandi is fully administered by the Agricultural Produce Marketing Committee (APMC), Azadpur. It had 2087 registered

commission agents and 1436 wholesale traders by March 2018 ([APMC Azadpur website](#)). There are more than 40,000 head-load workers, commonly referred as '*palledars*', engaged in loading–unloading and packing–unpacking. Almost all the palledars in Azadpur Mandi are migrants who come from different parts of the country in search of employment. A significant part of palledars belong to Bihar and Eastern Uttar Pradesh. They are included in the category of casual labourers by the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) in its various surveys (Jatav 2020).

The APMC, Azadpur functions under the Delhi Agricultural Marketing Board (DAMB) of the Government of the National Capital Territory of Delhi, as governed by the Delhi Agricultural Produce Marketing (Regulation) Act, 1998. The committee is responsible for regulating the wholesale marketing of agricultural produce, issuing licences, collecting market fees and maintaining market infrastructure. It grants licences in seven categories: Category A for commission agents, Category B for traders, Category C for weighmen, Category D for measurers or surveyors, Category E for brokers or transporters, Category F for labour contractors and Category G for head-load workers (*palledars*).

Methodology

Study Area and Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design to examine the socio-economic conditions and working environment of head-load workers at Azadpur Mandi. The Mandi, comprises two principal divisions: the New Vegetable Market and the New Fruit Market. The research integrates quantitative and qualitative methods to develop a comprehensive understanding of the workers' socio-economic status, employment arrangements, lived experiences, and institutional linkages.

The fieldwork commenced in August 2019. Initial access to the field was facilitated through Sajag Society, an organisation that also works with the Rashtriya Hamal Panchayat (a union of head-load workers). Two head-load workers associated with Sajag Society acted as gatekeepers and introduced me to the field. Accompanied by these workers, regular visits to the market were undertaken to establish a rapport with the palledar community in the *mandi* (market). This process of sustained engagement was crucial in facilitating subsequent data collection.

Quantitative Data Collection

The quantitative component of the study is based on a cross-sectional survey of 297 head-load workers (N = 297). The participants were selected through convenience sampling. A substantial proportion of the respondents were applicants for G-category licenses, and regular interaction with these workers during the course of the licensing process facilitated access to them. Data collection was conducted between October 2019 and March 2020. Rather than using self-administered questionnaires, the survey data was gathered through structured, one-on-one interviews with the workers to ensure accurate recording of their socio-economic backgrounds.

Qualitative Data Collection

To complement the survey findings, qualitative data were collected through in-depth interviews with 40 workers. Purposive sampling was employed for the study. Sample size was not predefined as it depended upon the saturation of data. Interviews were conducted between December 2019 and February 2020, using a semi-structured interview schedule. Twenty-eight interviews were conducted at the participants' workplaces within the *mandi*, while the remaining 12 were held at nearby shelter homes, offices or rented accommodations. The interviews explored different themes including migration trajectories, working condition,

occupational health risks, institutional framework and interactions with traders, market authorities and unions.

Additional contextual insights were gathered in May and June 2021 during the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. During this period, I, along with colleagues from the Delhi School of Social Work, organised a relief initiative titled 'Feeding Workers in Delhi', which provided food and basic medical assistance to head-load workers at Azadpur Mandi. This engagement enabled long interactions with the workers during the period of economic distress and contributed to a broader understanding of their vulnerabilities and coping strategies in times of crisis.

Secondary Sources

Secondary data were used to contextualise the primary findings. These included academic literature on informal labour and head-load workers in India, relevant legislative and policy documents, media reports, and pamphlets and materials produced by unions active in the mandi.

Ethical Considerations and Limitations

Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to conducting the surveys and interviews. The participants were informed about the purpose of the study and assured of confidentiality and anonymity. A key limitation of the study is the time gap since the completion of the primary fieldwork. As the principal data were collected between 2019 and 2020, with supplementary engagement in 2021, there may have been subsequent changes in the socio-economic conditions and market practices at Azadpur Mandi. While the findings capture structural patterns and institutional arrangements during the period of study, some operational dynamics may have evolved in the intervening years.

Informal Labour and Head-load Workers

Capitalist structures, as analysed by Karl Marx, perpetuate the pauperisation of labour through mechanisms such as low wages, precarious working conditions and other forms of exploitation. These conditions not only restrict the social mobility of workers but also compel them to engage in social reproduction, reproducing and raising children as future labourers to sustain the capitalist system. Marx (1867) argued that this cyclical process is integral to capitalism, as it ensures a continuous supply of exploitable labour while maintaining the structural inequalities necessary for capital accumulation. The International Labour Organization defines informal employment as 'all remunerative work (i.e. both self-employment and wage employment) that is not registered, regulated or protected by existing legal or regulatory frameworks, as well as non-remunerative work undertaken in an income-producing enterprise'. The informal nature of employment in this sector results in the absence of tripartite contracts, depriving workers of collective bargaining power and undermining their fundamental human rights. The first Indian National Commission on Labour (1966–69) defined 'informal sector workforce' as 'those workers who have not been able to organise themselves in pursuit of their common interest due to certain constraints like casual nature of employment, ignorance and illiteracy, small and scattered size of establishments' (Naik 2009). Standing (2011) conceptualises this growing mass of informally employed, socially unprotected workers as the 'precariat', a distinct class characterised by the absence of occupational identity, chronic labour insecurity and systematic exclusion from the rights and entitlements available to formally employed citizens. The palledars of Azadpur Mandi exemplify this condition.

The informal sector is very large and diverse. There are many categories in this sector such as home-based workers, waste pickers, street vendors, construction works, and others. One of these categories is head-load workers. The Kerala Head-load Workers Act, 1978 defined the term head-load worker as ‘a person engaged directly or through a contractor in or for an establishment, whether for wages or not, for loading or unloading or carrying on head or person or in a trolley any article or articles in or from or to a vehicle or any place in such establishment and includes any person not employed by any employer or contractor but engaged in the loading or unloading or carrying on head or person or in a trolley any article or articles for wages, but does not include a person engaged by an individual for domestic purposes’. Except for the Kerala Head-load Workers Act and the Maharashtra Mathadi, Hamal and Other Manual Workers Act, 1969, there is hardly any social and legislative policy that recognises head-load workers. The labour dynamics of palledars within the mandi system are defined by a mediated relationship where an *aadhathi* (commission agent) functions as the principal employer, while the workforce is organised through labour contractors. An academic investigation is required to analyse how these specific labour typologies influence bargaining power, wage security and institutional marginalisation.

The Socio-economic Profile of the Palledars

A common migration pattern was observed in Azadpur Mandi, where workers employed in a particular shop often originate from the same village or kinship group. Head-load workers tend to recruit other migrants from their native places, continuing this chain across generations. These workers are typically marginal farmers or landless individuals. Many of them were once small farmers but were compelled to sell their land to repay debts to moneylenders, often incurred for marriage expenses or medical treatment for serious illnesses. Consequently, these marginal farmers became labourers. A significant number of the participants belong to the first generation that migrated to the city for employment. The second

generation, aged between 16 and 30 years, has also entered the labour market, engaging in the same head-loading work after completing high school or intermediate education. The head-load workers in Azadpur Mandi largely come from the lower strata of society. Out of 297 respondents, 45 per cent belonged to Other Backward Castes (OBCs), 42 per cent to Scheduled Castes (SCs), 8.5 per cent to Scheduled Tribes (STs), and 4 per cent to unreserved categories. The respondent pool for this study is exclusively male, reflecting the gendered division of labour within the mandi. While the role of the palledar is strictly male-dominated, female labour is concentrated in distinct segments of the value chain. Women are primarily engaged in the manual processing of produce, specifically the unpacking, sorting, and subsequent repacking of fruits and vegetables. This clear demarcation of tasks suggests a highly segregated labour market where physical load-bearing and commodity handling are divided along gender lines.

Working and Living Conditions

Head-loaders (palledars) are one of the most vulnerable communities within the unorganised sector as most people get their wages based on a piece of work rather than monthly or daily remuneration. For carrying a 50 kg packet in Azadpur Mandi, a worker gets only ₹3–4. Around 77 per cent of the palledars admitted that they earn less than ₹10,000 in a month. Even out of these minimum wages, the commission agents keep some money with them so that the workers are completely under their control. This is a situation of bonded labour, which is not only illegal in India but also against the standards of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). The lack of social security is very high in this sector. To get a minimum wage for survival, workers have to spend more than 12 to 16 hours daily at their workplace. In Azadpur Mandi, about 50 per cent of the palledars reported that they work 12–16 hours a day while the rest spend more than 16 hours at their workplace. I could not find any palledar who works less than 12 hours. They lack security about whether they will find work the next day.

This high level of inconsistency and insecurity leaves them in even more vulnerable positions. They are perpetually worried about arranging food for the next few days, paying room rent and sending money home. In Marxian terms, they are alienated from the product of labour (fruits and vegetables), the process of labour, and self. They don't have any control over their working conditions and social life. Despite spending decades in Delhi, they are not aware of most of the places in the city because their social conditions don't allow them to think beyond work and the workplace. When humans do not control 'the conditions, process and product at work', alienation extends into general social conditions (Fuchs 2020). According to the Delhi traffic police, Azadpur is one of the most accident-prone hotspots in Delhi (Ekta, *et al.*2021). There have been many such incidents in the mandi where labourers carrying 50 kg weight have slipped and were injured or died in truck accidents, but no compensation was given by the employer or APMC.

Mohit¹ (name changed) works as a head loader in Azadpur. During work, his foot slipped in the mud and the fall fractured his hand. On the demand of the workers, the commission agent (employer) gave only ₹500 as compensation to Mohit. Mohit could not work for three months. During this time, he could not send money to his family, and managed the cost of his treatment, food, room rent, etc. by taking loans from friends.

Lack of institutional recognition is a one of the critical determinants of the structural precarity and subsequent deprivation experienced by palledars. APMC issues seven types of licences, in which there is a provision for a G-category licence for palledars. As claimed by workers and confirmed by APMC officials, after 20 years of this Act, by March 2018, only two G-category licences were issued by APMC Azadpur. Therefore, a head-load worker has no proof of his/her employment. There is a lack of awareness about the G-category licence. An activist of the Rashtriya Hamal Panchayat working with head loaders said that till a few years

¹Interacted with Mohit's fellow-workers and family members in November 2019.

ago, many APMC officials themselves were not aware of a licence for palledars. The matter came to light after the intervention of civil society organisations and the agitation of workers. Despite that, the application for a G-category licence is discouraged by APMC, giving different reasons. There is a union of commission agents and traders which often organises meetings and engages with authorities for negotiations but there is no such collective platform for palledars. Because of this, they are not able to protect their interests.

Health Hazards and the Cost of Labour

Data from prolonged interactions and in-depth interviews reveal a dual burden of occupational morbidity among palledars. The participants report a high prevalence of musculoskeletal disorders directly attributable to the mechanical strain of repetitive heavy weight-lifting. Parallel to these injuries, the study identifies widespread gastrointestinal distress stemming from the consumption of contaminated water and unhygienic food. These health outcomes are not merely clinical issues but represent the physiological manifestation of the workers' structural marginalisation within the mandi. The packets they carry often weigh 50 kg or more. As Dave *et al.* (2021) explain, carrying heavy loads on the head puts strong downward pressure on the neck, which causes faster wear and tear of the cervical spine. Their study compared 32 workers who regularly carried loads with 30 people who did not. The results showed that head loaders had less natural neck curvature (18.96° compared to 25.40°), reduced disc height and greater movement between neck bones, especially after walking with a 35 kg load. These changes were most noticeable in the upper neck and increased the risk of early neck degeneration and nerve problems (Dave, *et al.* 2021). Everyday more than 5000 trucks with fruits and vegetables come to Azadpur Mandi (Ekta *et al.* 2021). Due to this, the market remains full of dust and mud, which contaminate the food sold in the open. Many of these workers live in nearby shelter homes or in their workplaces. They mentioned that their usual diet consists of eight *chapattis*. However, due to time constraints, they resort to eating a ₹35

plate from the food stalls inside the mandi, which includes only four chapattis. This is just half of their regular intake and inadequate for the level of physical labour they perform, leading to a significant lack of nutrition in their diet.

A 40-year-old labourer died of dengue in Azadpur Mandi in 2019. Ramesh²(changed name) used to work as a head-loader in the market. He was a resident of Azamgarh in Uttar Pradesh and had been working in the mandi for the last 20 years. Ramesh had fever for many days, and despite that, he continued to work. One day, he fell while at work. He died the next day in the hospital. The doctor attributed the death to excessive weakness and lack of nutrition. His spouse had noted his tendency to suppress symptoms of physical weakness; this coupled with a lack of resources to afford fruit even during illness had led to this unfortunate tragedy. This incident highlights the tragic irony where those handling nutritional commodities are financially excluded from their benefits.

The palledars don't have decent spaces to live. Whoever does manage to rent a room, which is usually a small space, also shares it with 3–5 people. The average rent for a room is ₹5–6k and after splitting the cost with others, the single tenant has to still pay around ₹1500 a month for shelter. They become physically weak and sick after an age due to unhealthy food and insufficient sleep. Manual workers are unskilled and after a certain age, they become incapable of doing the work. They do not have pensions or any other means of social protection so that they can survive for the rest of their life. The pandemic of 2020 has badly affected the lives and work of these people. Due to the consecutive lockdowns during the first and second waves of SARS-COV-2, only one-fourth of the head loaders in the mandi were left at work. During that time a large number of people were forced to go back to their hometowns. Those who stayed in Delhi had to face a severe crisis of food grains. Due to the closure of work for

²The interview with Ramesh (changed name) was conducted on 14th January 2020.

several months, they could not pay their room rent and their debt kept increasing. The story of a labourer best exemplifies this quandary. During the pandemic, unsustainable debt at local provision stores compelled a labourer to undergo permanent distress migration. He subsequently sought employment in alternative urban centres to avoid returning to Delhi. This story illustrates how escalating debt-traps force workers into cycles of displacement, as the city he had served for so long abandoned him at the time of crisis.

Human Rights in the Shadows

Before the city of Delhi awakes, the ‘palledars’ of Azadpur Mandi are already hard at work. They are the human engine of Asia’s largest fruit and vegetable market. But while they are essential to this vast supply chain, their own lives are lived in shadows, marked by a profound lack of dignity and basic human rights. Article 6 of the UDHR promises that everyone has ‘the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law’. The absence of formal licensing or official identification not only renders the employment status of palledars institutionally invisible but also effectively dissolves the legal liability and accountability of the employer. This systemic lack of documentary evidence facilitates a landscape of intensified labour exploitation as the aadhati is shielded from the regulatory oversight governing wages and working conditions. Furthermore, in the event of workplace accidents, the inability to establish a formal employment relationship precludes workers from accessing statutory compensation from either the employer or the state, thereby individualising the entire burden of occupational risk.

This invisibility is deepened because many are migrants who have travelled far from their home states like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan, etc. Their voter IDs are registered back home, leaving them politically voiceless in the city where they live and work. This reality creates a politically invisible class within the city. Various research highlight the fact that

because migrants' political voices are anchored to their distant homes, they lack the leverage to demand better living and working conditions from urban authorities, which are not accountable to them. This exclusion from public life goes against the spirit of Article 21 of the UDHR, which upholds the right to participate in one's community. Their workplace is a site of constant hardship. The air is thick with dust and the smell of decaying produce. The ground is often a mess of mud and garbage. Yet, the workers are given no safety gear—no masks, gloves or proper boots. This leaves them vulnerable to lung infections, skin diseases and injuries. A working day for palledars is so protracted that it spans the everyday cycle, with both dawn and dusk occurring during their active shifts at the mandi. They work without a designated place to rest or a formal break for meals. This stands in stark violation of Article 24 of the UDHR, which establishes the 'right to rest and leisure'. The human body is treated like a machine, expected to work without stopping, leading to chronic pain and exhaustion that ages them far beyond their years.

For this punishing labour, they receive wages that are an insult to their effort—a mere ₹3–4 for each heavy sack they carry. Such a small amount makes it impossible to achieve an 'existence worthy of human dignity', as promised by Article 23 of the UDHR. This economic desperation traps them. They are forced to live in tiny, overcrowded rooms, sharing their space with many others. They eat cheap, often unhygienic food and drink whatever water is available because it is all that they can afford. If a worker dies on the job, he is simply replaced, and his family is left with nothing. This reinforces the idea of 'footloose labour', a term used by researcher Jan Breman (1996) to describe workers who bear all the risks of their jobs and are easily forgotten by the system they serve. It is a direct violation of Article 22 of the UDHR, which affirms the right to social security. The current poor condition of the palledars also violates the various international declarations that aim to protect labour rights. Casual work is considered one of the Unacceptable Forms of Work (UFW) as defined by the ILO. The ILO

describes UFW as work carried out under 'conditions that deny fundamental principles and rights at work, put at risk the lives, health, freedom, human dignity and security of workers, or keep households in conditions of extreme poverty' (McCann and Fudge 2019).

Need for Legal Interventions

Protection of these rights of head-loaders or any unprotected workers is not possible without effective legislation and formalisation. The Maharashtra Marvadi, Hamal and Other Manual Workers (Regulation of Employment and Welfare) Act, 1969 can be a model for the formalisation of casual work in India. Despite its limitations, the Act is considered to be greatly beneficial to the mathadi or hamal workers and is seen as one of the progressive measures undertaken by the state government in order to deliver welfare (Deshpande 1999). The term mathadi refers to head-load workers in Maharashtra. There are 14 types of employment scheduled under this Act in connection with manual operations. Under this Act, a Mathadi Board has been formed to regulate the casual labour market in which both the employee and the employer register themselves. This model ensures the decasualisation of mathadi or hamal workers by providing complete security, decent income and comprehensive social security, including provident fund, gratuity bonus, health coverage, life insurance, accident coverage, maternity benefits, paid leaves, financial assistance for the education of their children (Marshall 2014). The Second National Commission report mentions that the Mathadi model can be implemented to provide adequate social security to unorganised sector workers in India. The workers of Azadpur Mandi have been demanding the implementation of the Mathadi model in Delhi for many years. Awareness campaigns and protests have also been organised by trade unions, especially by the Rashtriya Hamal Panchayat. The Government of the National Capital Territory of Delhi, along with trade unions and civil society organisations, has prepared a bill called The Delhi Mathadi, Palledars and Other Unprotected Manual Workers' (Regulation of Employment and Welfare) Bill, 2019. This Bill was also appreciated by the trade unions for

the formalisation of casual workers in Delhi but to date, this bill has not been passed by the legislative assembly.

Discussion

The piece-rate payment system functions as a structural mechanism of exploitation within the mandi, engineering a form of ‘manufactured consent’ among the workforce. By tethering earnings directly to the volume of output, the system compels workers to exceed their physiological limits merely to secure a subsistence wage, effectively rendering theoretical legal protections obsolete. This Taylorist model facilitates the total erosion of worker autonomy over both time and the labour process. Given that most palledars are tethered to a single aadhathi, it is imperative to transition towards a formalised monthly or daily wage structure. Abrogating piece-rated remuneration would enable workers to quantify their labour hours, providing the necessary framework to enforce a standard eight-hour working day. Under this proposed legal shift, any additional labour should be strictly capped at four hours of overtime and remunerated at double the standard rate, ensuring that the workers’ physical health and constitutional rights are safeguarded against the predatory logic of the current system.

Informal employment within urban spaces significantly intensifies worker vulnerability through a dual mechanism of exploitation. While informal roles are characterised by precarious income, depressed wages and heightened employer control, the urban environment simultaneously converts all essential goods and services into commodities. In this setting, workers lack any ownership of the means of production, yet they occupy the dual role of producer and consumer within the same space. Essential requirements such as nutrition, potable water and shelter are accessible only through market exchange. Consequently, those earning sub-subsistence wages are trapped in a cycle of intensive overwork. They must perpetually

extend their labour power simply to afford the basic commodities required for their own biological and social reproduction.

The study offers several recommendations to improve the working and living conditions of head-load workers. Beyond ensuring legal protection for these workers, the establishment of subsidised public canteens should be prioritised to provide them with nutritious meals, thereby safeguarding their health. The findings of this study highlight that workers suffer from various health issues, primarily due to the consumption of contaminated water and poor sanitation. Therefore, the provision of clean drinking water and regular hygiene practices must be considered as fundamental necessities. Providing adequate shelter at the workplace for rest is another vital measure that needs to be implemented. Recognition of head-load workers, both in legal and social terms, is of paramount importance. The issuance of identity cards and licenses for all head-load workers, along with access to Public Distribution System (PDS) rations in urban areas, should be prioritised. Simplifying the process of acquiring voter identification and facilitating the opening of bank accounts would also help integrate these workers into the formal social and economic fabric of the cities in which they work. Collectively, these measures would contribute to the enhancement of their living and working conditions, promoting dignity and inclusion for this marginalised workforce.

Conclusion

Globally, the organised sector is contracting, while the informal sector is witnessing unprecedented expansion, presenting numerous challenges for a large population that demands both academic and political attention. Insecure employment and the precarious conditions of workers have become increasingly prevalent worldwide. A minimum standard of dignified living can be ensured for these workers across various sectors through effective government policies and legal protections. Head-load workers, a significant group employed in nearly every

city in India, remain largely unprotected and unrecognised by law, with only a few exceptions. These workers, particularly in metropolitan areas, face multiple vulnerabilities throughout their lives.

The profound insecurity of head-load workers in Azadpur Mandi arises from a systematic lack of formal legal recognition, which excludes them from essential social security and statutory protections. This institutional neglect constitutes a significant breach of constitutional guarantees. By denying these workers the legal status afforded to other citizens, the state fails to uphold the principle of equality before the law under Article 14. Furthermore, the hazardous working conditions and absence of healthcare undermine the right to a life with human dignity, as protected by Article 21. This reality contradicts the Directive Principles of State Policy, specifically the mandates for humane working conditions, the protection of worker health and the provision of a living wage. Consequently, the current labour regime reflects a failure to translate these foundational constitutional ideals into tangible protections for the marginalised.

The story of the head-load workers of Azadpur Mandi is a story of a crisis of human dignity. They are legally unrecognised, politically voiceless and denied their basic rights to safety, fair pay and rest. Their struggle is a powerful reminder that the efficiency of our economy can come at a terrible human cost. They need to be formally recognised as workers, protected by laws that ensure their safety and fair wages and given a voice in the city they help to feed. Anything less is a continuation of the silent, daily violation of their most fundamental human rights.

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