



Health Hazards in the Occupation of Carrying Loads: A Study of Loaders in Old Delhi

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Abstract: *The occupation of carrying loads involves manual transport of goods from one place to another. Loaders carry loads on their heads, backs and through hand carts throughout the day and sometimes even during the nights. They have no fixed timings of food, rest and work. Moreover long distances, heavy weight of the cargoes, overcrowding, congestion on roads and other issues make their tasks more challenging leaving an impact on their physical and mental health. This leads to many health issues among the loaders working in Old Delhi. It is in this context that this paper studies the working lives of hundred loaders in Old Delhi to articulate if this occupation has any impact on their physical and mental health. For the same, it studies the health dimension of the working lives of loaders in Old Delhi and expounds data on their common health problems, availability of medical support, kinds of health issues that they experience, presence of doctors in the area, attitudes of loaders towards doctors and treatments.*

Keywords: *Informal workers, Loaders, Health hazards, Indian Labour class, Work culture, Occupational health issues.*

Informal workers in India whether at mines, factories, brick kilns, industries, mills or markets have always experienced bad working and living conditions, challenging work spaces, paucity or absence of water and food, health hazards, long hours of work, precarious nature of occupation and other issues. Various studies by Breman (1985), Chakrabarty (1989), Simeon (1995), Nair (1998), Simeon (1999), Joshi (2003), Talib (2010) and others have confirmed the challenging nature of working conditions of the informal workers. Such conditions of work often lay the foundation of many occupational health hazards among workers. Among these workers are the commercial loaders, they are the workers who carry loads on their heads, backs and through hand carts from one place to another. They manually lift, transfer, arrange and deliver the goods to different places. Due to the application of immense physical labour and existing throughout the day in the smell of spices and detergents, dust, pollution, noise and traffic and others they face multiple health threats. Amid these challenges they can be seen

working throughout the day and sometimes even during the night in the busy bazaars, lanes and by lanes unloading and loading goods. There are no formal rules or regulations that govern the weight of the cargoes hence goods ranging between kilograms, quintals and tons all have to be carried to their destined locations. Loaders are usually given a *bilti*¹ by their *thekedars*² and are instructed to deliver the goods as per the details explained on the *biltis*. Once their task of delivering the goods is completed loaders take the signatures of the receiving parties on those *biltis* and bring them back to their *thekedars*. Since, Old Delhi markets receive goods from different places in India all the time there are no fixed timings of arrival and departure of goods. This makes the work timings of the loaders very precarious. They have no proper time of taking meals, tea, water and rest. Sometimes, due to a lot of workload loaders even stay in the markets. For the same, there are no special night increments or charges that they get from the shopkeepers.

Carrying loads manually also exposes them to a number of health threats and accidents for which they receive no special compensation or support from the shopkeepers. Any work place accident or if they develop any health issue due to this work is their own responsibility. These conditions are a part of the everyday work life scenario of loaders in Old Delhi. Most of the workers are migrants from different states in India. They are dependent on their networks of fellow loaders in cases of accidents or medical emergencies. Due to the manual nature of their occupation loaders are exposed to threats of accidents, medical emergencies or other physical or mental health issues. This paper discusses the health dimension of carrying loads in Old Delhi. It underlines aspects like common health issues faced by the loaders due to their engagement in the occupation of carrying loads. It also brings out data on the attitudes of loaders towards doctors and modern medicine throwing light on the treatments and remedies they follow if they encounter a medical problem.

Health problems among loaders in Old Delhi

Health of the loaders is one of the core concerns in Old Delhi. Lack of any support system, absence of unions and no formal protocols further complicate the questions of their safety and medical securities in the field. Data collected from the loaders showed that most of them complained of musculoskeletal issues including body aches and muscle pains. Loaders during their interviews said their occupation is exhaustive and leaves them with no energy to do anything including even cooking when they get back to their homes. Some of the common accidents mentioned by loaders in their in-depth interviews were damage to the spinal cord, nails getting peeled off, cargo falling on a loader, losing control of the hand cart, head injuries, injuries to various other body parts and others.

¹ Bilti is a common term used for a bill. A bill contains details on where to deliver the goods. It is an agreement alliance confirming the two parties from where the good is bought and to where it will be delivered.

² Thekedars are the group leaders of a group. They manage the tasks of hiring, firing, conflict management and others in the group.

Loaders also expressed that they experience constant pain in their spine and they have been directed by the doctors to not carry any load however due to paucity of options to earn they carried loads. Majority of loaders mentioned that due to constant noise, pollution, dust, long exposures to the smell of spices and detergents, tension of protecting the cargoes, lifting heavy cargoes through hand carts or on their heads and backs they develop regular to severe headaches, body aches, joint pains especially in their knees, allergies of various kinds, sprains, strains in muscles, severe back and shoulder aches and others. A few also complained of experiencing fever, cough, cold, vomiting, chronic fatigue, nausea, rashes on skin and other problems on daily basis. Data collected from the loaders showed that whether frequently or less frequently all loaders complained of one health issue or the other after joining this occupation. But, all of them have accommodated these issues as a part of their everyday working lives. They have normalised tolerating pains.

Sameer a twenty six years old loader said '*pains have now become our forced friends, we hate them but then what, whether we hate them or they knock us down but we cannot get rid of them. They live with us forcibly*'. Loaders also suggested that due to the application of immense physical labour a lot of them started developing these pains and related issues immediately after joining this work but they kept on ignoring them. They said paying too much attention to these issues and talking about them among their fellow men is degrading and devaluing their own selves. It is not appreciated to 'behave like women³' in this occupation.

Data showed that many loaders in Old Delhi had developed spine and spine related issues. A loader working since thirty eight years in this occupation told me that he faced many health issues throughout his work life in Old Delhi but he never stopped working however only two weeks back he had to stop working. This time his doctor told him that he had some issue in his spine. His reports said that he had developed scoliosis spine bent sideways. He expressed that he had to spend a lot of money in the diagnosis and his doctor told him that it happened to him due to the wrong posture of may be carrying the loads or more pressure on one side of the body. He called it 'the reward of his work'. I discussed this health condition with some professional medical practitioners in Delhi and learnt that such issues were serious issues and they could lead to paralysis, permanent damage to their bodies, spinal cords and overall damage to their bodies.

Another loader showed his report of developing postural kyphosis. When I discussed more on his report with an orthopaedic surgeon and a physician they informed me that usually people have it since birth and if there's no such problem in the patient in their childhood then they develop it due to wrong postures or because of carrying heavy loads. The loader who showed me his report during his interview also said he is not the only one with this problem many of his friends have also been diagnosed with many spine related issues. Some loaders told me that many of their senior loaders who had now retired

³ A commonly used phrase by majority of loaders in their interviews.

and were back in their villages also complain of having this problem. They said that such side effects are very common in the occupation of carrying loads.

Loaders also said that after carrying heavy loads many of them experienced persistent lower back pain, stiffness in back and legs, tenderness in lower back and pains in their thighs. While interviewing the loaders they introduced me to a person who worked with them till three years ago but now was working as a helper in a shop. When I interviewed him he told me:

'When I joined this work I was nineteen years old after working for seven years in this occupation like another day I was arranging the loads on a hand cart. While doing that, I experienced severe pain around my neck and shoulder area. I felt as if someone was cutting my neck, the pain was excruciating I was experiencing that pain in low intensity since a couple of days but that day it became unbearable. I took help of a friend and we immediately went to a hospital doctor told me that I had a stress fracture in my neck. I left carrying loads that day and now I work as a helper in a shop'.

He smiled and said *'you will find many such cases like mine in the market, many of us earn some money and then spend it on our medical treatments, it is a common thing in the market'.*

Many loaders also admitted of developing breathing issues after joining this occupation. Though, it is hard to say if it has a direct relation with their occupation or not some physicians told me that sometimes when lungs experience too much pressure and stress from a long forward or sideways bent posture there can be a possibility of incurring breathing problems. Loaders expressed that sometimes while carrying heavy loads they experienced shortness of breath, tiredness, dizziness and some sense of unpleasantness while breathing.

A loader working in Old Delhi since over a decade said that *'I feel that my body is collapsing from inside. I never used to get infections, flu or any other health issue so frequently but now i catch one infection or the other very commonly. You might find it funny but honestly sometimes the loads are so heavy that I see myself carrying them even in my dreams and I feel tensed while sleeping that's our life'.*

Other common problem experienced by the loaders included 'knots' in various parts of their bodies. Almost all loaders whom I interviewed had developed knots on their bodies. When I showed pictures of those knots to an orthopaedic surgeon, to understand about that problem he said that they are called trigger points. Loaders said they are visible bulging out structures on their skin some of them had pain in them and the others experienced no pain in them. Loaders also asserted that when they carried heavy loads they felt immense pressure on those knots and experienced tremendous pain in them. Since, this issue was experienced by all the loaders I interviewed I wanted to know if it could be the result of their occupation. Hence, on consulting a doctor he explained to me that in medical terms

these are called trigger points or myofascial trigger points. They appear on body due to wrong or bad postures, dehydration, bad eating habits, tensed muscle fibres, overuse or injury in muscles or stressful lifestyle. Due to this the muscle knots generate a lot of tissue fluid pollution, waste products of muscle cells then are metabolically 'revving' with intense muscle contraction. The exhausted molecules then accumulate mostly causing pain which irritates the trigger points. It is called metabolic energy crisis or sick muscle syndrome.

Apart from physical problems loaders in Old Delhi experience a lot of mental stress as well. Many loaders informed me that they experienced anxiety and chronic sadness at work and even when they got back from their work spaces. Loaders said that this occupation generates a lot of worries and mental tension in them. They are mostly worried about the safe delivery of the cargoes because loss of goods can bring huge penalties for them. Many loaders said that their core cause of worry includes the accidents that many loaders face in the fields. During a focussed group discussion most of the loaders showed their worries about the cart collapsing or a cargo breaking their back and others. They said since they work amid the busy markets any accident could happen anytime constant thoughts like these leave them bothered. Loaders also complained of increase in their anger levels and frustrations. Many loaders said that this occupation is very frustrating. They have to face bad words and insults from people in authority, sometimes cargoes are lost, there are cases of theft, conflictive situations, humiliations, bad behaviours and others. All of this creates a lot of mental tension for them. Loaders confessed that facing situations like these every day causes unhappiness, immense mental stress and tension to them. Some of them confessed that they often enter into physical fights and conflicts as well because they are not able to control their aggression. Many of them said that they feel hopeless, helpless and in deep mental pain in this occupation.

A loader around forty five years old said that 'now when I look back I see I have wasted so many years of my life. I have ruined my body from inside, married many physical pains and injuries forever and invited immense aggression and mental stress for the rest of my life. I am not the same person anymore. I feel something is lost inside me leaving me unhappy and irritated. But, then I tell myself what else I would have done if not this?'

Another loader twenty two years old said 'this occupation takes all my energy. I feel very angry and frustrated all the time. There are days when I do not have energy to even feel angry and frustrated and then all I do is miss my family, I feel unhappy that I am turning so bitter towards them but this occupation has made most of us this way in here'. Many loaders expressed the same concerns that this occupation tires them out generating feelings of anger, irritation, stress, insecurity, frustration, aggression, sadness and humiliation.

Attitudes towards Medical support and Medical Practitioners

Most of the loaders working in Old Delhi are migrant workers they belong to different states in India. All of them have strong linkages with their villages and believe in the customs, remedies and rituals practiced in their villages. They are very attached to their roots and in cases of any health trouble they first prefer to consult the people at their village or apply home remedies they know. Therefore, loaders do not approach modern medicine doctors very easily unless there is an emergency. Fever, cough and cold are considered an 'everyday issue' by them and they do not prefer to even take an off for them.

A forty two years old loader told me in a group discussion that *'sneezing, coughing, headache and fever are an everyday business here, they are normal. Work can't stop because of them. We usually drink a glass of milk with some turmeric and one or the other herb and then we are fine. For such small issues going to the doctor or taking an off is not worth'*.

Most of the loaders share the same idea. They all think that unless the fever, headache, cough, cold, stomach ache, body aches and others what they call every issues are not in very high intensity they can be handled at home or at work. Despite health issue of one kind or another loaders do not prefer to see doctors easily. However, in case of major pains and health issues when their home remedies do not work and the issue is out of their control then they go to see doctors. In such cases data collected from loaders in Old Delhi showed that out of the hundred interviewed loaders 62% of the loaders visit doctors once a month, 16% after two to three months, 13% of them once in a week and 9% never go to see doctors. A lot of them practice 'sharing their prescriptions' in the field that is they themselves estimate that their fellow loader is also experiencing the same symptoms and can take the same medicine as their own. In such cases they share their prescriptions. They suggest pain killers and tablets to each other and even prefer to tolerate pain and other issues till they are not an emergency or unbearable and then they go to see doctors.

Loaders in their interviews also expressed that they do not have faith in doctors in the city because they have had a few experiences where due to some problems that happened from the side of the doctors or hospitals worsened the cases of their friends. Due to such incidents their faith in modern medicine has also been disturbed. When I asked them if they attend free medical camps or free treatments then many of them said that they do. A loader said *'if health care is free and available here at our door steps then of course anyone would want it and mostly in this area all of us want it due to the nature of our work*. But to specially spare some time and visit doctors and hospitals is not possible for us. Even if it is, I do not know how many of us believe that with such an effort *'we would be cured'*. Their statements showed an attitude of fear and distance towards modern medicine they found them waste of money and unsure of providing them relief. A loader in a group discussion passed a statement to which he received a lot of support *'once a visit to a doctor then its endless. One has to visit that doctor always till the last breath of one's life'*. On the contrary there was a small population of them

who believed in modern medicine one of the loaders from that group said that '*cities have their own city based issues and problems and they need city doctors to resolve them*'. He said '*our men are used healing without doctors or have seen bad or improper health care back in their villages hence they always rely on home remedies but that idea is changing in the markets now*'.

Among the loaders who visit the doctors said that not always do they take all the medicines advised to them. They all feared taking so many medicines. Therefore, only when their issues get too serious they followed full advice of their doctors. Therefore, data collected from the loaders showed that loaders in Old Delhi are reluctant in going to doctors, they do not have too much faith in modern medicine, they try to escape doctors and pains as long as they can, tolerating pains and other health issues and only when they get too serious they visit doctors. Even in such cases they do not take doctors advises and take all medicines religiously rather take them for some time or start them if they experience a high intensity of their medical issue. In most of the cases they prefer to consult their homes and practice home based remedies and treatments. However, in serious cases they approach 'city doctors'.

Conclusion

From the discussion above broadly it can be said that the occupation of carrying loads causes physical and mental stresses and issues to the loaders. Though a confirm relationship between their work and health cannot be asserted, based upon their responses, issues, diagnosis and word with the doctors it can be said that their occupation is one of the prominent causes of many of their mental and physical ailments. Loaders in Old Delhi suffer from multiple spine issues, fever, cold, coughs, headaches, muscle pains, musculoskeletal issues, accidents, injuries, allergies, breathing issues, myofascial trigger points and other physical health issues. Due to the stressful nature of their work loaders also suffer from many psychological issues like stress, chronic sadness, anxiety, feelings of worthlessless, helplessness, hopelessness, anger issues, irritation, aggression, frustration and others. Such issues make them very impatient and impulsive. According to the data collected from them loaders said that such issues lead to arguments and conflicts in their workspace and arguments over distance with their parents, wives and children as well.

As far as their attitudes towards modern medicine, treatments and doctors are concerned only in serious cases loaders prefer to consult doctors. They are mostly unwilling to visit a doctor and prefer to rely on their home based remedies unless they experience unbearable pain or other emergency health situation. Even if loaders visit doctors they do not take their medicines as advised they prefer to take them in serious cases till they are sufficiently cured and then they leave medicines. They think that having medicines and visiting doctors is a vicious circle once it begins it difficult to get out of it. They therefore prefer to stay away from modern medicine unless it is too necessary.

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