

When Victims Are Defamed

The Interdependence of Rickshaw Pullers and Owners

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While there has been some major breakthroughs as a result of our campaign on behalf of street vendors, the cycle rickshaw sector stays caught in a stalemate. Confiscation and seizure of rickshaws by the police in collaboration with the municipal staff continues unabated. Bribes, beatings, and extortion have not stopped. Even our petition to the High Court, demanding that the new policy announced by the Prime Minister be implemented, has not made much headway. One important reason for this stalemate is that the government policies have created powerful vested interests, not only among the police and corporation officials who benefit from the restrictions imposed on the rickshaw sector, but also among a section of rickshaw operators who are derisively called as thekedars. The following account provides a glimpse into the role of rickshaw fleet owners, the pressures under which they function, and how a few among them have been converted into middlemen or dalaals between the police, corporation officials and the ordinary rickshaw owners and pullers. It also shows the tremendous grit and entrepreneurial spirit of even the poor and illiterate in India. It reveals their desire for upward mobility and their initiative in exploring all possible avenues for moving out of poverty despite all the hurdles placed in their way by the government. Their fairly typical life stories also provide insights into how a very socialist or pro-poor sounding slogan and policy is actually designed to be an instrument of extortion.

One of the most absurd restrictions imposed by the government on the rickshaw sector is that a person cannot own more than one cycle rickshaw in Delhi. Anyone can own a fleet of cars, trucks, or even aeroplanes. However, possessing more than one cycle rickshaw has been treated as an offence, which is punishable with the confiscation and destruction of the vehicle. The law also stipulates that the owner must also be the puller of the rickshaw. If someone other than the licensed owner is found plying the vehicle, it is liable to confiscation. A whole regime of draconian restrictions on owning more than one rickshaw are justified in the name of preventing the exploitation of poor rickshaw pullers

at the hands of “rich contractors”, who the police and corporation employees refer to as the “rickshaw mafia.” This is a classic example of hating those

whom you exploit most. These are the very people from whom the corporation and police employees collect hefty bribes, and yet they are



One of the “*thekedars*” of South Delhi at his roadside rickshaw yard and repair shop. He entered this trade as a puller.

* All names have been changed to protect the identity of those quoted

made targets of a systematic defamation campaign.

Even if one owns 200 rickshaws calculated at an average Rs 3,500 to Rs 4,000 per new rickshaw or Rs 1,500 for a second-hand rickshaw, it represents an investment of no more than four lakh rupees counting both old and new vehicles. By enacting a law, which prohibits a person from owning more than one rickshaw, the government has, in fact, legislated that a poor person has no right to move out of the poverty trap. It in effect means that a person who begins his life as a puller should never get to own assets of more than Rs 3,500. This amounts to using the might of the State to crush people's entrepreneurial spirit and desire for upward mobility. All this when restrictive laws such as the Anti-Monopolies Act for the corporate sector have been scrapped and we are supposed to be liberalising our economy.

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Contrary to the myth propagated by the officialdom that rickshaw fleet owners represent an exploitative class of people, with irreconcilable conflict of interests between them and the pullers, a vast majority of contractors have emerged out of the ranks of rickshaw mechanics and pullers and operate under conditions of great insecurity. No more than a dozen would qualify to be called the so-called rickshaw mafia. Even this group has come to acquire a stronghold over



One of the most "prosperous" rickshaw fleet owners who also runs a cycle and scooter tyre repair business from his rickshaw yard in South Delhi.

the trade only because they act as middlemen between the police, the licensing authorities, and the ordinary rickshaw operator. We even found cases of policemen or their close relatives owning large *benami* rickshaw fleets. Of the contractors we interviewed in 2001, 24 began their earning life as pullers or roadside rickshaw mechanics. Another seven began as petty vendors or unskilled labourers. Most of them belong to families of marginal farmers who migrated to Delhi in search of daily wages. They entered this trade by purchasing a couple of second-hand rickshaws with their modest savings and over the years, built small or big fleets. Only four out of the 36 whom we interviewed are from lower middle class families who entered this profession because they failed to get any jobs after they completed their intermediate or graduation. Instead of joining the ranks of the educated unemployed, they got modest amounts of money from their families to invest in a few rickshaws and slowly added more over the years. However, despite all the payoffs, almost all have lost as many rickshaws in municipal raids as they own today.

The contractors manage their big or small rickshaw fleets from their makeshift stands, which they have made by occupying a piece of public land and pavements, with very little protection from the elements. These spots are used for servicing and repairing rickshaws as well as parking the vehicles at night. A large proportion of rickshaw pullers sleep at these stands because as seasonal migrants they cannot afford to pay the prevalent high rents for living space even in Delhi's slums. This use of public space makes the fleet owners additionally vulnerable to extortion. The amount of monthly payments that they have to cough up to the police and municipality depends on the number of rickshaws they own and the amount of public space they occupy. Given the exorbitant land

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prices in Delhi, it is impractical to expect them to operate their trade from a personally owned piece of land as this would make their trade altogether unviable.

Even after paying bribes, they do not have any security. The threat of eviction from these roadside spaces forever hangs like a sword on their heads. In 1993, the Rajdhani Cycle Rickshaw Operators Union felt compelled to file a petition in the Delhi High Court to demand that the MCD should be directed to allocate rickshaw stands or halting points. The Court directed that 234 stands be allocated for the then sanctioned quota of 20,000 rickshaws in Delhi. But these orders were never implemented. In 1998, the Rickshaw Operators Union filed yet another petition demanding implementation of the Court orders as well as increase in the number of stands to at least 900, since the sanctioned quota for rickshaws was enhanced to 99,000 that year. Even this number is highly inadequate since the number of rickshaws plying in Delhi is believed to be five to six lakhs, counting those used for carrying passengers as well as those that ferry goods or are used for garbage collection.

On February 27, 2001, Justice Sareen appointed a Committee with the Police Commissioner Traffic as its member, ordering that within four months, these stands should become operational. Only 25 stands have been earmarked by the MCD, that too after years of constant pleas by the rickshaw operators. Even out of these 25, some cannot be used because they fall in zones declared "No Entry" for rickshaws.

The life stories of Shyam* from Delhi's Nizamuddin area, Imtiaz Mohammad* operating in Central Delhi, Mohammad Maqbool* of Sarai Kale Khan and Surjeet Singh* from West Delhi are fairly typical of

contractors operating in this trade. Their accounts also give us an idea of the incomes generated from rickshaw hiring as well as the risks involved in this trade.

The Tribulations of Shyam

Shyam operates from one of the slums near Nizamuddin Railway Station in South Delhi. He comes from Vellur town in Tamil Nadu. His father, who died many years ago, used to roll *bidis* to earn a living, despite being a

official sanction for plying rickshaws. In those days, the city administration did not have such an aggressive policy for the removal of rickshaws as it does today. He became aware of these official requirements only when the Nizamuddin police locked him up for two days for renting and plying rickshaws without licenses. They released him with a warning that he dare not operate without getting an official permission and licence



Sunder, who entered the rickshaw trade as a puller and has lost hundreds of rickshaws to MCD confiscation drives after he became a "thekedar".

traditional *sthapati* (architect). Like many traditional artisans, Shyam's father also gave up his skilled occupation inherited from his forefathers for an unskilled job because modern architecture left no place for traditional builders.

Desperate for work, Shyam ran away from his home in Vellur and came to Delhi, in 1982. He began his working life in Delhi by taking on milk distribution for private homes on a hired cycle rickshaw, which he pulled himself. Through that work, he saved some money and invested it into the rickshaw trade by purchasing four to five rickshaws in 1983. From 1983 to 1986, he operated them without any licences because at the time he was not aware that one had to obtain an

number. But since getting MCD permits was never easy, he continued without papers for a few more years by paying off the police and MCD.

On asking Shyam to recount his experiences, he said, "To my horror I found that their tyranny increased after I entered their record books. Everyday, they would confiscate one or two of my rickshaws." At the same time, bribe rates escalated sharply. In the 1980s and early 1990s, it used to cost about Rs 50 for the release of one rickshaw. By 2000, they had increased the fine to Rs 300 along with storage charges of Rs 25 per day plus, of course, their bribes. Even after paying off, one is not sure whether one's vehicle will, in fact, be released. Since 2000, they have acquired the right to

junk your rickshaw after 15 days. This acts as an incentive to delay release so that they can show it as 'junked' and sell it off as 'unclaimed'."

When I first interviewed Shyam for a documentary film in 1995, he was jobless, depressed and disoriented because all of his 80 rickshaws had been confiscated by the MCD. I got the impression that he had become a drug addict during that period. He had then alleged on camera that MCD *babus* were demanding Rs 300 per rickshaw as bribe for the release of even his 50 licensed rickshaws. "I just couldn't cough up that much money. So they just gobbled up my vehicles." After a lot of running around, he was able to retrieve a few of the unlicensed ones but had to sell them off as junk, which is what they had been reduced to due to repeated seizures and whilst being dumped in the open yards of MCD.

Subsequently, for some time, Shyam resumed milk distribution. In 1999, he once again invested his savings in purchasing four to five rickshaws and by 2001, once again acquired 50 rickshaws. He still keeps, for record, the "passing" (sanction) papers of the old rickshaws and even renews them every year. In all, by 2001, Shyam lost 150 rickshaws to the MCD and the police. Narrating his woes he says, " Even though like everyone else I too give a fixed monthly payment to the MCD *babus*, yet, a minimum of two vehicles fall in their net every month. I have to spend at least Rs 400 to get each of them released. They then enter only half of the seized vehicles in official records so that they can steal and

sell off the rest. This is an important reason why I have never bought a new rickshaw. I buy second hand ones and put them on the road after repairing and renovating them myself. Who can afford to risk such a major investment?" Like other fleet owners, Shyam also feels very



Most rickshaw owners, like the one shown above, undertake repair of their own vehicles.

peevied by the fact that in addition to their regular "monthly", the Corporation and police also come and fleece money from them on every festival. Each small contractor ends up paying at least 500 rupees extra on every festival.

In some of the municipal zones of Delhi, fleet owners alleged that in their area, MCD employees keep *dalaals* to collect bribes for them to minimise the risk of they themselves being caught red-handed. However, according to Shyam, the Corporation employees in the Nizamuddin area come and take their bribe money directly, "But it won't be the same

person every time. They keep changing faces. When in 1996, you telecasted my interview over Doordarshan as part of your programme on rickshaw pullers, they were jolted out of their wits and, for a while, they stopped demanding bribes from me. But over time, it started all over again. However, I pay a little less than the others because of that interview." He further adds: "When in the year 2000, they announced an increase in the sanctioned quota of rickshaws from 50,000 to 90,000, they kept the number down by making it difficult for us even to get application forms. They would say, 'Come next week, forms are finished.' This was yet another way of forcing people to grease their palms for every form they parted with. It is because of the obstructions they put in our way for legalising our existence that many of us see no point in even applying for renewal of licences and just settle the matter through direct payments to MCD employees."

Woes of Imtiaz Mohammad

Fifty-three-year-old Imtiaz Mohammad owns a hundred rickshaws today and lives in Kanchanpuri, a slum near Rajghat Power House. He hails from the West Champaran district in Bihar. His family owns three bighas of land in the village, where half of his family is still involved in cultivation. He came to Delhi in 1974, while two of his brothers went as labourers to Saudi Arabia. He began his life in the Capital with rickshaw pulling. According to Mohammed, the hire charges in the 1970's were seven rupees a day and pullers were not

harrassed by the police to the extent that they are now. In the 1980s, he subcontracted 50 rickshaws from Ramzan, a contractor, from whom he used to hire a rickshaw for plying and with whom he had built a good equation. He gave Ramzan six rupees per vehicle and charged ten rupees from the pullers. Out of the four rupees he got, he had to take care of repairs and maintenance. Ramzan was responsible for dealing with MCD raids and confiscation. For twelve

“Behind us is the river Yamuna and in front is the Ring Road which has been declared out of bound for rickshaws. What do we do? Dump our rickshaws into the Yamuna? Even that is not allowed! After all, we too pay road tax and other levies to the government. “Are city roads meant only for motorised vehicles? If the government does not want us to ply rickshaws, let them give us jobs. Otherwise, what option do people like us have but to take to stealing and crime to earn our living?”

unlicensed ones and operates from Sarai Kala Khan in the Nizamuddin area. He comes from Badaun village in UP where he and his father were fruit and vegetable vendors for almost ten to twelve years. In 1968, his father migrated to Delhi and started a small *parchun* shop in the urbanised village of Sarai Kala Khan.

Maqbool came to Delhi in 1978 and began selling vegetables after which he took a cycle repair mechanic’s job in Lajpat Nagar that lasted seven years. Thereafter, he drove a self-owned auto rickshaw after getting a loan from a private financier at 24 per cent interest. That did not bring much of an income. After deducting the running and maintenance expenses, he was left with just Rs 50-60 a day, out of which he also had to pay the loan instalment. Since he was unable to make timely payments, the financier came and took away Maqbool’s auto. So he went back to selling vegetables since two of his brothers and father were already in that business. After about a year and a half, he entered the rickshaw trade beginning with the purchase of one rickshaw for Rs 1,400. Slowly he built up a larger fleet, even though he had to go through the usual harassment for getting licenses. “It is hard to even get an application form from the MCD. Apart from selling it in black, they will keep you dangling for months or even years on end, finding needless faults with your filled-in application form. There are endless legal requirements—you have to submit affidavits, ration card, a certificate from the local corporator and what not, merely to get a rickshaw licence! Even after all that, if you are not willing to pay bribes, your file just does not move.” He too used an interesting analogy that I heard from several rickshaw pullers: “ It seems easier to get an M.P. ticket than to get a rickshaw licence!”

Maqbool has lost nearly 60 rickshaws to MCD’s confiscation



Cycle rickshaws outside the Traffic Police Booth waiting for passengers outside Nizamuddin Station—an area supposedly prohibited for rickshaws.

years, he partnered with Ramzan, after which he purchased five of his own rickshaws. Over the years, he continued to add to his fleet and simultaneously kept losing rickshaws to the MCD resulting in a total loss of 150 rickshaws during this period.

According to Imtiaz, the pullers very often simply run away for fear of being beaten up once the vehicle gets caught in MCD police raids. When that happens, the owner has no way of knowing which zone his rickshaw was seized from and where it lies dumped. In 2001, his entire business had folded up because all the exit points from their slum into the city were banned to rickshaws.

The Battles of Maqbool

Mohammad Maqbool, aged 32, is educated up to class five. He owns 50 licensed rickshaws and many more

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drives between 1998 and 2001. During the same period, nearly all the 100 rickshaws that he possessed were involved in close to 300 incidents of seizure. He got them released after paying the official fine of Rs 325. In addition, he says he had to get his rickshaws released countless times before they were entered in the official record after seizure. For that, he had to pay a minimum of Rs 200 as bribe per vehicle. The high frequency of seizures could well be due to the fact that he is situated in a zone in which his rickshaws have to negotiate the Outer or the Inner Ring Road, both of which are “No Entry” zones for rickshaws.

In addition, Maqbool pays Rs 200 as licence renewal charges for every rickshaw. He claims that the Corporation inspectors take a regular monthly bribe of Rs 1,500 from him. From some others, they even charge Rs 100 per rickshaw. The policemen take Rs 1,000 per month. Maqbool too alleges that only licensed rickshaws are seized and junked. “They spare the unlicensed ones because those give them a better handle for extortion.” He says that if a licensed rickshaw is confiscated and junked by MCD, the owners make a new rickshaw and emboss the same licence number on it.

He has also lost several rickshaws when the pullers who rented those, ran away with his vehicles. However, Maqbool has a lot of old and loyal pullers working with him. He seems to have a good equation with his pullers and is known to even give small loans to them. He has employed three mechanics, out of which two of them are his own cousins at a monthly salary between Rs 2,500 and Rs 3,000. Maqbool like many others told us that no contractor can manage this business single-handed. He has to involve one or two members of his family to work with him because one person cannot cope with the harassment that comes with seizures

and getting the vehicles released. At Rs 20 a day as rental, he gets Rs 600 per month, per rickshaw. Out of this, he spends nearly Rs 400 per month for maintenance, repairs and bribes per rickshaw, thus saving only Rs 200 per vehicle per month. Thus, his monthly income is not more than Rs.10,000.

The Saga of Surjeet Singh

Surjeet Singh (age 55) owned 50 rickshaws in 2001, and in addition has lost 50 vehicles so far in the MCD raids. There is a family of refugees from Pakistan who migrated to India,

in 1947. His father used to sell milk in Pakistan and shifted to street hawking after coming to India. Surjeet Singh began his earning career by selling vegetables on a trolley rickshaw in the Moti Nagar area of West Delhi. In the 1970s, he earned Rs 20 to Rs 25 per day from this work. This trade involved leaving for the wholesale vegetable market at 2 a.m. and hawking till 9 p.m. everyday on his rickshaw. For 18 long years he plied a rickshaw himself. Slowly, he saved some money and began investing in buying cycle rickshaws. Today, he



Hundreds of confiscated rickshaws lying junked in MCD yard in Lajpat Nagar despite claims that MCD has stopped confiscating rickshaws.



owns 50 licensed vehicles, which he gives out on hire at Rs 17-18 a day. He pays Rs 2,000 per month to MCD inspectors of the four zones in which his 30 rickshaws ply. The police inspector takes Rs 500 per month. This does not include festival gifts plus entertainment expense for the worthies of these two departments. And yet, he lives in terror of confiscation and loss of his vehicles. In 2001, he told us that every month at least three of his vehicles are seized and released after the usual fines and speed money.

Due to the high level of tension in this trade, Surjeet Singh has developed severe health problems including diabetes. On August 21, while I filmed the rickshaw confiscation drive by the MCD in West Delhi, I saw him chase the MCD vehicle, which had seized some of his rickshaws in such desperation that he began oozing blood through his urinary tract. With his bloodstained clothes, he chased the MCD inspectors so that he could get his seized vehicles released before they got entered in MCD records. Seeing the gravity of his health problem, his colleagues in the trade forced him to get admitted to a hospital. During Manushi's *Lok Sunwayi* of rickshaw pullers, the manner in which this six-foot-two-inch tall Sikh broke down while narrating the assaults on his livelihood, left everyone including our panelists speechless. Several people actually cried with him.

The costs of maintaining a rickshaw fleet of 50 and the high risks involved in the trade leave Surjeet Singh with no more than 200-250 rupees per month, per rickshaw. Thus, a family owning 50 rickshaws would not earn more than Rs 12,000 a month involving long hours of work exposed to the elements for two members of the family. Only those who have larger fleets of 100-200 rickshaws are making



Rickshaw pullers having their meal at a "thekedar's" yard where most of them also sleep at night.

better money because the larger the fleet, the higher the absorption capacity for losses.

Income and Losses

The income from rickshaw hire varies considerably because during seasons when a large number of pullers go home, a certain number of rickshaws remain unused. There is loss of income on rickshaws that stay in municipal yards after seizure. Thus, while the job may appear to bring high returns on a small investment, in actual fact, the income is considerably depleted due to losses inflicted by the government machinery. They have to work under very harsh conditions—sitting on the roadside exposed to heat, cold, and rain for more than 12-16 hours a day and seven days a week. At least two members of a family have to be involved in this trade for it to be

viable. Moreover, they have to be on constant alert. As soon as one of them spots an MCD vehicle ready to go on a confiscation drive along with the traffic police, they take off on their scooters or motorcycles on breakneck speed. They can then save their rickshaws from seizure by warning their pullers to take their vehicles away from the route taken by the MCD staff out on a confiscating binge. Despite all the bribing, wining and dining of police and MCD, no one escapes confiscation altogether. Add to it the tension and anxiety of losing rickshaws, and of keeping the police and MCD placated. Under these circumstances, no wealthy person with options is likely to stick to this trade for long.

The small fleet owners have to go through these middlemen contractors to procure licences. Since legally, no rickshaw operator is allowed more than one licence, all others had to be made as *benami* licences in the name of real or hypothetical rickshaw pullers. Thus, even after paying bribes, no one, including the so-called rickshaw mafia can ply all their rickshaws legally and each one remains vulnerable to his vehicles being confiscated. Also, since

With his bloodstained clothes, he chased the MCD inspectors so that he could get his seized vehicles released before they got entered in MCD records.

most of the city roads have been officially declared as out of bounds for rickshaws, they are all vulnerable to seizure and harassment by the police. This is not to overlook the fact that many of these contractors have acquired a deep vested interest in the licence-quota system. A small number have benefited by becoming conduit channels for bribes.

However, it is not just those few who act as bribe channels but even many of the ordinary rickshaw fleet owners have acquired a vested interest in the old licensing regime because they feel if rickshaw ownership is made easy and open, many more small players will enter the trade. The licence -quota system limits competition, makes it

difficult for new and small investors to enter the trade and keeps the hire charges artificially high. Since the investment for starting this trade is low, they fear that a whole army of unemployed youth will buy five to six rickshaws, thus increasing competition in the trade, which is bound to bring down the daily hire charges. If the police and Corporation stop seizing and junking rickshaws, many more actual pullers might think of investing in their own rickshaw, especially if they could share its use

The ostensibly pro-poor policy of limiting one licence per person and making it mandatory for that person to ply the rickshaw, actually strengthens the role and stranglehold of middlemen rather than weaken it.



This humble vehicle is not only a means of livelihood for millions but also a bed for rest and sleep.

with other family members. This would further cut down the incomes of rickshaw fleet owners and contractors. Thus, the ostensibly pro-poor policy of limiting one licence per person and making it mandatory for that person to ply the rickshaw, actually strengthens the role and stranglehold of middlemen rather than weaken it.

Mutual Interdependence

Rickshaw pulling involves very hard physical labour, which is why few rickshaw pullers can work six to seven days a week. Most rickshaw pullers are young men aged between 18 and 35. By the time a poor person has reached 40-45, he does not have much stamina left for this backbreaking job. Even young pullers take a day off after four to five days because they say their bodies start aching and require time to recuperate. Many take to drugs and liquor to overcome fatigue, which in the long run lowers their stamina and destroys their health.

Despite the hard work, thousands of unemployed men gravitate towards this work. This is because it is one of the few urban occupations in which even an unskilled person without any capital whatsoever can enter and start earning from day one—thanks to the fleet owners who make their vehicles available for hire without the need for offering elaborate securities. This occupation also allows a great degree of flexibility—you can choose the hours of your work, the number of days you want to work in a year or month, time to fulfill responsibilities towards families left in the village – without the risk of being fired. Despite all the problems involved in this trade, it still pays somewhat

better than most of the jobs available to poor migrants with low or zero literacy skills.

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vehicle. The hire charge for a rickshaw in Delhi varies from Rs 17 to Rs 25 per day depending on the physical state of the vehicle. An old style new rickshaw costs about Rs 3,500, depending on the quality of parts used in assembling the vehicle. Most of the rickshaws we see on Delhi roads are in a very dilapidated condition and can be purchased

second-hand for anything between Rs 1,000 to Rs 2,000.

A hire charge of Rs 20 to Rs 25 per day for an old rickshaw that could easily be purchased for Rs 1,000 to Rs 1,500, seems really exorbitant. The puller is actually paying Rs 600 to Rs 700 per month for a vehicle that could be purchased for a couple of thousand rupees. Thus, he would have paid nearly Rs 6,000 during the course of twelve months to the contractor for a vehicle that costs half that amount. A three-month hire period is enough to cover the cost of a second-hand rickshaw.

On the surface it appears that rickshaw-hiring trade brings disproportionately high returns. With an investment of Rs 3,500 to Rs 4,500 for a new rickshaw, a person appears to be earning Rs 600 per month. MCD officials have indeed used this argument very effectively to appear as the saviours of rickshaw pullers by their ostensibly pro-poor policy of legally banning the existence of *thekedars* and allowing only actual pullers to own rickshaws. But as with all our governmental policies and legislation, in this area too, the actual implementation of such pious sounding, pro-poor laws end up harming precisely those they are meant to benefit. If one examines the hidden costs involved, the trade does not appear that lucrative. Given the losses incurred, this trade begins to yield a good income only if one owns a large fleet of 100-200 rickshaws, while those with small fleets continue living in slums.

The lived experiences of pullers also demonstrate very clearly that in actual fact, there is great interdependence between pullers and owners—with the latter acting as a necessary protective buffer between the poor pullers and the many *sarkari* tyrants that prey on this trade.

→ Most pullers are seasonal migrants who maintain active links with their



Choli-daman ka saath : a puller waits as the vehicle he has hired is repaired by the rickshaw owner

village-based families. A good number of pullers leave Delhi in the sowing and harvest seasons when more labour is needed on the farms. They also visit their villages for festivals, marriages, childbirth, deaths, family illnesses and other emergencies. If they owned their own rickshaws, who would they leave them with, especially considering that the law does not permit any person other than the actual, legal owner to ply the rickshaw? If they left it behind on hire, and the rickshaw got confiscated, they would not be around to come and get it released within the stipulated period of 15 days. Also, since seasonal migrants predominate this sector, there is hardly any legal recourse available to the rickshaw owner if the puller who has hired the vehicle simply runs away with it or sells it away while pretending it was confiscated by the MCD.

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→ Even while they are working in Delhi, hardly any of them have the luxury of proper housing. They either rent small *jhuggis* on a shared basis or sleep on footpaths or at the rickshaw yard of the fleet owner they work for. A large number sleep on the rickety rickshaw they ply. Since there are no safe parking lots for these rickshaws, they run the risk of the vehicle being stolen if parked unattended on the roadside. Fleet owners solve the problem of theft by allowing the pullers to sleep in the yard or on the rickshaw itself.

→ Sleeping in-groups at the fleet owner's yard also provides them security that comes from numbers. If they operate as individuals, they are more prone to abuse by the police and anti-social elements. Their money is more likely to be stolen or snatched away when they are found sleeping alone. Many of those we interviewed complained of how they are deprived of their meagre earnings by petty criminals and even the police.

→ Since the government as well as private banks make it almost impossible for the poor to open bank accounts, most rickshaw pullers save their earnings by depositing them with

the fleet owners, many of who are usually literate and some even educated up to intermediate or B.A. They take their savings back when they have to go to the village.

→ In case of rickshaw seizure, a puller runs no risk. He just comes and reports to the owner or simply abandons the vehicle and disappears. If it was his own vehicle, he would have to spend days and a considerable sum of money getting the vehicle released. An illiterate and poor puller is far more vulnerable to abuse and fleecing than the contractors, who over the years acquire a little bargaining power with those they pay bribes to. None of the pullers have the staying power to spend days and money on bribes to get the vehicle released without earning anything for those number of days. By hiring a rickshaw on a daily basis, they lose nothing if the vehicle is confiscated and they are back to work next day hiring another rickshaw from the same or another owner.

→ The daily rent for rickshaws clearly includes the extra legal expenses plus the risk of actually losing it through confiscation. The *thekedars* thus appear on the scene as risk takers. The only security they demand is that a known person should be willing to stand guarantee for a new person who wishes to enter this trade. They do take advance with no security deposit and require payment of hire charges at the end of the day or week. The fleet owners often lose rickshaws to cheats within the trade who hire the vehicle only to disappear with it. At such times, neither the law nor the police come to their rescue because the sums

involved are too small for the police to bother. The owners thus have to keep a constant vigil on their vehicles. They employ at least one mechanic at a minimum salary of Rs 3,000 per month to service 30 rickshaws. Most of them are expert mechanics themselves and assemble their own rickshaws. Given the very high wear-and-tear of vehicles, maintenance of rickshaws is a labour intensive and expensive job involving nearly Rs 300 per month per vehicle. Individual pullers would have to spend more if they had to get the repairs done with their own money. Thus, theirs is a relationship of interdependence.

→ Many even act as bankers for those who regularly hire rickshaws from them since the poor and illiterate are shunned by the regular banks. For those pullers whose families do not live with them, their *jhuggis* are not safe even during daytime for leaving their savings behind when they go to work. Many actually sleep on their vehicles both at night as well as during their break during the day for fear of their rickshaws being stolen or taken away by thieves.

→ While some contractors are indeed rough and abusive with their pullers, we found that out of sheer necessity, a majority of them have to act with a measure of consideration and provide protection to the pullers. Since pullers are free to move from one contractor to another, the fleet owner incurs losses if he does not

have a good number of regulars who hire his rickshaws daily. Most pullers frequently leave the city for their villages and even when in Delhi, seldom ply a rickshaw during the entire 30 days of the month. Hence a certain number of rickshaws invariably are out of use. Therefore, fleet owners have to work hard to ensure that at least the reliable among pullers – i.e. those who pay their daily rental regularly and are not prone to running away with the vehicle – stay with them on a regular basis and keep bringing additional reliable recruits from their villages. Hence there is real interdependence between these two groups “*choli daman ka saath*” (relation of saree and blouse) as one rickshaw puller put it, rather than a relationship of permanent hostility or conflict of interest, as institutionalised in the government mindset and policy.

→ If a puller falls sick, meets with an accident or needs a loan to tide over an emergency, he is likely to get a measure of help from the fleet owner, that is, if he has built a long-term relationship of trust with him, and especially if he uses the owner as his banker as well. Given the total lack of social security for the self-employed poor, especially those without family in the city, such an anchor often provides the only available safety net. □

A Typical Profile of a Rickshaw Puller

Shah Alam, 35 years, migrated to Delhi from a village in district Muradabad where his family owns four to five bighas of land. His younger brother cultivates their land and also works as an agricultural labourer. Alam began his working life when he was merely ten-years-old – on his family land as also as a labourer on daily wages in the village.

At age 15 he came to Delhi and began to work in a *dhaba* behind Novelty cinema.

Apart from food, he earned a mere 40 rupees a month and slept in the premises of the *dhaba*. He, however, gave up that job in six months as it paid him measly wages. That is when he started rickshaw pulling in Kodia Pul area. At that time the hire charge for a rickshaw was six rupees a day.

He married at 18 and has five children. His wife and children look after his agricultural work in the

village. The children are sent to the village school. Their land produces no more than five to six quintals of wheat and an equal amount of paddy. Crop failure due to excessive rain or drought is a common occurrence leading to losses and further erosion of limited assets.

Today, he pays Rs 25 a day for renting a new, well-kept rickshaw and earns about Rs 100 per day. Out of his savings he sends home Rs 2,000 per month. However, there are days when the income is much less as income fluctuations are very high in this trade.

His fleet owner has obtained licences for most of his vehicles and has also got a licence in the name of Shah Alam. The rickshaws he has plied have been seized a few times by the MCD but apart from losing that day's earning, he does not have to pay the fines and all the rest from his pocket since he would rather rent than own them. Why does he not buy his own rickshaw? His answer is typical of what most pullers say in response to this question: "As it is I earn so little, I sting every bit I can and save money at the cost of my own needs in order to send it to my family in the village. I often think about buying a rickshaw—I can get a second-hand one for Rs 1,500- Rs 2,000. But I dare not take the step because of all the bribes when one has to pay at every stage. After all how much extortion can I absorb with my meagre earnings? Most intimidating of all is the prospect of the MCD impounding it. How can a poor man like me afford to lose my main source of livelihood? The fleet owners have better staying power. So it is best they deal with all these fleecers."

Shah Alam's biggest problem is with the traffic police. No matter where they park their rickshaws, policemen



This picture is not of Shah Alam

routinely shower abuse and beat them with their heavy batons. Since there are hardly any "legal" parking sites for them, their presence is treated as an "illegal" encroachment everywhere. The policemen shoo them away with *dandas* and harass them no end for parking their rickshaws on pavements, roadsides or even *maidans* and public spaces. During the course of my interviews, I met numerous pullers who said that their beating with the police *lathi* is so severe, and often aimed at a vulnerable body part, that they are unable to work for days.

In addition, the police regularly fleece them of a good part of their earning. According to Shah Alam, a routine encounter with the police could cost them anything from five to fifty rupees, or sometimes even Rs 100. Policemen charge Rs 25 per week for letting them ply in "No Entry" zones and more for permission to go inside the railway station. Unless the

pullers pay up, they will beat them up mercilessly on the plea that they are obstructing the free flow of traffic by parking on the roadside. He says, "The MCD use the threat of vehicles for extortion whereas the police threatens people with arrest and subjects them to *lathi* blows in order to make them cough up money. As far as rickshaw pullers are concerned, they fear the police far more than MCD because while the Corporation officials can only harass the owners, the police can endanger our very lives. They can arrest us on trumped up charges and beat us to a pulp." Also pullers are especially vulnerable because they are on the road all the time.

In this scenario, the fleet owners do not appear as complete enemies or exploiters against whom the government is offering them protection. Rather, the fleet owners seem to act as buffers and shock absorbers between the pullers and the tyrannies of the officialdom. Such is the fear of *sarkari* agencies, that many rickshaw pullers in Delhi completely avoid going near a police station or a municipal office and would much rather drop their passengers a few yards away from such dangerous locations.

As the above accounts indicate, viewed from the eyes of the hardworking citizens of this country, the government functionaries are wrecking the livelihoods of rickshaw pullers and fleet owners, depressing their incomes and making their lives more insecure than they need to be. When lawmakers and implementers get to be viewed as criminal mafias, is it any surprise that people begin to disregard and disrespect laws? □

All pictures accompanying this article are by Sondeep Shankar.