

Studying Everyday Lives of Head Load Labourers in Kolkata: An Empirical Exploration

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Abstract: *In this study, I focus on the everyday lives of Head load labourers working in Koley market, Kolkata, which is one of the 54 wholesale markets in the City. They migrated to work here for several years. This wholesale market has a wider impact on the socio-economic life of the different hierarchical divisions of workers associated with it. The experience of working as a labourer was defined by the types of work, but the reverse is also true: mapping daily lives at work is crucial to comprehending work itself. How does this job affect labourers' lives? This paper is an attempt to analyze the socio-economic profile of the head load porters, to find out the problems experienced by them and finally to look into the everyday negotiation and emotions that they deal with every day.*

Keywords: Head-Load labourer, Koley market, Everyday Life

Labour—that is human life expenditure to reproduce life, is at the centre of Marx's theory, a preoccupation that began as an inquiry based on 'real life' and 'practice'¹. According to this perspective, labour and life are two sides of the same coin and their entanglement is universal². If we do not acknowledge the concreteness of the living experience and its eventual incommensurability, on the other hand, we may fail the quest for ethnographic understanding. Understanding the world and its diverse inhabitants in their terms, their specific connections and disconnections dissolve distance. The present study seeks to examine the conditions of living of numerous headload labourers situated in Kolkata, according to their experiences and perceptions. The head load labourers or porters are also called *Mutia-mazdoor* or *Muita* in Hindi and *Mute Majoor* or *Mute* in Bengali. This empirical study was conducted in Koley Market-aka-Nafar Babur Bazaar where the labourers load and unload the huge weights of packed luggage of different vegetables and fruits supplied to and from this market.

Earlier Studies

Headload workers have historically been among the most degraded, socially and economically, of all occupational groups³. Head-load work is unskilled, casual and physically demanding, and most workers are from disadvantaged social groups. Uncountable porters are not only found in

numerous age-old markets but also in railway stations called *coolie*. Most of the international research is done in Africa as it is most prevalent in that subcontinent. Numerous studies in African rural and urban contexts focus on socio-economic issues⁴ or different issues of health like heavy load workers experience severe spinal and back problems.

In India, particularly in West Bengal, there is a remarkable scarcity of the study on head-load porters. There are some studies in the context of unorganized or informal sector occupation, its problems and their movements, for instance, the case of head-load workers or porters in politically and socially mobilised Kerala. In the 1960s, head-load workers were organized by the leftist political parties in Kerala, and their unions succeeded in dramatically raising wages, compartmentalising and controlling the labour market⁵. Head-load worker unions had little institutional support or legal status in the early years while being politically organized and locally powerful. When head-load worker militancy became a serious labour problem in the 1980s, the communist state moved to formalize informal labour organization by enacting a fixed-work day, limited workloads and establishing a formal labour dispute resolution procedure. A welfare scheme also included educational grants, housing loans, accident insurance and a pension plan⁶. The Act is the Kerala Head Load Workers Act 1978, which controls employment and went into effect in 1981. Vijaya Shankar⁷ analysed the rise of trade union organisations among the headload workers in Trichur. Mohanan⁸ attempted to investigate the effectiveness of welfare funds for the unorganised Head Load workers in Kerala. The Karnataka State Government has identified the following 43 categories of unorganized workers for extending social security benefits.⁹ In his study of 'Wholesale market: Study of a Market in Kolkata, P.Sengupta¹⁰ explained the detailed functioning of a Wholesale market in the city and it was published by the Centre of Urban Economic Study, Department of Economics, University of Calcutta. Gandhi & Namboodiri¹¹, in their research paper, 'Marketing of fruits and Vegetables in India: A Study covering the Ahmedabad, Chennai and Kolkata City'.

Study of a Market in Kolkata" explained the detailed functioning of a wholesale market in the City and it was the headload of labourers and their everyday lives are still unacknowledged in academia. In reality, being recognised as an unorganized sector of labour forms, or informal economy.¹² the lack of primary data emerges as a valid criterion for selecting the people as my study participants. Also, the setup of Koley market deserves a special mention in terms of a 24X7 hour open wholesale market.

The Objectives

With this backdrop, the focal objectives were-

- i) To draw an idea of the arrangements of the daily wholesale market
- ii) To explore the positions and conditions of living of numerous labourers according to their experiences and perceptions

Study Area

I would visit Koley Market-aka-Nafar Babur Bazaar. There are 166 primary hats or markets in the city of Kolkata according to the West Bengal State Marketing Board. Out of these 166, nearly 54 are known as wholesale markets. Koley market is one of those 54 markets operating in the city of Kolkata and is also one of the oldest and biggest of all. The study area is situated in ward number 50 of the Kolkata Municipal Corporation which is located near Sealdah Railway Station which is an important suburban rail terminal. It has direct access to Haora Railway Station and Sealdah for easy movement of goods. It deals with all types of vegetables, fruits and puffed rice.¹³ The total area covered by this market is 1.66 acres or approximately 57,600 sq. ft.

It is important to understand what the trade did when it was first established and how it has evolved, because the overall spatial system may have been shaped by historical conditions as much as by current objectives.¹⁴ The Koley family was a Zamindar family hailing from the Bankura District of West Bengal. This family was interested in industries and set up markets and factories.¹⁸ Koley Market area was formerly a stable (place for horses), but it was eventually taken over by Nafar Chandra Koley, a wealthy businessman. He established the market before independence in the year of 1933. The name of the market is derived from his surname. Thus the market is named after the founder and became known as Koley Market. Koley Market is one of the first ventures of Koley Properties Private Limited. This market primarily serves the needs of the traders, who subsequently sell through retail outlets however the retail markets organize direct sales to end users. The present building is about 50-52 years old; though it has been renovated in parts from time to time, its decaying and dilapidated conditions are still obvious. Mr. Bablu Koley, the owner of the market has employed 150 employees to ensure the market's efficient operation. Aside from owner's personnel, there are 3 main market functionaries such as aratdars, general sellers and porters.

Koley market has significant dynamic elements and internal geography of its own. The market area has an elongated shape and the market area is defined by Acharya Jagadish Chandra Bose Road, Serpentine Lane, B.B Ganguly Street and Shashi Bhushan Street. A four-storied building facing B.B. Ganguly Street occupies nearly 1/3rd of the total market area. A room on the ground floor of the building is used for dumping the garbage produced within the market. The market authority's offices are situated on the 1st floor, while all of the remaining rooms of the building have been rented out to various types of shops and for residential uses. The actual market operations are done in the large compound of this building. This compound is mostly covered by a tinned roof and is separated into 2 parts- One for the casual vendors and the other for the aratdars who operate as a middleman in the markets of pavement traders and stall owners. The main advantage enjoyed by the

pavement traders is that they do not need to pay taxes and may readily attract customers when they pass through the road.

On Using the Methods for Fieldwork

The methodology followed in this study incorporates several stages. Firstly, I approached head load labourers during noon, because that time usually those who had no work, gathered around a tea shop of a Bihari *chaiwala* (tea-stall of a Bihari man). In the first stage, a survey has been carried out with structured questionnaires that include minimum information about the individual porters and also on the infrastructure, functions, administration, problems and spatial networks of trade in the market. For a deeper understanding of the contextual phenomena, unstructured, semi-structured and in-depth interviews were utilized, while taking cues of their response. Through this method, I could enter deep into their lived experience.

The Head Load Porters of Kolkata

Head load porters accepted the burden of selling the whole basket of commodities. The casual vendor generally came with a basket of commodities. On the congested road outside Koley Market- Kolkata's largest wholesale vegetable market, one often came across a group of well-built men in colourful turbans. They wrapped a long piece of cloth around their head and then worked as a team to lift bushels of veggies from the trucks and carts outside to the wholesalers. These packages were then carried by one, two, three or sometimes four porters walking in unison. Their strength was unbelievable, and they needed to walk very close to one another when they carry the load as a team. Each team generally had 15-16 men, mostly from the same extended family or village. They worked shifts of eight to twelve hours. The bundles that arrived vary in weight. The smaller ones were not more than 200 kg and did not require more than three people. The bigger loads could weigh more than 400 kilos and require the collective effort of five men. The wholesalers pay the team leader and money was divided accordingly.¹⁵

Table- 1

The tabular account of the head-load porter participants of the study

Participant No.	Name	Age (in Years)	Native Place	Caste	How long have been here (in Years)	Earn per month (in rupees)
1	Manoj Shah	42	Bihar	Tili	27	7000-8000
2	Md. Ismail	37	Mathurapur	Muslim	20	8000-9000
3	Subir	50	Jharkhand	Goyala	30	8000
4	Ramunia	45	Bihar	Yadav	20	7000-9000
5	Jamuna	40	Joynagar	SC	11	8000
6	Basudeb	52	Madhyamgram	SC	35	9000

7	Shyambahadur	33	Allahabad	Rajput	12	8000
8	Kountal	27	Bihar	Rajput	6-7	9000-10000
9	Ramu	45	Bihar	Ashman	24	9000-10000
10	Arjun	50	Jharkhand	Yadav	16	9000
11	Gyan	54	Jharkhand	Yadav	25	8000-9000
12	Unna	50	Jharkhand	Goyala	20-22	8000-9000
13	Ganesh	47	Bihar	Tili	26	6000-7000
14	Bhupinder	60	Bihar	Yadav	45	9000
15	Sreeram	35	Bihar	Yadav	16-17	7000
16	Ajay	39	Bihar	SC	18-19	8000-9000
17	Ramadhin	45	Bihar	Muslim	27	10000
18	Mohan	49	Bihar	Yadav	33	9000
19	Upendra	35	Bihar	Yadav	15	7000-8000
20	Tajimul	27	Hasnabad	Muslim	15	10000-11000
21	Sikandar	32	Bihar	Yadav	19	11000-12000
22	Dharamveer	32	Bihar	Yadav	15	8000-10000
23	Shankar	53	Hooghly	SC	31	9000-10000
24	Moeen	51	Hasnabad	Muslim	24	8000-9000
25	Mohan	44	Bihar	Yadav	20	8000
26	Shibnarayan	55	Bihar	Tili	25-30	9000
27	Paban	60	Bihar	Yadav	28	8000-9000
28	Rajkumar	23	Bihar	Yadav	1	6000
29	Sujit	25	Bihar	Tili	8	10000
30	Madan	42	Bihar	SC	12	8000
31	MOhan	39	Bihar	Yadav	25	7000
32	Shibsankar	50	Bihar	Tili	30	7000-8000
33	Mohammad	43	Barasat	Muslim	25	10000-12000

The above table had been drawn based on fieldwork conducted among the porters of Kolkata mainly spanning the areas of Koley market at Sealdah. The table would explain the distribution of these porters based on certain socio-demographic criteria to develop a preliminary understanding of these porters. It had been observed that most of the porters migrated from states like Bihar (67 percent) and Jharkhand (12 percent), while it is 18 percent of porters belong to West Bengal.

The table given above would also illustrates the caste groups of the porters coming to Koley markets. It had been found that among the Hindu porters which accounts for 28 out of 33 total porters under study. Muslim porters, on the other hand, constitute 5 (15.15 percent) out of total 33 study participants. Of these, 28 Hindu porters, caste groups included, Tili, Yadav, Goyala, Ashmaan, Rajput and members of Scheduled Caste communities.

From the above table, it was clear that the majority of the participants belong to the caste group Yadav (40 percent). The rest half of the study population consisted of participants from other caste groups of which 15 percent are Tili. Rajput and Goyala were found in equal percentage accounting for 6 percent of total porters while members of the Scheduled Caste community too accounts for 15 percent. Members from Ashmaan caste groups were found at meagre percentages of only 3 percent.

As per monthly income is concerned, the majority of study participants earn between Rs 7000 to Rs 9000. 12 people out of 33 total porters manage to earn Between Rs. 9000 to Rs. 12000 in a month. Study participants can also be divided based on their years of working as porters working in Koley market. For the sake of convenience and clear illustration, I have arbitrarily divided the porters into three categories based on their years of working. These three groups include: a) those working below 10 years b) those working for 11 to 20 years c) those working for 21 years to 30 years d) those working above 30 years. Based on such categorisation, it is observed that 3 percent are relatively newer and worked below 10 years, 12 percent of study participants out of 33 total selected participants have worked for 11 years to 20 years and for 21 years to 30 years. Participants, on the other hand, account for 6 percent who worked above 30 years.

Poor living conditions of porters: Among the different hierarchical divisions of the market, the owner, aratdars have good housing conditions. The maximum profit was earned by them. But the sellers and the porters suffered a lot due to their poor income and a huge amount of family members are also dependent on them. Their monthly income was very low so it was very difficult for them to take care of their family members and they also could not afford to stay even in a rented house. The market was open 24 hours a day and for getting work to earn money they sleep in the market. They lived under unhealthy conditions and sleep in the open spaces of the dirty market. Thus they were affected by vulnerable diseases. During the rainy season and winter, they suffer the most.

The Everyday Lives of Head Load Labourers

The amount of energy, stress and lack of facilities that surface in the sight of millions of people passing by the street would necessarily arouse sympathy for the labourers. It might be assumed that the compulsions or the situation of no other available jobs might have led them to such jobs. Except for certain personal worries, situations of unbearable economic burdens, apprehensions about the future, emotions regarding past personal plights, and conflicts with some infrastructural providers (be they government or private agencies) they are not grossly unhappy with their status and conditions as expected and realised.

Journey to be the Head-load Porter: Active Choice or Passive Compulsion or Negotiation Between

Becoming and continuing as a head-load porter depended on some

choices, but there were compulsions as well. But like other sectors of the 'a capital-driven economy, the workers always made certain negotiations and seek opportunities to cope with it positively. As narrated by Basudeb, a 52-year-old porter—

I worked in a grocer's shop... I first came at Chiriamore. Then they shifted me to Phulbagan. From there I came here... There are many people who came from our village. From them I came to know about this market... Yes, we have to be patient all day long. There is no guarantee. For example, I have sat here since 9 am. When I will get the work then I will do.

There are some compulsive backdrops at joining it as well. As Ramu, aged 45 years said -

I was a helper in a grocer's shop in Bihar. I worked as a labourer there. I came here in 1995. Then I came back to Bihar. I again came here in 2004. I married to a Bengali girl. Then I lived in Bihar for 2 years. After that I could not get some job. Then she suggested that I can get some job in Kolkata. She had a house in Kolkata. Then I started my job from here.

Sankar, 53 years old told that

I worked at Howrah haat. ... I came here to earn more. My son is in 11th standard. He is a good student... I could not go to school. But, I had to support my son for higher study.

Living Here and Meeting Everyday Needs

It became a common query about where they stay, where are their toilets, where they bath, and how and what they eat. In Koley Market, the arrangement is provided by its owner. They had restrooms, toilets, bath space, and a mansion in nearby Beliaghata Koley Mansion. A few of the porters prefer spending free time in the room, except the period of intolerable heat or rain. They sat to take rest, take tea and gossip. Even during free time, better not to call it leisure, their isolation for rest was their option; otherwise they were not alone. Most of them ate from the fixed, but alternative line-hotels. Mohan, 39 years old porter stated-

No, we do not have any holidays. We don't take any leave. We work as our own. We take leave only in Eid or Chat or Diwali that you call Kali Puja, Holi... Even the Bengalis are not infrequent during Durga Puja. They follow shift system. Otherwise hoe the market will run... The vegetable, fruits ... rice and everything is needed everyday.

Another participant, named Shibnarayan added that

'But we take leaves, if we wish. There is no restriction if we have valid reason... Moreover, there is no scarcity of mutias to replace'.

Whether the Income Fulfill What They Expect to Meet

This point covered the issue that whether the earning fulfilled what they expect to meet. Another issue was how they manage and they compare the past and present of the earning. The average everyday expenses varied from Rs.100 to Rs.300. As one participant commented, 'It depends on the no of vehicles. It's not fixed, from 500 to 5000 rupees. If goods come in large no then we have an

opportunity to earn more. It may be 200, 500 or even 1000 rupees'.

Almost everybody has monthly savings that might vary. Moeen narrated *'I make 8 thousand, sometimes 9 thousand, but it depends. It depends, like you can see I have just loaded the van, I can make 100 to 300 rupees per day.'*

Almost all the able-bodied porters have Bank accounts and Aadhar cards. Dharamveer, 32 years old labourer said –

Earning has increased, that time we made 50 paisa per loaded basket and we take at least 50 baskets whole day... now it is 5 rupees each. It depends, and varies from, 200 to 250 to 300 rupees per day as the prices of other things need this gradual hike and I can manage well.'

It was now clear that the income was not fixed. It depended on the supply of the materials and the number of head-load porters to get a share of the jobs. For most of them, this variation had different ranges and at different phases of the occupational life course. For a few newcomers, the earning might be fixed. For most of the able-bodied workers and a few experienced but elderly ones, the sense quoted below is common *'I have no problem to run my family with it.'*

But some porters do not accept the compulsive life that does not meet the ends. As stated by Sreeram, aged 35 years-

'It's going on somehow. What can I do, by this I am managing ... Have to manage everything with these even if become ill, I often get anxious about. How to let women of my house to earn for family?'

Illness and Health Services

Life was difficult for these human forklifts. The market remained open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. They worked in shifts of 12 hours or more which causes severe neck and back pain. Many were forced to retire by the age of 40. While passers-by admire them, the porters were prone to degenerative diseases caused by the weight of the loads they carry. The degenerative disease was described as a disease that changes one's spinal disc as people age. The disease could affect the entire spine but most often occurs in the discs, lower back (lumber region) and neck (cervical region). Porters suffered from various diseases. Most of the porters suffer from colds, coughs, osteoarthritis, and degenerative disease in the back and neck. One of my participants, Ajay said,

'It is cough and cold, and as my work is so heavy, I feel physical pain frequently.... I pay your bill. Sometimes 'babu' pays the bill. When there is some serious problem 'babu' (employer) pays the bill'.

The pain gets worse with movements such as bending overreaching up or twisting. Then they go to a government hospital. As Madan told, *'Sometimes I visit NRS hospital or Medical college. Physical pain, fever etc., and we go to medicine shop and take it. ... The shops know which medicine to give.'*

Moeen preferred to go home. As he said,

'I take medicine, or sometimes I go to my home, take rest and come back to work.'

It suits me best that take medicines from here. We don't have our home here so if any health problem arises, we prefer to go home'.

Children, Family and the Desires about them

It was very common to obtain data from the Hindi-speaking porters that they had two or more two children. But the state of their preparation for future life varied a lot. The quotes below would demonstrate it. As Subir, 50 years old porter told –

'My son studied in Bengali medium school. It is tough to manage the cost of an English Medium school ... even if they were in English medium the parents also have to know English too. That is not possible for us'.

The most happily motivate participant, Paban, aged 60 years narrated-

My family is of almost 12 persons. My sons, girls, wife, grandsons... Yes, all the children go to school ... all English-medium... I have three boys. ... I want that they become officer or doctor or engineer. I also work hard for their future. I also help them. I send 10,000 or 15,000 rupees whenever they want. For example, I send money for their school fees... This time, I will buy a good bags from K.C.Paul. They can use it in school. It may costs 2000 rupees or 2500 rupees, I will buy a good bag. I can also buy good khatas for them.

There was proud father, Ramadhin

My younger son passed matric. The next son has taken science stream, he is in college now. The elder son has taken arts. ... They read in private college. My son who has taken the science stream, he has to take four tuitions. ... No, they do not live in hostels, have taken a house on rent. They got their coaching there. My elder son has come here.

The Emotions

I would like to present certain vignettes of different emotions here-

Personal Vignettes of Emotional Pain

Unna, 50 years old porter lamented-

My daughter is no more now, she died. Even I have to maintain the expenses of the court case that I have lodged at High court. .. They [in-laws] Killed by suffocating my daughter with pillow;but still my son runs a shop to help out...

Ganesh, aged 45 years also shared his sorrow like this-

'I had one son. He passed away. Then my wife passed away. Now I am alone. I have younger brother. He lives in the village. My parents also passed away'.

Personal Vignettes of Happiness

Basudeb, 52 years old labourer shared his happiness-

Almost 35years as a mutiamajur ... I am now 52years; My family could not believe I work in such a large city and do hard work. My wife did not believe me ... ha ha ... that I am staying here, so my family came here to see, and they only know what I do, and where I stay.

Narrations of Hopelessness

Upendra, 35 years old stated-

Nothing is fixed here. Sometime I eat sattu, sometime I manage to eat rice in hotel. There are certain days as well when I can't afford food. I went for other job as well but I could get any. As I am engaged with this work from my childhood so I know I have to do this work for my living.

Another participant responded as-

If you face any situation where you need money what would you do? Do you take loan from anywhere? No, I did not do that. I did not get help from anyone so far and I am confident that I will not get help from anyone either in future. I am afraid to take loans because I have to depend on my hard work. I live in such a condition where I am not able to provide food to my children sometime.

Stories of Deception

Tajimul, 27 years head load labourer shared his stories-

My grandfather cheated us. My mother bought the place where we are living now. We have to depend on our hard work. My father also involved in this work as well. After his two legs got affected I came here to earn. No I came here by myself. I left my study and came here. When my father had that accident I had two unmarried sisters. I have to do something for living. I also have to save money for my sister's wedding. That is why I came here and start working.

Anxiety about Future Uncertainties

Gyan, 54 years old was anxious about his future. As he told-

I am getting old day by day. After certain age I can't able to do this kind of work. I stated my journey from home at around 3 am. I go back my home at 9-10 pm. The kind of work I do nobody will feed us if I stop working.

Discussions and Conclusions

Mark Holmstrom remarked in 1976 that 'the anthropology of urban work – in the sense of a careful description of workers' lives, which relates their action and thinking to their situation – has hardly begun in India'.²⁰ The absence of thorough empirical considerations of labourer's life lead me to take up this work based on the everyday lives of head load labourers in Koley market, Kolkata in West Bengal. The participant's perceptions about the lived experiences of the head load labourers in the Koley market explored that they are compelled to live in this market as they do not have enough income to rent a house. During my fieldwork, it was observed that the porters or Mute of Koley market suffered a lot as a large family was also dependent on them. As their monthly income was low, it is very difficult for them to take care of their family members. They shared their journeys that how they became a headload labourer. It can be seen that the everyday life of the porters is an amalgamation of stories of anxiety, hopelessness and pain. Taken together their voices tell us that the labourers felt miserable during monsoon, as their living condition is too deplorable to live. On the one hand, there is a struggle;

while on the other hand, there are some happiness and hope for a better tomorrow, a striving to create a better life for themselves.

Collectively the findings from the current study contribute little in the way of uncharted new insight into the experience of head load labourers in Kolkata. In this paper, I sought to help readers hear the individual voices of each participant and to construct from participants' perspectives, consistent with the thoughts of Creswell (1998)¹⁶, a composite voice of all participants. This study increases the understanding of the nature of the head load labourers' experiences that demands a more humanistic and empowering approach.

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