

As I drive to work along one of the arterial roads in the city in the morning, I find clusters of identically dressed women waiting for a bus. These are women from the nearby colonies who are waiting for the company bus to take them to work. Almost all of them work in garment export houses and all of them are wearing the company uniform of blue salwar-kameez. This is a recent phenomenon. Seeing them, my mind goes back to the time I was growing up when the labour market was totally different.

Back then the city was much smaller. The population was a few lakhs and employment opportunities were few and far between. The participation of women in the organised or semi-organised labour force was miniscule. The daily wage labourers were mostly men and women from Rajasthan and men from Mewat since these areas were agriculturally underdeveloped. Mewatis were also rickshaw pullers though one could find a fair number of men from refugee families also. The city had several refugee camps and as with all migrants, the people were extremely hard working. The men drove rickshaws, hawked vegetables etc. while the women worked as maids. There were very few factories- mostly rubber and ceramics. Their shifts were announced with sirens which incidentally were also used as standard time keepers by the city folks-8 am and 5 pm. The other source of employment was the government- clerks in the various ministries in Delhi who used to commute in special state transport buses called Pass Holder buses; or people working in the Central Ordinance Depot who used to commute by train to Delhi. Finally, educated women who worked were almost always school teachers who more often than not were posted outside of the city in remote areas. They would commute to work infrequently as attendance didn't seem to be compulsory for either the teachers or the taught!

All this changed in the early eighties. The dream project of a favourite son of the then Prime Minister finally got going with Japanese collaboration and the employment landscape of the city underwent a major change. Maruti spawned a whole ecosystem of suppliers and sub-contractors in the areas around the city. The increased employment opportunities also meant increased influx of migrants. The demographics of the city changed. While earlier there were basically two groups of people- "locals" and "Punjabis", now there were people from all over the country. The workers in these factories were easily identified- for the first time, one saw grown-ups wearing uniforms- and they were not even from the police or the Army! They had special buses to ferry them to and from work and they were all men. Japanese egalitarianism!

The demographic change was also reflected in the unorganised sectors- the refugee rickshaw pullers got replaced by Biharis, the local plumbers by Biharis first and then Oriyas and the carpenters and painters by people from Muradabad and Amroha. Interestingly, there were a significant number of construction workers from Madhya Pradesh and this continues till date. Thus, for instance, there are daily buses run by private operators from the city to various cities of MP.

And then came the IT revolution or more accurately for the city, the BPO revolution- BPO being the polite name for a call centre. As it turned out, this coincided with the marketing of the city as the location of choice for all the transnational corporates by private real estate developers, notably DLF. And given the herd mentality, the efforts of the government to develop industrial hubs in and around the city also got a fillip.

This development obviously had its ramifications on the labour market. At the top of the food chain were the high paid young executives who splurged on apartments and villas in gated communities and drove fancy cars. Then there were the agents- youngsters straight out of college, trained to speak with American accents and use the relevant CRM software to cater to American clients. The local boys and girls were not enough to meet the burgeoning demand for these IT coolies. And this led to a huge migration into the city. Twenty somethings, living away from home, earning what for them was a decent wage. For the first time, the concept of a “package” was introduced in the local vocabulary. Package being the vernacular for the Cost to Company (CTC) salary that these companies were paying. Parents would proudly talk about their daughter’s package and not forget to mention that a cab comes to pick her up and the company has provided her with a mobile!

Of course the BPO and other industry led to a mushrooming of other associated businesses. Call centres need security guards, housekeeping services and transport vehicles to ensure that the coolies come in on time. This too led to an inward migration to the city- the cab drivers were mostly local while the housekeeping and security staff was mostly from Bihar and Bengal.

In all of this, there was another trend which took off again sometime in the late nineties- courier services. Indian Postal service was just not good enough for corporates used to in-time deliveries. The demand for reliable, inexpensive and punctual delivery of documents and material led to the growth of the courier industry which grew exponentially. The courier boys, as they were called, also had a hierarchy. The big courier companies gave them motorcycles and scanners while those lower on the ladder had to make do with the humble bicycle. A courier boy, trudging along in sweltering heat to deliver his required quota of letters became a common sight.

On a smaller scale was home delivery of food. From the fast food chains to humble restaurants, all started offering free home delivery. Scooter and bikes with a hot case at the back could now be seen speeding along the roads and by-lanes of the city. This sector was mostly using locals or second generation migrants as labour.

And then came the e-commerce revolution. This gave rise to a new breed of delivery boys. Where the courier boy used to carry a satchel behind his bicycle, we now had the e-commerce delivery boy lugging a huge bag on his back as he drove his motorcycle. The bag, which could easily weigh more than 50 kilograms, would never leave his back even while climbing 4 floors of a building. This was veritably the 21st century beast of burden.

All these employment opportunities were of course mostly for men. Women did find employment in the call centres and to a lesser extent in housekeeping and security services. However, economic pressures forced a fair number of local women to take up whatever jobs were available. Some got employment with the garment exporters while others got employed in the new cottage industries- the ubiquitous beauty parlours and crèches. Lower down the ladder came the maids who would cater to the growing middle classes.

Here something curious happened. The refugee women, over a period of time because of children becoming educated and getting employed, climbed up the ladder and gave up these menial jobs. The gap was filled by Bengalis mostly from the region around Malda who had migrated into the city and lived in the various slums. The men folk started working as daily labourers or pushing the Biharis out of rickshaw pulling. Interestingly, it is rare for a Bihari migrant to bring his family along when he migrates while it is very unusual for the Bengalis to migrate alone. Maybe it has got to do with the land ownership patterns in their respective native places. In any case, the women folk from Malda filled in the vacuum left by the refugee maids and pretty soon, almost all the maids in the city were from Bengal.

And so every morning the wage labourers set out- the maids and the rickshaw pullers early in the morning, then the factory workers who still cycle to work and the men and women waiting for company buses, the daily wagers congregating at the “labour chowk” and so on. Belonging to many different states, speaking different languages, celebrating different festivals all of them are part of a giant economic machine- a machine where the latest revolution in information technology and big data co-exists with a pregnant woman daily wager hauling bricks on her head at a construction site.

March 11th 2017.

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