

The Formalities of Delhi's Informal Markets

By Caleigh 'CJ' Christy

The informal markets of Delhi are purveyors of the multilayered lives of the city's residents. They provide for independent employment opportunities and a variety of unexpected goods. When compared to the more luxurious shopping centers in Delhi, both the necessity and uniqueness of these marketplaces are revealed. The multitude of stories and lives gracing Delhi's population can be seen through the economic transgressions of the shops and vendors of the capital's varied neighborhoods.

Informal markets are those where the jobs and workers are relatively unregulated and unregistered, meaning that the ongoing economic activity is not an official part of the state's governance. According to a case and space study by Nynika Jhaveri, there are estimated to be over 500,000 street vendors filling the roads, sidewalks and alleyways of New Delhi - taking up almost 6.5% of metropolitan space. While these numbers can seem small in comparison to the total population, informal markets are quite the dominating economic force. It is assumed that Delhi's informal sector is anywhere from 60-90% of the population's workforce, according to numerous studies. Much of the city runs on these markets, whether that's those manning the stalls or those purchasing from them.

As one of the fastest growing cities in the world, the urbanization of Delhi paired with the increasing migration to Delhi NCR creates an increasing need for these informal markets. Some market spaces cater to specific groups, such as Majnu Ka Tila which is known as 'Little Tibet' or the Jama Masjid market which serves a largely Muslim population. Some markets look more informal than others, such as INA market compared to that of Sarojini Nagar. Informal markets paired with the more established shopping centers of Delhi allows for prices and goods that fit everyone's economic restrictions and tastes.

It also creates an employment opportunity for many that would not exist otherwise.

Informal market spaces create jobs that require low human capital for a higher income than would normally be expected. While it is not an inherently simple job, it is an opportunity to find a semi-steady income for those that have uncertainty for economic success. Poorer citizens of Delhi can rely on informal markets to be unregulated, and therefore more accessible jobs than those under governmental watch. These markets tend to be cash based, keeping a flow of money that attends to the sellers needs, rather than an official market pricing seen in more established shopping centers.

Though there are attempts to find regulation in this ever-changing market scene - such as the Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending Act - most informal workers have little need for official registration. The addition of new markets with new migrants, alongside the shops that are hundreds of years old in Old Delhi, also makes it difficult to add any official organization. This lack of official planning creates a controlled chaos that showcases the uniqueness of each market's surroundings.

By comparing and contrasting the variety of markets available for Delhi residents, the surprising similarities and blatant differences offer an opportunity to understand why it can be said that an entirely different city sector can be steps away. The food, clothing, structures - and especially the prices - tell shoppers plenty about what type of bazaar space they are entering. An ever crowded city creates a beautiful symphony of contrasting lives that provides a new space every other street.

A Note From the Photographer

The goal of this photo essay is to take contrasting market scenes, as well as markets that are quite alike, and see where similarities and differences exist. These photos attempt to address the extremes of different livelihoods existing in the Delhi sprawl, while taking an element that is part of almost every citizen's daily life - shopping.

The creation of this essay, while taking me across Delhi, does not even begin to scratch the surface of every informal - and more established - market that is part of the city. Still, in my pairing of photos I hope that I push across the ideas and themes that I saw while out shooting.

The messages I took away from this, and hope that each viewer can as well, is that despite how areas can look physically different, there are many overlapping elements to all the citizen's of Delhi's lives. There is also a concept of poverty vs. wealth that obviously comes with addressing any level of economic discourse, and though it is visually apparent, it does not devalue one market or the other.

Both sides of the coin address these markets daily whether they realize it or not. As I developed this essay over the last three months, I realized how important and dominant street vendors, as well as organized market spaces are to the city's comings and goings.

The experiences, people and goods that I saw throughout the development of this project meant interacting with Delhi from end to end - creating a new understanding of the city as whole that I also hope comes through with the visuals.



Temporary booths line the streets around Hazrat Nizamuddin Train Station in New Delhi on Thursday, April 4, 2024. Street food, clothing, and other goods can be found surrounding the area.



Shoppers pass luxury boutiques that makeup the shops of Khan Market in New Delhi on Monday, April 1, 2024. Khan Market is one of Delhi's hubs for more luxurious shopping tastes.



A street vendor makes fresh bhature outside of AIIMS hospital in New Delhi on Monday, April 1, 2024. Many of these setups are temporary and are put up on a day to day basis.



Numerous delivery bikes for Dominos take up space in the South Extension parking lot in New Delhi on Thursday, April 4, 2024.



Vendors and advertisements utilize road space to set up temporary shops in the Mehrauli neighborhood in New Delhi on Monday, March 11, 2024.



Advertisements for different shops crowd the market roads of Mayur Vihar Phase 1 in New Delhi on Tuesday, April 16, 2024.



Shoppers browse the shelves of a stall in INA Market in New Delhi on Thursday, February 15, 2024. At many of these stalls, a number of workers are on hand to aid shoppers.



Shoppers sort through the piles of clothing on tables, the ground and hanging in Sarojini Market in New Delhi on Monday, March 4, 2024.



A temporary corner stall sells different containers amidst residential housing in Mehrauli neighborhood in New Delhi on Monday, March 11, 2024.



The multi-leveled shops of Ambiance Mall create a market of commercial and high-end clothing in New Delhi on Tuesday, April 23, 2024.



A fruit and vegetable market offers goods to grocery shoppers in INA market in New Delhi on Thursday, February 15, 2024.



A street vendor rolls his cart of fruit through the Y.K. Jhuggi camp looking to sell his produce in New Delhi on Tuesday, February 23, 2024.



A street vendor sells a variety of goods, including Kufis, in the muslim dominated market of Jama Masjid in New Delhi on Wednesday, April 10, 2024.



A vendor sits on his phone waiting for shoppers in Majnu Ka Tila in New Delhi on Friday, March 8, 2024. Manjnu Ka Tila hosts goods that are aimed at a younger, more modern audience.



The old and the new meet in the layered structures of Chandni Chowk, with shops on the first levels and historic residential apartments on top, in New Delhi on Tuesday, April 2, 2024.



Luxury stores and fast food restaurants line the streets of Lajpat Nagar market in examples of the vertical growth New Delhi faces on Tuesday, April 16, 2024.



A guard sits outside a luxury saree and jewelry store in South Extension in New Delhi on Thursday, April 4, 2024.



A street vendor adjusts clothing on a rack labeled with fixed pricing in Sarojini Nagar market in New Delhi on Monday, March 4, 2024.