

PRESSED IN STEEL

Part - I

CENTRE FOR NEW ECONOMICS STUDIES

PHOTO ESSAY

Shramiks of Wazirpur



An alleyway in Wazirpur Industrial Area.

Shramiks of Wazirpur

Photos by Jignesh Mistry

Text by Tavleen Kaur and Apremeya Sudarshan

Wazirpur is one of 29 industrial areas spread across the National Capital Region. Not until the past 20 years, Wazirpur industrial area was barren land with hardly any inhabitants. The place has now become crowded with small-scale factories attracting a large population of migrants usually from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Bengal. Sprawled amongst the factories are '*jhuggis*' or slums the migrant workers call home. Some stay for 6 - 12 months, others bring their families and have lived in Wazirpur for the past decade. Here, they find work as household help, guards, or as labourers in the surrounding factories.

Most people in Wazirpur seek work at steel factories through middlemen. Those with connections can find good contractors who provide relatively fair offers. Others have to navigate by word of mouth for employment offers at less than ideal rates, with a cut of their salary going to middlemen. Most hardly make minimum wage, especially since jobs have become more scarce post-Covid. Once employed, workers must go through eight to twelve-hour shifts, six days a week dealing with heavy machinery. "If your mind wanders, you'll get hurt...it has happened to me" says an elderly factory worker. A stray piece of steel may hit someone, a machine may malfunction, causing a current to run through its operator, and it is not uncommon to find people with a severed hand or foot. First aid may be provided, but paid leave is a rarity.

Young workers hauling steel pots in a cycle rickshaw.



In most of these small-scale factories, workers press, cut and polish steel. Conditions of work are hazardous and many are susceptible to chronic breathing issues. In return, workers receive around Rs. 5000 to 8000 as wage for eight-hour shifts. Most insist on working overtime, pushing the duration of their shifts to twelve hours, adding an extra Rs.2000 to their salaries. Monthly rent for one small room for a family of 4 can be up to Rs. 3000, including electricity bills. Thus, paying a third of their salaries on rent with hardly any money left for additional expenses, let alone for hospital bills.

"They spend lakhs on machines but not 5 rupees to fix a plug..."

-Preeti, Factory Worker, Wazirpur Industrial Area



Workers covered in dust from polishing steel.



“I have heard of many companies turning a blind eye towards what happens inside their factories. That’s why, my relatives and family members are reluctant towards sending girls out to work in factories. Luckily, my workplace is nothing like that.” - Preeti, Factory Worker, Wazirpur Industrial Area.

Girls as young as 18 feel compelled to start work in these factories as a way to support their families. Women in these work spaces are often harassed, discriminated against and are seldom paid as much as their male counterparts. Compared to men, their wage after overtime adds up to only around Rs. 3000 to 7000. Though such working conditions for women are not uncommon, factory owners do make the attempt to avoid bad reputation. In a somewhat tight-knit community like Wazirpur, people learn of jobs and work conditions through gossip. If an owner has a bad reputation for exploiting their workers more than their competitors, hiring labour often becomes more difficult. Even anecdotes of people stopping work from time to time are not altogether absent. So most factory owners have set up CCTV cameras to ensure the safety of their women workers. Though exploited, they are not completely lacking in agency. Because of the presence of a relatively inclusive worker community, many people prefer being in Wazirpur as opposed to other industrial areas like Bawana, where many have mentioned feeling isolated.



A worker doing the final polish.

Despite the exploitative working conditions, many are sympathetic towards their employers. When referring to the lack of compensation from owners for a worker's injuries, a worker had said that, "Babu does what he can...". Workers often blame themselves for their injuries instead of holding their employers accountable for their working conditions. Some reimburse workers on their medical bills whilst cutting the same amount from their salary, but they are nonetheless grateful. Though working conditions may be awful, this narrative of 'false consciousness' is present throughout the working class of Wazirpur.



Workers packing pots at a steel workshop.



A Worker operates a power-press machine to shape steel containers



Workers pressing out steel plates to shape containers.



Crowds gather by floating vendors that flood the streets of Wazirpur industrial area. Amidst the clamour of industrial machinery, residents shop for their daily groceries.



Sheets of pressed steel to be towed away in cycle rikshaws.



Workers press, cut and polish steel to create tumblers, bowls and plates. Overlooking safety concerns, they operate polishing, rolling and cutting machines. Ironically, the plants are clustered around an eight-story structure that houses the Employee Provident Fund Organisation's office; though most workers lack both a provident fund and health insurance provided by the Employee State Insurance Corporation.



A worker sits next to a polishing machine.



Rolls of imported pressed steel laid out in an alley.

In the absence of support and safeguards by both, employers and the government, they work to earn and sustain their families, toiling day in and day out in hazardous environments with their health at risk. They have no choice but to keep working. Workers and their families bear a burden and unfortunately, the burden they face is one that seldom ends. Despite this, many seem to be optimistic about the future ahead.



Living structures in the industrial area.

WE WOULD LIKE TO SINCERELY ACKNOWLEDGE:

MUKTA NAIK, FELLOW, CENTRE FOR POLICY RESEARCH

**SUNIL KUMAR SINGH, ASSOCIATE RESEARCHER,
CENTRE FOR POLICY RESEARCH**

**DR. ASHOK KUMARI, RESEARCHER, INFORMAL WORKERS RIGHTS
ACTIVIST AND INDEPENDENT WRITER ON WOMEN'S ISSUES**

THE TEAM



Jignesh Mistry
Visual Storyboard lead, CNES



Tavleen Kaur
Research Assistant, CNES



Ruhi Nadkarni
Research Assistant, CNES



Apremeya Sudarshan
Intern, CNES