

Fighting Fires

Migrant Workers in Mumbai

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Migrant workers in one of Mumbai's most industrially dense areas with 3,500 small manufacturing and recycling units face a number of hazards, with fires being among the common ones. This article looks closely at the causes and aftermaths of these fires and notes how the workers cope with them even as their skills and knowledge prevent even bigger accidents.

Fires are not new to Mumbai. News reports suggest that 97 serious fire accidents were reported in Mumbai in 2019 and 84 in 2018 (Panigrahi 2020). In 2018, the Mumbai Fire Brigade received a total of 4,899 calls. Of these, 1,020 were of fires affecting residential buildings including high-rises, while commercial establishments had 386 incidents and slums had 544 (Upadhyay 2019). Despite this general increase in fire incidents and a consensus around widespread flouting of fire norms across the city, this article shows how fires affecting poorer neighbourhoods in the city continue to be viewed with suspicions of arson, rather than as result of the sheer lack of urban planning, migrant housing, and safe working conditions in these neighbourhoods. Migrant workers, employed in small industrial units in the city, are forced to take on the responsibility of keeping themselves safe from not only regular incidents of fire, but also other occupational risks that unsafe working and living conditions expose them to.

The article is based on an ongoing qualitative research project on risk and safety, being undertaken by the Aajeevika Bureau in Kurla (L-ward in Central Mumbai). The ward is among those with the lowest human development indicators in the city with low levels of sanitation, health and education (Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai 2010). The ward is also one of the densest given its industrial cluster of over 3,500 small manufacturing and recycling units. This includes not only metal works, but also waste sorting, garment manufacturing and packaging. The small-scale units are particularly attractive to migrant workers, as they double up as housing in the city. Workers come primarily from Uttar Pradesh, and the large majority of the working population of L-ward is Muslim. The units have an average of seven to eight workers who live and work in

cramped spaces with no fire exits and surrounded by hazardous chemicals and machines. At least two big fires in the neighbourhood over the last four years, leading to the deaths of 12 and two workers respectively, have brought to light the high-risk environment that prevails at the heart of Mumbai (*India Today* 2017, 2019).

The last big fire occurred on 27 December 2019, and the immediate response was of suspicion. How did the fire occur? Could there have been any hidden motivations for it? Who stood to gain from the fire? Was a claim to insurance involved? A range of observers, from the workers themselves to government officials, middle-class residents of the neighbourhood and observers from non-governmental organisations (NGOs), asked these questions. Our ground research in the aftermath of the fire with police and fire officials indicates that the fire started in a chemical boiler, which, given its hazardous nature, is not in itself surprising. Furthermore, it spread widely across at least 54 other units, completely paralysing work for the weeks that were to follow. This diminishes the likelihood of any possible gains from the fire for either employers or workers. Lastly, our research indicates that they had no access to formal private insurance. As they lie outside the purview of the Factories Act, 1948, given their small scale and low volume of workers, they have no official industrial licences. Those operating units with hazardous chemicals need to get special permissions. However, in the absence of any strict regulations or inspections and given the additional costs involved in getting and renewing licences, they ignore these requirements, forfeiting access to private insurance.

There is merit then in positing that the suspicions around the fires do not most often emerge from a particular incident, but from a longer history of unexplainable fires in industrial neighbourhoods in Mumbai. For instance, fires in the city's textile mills were a common feature in the 1990s and 2000s as mill owners sought a rationale for the closure of the mills and retrenchment of workers (Whitehead 2014). The fires were meant to circumvent labour legislation

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that disallowed mass retrenchment without prior permission of the state, which in itself depended on proving financial unviability of the mills (D'Monte 2005). During this period, Mumbai's real estate markets boomed, following the liberalisation of the economy, leading to Mumbai's emergence as a financial capital. In this context, even for financially profitable mills, selling the lands that the mills stood on became more attractive than running the mills (Finkelstein 2019). Similarly, fires in Mumbai's slums have been used by private developers and redevelopment authorities to circumvent politically contentious procedures of consensus and consent building around slum redevelopment (Sharma 2009). Slum dwellers have been particularly vocal in demanding *in situ* redevelopment and fires mandate that inhabitants evict their burned-down tenements with immediate effect and take residence in temporary allotments provided often at the peripheries of the city, away from their established sources of livelihood in the city.

In contrast to these episodes of what we term "property fires," the incidences in Kurla have had no property claims associated with them, and have also led to loss of life. There has not been any

insurance protection for life or property. In this context, these fires emerge as what we term "occupational fires." They arise from the particularities of hazardous work in metal recycling and manufacturing, and have also been common in landfills (Gidwani 2013). In hazardous spaces like these, low-intensity fires are expected to be even more frequent than official figures suggest. There have been two low-intensity fires in January and February 2020, post the big fire of 27 December 2019. Against this background of fires being intermittently linked with the work, our research has sought to gauge the perceptions of fire safety among those who work and inhabit these spaces: workers, employers, contractors, and helpers. How do they see these fires and the other risks that are an everyday part of the work they do?

Inherent Risk

Workers interviewed for our research saw fires and risks as inherent components of metal recycling and manufacturing work. Much of the metal being used in the production units is already used, and includes metal pipes and sheets acquired from demolition sites. These are cleaned with chemical acid,

cut and shaped according to the requirements of the new product. Machines are second-hand, often as old as 20 years, and tend to malfunction. Crush injuries of fingers are not unheard of. Cuts, bruises and burns are extremely common, and often render workers out of work for prolonged periods of time. A high level of skill and alertness is required to do the job and keep oneself safe in the process, workers conclude.

They lay great emphasis on learning, and an informal system of apprenticeship seems to anchor the safety endeavours in these units. Senior workers train new workers on how to be careful while working the machines. This is not skill training in a classroom or workshop, but learning on the job, with its own risks of trial and error. New workers migrate to the city, and learn from an *ustad* or senior worker. Senior workers lay emphasis on this training as the key to surviving the high-risk work environments of Kurla. "Helper" (being a helper) moulds a young migrant into a skilled worker. If the relationship between the trainer and the helper is good, the worker will remain safe, a worker concluded. Workers pride themselves on the depth and breadth of their knowledge.

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A worker of a lathe machine notes, “any metal thing can be made on this machine. I can literally take apart a motorcycle and make its every part on this machine.” They know their work inside out, and take pride in it. “Bas paper ke engineer nahin hai, baaki toh lohe mein sab ki PhD hai” (We might be lacking a formal degree in engineering, but we have doctoral level of knowledge of everything metal), says another worker. With no state or employer responsibility, workers are thus forced to take charge of their own safety. Workers, however, also disagree on some aspects of this assumption of responsibility, particularly on the question of repairing machines. Some workers contend that it is the workers’ own responsibility to fix the machines when they begin to malfunction or break down. They argue that as it is they who use these machines on an everyday level, and not the employer or an external mechanic, it is their responsibility to both be able to tell if a machine is “behaving oddly” and also to repair it. Others, however, regard employing *jugaad* (quick-fix, cheap) solutions to repair machines as potentially hazardous, and as leading to the accentuation of their already unsafe work.

Given the complex, open-ended and hazardous nature of metal work and the responsibility that it lays on the workers, the question poses itself: Why are there no state and institutional mechanisms for protecting them against workplace risks? Lorraine Daston (2016) in an article shows how the meanings of risk are not fixed and, in fact, shape decisions around what risks should be mitigated and who should be protected against them. Much of the public and media discourse around fires in migrant neighbourhoods tends to construct them as fundamentally unpreventable. Fire incidences are immediately linked to their “illegal” status, which completely shifts the blame of the fire to the residents themselves. While the Kurla fires did not receive as much coverage, one could see this debate play out in the media discussions in the aftermath of the fire in Delhi’s Anaj Mandi in November 2019 that led to the loss of 43 lives (Trivedi 2019). The logic of illegality-caused-fires portrays an incomplete picture, given that there is no contemporary mechanism

for these units to get access to a legal status. The latest Occupational Safety and Health code of the Ministry of Labour is limited to units employing 10 workers or more,¹ thereby itself excluding small-scale workers from the ambit of safety law and regulation. As mentioned earlier, small units like the one in Kurla are also not mandated to register under the Factories Act, which covers industrial units employing more than 100 workers. The only licence required for these units is one issued under the Maharashtra Shops and Establishment Act, and that has no legal provisions for the health and safety of the workers.

Out of Civic Purview

Migrant workers, in particular, are further illegalised by the removal of their work and living spaces from civic attention. The neighbourhood is left to its own, surrounded by fumes, electric overload and garbage accumulation, exposing the units to a larger tinderbox-like situation. A fire in one unit thus spreads fast and widely. Migrant workers are also made illegal by the de-legitimisation of their migration. “They shouldn’t come to the city,” some commentators noted in the aftermath of the Delhi incident. The state, by making them illegal, has put all the burden on migrant workers to both—justify their migration to work in the city, and to keep themselves safe as they undertake this work.

The state and public discourse has once in a while celebrated migrant work as entrepreneurial. The recycling industry has particularly been celebrated as a great service that workers perform for the circular economy. The state does not just need to legally recognise the work in terms of work hours, safety gear, inspections, etc. The void goes deeper. The state and society at large needs to also recognise their knowledge, their skills and their experience. For every fire that occurs, there are probably many that are avoided by the resourcefulness and commitment of these workers. Rather than building on their knowledge, the current policy environment for labour has instead fixated upon predictions of mass redundancy caused by automation in the “future of work.” For the workers in

these units, it is they themselves who operate the machines. They believe that they are smarter and more resourceful than the latter, and can make machines produce a variety of goods. They are not scared of a distant future when machines may take over their work totally. They are apprehensive about surviving the present, before the next fire comes to their doorstep.

NOTE

- 1 <https://prsindia.org/billtrack/occupational-safety-health-and-working-conditions-code-2019>.

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