

For a Sociology of India - III: Three years into the pandemic: What changed in Delhi's electronic bazaars

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Accepted for publication in Contributions to Indian Sociology

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Abstract

The initial impressions from Delhi's Lajpat Rai Market, Palika Bazaar and Nehru Place have been that they integrated into the digital economy as suppliers and service providers to e-commerce platforms during COVID times. The increasing use of digital payments to boost online sales, including social media marketing on Facebook and YouTube, has also brought many of them inside a banking system. As a result, physical bazaars are now less about informal face-to-face commerce and operate more as repair hubs and ancillaries to a platform economy.

I Introduction

After seeing visuals of a hurriedly declared lockdown, showing migrants walking for days on foot to get to their homes, and next to nothing done to support those absorbed in the sprawling informal economy, I now looked to constructing an image of the present. Returning to Lajpat Rai Market, Palika Bazaar and Nehru Place at the beginning of April 2022 in Delhi, it was nice to see a steady flow of people. In a way, at least for the marketplaces, I was entering a post-pandemic world. Seeing me with a face mask, a shopkeeper at Palika Bazaar commented, 'the government mandate on the mask has relaxed; it is for you to want to have it on'. Others commented on how they would have come up to me but were reticent on the count of the mask. The 'mask' had now become an object redundant in their eyes, a signifier of times better forgotten. I should have been less surprised by this amnesia as bazaar tonality has been about the present. Traders and street vendors direct their energy to what is unfolding before them—scanning every person entering the marketplace, trying to divert their attention to the shops and hoping to strike a successful transaction. Amid the heightened energy, pandemic-related questions were not very welcome. There were some nods here and there, and only gradually did the COVID-related coping strategies begin to be shared.

II WhatsApp mart

What had stood out in video game shops in Palika Bazaar was that they looked like warehouses, with many new consoles, such as of Nintendo Switch OLED and PlayStation 5, stacked in various corners of the shops. But now the quantity of brand-new consoles here had visibly increased. They are mostly sold online rather than as products to face-to-face consumers. A trader at the inner circle of Palika, Naveen, showed me his WhatsApp feed of group messages with his 1,500 business clients divided into customers, distributors and importers. He checked with the leading trader to see if it

made sense to continue the bargain with a particular consumer after he rejected the initial price based on his research of other online platforms and their pricing of products. Seeing that a specific online platform offered a lower price, he suspended the exchange midway and tried to lure the customer with other products.

The back and forth of WhatsApp messages with customers and distributors went on for the whole day. If not on WhatsApp, they were on Facebook and YouTube. Traders had Facebook pages where they uploaded photos of the new consoles in the shop. They either directly contacted regular customers or waited for their followers to show an interest in the listed products. They capitalised on contacts in Dubai with distributors who made trips to bring the latest consoles to the bazaars, which they stocked in their shops. The pandemic normalised the decline of face-to-face customers, which had started with the penetration of e-commerce sites in the last decade. But now more than ever, shops have become storerooms connecting the end consumer to affordable products and retailers with 'out of stock' items via texts. The animated conversation comparing prices gave the impression of a trading floor, only this time it was in the pit of a physical marketplace. Instead of computers and algorithms, text messages on WhatsApp could modify the market price.

III Virtual repairs

Before the pandemic, a few vendors were proficient with up-to-date technology, mainly hardware repair. Now, they are using technical skills to assist consumers virtually. With AnyDesk, for instance, they accessed customers' computers remotely and were able to install antivirus software, scan computers to remove viruses and help customers in resolving other software issues. At times, when the computer issues were unresolvable remotely or when the customers were unable to give remote access, street vendors went with their motorbikes to provide at-home services. Many of them used software such as WeTransfer to send JPEG files on gaming hacks and repair videos to customers. Of course, these technologies were available even before the pandemic, but only in the last few years have they also taken centre stage, at least for some street vendors, changing from mainly working with ad-hoc infrastructure to now computers and smartphones.

Mohit looked much more relaxed than in my previous interactions with him as a senior street vendor. Since I had last met him, in the summer of 2019, he had augmented his stock with a carton that held DVDs of games and software, a computer and a laptop that he kept on a first-floor balcony in one of the buildings in the marketplace. Another asset comprised a blue phone box with pen drives of software and games sold to interested customers. Mohit's business had climbed upward as he quickly learnt new skills and was highly adaptable to emerging consumer needs. Before the pandemic, he was dealing with face-to-face consumers, but now he has gotten used to giving step-by-step explanations of fixes on the phone to customers who could not be in the marketplace. Trying to capture the new type of stay-at-home consumers, some traders at Lajpat Rai Market uploaded repair videos on their YouTube channels. Customers used their services by calling them on the phone and mailing them their consoles and joysticks that the traders fixed and sent back.

IV Digital payments

A sharp rise in digital payments has been discernible in all three marketplaces over the past few years. It was uncommon for direct customers to use virtual pay in a shop at a time when people headed out of their homes to buy things from marketplaces. Most transactions were in cash but today Paytm is the preferred mode as it was one of the first unified payment interfaces (UPI) that traders deployed. In an unforeseen way, UPIs became a money-making opportunity. Traders exploited the possibility of exchanging cash for digital payment. An occasional consumer who

needed to make a quick digital payment and did not have a UPI had no alternative to using the traders' accounts to make the payment. In this way, UPI also ushered a money market where traders earned a commission either exchanging cash for digital money or vice versa.

The changes in the last five to six years had been cataclysmic. The demonetisation of 500- and 1,000-rupee notes in November 2016 had brought on the worst cash crunch as traders waited in long queues to get money from ATMs. Subsequently, traders moved towards a hybrid payment model of cash and digital payments to avoid relying on cash alone, which in an unexpected way made it easier for them to adapt to an online payment mode through the pandemic. Many of them had a cheap internet connection through telecommunication services like Jio and had got used to managing a large part of their transaction online. But traders also knew what leaving a digital footprint meant after being on digital platforms and were aware that their financial transactions could be tracked by banks and law enforcers.

V What is next for COVID studies?

The earlier account shows that many bazaar vendors were able to adapt to digital technologies through the pandemic. But new hierarchies are now visible based on skills and depending on who adapted better and who were more tied to traditional routes of securing employment. While a section of informal labour showed a comfort with new digital technologies, those whose jobs had to do with real people were severely affected. A good example is the shop assistants in Palika Bazaar who did not have technical skills and worked on a commission basis to attract consumers to shops. They were struggling to find an income during the first lockdown in 2020.

Vikash said that his savings got spent quickly and, as the marketplace remained shut, he had to look for other avenues of income. He found work as a daily labourer in the Paharganj area which was demanding—to load freight on trucks. Vikash did not develop any new technological skills during the pandemic as he realised that he did not have the aptitude or the resources for a 'stay-at-home' economy. Once Palika Bazaar opened, he returned to doing his previous work of convincing consumers, which he is pretty good at, to buy something from the shop and got a nominal commission on the sold item. He even managed to sell me a hand torch that I did not need. This was the story of several street vendors who were unskilled as far as the new technology was concerned. They made about ₹15,000 monthly by being on the lookout for prospective buyers and guiding them to shops, resigned to this condition. As one street vendor put it:

We are caught in a vicious circle, which there is no way of escaping. Our dreams and desires are contained within its boundaries. There is no point in thinking big. We neither have the kind of assets nor the educational qualifications to better our circumstances. We have to be happy doing our routine work here.

Many street vendors stayed home during the first lockdown and returned to the marketplace at the earliest, resuming their earlier jobs.

The scene playing out seems to me to be out of a dystopic novel: A digital corporation wants the population to use their products. The government supports it with a few key policies, a virus erupts, and traders and consumers have to turn to the new technology perforce. Now, bazaars are beginning to work as a subsidiary unit of e-commerce platforms, which is why face-to-face commerce is not the core. Instead, we see them acting as warehouses, online retail and repair markets. Many skilled actors gained from this transition financially; they adapted to the requirements of an online economy using both cash and digital payment methods and explored social media networks such as WhatsApp and Facebook to expand their clientele. But at the same

time, they do feel alienated from their labour. They are no longer guiding the retail economy but have become an appendage to e-commerce sites.

There are huge adjustments that physical bazaars have to make as they lose out much of the face-to-face sociality of marketplaces that were still a thing before the pandemic. Even big game shops in Palika Bazaar must share their space with clothing items, and gaming counters are now one-third of a shop overflowing with denim pants and dresses. Overall, the pandemic pushed towards e-commerce platforms and reduced face-to-face trade.

An area that will be crucial for present and future pandemic-related research is the increasing use of smartphones for business, which started before the pandemic and got fortified by it. Digital technologies have led to a convergence of informal economic actors—small-scale traders, gig economy drivers and delivery personnel—through social media, digital payment interfaces and e-commerce platforms. Smartphones provided income opportunities for a host of informal economy actors and, at the same time, shaped the social and economic fabric to take a virtual turn. Then, one can ask, will face-to-face exchange continue to be part of our urban economic sociality? Some traders and street vendors here predict the death of physical marketplaces by online commerce, arguing that the next generation would not bother about something like a bazaar. Yet, others were optimistic about repair work, considering where else could one repair motherboards. There was a sigh of relief on this count until someone pointed out that companies could soon begin to manufacture replaceable parts, making electronic bazaars entirely redundant.