

Life on the Margins: Migration, Identity, and Survival of Denotified Tribes in Delhi - With Special Focus on Gadia Lohars and Bawaria/Kanjar

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Abstract : *Denotified Tribes (DNTs) in India continue to be one of the most structurally excluded social groups, as a result of the long history of colonial criminalization, the present administrative invisibility and the fragilities of informal urban life. This paper studies transformations in livelihoods, identity negotiation, and survival practices of denotified and nomadic communities through migration to Delhi, employing documentary research, with particular focus on the Gadia Lohars and Bawaria/Kanjar communities. The analysis is largely based on government commissions' documentation and rights-based reports, revealing that the "urban opportunity" in Delhi is often a precarious pavement-side settlement, an unstable job, and regular eviction and harassment. The study suggests that identity is cultural and bureaucratic, as it is constructed and deconstructed by the documentation regime, the movement of classification between states, and the ordinary governance of informal practices. The paper calls for a rights-based approach to housing security, the portability of rights for migrants, consistent classification and enforcement of anti-discrimination policies, and a stress on historical stigma related to denotified identities as key elements for durable change.*

Keywords: *Denotified Tribes, Delhi, migration, identity, informal settlements, Gadia Lohar, Bawaria and Kanjar.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Delhi has always been a city of migration, attracting people from all over the country to work, find safety, and pursue social mobility. But for Denotified Tribes and related nomadic groups, urban migration often perpetuates the same mechanisms of exclusion in new forms. The transformation from a nomadic or nomadic-like existence to living at the side of the road, part-time work, and the lack of a continuous service system shows the city's absorption of labour and its refusal to be fully included. Delhi has been continuously attracting people from Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Haryana, and other parts of the country to meet the demands of the expanding labour markets in the NCR. Such migration is often portrayed in public discourse as an opportunity story or a city problem. But migration is not a story for either denotified or nomadic communities. It is more commonly recognized as a survival tactic developed in the context of dispossession and stigma, and then reworked in the present through various practices of exclusion in the city.

This paper explores the experiences of Denotified Tribes (DNTs) in Delhi in the context of migration, identity, and survival, with a specific focus on the Gadia Lohar and Bawaria/Kanjar communities. These communities' histories and occupations are unique. However, both are confronted with the same political situation: denotified identity that is widely linked – in historical and current social practices – with suspicion, “criminality”, or illegitimacy. Scholarly discussions have focused on the fact that denotification did not end social criminalisation; rather, it produced an afterlife of stigma that is reproduced through social discrimination and governance practices, particularly policing and welfare gatekeeping (Meena, 2024).

The paper is inspired by three interrelated questions. How does migration to Delhi change the economic and settlement strategies of these communities, including occupational identity? Second, how does identity get negotiated when a community is culturally distinct but administratively unstable, especially if classification varies from state to state or

isn't consistently recorded? Third, what do documentary sources tell about the processes of production, maintenance, and legitimization of marginality in the city?

The importance of the emphasis on Gadia Lohars is that there is relatively significant documentary evidence available on the settlement patterns and housing rights issues of Gadia Lohars in the city of Delhi. In 2019, Housing and Land Rights Network (HLRN) prepared a report, Mapping the Marginalised: Delhi's Gadia Lohar Community (HLRN, 2019), which delivers a unique and comprehensive evidence-based analysis of the condition of the Gadia Lohar community, their eviction risks and their barriers to access government entitlements based on surveys in 58 settlements across Delhi. The focus on Bawaria/Kanjar communities is likewise relevant but hard in a documentary technique. There are few source sets accessible for community level reporting in Delhi. The study is particularly dependent on commission-level and scholarly recording of challenged categorisation, since the same group may be categorised unequally between states, with implications for access to rights when individuals move (Meena, 2024).

The main thesis of this paper is that the denotification of marginality in Delhi isn't only due to poverty. It arises as a result of four factors: (a) insecure access to land and shelter, (b) a welfare state that is geared towards stable residence and recognisable addresses, (c) transition to new occupations under economic pressure, and (d) a persistent social stigma that makes denotified mobility look shady. Rational responses to exclusion – pavement settlement, informal work, flexible movement – are also the conditions that make communities vulnerable to eviction, harassment and denial of entitlements. The margins are not coincidental in this regard. They are a product of the city's legal, spatial and belonging regimes.

2. METHODOLOGY

The research technique used in this study is documentary research. Documentary research is a qualitative research strategy that uses written, published, and archival data to interpret social circumstances. In the case of denotified and nomadic communities, which are often undercounted, misclassified or absent from conventional quantitative sources, documentary research is suitable. In these situations, policy documents, commission reports, rights-based surveys, and investigative journalism often provide the most compelling and publicly available evidence of lived reality.

The study's focus on governance and classification also fits well with documentary approaches. Policy papers tend to spell out eligibility restrictions, administrative recognition and category conflicts more fully than regular surveys. Documents are therefore not neutral representations but social artefacts that both represent and produce reality.

2.2 Data sources and selection

The analysis is based on a purposive sample of documents, with special attention to documents that are directly relevant to denotified/nomadic communities, focusing on Delhi or Delhi NCR, giving detailed evidence on housing, eviction, livelihoods, and entitlements, and presenting an authoritative framing of policy recommendations and academic study of denotification and contested identity.

The analysis is based mainly on:

Documentation on rights and housing of Gadia Lohars in Delhi, particularly the Housing and Land Rights Network [HLRN] report on surveys conducted in 58 settlements (HLRN, 2019).

- Commission and policy documents pertaining to DNT/NT/SNT conditions and recommendations, especially the National Commission report related to the Idate Commission (Government of India, 2018).

- Secondary documentary summaries and curated library entries that present important facts and metadata (e.g., PARI library resource page on the HLRN report).

Literature on DNT historical trajectories, contested identities and categorisation (e.g., Meena, 2024).

Delhi-specific material is limited; focus on studies relevant to Bawaria livelihoods and identity; use with caution (e.g., research on Van Bawaria in Rajasthan on livelihood patterns and the context of food insecurity).

2.3 Analytic approach

Documents were analysed thematically in five areas: 1) Migration pathways and settlement geographies in Delhi, 2) Livelihood strategies and occupational transition, 3) Identity formation, stigma and criminalisation narratives, 4)

Documentation, classification, and welfare eligibility mechanisms, and 5) Housing insecurity, eviction, and the governance concerning informality dynamics.

The goal was to discover patterns and trace how macro-level policies and narratives manifest at the micro-level as constraints. The analysis also examines the difference in the visibility of the two communities in documentary evidence: housing rights documentation is more visible for Gadia Lohars, whereas contested categorisation and stigma are more visible for Bawaria/Kanjar.

2.4 LIMITATIONS

Structural biases could be captured in documentary sources, particularly when created by state agencies or systems that have historically excluded or marginalised the populations they document. To overcome this, when possible, claims are triangulated across a range of document genres, and categories and “official” descriptions are analysed as objects of study rather than as truths.

Limitations are significant. Participatory and ethnographic research is not a substitute for documentary research, which can miss the voices of the least documented and everyday meaning-making in an intra-community diversity. Further, there is limited settlement-level information available for Bawaria/Kanjar in the available set of documents, at least for the city of Delhi. The paper, therefore, focuses on the inferences that can be made with caution from the commission-level analysis and the scholarly literature, particularly the structural issue of inconsistent classification, without overconfident assertions about community movements in Delhi.

3. Denotification and Its Afterlives

3.1 From “criminal tribes” to denotified communities

The denotified Tribes are those communities that were registered under the colonial Criminal Tribes Act 1871, which was aimed at building up entire populations as criminals and put them under surveillance, restriction and forced settlement. Denotification occurred post-independence, but the legal process did not remove the social connotations of criminalisation. The label was enforced not only through the law but also through strong stigma and administrative practices, which influenced perceptions and the management of these communities.

Modern scholarship conceptualizes denotification as incomplete, as DNT communities still face criminalization in everyday policing, profiling and in the persistence of suspicion in social interactions as well as institutions (Meena, 2024). From this perspective, denotification did not stop criminalisation; rather, it changed it, from explicit in the criminal law to more implicit in governance and society.

3.2 Structural marginalisation and commission documentation

National commission reports are particularly important papers, as they summarise data and evidence on DNT exclusion by area. The Government of India report on the Idade Commission states that the DNT/NT/SNT populations are among the most marginalised since they are dispersed and have less access to welfare and other services (Government of India, 2018). These findings also reveal the link between mobility, lack of stable home and welfare restrictions making access to entitlements fundamentally difficult.

What the commission documents reveal is that marginality is not an accident but a systemic phenomenon. Historically, communities forced into mobility and those lacking stable land access are twice marginalised: not only because they are not part of the economy, but also because they are not part of the welfare system, which assumes stable settlement.

3.3 The city as a filter of belonging

These conditions are further aggravated in Delhi, where access to shelter, schools, ration benefits, and urban rehabilitation services is often contingent on settlement surveys, eligibility lists, and criteria that favour long-term, fixed residence. The paper was unable to extract the official Delhi slum rehabilitation policy statement due to current tool limitations, but the documentary record of HLRN shows that the key to accessing slum rehabilitation and entitlements is to recognise and document the settlement. Unrecognised settlements and inconsistent address proof become direct barriers to rehabilitation and entitlements (HLRN, 2019).

Delhi is nothing but a location that allows the migrants to come, a place that pretends to discriminate against them in terms of levels of belonging. Denotified groups work through the filters of stigma, regulation of informalities and state-to-state contestations over caste categorisation.

4. Delhi, Migration, and the Production of Margins

4.1 Migration as a strategy under constraint

Migration of DNT communities to Delhi must be seen as a tactical solution to multi-faceted constraints, for example, poverty in rural areas, lack of land holdings, discrimination, and livelihood opportunities. But the city provides only temporary jobs and unstable housing. The shift from rural or semi-rural modes of mobility to urban life on the pavement side is not a shift from “tradition” to “modernity,” but from one precarious regime to another.

4.2 Informality as governance, not just absence

Informality in Delhi is often described as a lack of legal tenure, of services, of planning. However, evidence indicates that informality is also a form of governance: it enables the city to use cheap labour, yet it also grants the power to remove, displace, or deny rights through legal and administrative vagueness. For communities such as Gadia Lohars that rely on the roadside visibility and space for ironwork, informal settlement is an economic no-brainer but a political no-go (Tehrani, 2015).

4.3 Marginality as the intersection of space, stigma and paperwork

Three mechanisms are found again in documentary sources: 1. Space: Communities are made visible through settlement on the edges of the pavement and the edges of the road, which can be an invitation to the economy and to enforcement. 2. Stigma: Denotified identification is also related with suspicion affecting the treatment they get from police, employers and neighbours (Meena, 2024). 3. Paperwork: Access to rehabilitation and rights is dependent on paperwork and recognition, which is constantly impeded by movement and evictions (HLRN, 2019).

These mechanisms create what might be called “permanent temporariness”—decades of living in the house without rights.

5. Case Study I - Gadia Lohars in Delhi

5.1 Community's history and the ways it has been formed by its surroundings.

The documentary record describes the Gadia Lohars as a traditionally nomadic group involved in ironwork and toolmaking. In Delhi NCR, they reside in various slums and on the roadside, where they can sell and repair iron tools and utensils, often near markets and roads.

HLRN's Mapping the Marginalised report is key, as it directly captures settlement patterns and conditions. The report is based on surveys and focus group discussions in 58 Gadia Lohar settlements in Delhi, between February-March 2019, which sought to enumerate settlements, document living conditions, and assess access to housing and entitlements (HLRN, 2019). The report is said to be filling a significant data gap and defines the community as “extremely marginalized and impoverished” (Rural India Online, 2019).

According to the PARI library entry, Gadia Lohars in Delhi reside in more than 90 informal settlements and are constantly at risk of forced eviction, while their livelihoods depend on iron tool-making and selling (Rural India Online, 2019). It also points out that the settlements are not recent and that “informal” does not imply “recent”.

5.2 Livelihoods: Ironwork, visibility, and vulnerability

Forms of Gadia Lohar activity do not depend upon settlement location. The livelihood of the roadside settlement is based on a pedestrian customer base, close proximity to road transport, and the availability of scrap or raw materials. The home-work fusion is also a survival strategy: housing is not only a location to live but also an infrastructural base for production and trade.

There are several reasons, including relocation, lack of safe space for livelihood activities and limited access to government livelihood support programs, putting pressure on livelihoods (HLRN, 2019). Space means consumers, it means productive capability. This is not just removal from shelter but also removal from livelihood infrastructure.

5.3 Sufficient housing situation and essential services.

The research from HLRN describes serious problems in the living circumstances of the households examined, many of whom have no permanent residence and no access to sewage, water and weather protection (HLRN, 2019). These conditions are experienced differently by different genders. Poor sanitation and privacy increase the risk for women and girls; displacement interferes with school attendance and health services.

It is also documented that the built fabric itself is not stable; households may invest in incremental improvements to their dwellings, but because of the threat of demolition, they have a rational preference for the temporary over the durable, even if the temporary is harmful and unsafe.

5.4 Forced eviction as a recurring structure

A key finding in the documentary record is that eviction is not the exception. It's just the way it is. The witnessing of forced evictions and displacements has been reported in most communities by HLRN. The recurrent demolitions have harmed the stability of the settlements (HLRN, 2019). This drains not just monetary resources and social networks, but also undermines the capacity to independently manage and supervise school enrolment and rationed benefits. The demolition of Gadia Lohar homes has been continually documented by rights groups in recent years, including in September 2022 after reports by the Housing and Land Rights Network (HLRN) on the demolition of Gadia Lohar houses around Shyam Lal College in Shahdara (Housing and Land Rights Network, 2022). This paper's main findings are drawn from the 2019 report, which in turn confirms the structural condition underlying the findings.

5.5 Identity, organisation and political demands

Community mobilisation efforts include the formation of collectives, e.g., the Gadia Lohar Sangharsh Samiti, initiated by civil society actors to voice concerns about housing, education, and evictions (Rural India Online, 2019). This is because it not only marks a shift from stigmatizing, but also from a political agency perspective. Denotified identity is the basis for rights claims and collective bargaining.

In this context, the Gadia Lohar case is a case in point of how identity can be effectively redefined from a suspicion to a feeling of historical injustice that needs redress. The implicit display of how community organisation interacts with the production of documentation – surveys, mapping and reporting are tools of recognition.

5.6 Documentation and entitlements: Bureaucracy of survival

HLRN's analysis shows how access to entitlements is affected by documentation impediments and the lack of acknowledgement of settlements. It refers to the difficulty in obtaining and accessing caste certificates, problems with address evidence and portability of documents in the context of frequent evictions (HLRN, 2019). While households have identification papers, entitlements can be denied due to address mismatches or because the household is not listed by address in the official surveys.

This creates a loop. If there is no recognition the vulnerability to eviction is higher. If there is no documentation the eligibility for rehabilitation is lesser which increases vulnerability. In the light of documentary evidence, this loop is likely to be one of the elementary processes of marginality in the urban administration of denotified communities.

6. Case Study II – Bawaria/Kanjar in Delhi: Contested Classification and Stigma

6.1 The process of documentation and the necessity of methodological care

While documents for the Bawaria/Kanjar communities are less visible than for Gadia Lohars in Delhi, both communities are less well documented in terms of housing rights than other communities. This is meaningful in and of itself. Documentary visibility tends to follow mapping by civil society, mobilisation by law, or public debate. Communities can be “invisible” because marginality is less visible, less normalised, and less documented.

This limits the analysis to what can be verified with documentary evidence – the structural issue of contested categorisation across states, the historical stigma attached to denotified identities, and how they manifest in entitlement barriers in migration situations.

6.2 The failure to effectively categorise and make content portable.

The most obvious documentation-based observations are that both the Bawaria and Kanjar communities are classified differently by region. The Bawaria can be scheduled caste in the state of Rajasthan, but not in Delhi, and the Kanjars can be classified differently in various states and be treated as DNT in Delhi (Meena, 2024). These are not just technicalities but represent the difference between people being able to obtain a caste certificate and thereby access reservations, scholarships, and targeted welfare schemes.

Portability is an important consideration for migrants. If a person moves to Delhi with documentation that fits one state's classification system, they might not be able to "translate" it into Delhi's classification system. This leaves migrants a kind of bureaucratic limbo, where they are visible to systems of suspicion (policing, informal surveillance) but not to systems of welfare and rights (Jha & Chakrabarty, 2025).

6.3 Stigma and suspicion in urban settings

Denotified stigma may act as an interpretative lens via which communities are viewed. Researchers have stressed the continuity of "criminal tribe" discourses and their continued social impacts (Meena, 2024). In an urban setting, this stigma can be compounded by the existing issues of informal settlement and casual labour, which could lead to greater risk of harassment, profiling and rejection of rental accommodation or regular work.

While not fully bibliographically described in the extract here, a documentary text on contested identities among denotified groups reinforces the idea of identity as contested and socially constructed, produced through state listing procedures and social discrimination (Mishra, Meena, et al., 2022). This is a useful way of speaking of Bawaria/Kanjar identity as always being negotiated, in opposition to administrative categories and stigma, in Delhi.

6.4. Survival and livelihood strategies: the extent to which documentary evidence can (and cannot) back them up

The research does not make any significant statements regarding living patterns in Delhi without a complete settlement survey for this source set of Bawaria/Kanjar, which is absent. However, the background on the livelihood vulnerability and food insecurity of Van Bawaria populations under marginal conditions is contextualised in the Rajasthan research (B. Mahapatra et al., 2023). The findings indicated that vulnerability is not only a matter of income but also of nutrition, stability and access to services of persons.

The thrust of the Delhi facing claim, supported by indirect commission evidence and scholarly literature, is that the range of livelihood possibilities shrinks in the face of contested classification and ongoing stigma. Individuals are forced into informal/precarious employment and remain subject to governance that punishes informality.

7. Comparative Study: Migration, Identity, and Survival Across the Two Cases

7.1 The common structure: permanent temporariness

In both cases, denotified marginality can be interpreted as a system of "permanent temporariness" in Delhi. Settlements can be inhabited for decades, yet people can still be evicted without secure tenure or access to basic services (HLRN, 2019). Bawaria/Kanjar migrants might dwell in multiple regions of the city and are subject to conflicting categorisations and stigma that hinder their access to rights and stable integration (Meena, 2024).

In both cases, the city welcomes presence but not belonging. Men and women are allowed to live as long as they can be taken away.

7.2 Recognising one's identity through cultural practices and official rank

The Gadia Lohar case underlines identity associated with work (occupation), community history and organisation, and ironwork and tool-making. However, it is also documented that identity is also bureaucratically managed: caste certificates, address proof and settlement listing either create space for rights or block their way (HLRN, 2019).

The focus of this discussion is on Bawaria/Kanjar and on documenting here that identity is unanchored by bureaucratic boundaries between states. Migration contexts create barriers as the same name can be mapped to different categories (SC, DNT or others) depending on jurisdiction (Meena, 2024). Here, identity is defined by "who you are" and "what category the state assigns you," and that category can change as you move.

7.3 The analysis focuses on the governance of informal behaviours as a means of exclusion.

In both instances, informality is at the heart of the matter. Roadside settlement and public space work – vital livelihoods – are considered ‘encroachment’ and are subject to demolition and eviction (HLRN, 2019). Informality can be more widespread among Bawaria/Kanjar, but the combination of stigma and bureaucratic exclusion has similar consequences: precarious jobs and precarious living conditions.

This is not just the fault of urban planning, but a method of governance that provides flexibility for the removal and denial of documentary records, leading to structural exclusion.

Survival strategies that may be called “informal” or “unplanned” are sensible ways of dealing with constraints from the viewpoint of the communities. Customers live close to roads, which helps sustain customer access. If you relocate a lot, you may have to move if evicted or harassed. Community networks compensate for institutional marginalisation. Based on documentary research, these strategies are seen as coping strategies, not cultural deficiencies.

8. Discussion: What the Documentary Record Reveals about “Rights” in Delhi

8.1 Housing as the hinge right.

Throughout the document record, housing security is a fulcrum right: other rights are not secure without it. The report by HLRN documents the impacts of eviction on education, health, livelihoods, and documentation, as well as the harms that flow from these impacts (HLRN, 2019). Increasing demolitions in subsequent years only reinforce the notion that protection is fragile rather than durable (Housing and Land Rights Network, 2022).

8.2 Gatekeeping institutions and the regimes of documentation.

The documentary record is treated throughout as a gate-keeping institution, rather than as a neutral administrative procedure. Address evidence is exclusionary in the case of nomadic and eviction-prone populations. Caste certification is precarious and difficult to link across state systems in communities with disputed classifications (Meena, 2024). This turns welfare into a conditional privilege and a privilege not to be enjoyed by most of those who are not stabilised.

8.3 Stigma as governance technology

Stigma, as a governance technology, influences discretion. For the denotified, an official, a police officer, a landlord, or an employer who attributes a denotified identity to a person is not only treating that person as a person of a different class, but is also limiting their life perspectives: less housing, more informal labour, more coercion. Colonial criminalisation becomes part of typical interactions and institutional practices (Meena, 2024).

8.4 Maps as interventions in the politics of visibility.

How documentation can also be a tool towards justice is illustrated in HLRN’s mapping and surveying efforts. Civil society documentation involves listing settlements and documenting conditions, thereby challenging invisibility. PARI’s entry further reinforces the idea that being counted is a political state of rights claims (Rural India Online, 2019).

9. CONCLUSION

The study is documentary research that brings to light the relationship between migration, stigma, documentation regimes and governance of informal space on the margins of life in Delhi for denotified communities. The documentary evidence for Gadia Lohars reveals a “settlement geography” that has been in place for a long time but is yet precarious, as livelihoods depend on road visibility and eviction is a recurring practice rather than an exception (HLRN, 2019). The document record reveals the contested and fluid classification of the Bawaria/Kanjar communities across jurisdictions, the creation of barriers to entitlements, and elevated vulnerability following migration (Meena, 2024).

In both scenarios, identity is constructed as cultural and bureaucratic. Lived through occupation, community history, and social networks, but also mediated through certificates, proofs of address, and official recognition. The strategies for survival – mobility, informal employment, street settlement – may be rational responses to exclusion, but they also involve communities in enforcement and denial. The paper concludes that inclusion policies are not based solely on welfare policies but also on rights-based housing security, entitlement portability, consistent classification, and active policies to combat stigma and discrimination, which continue to shape the lives of the denotified.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS

There are several policy implications from the documentary evidence. These recommendations are offered as a series of interpretations of the documentary record, and not as a comprehensive blueprint for reform.

10.1 Right to housing security and protection from forced eviction

Given the adverse impacts of frequent relocation, durable tenure solutions, especially in-situ if possible, should be prioritised, and effective measures should be enforced to protect Gadia Lohars from demolition without rehabilitation (HLRN, 2019).

10.2 Livelihood-sensitive rehabilitation models

Rehabilitation should incorporate a workspace or vending/production areas for communities where home is a place of work. Otherwise, relocation is an economic displacement. The case study findings from the documentary record of Gadia Lohar clearly indicate that the probability of rehabilitation without livelihood design is unlikely to succeed (HLRN, 2019). The portability of address requirements is also likely. of scattered and mobile populations is emphasised through commission-level documentation (Government of India, 2018). Proof-of-residence procedures and transferable entitlements for governance in Delhi should be more flexible and should not penalise movement due to evictions or work circumstances.

The documentary evidence that Bawaria and Kanjar classification varies across states is a pointer to the need for urgent reform to make this classification clearer, consistent and rights-protective, and for providing mechanisms for recognising migrants' entitlements without pushing them into a bureaucratic limbo, as highlighted by Meena (2024).

But stigma is invisible and very powerful; policy should not only cover welfare distribution but also address anti-discrimination in policing, housing markets, and service provision. Addressing the stigma of colonial criminalisation may be necessary for administrative reform to have any impact.

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