

Public Arguments – 4



Tata Institute of Social Sciences
Patna Centre

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Migrant Labour in Manufacturing in the Megacity

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Publication: August, 2017

Published by:

Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Patna Centre
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Patna – 801502 (Bihar) INDIA
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Printed by:

Kala Mudran
B/80, Narain Niwas, Buddha Colony
Patna - 800008 (Bihar) INDIA

This publication is part of a lecture series on 'migration'. We express our gratitude to Takshila Educational Society for supporting the lecture series.

“Dilli Door Hai”: Migrant Labour in Manufacturing in the Megacity

Mouleshri Vyas ¹

Abstract

The twenty first century is marked by increasing precarity of labour in countries across the world. With increasing urbanisation in countries like India, studies of migrant labour engaged in various types of work highlight the nature of urban transformation and its meaning for the urban poor.

In this paper, I examine the nature of work and conditions of migrant labour in the stainless steel utensil manufacturing industry located in the Wazirpur Industrial Area in the National Capital Region of Delhi. It is based on a study conducted through a trade union in the area in 2013- 2014. I find that informalization of manufacturing process and the workers in this industry is marked by absence of Decent Work conditions; this makes everyday life and work difficult for them. The structure of manufacturing here reinforces fragmentation of labour, as well as its transient relationship with the city. The fact that workers live as well as work in this area results in further restricting their interaction with other areas in the city, and embedding their lives in the tenuous social, economic, physical and political space of the industrial area. These complexities play out as dynamics in efforts at labour organising in this industry, of which this study provides a glimpse.

Introduction

The twenty first century is marked by increasing precarity of labour in countries across the world. Migration of the poor from rural and urban areas into large cities due to distress in their place of origin, and their conversion into informal labour in the manufacturing and tertiary sectors in the city is the sub text of this precarity. With increasing urbanisation in countries like India, studies of migrant labour engaged in various types of work highlight the nature of urban transformation and its meaning for the urban poor. Informalisation of the manufacturing process, most evident in present times across various industries in India, makes labour pay the heaviest price. Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME) in India contribute nearly 8 percent of the country's GDP, 45 percent of the manufacturing output and 40 percent of the exports. They provide the largest share of employment after agriculture (GoI, 2014). However,

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the state of labour in unregulated manufacturing units is deplorable. They are registered under the Factories Act of 1948, and hence bound by rules governing work, working conditions and social security for the labour. But the nature of the state machinery that largely responds sporadically and selectively to worker issues, adds to the overall indifference and low importance accorded to informal labour in the country. The flexible labour market has resulted in swelling of the ranks of informal labour in such formal factory set-ups.

In this paper,² I examine the nature of work and conditions of migrant labour in the stainless steel utensil manufacturing industry located in the Wazirpur Industrial Area in the National Capital Region of Delhi. It is based on a study conducted through a trade union in the area in 2013- 2014. Our entry into the area was facilitated by activists of the GRMES. While intermittent conversations with the leader of the GRMES spanned a period of several months, the interviews with workers were conducted over a period of two months in 2013. Primary data about work and lives in the industry was obtained through individual and group interviews, while the community profile was prepared through discussions with key informants. During the course of the study, the research assistant supported the ongoing work of GRMES; we were able to lend some support to a strike launched by them. We introduced GRMES to the New Trade Union Initiative, a federation of several hundred worker organisations in the informal economy from across the country; it is a relationship that is developing. At the time of writing the paper, the information about the collective was updated.

I begin with a description of the area. This provides a physical context for the work and lives of migrants labouring in the utensil manufacturing industry. The second section outlines the nature of the manufacturing process; section three details the profile of some of the workers.

I. Wazipur Industrial Area

Time stands still. From Dickensian England to present day Delhi, via several decades of urban development, nothing seems to have changed in the Wazirpur Industrial Area in the National Capital Region (NCR) of Delhi – at least not for the better.

² This paper is based on a study undertaken as part of a research cluster of the International Centre for Development and Decent Work. The original and complete paper is: Dickensian England in Twenty-first century Delhi- Without Great Expectations: Informal Labour Organising in the Manufacturing Sector in Crossing the Divide, Precarious Work and the Future of Labour, Edward Webster, Akua O. Britwum and Sharit Bhowmik (Eds.), 2017, University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, South Africa.

The following description of the area (Dogra, 1989) could have been written yesterday:

The imposing roadside mansions, including a luxury restaurant, on the stretch of Delhi's ever-busy Ring Road around the Shalimar Bagh bus stop give the impression of prosperity. Turn to the road towards the railway crossing and you will see shop after shop of glittering steel utensils. This is Wazirpur, a big centre of steel utensil manufacture. Move into one of the roadside lanes, however, and you will come face-to-face with the stark reality of a huge, sprawling industrial slum.

Here there are huge piles of iron and steel scrap (or scrap-like sheets) and cart-pullers carrying these sheets on their ramshackle carts. And there are the sheds where these sheets undergo numerous industrial processes before emerging as the glittering steel utensils that decorate the shops. There are children with their bodies and faces blackened in the process of polishing the utensils. Women inhale toxic fumes as they work with acidic solutions. And if it is one of those bad days which are becoming quite frequent, one may also see a profusely bleeding worker, the victim of an industrial accident, being rushed to one of the medical shops that pass as nursing homes. (p.1801)

It is possible to construct the history of the area through secondary sources and narratives of some residents. Wazirpur Industrial Area (WIA), a hub of small industries, is one among the 32 industrial areas in the region and located in the north of the Delhi National Capital Region (NCR). It was developed in 1966 under the second master plan for Delhi and is spread over an area of 210 acres. Though initially designed for plastic, hosiery and electronic industries, today steel utensil units overwhelmingly crowd the area. Other units like wool dyeing, copper wire drawing have also sprung up. In total there are about 2,000 units, though 80 per cent of them are nameless, existing only as plot numbers in papers (sic). Barely 20 per cent are registered. These ghost units thrive on the most vulnerable migrant labourers... - mostly from the very poor areas of northern India. The units are generally small and the owner also acts as the manager. Often crowded into buildings, sometimes a single building houses 8-12 units. About 60,000 workers work in these factories, either living within the factory premises, or as squatters within WIA (Singh, 2001, p.1944). Maintaining such areas as a 'degenerated periphery' serves the interests of the capitalists (Kundu, 2003, p. 3530).

Residents recount the trajectory of growth and significant changes that have taken place in the area. Anand, who leads GRMES, points out much of the

present labour in the factories comes from the families that settled here in the 1970s when they were being set up and was augmented by later migrants from these very states. When owners of industrial plots sold some portions of their plots, the size of the industrial units was reduced; this fragmentation of plots resulted in an increase in the number of industries in the area. During the riots of 1984 in which Sikhs were targeted, some of the owners migrated to other places in Delhi and some abandoned their units completely. After this phase the industries here also saw new ownership and a shift from hosiery to manufacturing of utensils.



Source: <http://www.mapsofindia.com/delhi/wazirpur-industrial-area.html#>

Yakub, who has lived in the area for thirty years, adds that with steel utensil manufacturing being new to this area, many workers who found it difficult to work in the industry, left the area, and trained workers from other parts of the country who had worked in this industry came to work here. Those who were trained workers or machine operators (Karigar) in hosiery manufacturing, and decided to stay on in the area, got demoted and became helpers. The decision about moving out of the area was for some workers, linked to the status of their housing. Those who had by that time purchased and settled down in small shanties in Wazirpur stayed back and adjust to the change, or searched for work in other industrial areas. The others who had no base in Delhi traveled where the hosiery manufacturing industry took them.

As an area of residence, it was only in the late 1980s that the situation

improved, with more secure shelters being constructed, though the inadequacy of sanitation facilities persists even today. About the year 2000, the study circle started by Anand triggered a positive change in people's attitude to their children's education. In 2007, one of the residents of the area was elected to the municipal corporation; with his election, the harassment of local shopkeepers by the authorities stopped.

WIA is known for the manufacture of stainless steel utensils. In the initial phase of the steel utensil manufacturing industry in Wazirpur all the processes were not undertaken in this area. Today are about 1000 small factory units out of which 600-650 manufacture steel utensils. Each unit has 40-50 workers, but in some units there are more than a hundred workers. More than 100 units are of syringe moulding and plastic related work while others are hotels, restaurants, car showrooms, chain, and hosiery and other related works. All the labourers are migrants from various states in the country. Other than steel manufacturing, men in the area are employed as security guards, drivers, rickshaw pullers, handcart pullers, and in head loading.

Most of the workers are tenants here and share a room and the rent of about INR 1500-2000 per month. Water and electricity facilities are available, but sanitation and solid waste management facilities are inadequate, resulting in water overflowing into the streets. Health conditions of workers are poor because of twelve-hour working days, congested surroundings, polluted environment, and lack of health facilities. Two or three major, and eight to ten minor accidents occur each day, with death of four or five workers every year due to accidents. The impact of the work and surroundings on the health of the workers has also been detailed by Singh (2001) who paints a bleak picture.

II. The steel utensil manufacturing process: Decent Work?

As one walks through the pocket of Wazirpur Industrial Area where the steel manufacturing units are concentrated, it is possible to spot the beginning and end of the manufacturing process: steel slabs are wheeled into the area on wooden carts that are pushed by men; finished utensils are visible in semi-open spaces, being packed and readied for sending out of the area. All the stages of the process take place inside small factory-like units that are poorly lit, unpainted, and may have one to five visible workers operating the machines, or standing near the furnace – faces blackened with dust and heat, and an apron to show for protection from the machinery. The utensil manufacturing process comprises grinding, hot-rolling, squeezing, cooling machine, acid-circle-cutting, pressing, making utensils, polishing, packaging,

and transportation on hand carts to the market. It is the hot rolling and cold rolling that are most risky and can result in fatal injuries for the workers. A brief outline of this part of the manufacturing process is indicative of the underlying risks and the fact that, "The capacity of humans to control the labor process...prime means whereby production may be controlled not by the direct producer but by the owners and representatives of capital" (Braverman, 133).

The hot and cold rolling are key steps in the manufacturing process. A steel sheet with width of 10 inch is converted into a 70 inch sheet after being pressed in a hot rolling machine. After the hot rolling, the sheet goes through cold rolling. The cold rolling process is even more hazardous for the worker as the temperature of heating the sheet is lower and the worker can get injured due to breaking of the sheet while it passes through the rollers. Hot rolling machine units work day and night without a break, the reason being the high cost of increasing the temperature in the furnace; restarting the machine after cooling would add to the cost. Hence the workers in the hot rolling unit are forced to work overtime to prevent losses and wage cuts. In cold rolling, on a hot furnace powered by gas, two helpers are deputed, who work on a six hour shift each. The helpers take rest for half an hour and then do the second shift of 6 hours. They are paid less than the machine operators. In cold rolling, machine mistris (mechanics) work for 4 hours and the helpers for 6 hours at a stretch. The machine workers have a choice of whether or not to work overtime and the factory does not necessarily work without a break. The helpers in cold and hot rolling have a similar job and they keep standing through the day, but hot rolling is more difficult as they have to forcefully complete twelve-hour shifts. Helpers earn about INR 8500 per month and furnace operators, about INR 9000. In cold as well as hot rolling as the workers start ageing prematurely; the roller machine operator or mistri after reaching the peak of his career, when he is about 45, (the monthly salary of a mistri is INR 10,000) gets demoted to the level of a helper as he does not have the strength to do heavy work. The resultant lower salary impacts the family at a time when his children are either striving for higher education or thinking of getting married. This is the story of most workers who work beyond twenty or twenty five years.

When examined within the framework of Decent Work, a concept launched by the ILO in 1999, the situation of workers in the WIA fails to measure up to it. The four pillars of Decent Work viz. employment creation, social protection, rights at work, and social dialogue with gender equality as a cross-cutting objective, are important yardsticks for assessment of workers' lives. (ILO). The sections that follow establish the fact that work in the steel utensil manufacturing

industry in enterprises that are unregulated and poorly regulated, retains the labour in non-decent conditions.

III. Workers' lives

This section outlines the work and lives of migrants in Wazirpur through the discussions that took place with the following workers: Aniket, Jayesh, Mohanlal, Yasin, Chintamani, Shobha, Zubeda, Ashima, and Anandi, the latter four being women. A brief background of each of the workers is provided; the situation in the village, their concerns with land and subsistence lay out the reasons for migration to the city. It builds the picture of their family's social and economic condition, resource and skill base, and hence, their entry into this industry and their dependence on these jobs.

Aniket is 25 years old. He works at cutting of steel sheets for manufacturing of utensils. He is from Kanauj district in Uttar Pradesh. Aniket dropped out after high school. His family lost their land due to indebtedness resulting from his father's alcohol addiction. He thinks that if they had land, he may not have had to migrate to Delhi. In the village he was working at a sweetmeat shop first as a helper and then as a cook. He belongs to the Halwai (rajput) caste and that is how he started to do this work. He came to Wazirpur industrial area two years ago; he changed one employer since then, as he was asked to leave due to surplus staff. He has close ties with his village and goes home at least twice a year.

Jayesh is 16 years old and engaged in acid spraying work. He too is from Kanauj district in Uttar Pradesh. He dropped out of school while in the fifth. His family is large, with six siblings and his parents, and sustains through agriculture. Only two of his siblings are studying; they have been able to go to private school and hence have a better quality education. He seems abashed by the fact that his father has studied more than him, and makes a telling comment about the state of public education saying, "My father says that in their times there was hope that education will be of some use in the long run and the teachers in the government schools were good. Now he believes that private school education is expensive and studying in government schools is no good; and it is better to find some work and not waste time on studies. But if we had enough resources all the children could have got good education."

Mukh Lal, 32 years old, is a hot roller machine operator. He is from Uttar Pradesh and lives with his wife and two children in Delhi, where he arrived at the age of 15 to find work. His family, comprising his parents, four brothers and their families, owns very less agricultural land in the village, which though

irrigated, is insufficient for their needs. He does not know the exact size of the land owned by the family. With his brothers migrating to Delhi, his parents cultivate the land.

Yasin, 26 years old, is from Uttar Pradesh too, and works at the polishing unit. He came to Wazirpur about five years ago. His family in the village comprises twelve members: his parents, six male children (including him) and his four sisters. His family owns ten bigha land, on which they cultivate sugarcane, rice and wheat. The land and its current productivity being insufficient to feed a large family, he had to migrate for work.³

Shobha, 17 years old, is from Mahoba in Madhya Pradesh. She left school when she was in the third standard as she was needed to look after her younger brother; her father was unwell and mother had to look after him in hospital. Her brother was subsequently diagnosed with a mental illness and required constant care. So she continued to stay at home while her parents went out to work. They are nine siblings, of which two brothers and one sister go to school. Two sisters are married and the others are working to supplement the family income. Her father is a mason and mother works as his helper; they are able to find work for just 15 to 20 days in a month. Shobha's father migrated to Delhi from Mahoba about thirty years ago. Their small patch of land in the village has been given to their relatives on share cropping basis. Since the land is very small they decided not to work on it as the returns would have been very low; hence her father's decision to migrate. Most of her relatives have migrated. Since her father decided to stay on in Delhi he was able to construct his own single room jhuggi (tenement).

Zubeda Khaton, 30 years old, is from Katihar district of Bihar. Her family has no agricultural land in the village; they only have 5 kattha⁴ land on which their house is built. She came to Delhi with her husband of 15 years, a year ago. Both she and her husband worked as agricultural labour on other people's fields for a daily wage of Rs. 100 per day. She worked under the NREGS⁵ from 9 am to 5 pm, but says she did not get more than ten days of work under this scheme in a year; she would stretch this over twenty days as she was unable to work eight hours a day, because she had to look after her children, and take up

³ Two bighas make an acre.

⁴ Twenty kattha make a bigha

⁵ The National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) is an employment guarantee programme that provides 100 days of work to those who demand it in rural areas. It is the largest public works programme in the world.

work that gave her the wages in the evening. In the village her husband earned a wage of INR 150 per day, but he was able to get work only four days in the week. They had a BPL (Below Poverty Line) ration (essential commodities) card in the village from which they procured 25 kg foodgrains and 5 litres of kerosene oil each month; vegetables and rice were provided by villagers for whom they worked. They took a risk in forsaking this benefit when they came to the city, where they are dependent on ration from the open market. They have three sons, whose education is one of the motivations for their migration to the city.

Ashima, 35 years old, works as a helper in utensil packing. She is from from Itawah, in the Mainpur district of Uttar Pradesh. She left school after the 7th standard, when she got married. She and her husband came to Delhi a few years after their marriage with the help of a villager who worked in Wazirpur. She has been working in the utensil manufacturing factories for eleven years. Her husband works as a helper in construction work. They do not have any land in the village; both worked as agricultural labour in the village; but the money was not enough to sustain the family when they had children. In the village the only work they could find was in the construction sector. They had two daughters when they were in the village; to escape paucity of work and torture of the in-laws for not having a son, they came to Delhi. Her father-in-law and younger brother-in-law work as masons in the village, but the work is not regular so they are also not able to earn well.

Anandi, 32 years old, works as helper in a steel utensil packing unit. She is from the Badayun district of Uttar Pradesh. She migrated to Delhi with her parents when she was six years old. Her parents who ran a tea and refreshment stall in Wazirpur now run a shop for daily needs. She went to school and dropped out after the 10th standard. She was married off at the age of 17 and has three daughters and two sons. After her first two daughters and one son she had decided to go for a 'family planning operation' but was pressurized against doing so by her in-laws who wanted one more grandson. When her husband died she came to her mother's house with three children; the two sons were kept by her mother- in- law.

Chintamani, 53 years old, is from Gorakhpur in Uttar Pradesh. He is a former mistri in a cold-rolling unit. At present he works as a watchman in a steel utensil manufacturing unit. After passing the 10th standard, he started looking for work around the village. He came to Delhi in 1975 when he was unable to find a job there. He started working in cold-rolling unit as a helper. Within a few months he started working as furnace operator at a salary of Rs.175 per

month and in a few years became a mistri (main operator) of a cold rolling unit. When he left this work five years ago his remuneration for a shift of 12 hours was INR 6400 per month. After that he took up the job of a watchman in the same factory. As he is growing old he cannot do work that is physically more demanding; the factory owner trusts him as he has been working there for a long time. As a watchman, he earns INR10000 per month for a 12-hour shift. For at least five or six days a month he works a double shift. Initially, whenever he visited his village, he told everyone that he drove a taxi in Delhi; he knew they would look down upon labour in a factory. He says that even now, most boys who work in factories here, tell similar stories when they visit their own villages. During the initial phase of his working life his family was in the village; so he could save a lot of money. His family owns four acres of agricultural land in the village. After his family joined him in Delhi, his brothers continued to cultivate the land. He sends them his share of INR 5000-6000 during each cultivation season to keep alive his rightful ownership of the land.

IV. Discussion

It is evident that small land holdings, or landlessness has driven most of these workers to migrate to the city. Large family size also seems to be significant in affecting access to education. The women came to Delhi with their parents or husbands. Lack of livelihoods in the village, as well as ineffectiveness of the NREGS, emerge as factors that led to migration.

Some of the migrants found jobs in this industry through a friend from the village, or distant relative. In one instance, an uncle was a contractor in a polishing unit and took the nephew into this work. He provided him food and a place to stay (at the workplace) for the initial period of five months. In some instances, people found work for themselves. It emerges that in certain units, a worker who started as a helper could learn specific skills on-the-job and move to the next level as mistri. At least two of the women talk about safe places for women to work – Shobha gave up waste picking to work at the factory, as it 'was not considered good' for a woman to be out on the streets picking up scrap. The apparently easy availability of metal scrap in the area seems to have brought children and adults into waste picking, to augment the family income. Zubeda indicates that her husband is suspicious of her whereabouts; however, he approves of the work place where she sits with other women to apply chalk on the utensils.

All stages of the manufacturing process are fraught with risk for the worker;

Aniket pointed to the absence of any safety gear. He works at sheet cutting. Mahesh says that acid spraying results in stomach ailments. He finds his stomach bloated every evening. However, workers do not absent themselves from work for long even if they are injured, as they fear losing their job. Yasin who works at the polishing unit says that his hands and palms are swollen; however, he is not complaining as he knows he is not the only one. Shobha, who works at a polishing unit says that their hands get cut from the sharp edges of the uncut utensils. There is a social division of work: women do not work at machines; Shobha was reprimanded once when she tried to handle a machine. Zubeda narrated an incident of sexual harassment at her workplace, where a man made a video of one of the women while she was working and circulated it among others. When it reached her son, she was asked to stay at home and disallowed from going to work. After a month, economic necessity prevailed and she was allowed to go back to work. Preeti, who works at the packaging unit, was the only person who said that the workplace is safe, as is the work. The highest risk seems to be at the rolling machines – cold and hot, where a sheet being put into a furnace can slide back rapidly and cut the worker in the abdomen. Physical and social risks seem to be commonplace in this industry; for the women, it is more the latter that they have to deal with on an everyday basis.

Wages vary across the nature of work, hours, as well as the weight and size of utensils. One of the workers said there is 'no concept of minimum wages' as the market rate of steel determines the processing charges for steel utensils. Most workers across units have twelve hour working days. In the hot rolling units, workers take turns at the machine, in order to cool off. So they spend some hours away from the machine, which are counted as working hours. Shobha, at the polishing unit gets INR 3000 for twelve hours of work; Ashima, at utensil packing gets INR 4000 per month. She has to use a pay-and-use public toilet as there is no facility for women. Preeti, at the packaging unit, works from 10 am – 9 pm. Her lunch break is not counted as part of work hours. Her monthly salary is INR 4000; with payment for overtime work, she takes home INR 7000. She is aware of the minimum wage issue, and has participated in a strike for wage hike at the factory. Triloki, who claims to have not received minimum wages his entire working life, pointed out, "The condition of the labour can be assessed from the fact that a majority of them have continued working at a constant wage rate for over a decade."

Living arrangements are organized with a certain logic. Yasin said, "Mostly people from one village or type of work stay together. In many quarters around

my shanty, people working in factory in one shift (day/night) stay together. Sometimes workers of night and day shift stay together so that the work of cooking and fetching ration can be divided easily... I do not think finding a place to live in Wazirpur is difficult as only labourers like us live in this area, with or without the family." In fact, for a family, it may be difficult to pay the entire monthly rent of about INR 1500 and Zubeda said that she may have to return to the village with her children if things do not improve financially for them.

Ashima's husband drinks but she explains, "He never abuses us and also works at home. I tell him to behave himself as it is very difficult to find living space in Delhi and if we are thrown out it will be difficult to find a safe place as this. We found a place in the inside street as we have two daughters and also the houses around us accommodate families only, and the houses where only male labourers live alone are a little farther and our street is also more hidden than other areas so it is good. You may find it strange but these things have to be thought before taking a house. We never changed our house from here despite problem of water and electricity." They use a public toilet and women make it sure that they go before dawn as the walls of the toilets are broken and then through the day they only access the toilets if they are in a group as men peep through the broken walls. Ashima's house has a bare look; the roof leaks in the monsoons as they are on the first floor. They use the same room to bathe.

Health problems emanating from the nature of work abound. Aniket had fallen ill due to the dust from steel cutting. Both he and Yasin said that they prefer to visit a private hospital in times of ill-health. Aniket takes loans from friends when he needs to; this is how friends help each other. Ashima is not aware of social security as entitlement. She questioned why women should get ESI when their work is not hazardous. She too takes medicines from private medical practitioners. She thinks that unions can be of help with addressing harsh problems; but for routine issues, only the government can help. Preeti, who is more aware of entitlements than others, has also demanded ESI from her employer. She gets a widow pension of INR 4500 every quarter. She uses her father's ration card to get provisions.

Future aspirations of the workers are clearly articulated. Mahesh hopes for less hazardous work, with more stability. He finds that it is more difficult to settle down in Delhi now, as the government is harsher. Mohanlal has bought a jhuggi five months ago and paid INR 1,00,000 for it. Shobha does not see herself doing this work for long; she does not like it, and thinks that an office job would be more respectable. Male co-workers joke that the women are

cleaning utensils at work too, as they do at home. However, Shobha says that at work, it is part of the production process, while when she does the same work at home, it is not even recognized as work. Ashima wishes that her daughters get married on time, as the kind of education that they are able to give them, will not enable them to get good work. Once they get married, they can work in a factory if their respective husbands want them to, but she is not going to send her daughters to the factory. Preeti would like to join and work with a union, though not at present, as she does not have time. Once her daughters grow up, she would be able to. Triloki, who has worked here the longest, is satisfied that he has done well for his family. He purchased a 25 sq. yard plot in Shalimar Bagh in the city on which he has constructed a house, where he lives with his wife and four children. He has also got a flat from the government as part of resettlement in another industrial area in lieu of a shanty he owned there.

The fragmentation of labour affects workers' connection with each other. The Babbage principle, related to division of labour in industrial settings, holds true in this industry. It states:

In so far as the labour process may be dissociated, it may be separated into elements, some of which are simpler than others and each of which is simpler than the whole. Translated into market terms, this means that the labor power capable of performing the process may be purchased more cheaply as dissociated elements than as a capacity integrated in a single worker (Braverman 1974: 57).

The labour process in the utensil manufacturing industry, outlined earlier, fragments the workplace and the workers, making the task of forging a collective identity extremely challenging.

The sense of community along regional lines and work categories affects the potential for bonding among workers. The strong regional aspect to workers' sense of community and identity, and the caste to which they belong, are likely to have led to conditions of distress in their villages, and hence encouraged migration to the city. Migrants from particular regions may also be found predominantly in certain types of work. For example, the Mahobias come from the Mahoba district in the Bundelkhand region of Uttar Pradesh; they are engaged in construction work. Some workers think that the Mahobia people have not changed much with time; they still sport the same attire which signifies them to be Mahobia, and the entire family works as construction labourers. The Bundelkhand region is directly connected by train to Delhi,

facilitating migration to this city. The women from this community are helpers in construction work with their husbands, and are also domestic workers; most of the men also prefer to work as security guards. The scheduled castes (the term used for historically disadvantaged castes that are listed in the first schedule of the Indian Constitution) in Bundelkhand villages were more oppressed and they were the ones more likely to migrate. In fact, those who have done well are still oppressed when they go back to their villages. However, it is now likely that even upper-caste people come to the city to work due to fragmentation of land among big families and the need to earn extra for sustenance. As another example, migrants from Jharkhand mostly work as rickshaw pullers and factory workers. They are relatively more educated than Mahobia or Bundelkhandi people and migrated in order to escape abject poverty in the villages. Satisfied with being able to feed themselves and their families in the city, they are not motivated to join protests and unions. Lastly, many of the supervisors are from Haryana. They consider the job of a supervisor more dignified than that of a worker who operates the machines. Interestingly, however, when they feel extra pressure from the owners, they become sympathetic towards the workers and also seek support from the labour unions.

While workers survive with support of these networks, community and identity also create fault lines across sections of workers that need to be bridged in order to build class consciousness. Circles of interaction and familiarity are important in this regard. Birbal Yadav says that many of the factory workers do not know other workers doing the same work in similar factories within the industrial area. Their social circle is limited to the people with whom they work or stay. Beyond that, the workers only know each other if they offer names, or organise Saraswati puja or Durga puja together.

Seasonal migration has a bearing on the supply of labour at different times of the year. Most of the Mahobias own land in their villages, and they return there to live from October to March. Many workers stay in Delhi only in the summer; during that time not many festivals are celebrated that require people to come together. For important festivals such as Chhath Puja or Diwali, workers prefer to go home. Around March, when workers return to the city, there is surplus labour, which may result in replacement of workers who are seen as troublemakers. In this way, the seasonal migration and its scale pose challenges to labour organising.

Bonds among workers are formed through various activities. Workers from Jharkhand stay together in close-knit groups as do other workers, but they stand out as they survive in minimal conditions and without their families so

that they can save most of their earnings. Mahobias spend money on gambling and also take loans from each other to gamble. The Dalit workers from Jharkhand may not have an ESI card or even make the effort to obtain one, but when it comes to Hindu rituals they spend thousands of rupees. One can see workers bonding over card games on the street corners on Wednesday, which is a weekly day off; they interact with each other only for a short time and then return to their more regular circles. Mostly the groups of workers who come together to play cards are not friends but strategic partners who sit together for a game and sometimes even gamble for money, a pack of tobacco, a bottle of liquor or a non-vegetarian dinner. Some people such as labour contractors give loans to workers to gamble. After a game, fights sometimes break out on the streets, so card playing results in rivalries as well as bonding.

Because women are engaged in types of work that are not machine-related, they seem to be at the fringes of the manufacturing process and of collectivising. As yet, there is no concerted thought about involving them in the worker collective. One GRMES member said:

We have women workers as well working in the factory but I have no idea about how women can have a union . . . Once we are able to fight . . . the benefits will trickle down to them as well. Why should we put them through the pain of fighting outside the house? It is enough that they are able to come out and work and also look after their families.

Vinay, another worker, stated:

The industrial work is such that in the past many years technology has made day-to-day things easier for people, but the technology in the utensil factory has not been worker friendly. It has put more pressure on the worker. Every change in technology has put pressure on workers to work with more speed and of course more strength, and women have not been able to cope with this.

The foregoing discussion underscores the fact that informal labour organising is a mammoth task. Union building in this sector is likely to go through many highs and lows before it stabilises. For an initiative such as GRMES, lack of financial support and resources makes this an uphill and frustrating task. A successful way forward depends on the collective's ability to build strong alliances with union federations and to enhance its resource base so that organising can be systematically approached.

In the national capital, the lives of these workers are far removed from the social, economic and political energy that imbues those of the other classes; the Delhi of the latter population is very different from that of labour in this sector of manufacturing. That said, it must be emphasised that social protection measures from the State are necessary for this section of labour. Whether it is for affordable housing and basic amenities, food security, work and employment security, or access to health and education, it is the availability of these services and their being of decent quality, that are both crucial factors for reproduction of labour, and achievement of development goals.

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