EXPERIENCE, ASPIRATIONS AND ORGANISATION: POLITICS OF INFORMAL WORKERS IN POST-1990s INDIA

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KOYEL LAHIRI

CENTRE FOR STUDIES IN SOCIAL SCIENCES, CALCUTTA

R-1 BAISHNABGHATA-PATULI TOWNSHIP

KOLKATA, WEST BENGAL – 700094

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Certified that the Thesis entitled

'Experience, aspirations and organisation: Politics of informal workers in post-1990s India' submitted by me for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Arts at Jadavpur University is based upon my work carried out under the Supervision of **Associate Professor Dr. Priya Sangameswaran and Professor Dr. Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya.** And that neither this thesis nor any part of it has been submitted before for any degree or diploma anywhere/ elsewhere.

Countersigned by the Supervisors

Candidate:

Associate Professor Dr. Priya Sangameswaran

Dated: 28.01.2023

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Professor Dr. Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya

Dated: 28/1/2023

ABSTRACT

This dissertation looks at informal workers and their politics at two sites of work in post-1990s India: the hawker in the city and industrial workers at factories, using an ethnographic fieldwork methodology supported by secondary literature. It argues that there are three big shortcomings in literature pertaining to informal workers' politics: insufficient data due to lack of primary studies, a pro-union framing that exists by default within labour studies, and a limited understanding of an informal worker's agency. Aligning with a critique of the default pro-union framing, this dissertation argues that the form of organising is, arguably, not important in itself. Rather, it needs to be evaluated on the basis of whether its membership and intended membership believes that their needs are being adequately addressed in the short as well as the long term, and the impact that it creates on state and capital. Drawing from fieldwork, I argue that given the forms of precarity that mark hawking and factory work in the post-Fordist world of work, the union/association form, at this moment, has more to offer to hawkers, than factory workers. Further, drawing from the two case studies, this research contends that while over-arching self-contained narratives of informal workers' politics might be challenging or impossible to arrive at -given the huge diversity that exists in work structures and conditions-what is nonetheless indicated is a need to understand anew what we recognise as politics and/or legitimate forms of struggle, and the goals and motivations of resistance. The latter, I argue, draws from a worker's three-fold relationship with work, i.e., at the site of work, and with the social and selfhood aspects of work. The dissertation highlights the diverse ways in which agency is exercised by workers within this threefold relationship and the manner in which desire and discontent can be located across all three registers.

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Chapter One

Introduction

This dissertation looks at informal workers in India and their politics at two sites of work: the hawker in the city and industrial workers at factories, using an ethnographic fieldwork methodology supported by secondary literature. The two sites and workers are connected by contemporary processes of urbanisation, industrialisation and global processes of informalisation of work. Despite growing evidence to the contrary, there continue to be assumptions that informal workers do not organise/cannot organise. I trace this assumption through these contrasting studies of two kinds of informal workers-one in the informal sector, the other in the formal sector- and address gaps in the existing literature on the contemporary politics of hawkers and factory workers. Hawkers are studied via the National Hawker Federation (NHF) and its membership in Kolkata and Delhi. The NHF, formed in 2000-01, with 1188 member unions, [1] claims to be the largest federation of hawkers in India, with a presence in 28 states. Factory workers are studied in Delhi National Capital Region (NCR) in the industrial areas of Okhla, Faridabad, Gurgaon and Industrial Model Town Manesar (IMT Manesar).

Locating the two cases within relevant literature specific to their domains, this dissertation addresses questions of how hawkers and informal factory workers organise and why, addressing issues of representation, inclusions, exclusions and relevance of form vis a vis the principal features of precarity associated with the occupation in question.

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[1] See the website of the National Hawker Federation located at http://www.nationalhawkerfederation.com/ (accessed August 18, 2021)

This dissertation goes on to argue that it is impossible to arrive at a nuanced understanding of informal workers' politics without first recognising that a worker's relationship with work is infinitely more complex than is frequently acknowledged. It argues that workers' politics stem from a three-fold relationship with and experience of work. That is, first, a worker's experiences at the site of work and the dynamics therein, such as everyday experiences at work, interactions with the state, employers, other workers, the political economy their work is embedded in, etc. Second, a worker's relationship with work and its social aspect. For example, the work one does provides more than financial sustenance to an individual; it also helps secure social position and respect, affecting the livelihood choices workers make. This in turn affects their political demands and articulations. Third, the relationship of work and selfhood, marked by experiences of leisure, free time, drudgery, repetition and pain, and desires, hopes and ambitions cherished. The line dividing the social from selfhood, as used in this dissertation, is a soft one, for though both weave into each other, the dissertation still wishes to mark the distinction between them such that selfhood refers to inner worlds, i.e., inwardly focussed, where the principal actant is the worker, with their external social context reasonably muted. The social, on the other hand, refers to a more 'outward' focus where the principal actant is still the worker, but the worker embedded in their social context.

It argues that which of these three aspects one stresses is important, and that progressive movements sometimes focus on the material and worksite related issues over the other two, thereby limiting political imaginations, asks, and struggles. Additionally, this can impact the degree to which progressive movements resonate with their intended membership, with implications for workers' struggles and the political heft of labour on shaping the world of work. Equally, the question of how progressive movements respond to this threefold relationship and factor it into their politics also matters because when political space is ceded by progressive workers' movements, the vacuum left can be occupied by right wing ideological

and reactionary forces and movements. Scholars have noted how this has previously played out in Europe (Bhowmik 2012, 104) and in India (Bhowmik 2012, 121) when trade unions have been unable to adequately fulfil their roles in representing working class interests.

This introductory chapter begins by looking back on how and why this research was pursued, recalling the shifts in perspective that have occurred in course of this project. This is followed by a discussion on literature on informal workers' politics and the interventions and contributions of this dissertation towards those debates. Distilling three broad gaps within the literature, the chapter then states the research questions of this dissertation and closes with an outline of the chapters to follow.

Origins

Introductions are a return to beginnings, and the beginnings of this project precede December 2013, when I officially registered for my PhD studies. The project was motivated by two events on the ground, occurring within a few months of each other in 2012, in Kolkata, West Bengal, and Industrial Model Town Manesar, Haryana, respectively. These in turn, followed closely on the heels of the global surge in political activism and protests that one saw in 2010-2011 with what came to be called the Arab Spring in the Middle-East and North Africa, and the Occupy protests that began in North America and then spread to several countries across the globe. The wave of protests had generated a palpable sense of optimism and possibility amongst many; there was a feeling in the air that anything could happen.

The first event was a series of evictions of hawkers from various parts of the city of Kolkata, West Bengal, that had occurred in March 2012. Living and studying near some of these eviction sites along the high-traffic, multi-lane Eastern Metropolitan Bypass, I had witnessed the immediate aftermath of the evictions, and the militant resistance by the hawkers refusing to

cede space. They had re-occupied their sites immediately, and carried on demonstrations and protests daily, organised under the Hawker Sangram Committee (HSC), an independent organisation of hawkers' unions in Kolkata. These protests continued until May 2012 when they received an assurance from the state government that there would be no more evictions, and those evicted would be rehabilitated either at the same locations, or at mutually agreed upon alternatives. Most of the evicted hawkers were back at their usual hawking spots by this time. I was deeply interested in this militant fightback by the HSC, and the fact that it had managed to return hawkers to the sites they had been evicted from. What is more, the HSC had a history of winning such battles and successfully advocating for its membership, having emerged out of a previous city-wide eviction drive in 1996 titled Operation Sunshine. This, coupled with the fact that the HSC had managed to retain a meaningful presence and membership on the ground, felt quite remarkable in the terrain of hawker politics (I discuss this in greater detail in Chapter Four). I thus converted my engagement with the evictions of 2012 into my MPhil research project, which I concluded in 2013, inquiring into the politics of the HSC. In this period, the various state memberships of the NHF, of which the HSC was a co-founder, had also been fighting local battles in cities across India, and the NHF had been amping up its campaign for a law for hawkers along with other hawkers' movements in India. The Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Bill, 2012, was passed by Lok Sabha in September 2013, Rajya Sabha in February 2014, and received the President's assent in March 2014 thus becoming the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014. The enactment of the law was seen as a moment of triumph after a long struggle by hawkers' organisations. Hawkers' organisations in India, all of which had been campaigning for a protective law for hawkers, were a testimony to the fact that informal sector workers can and do organise. Given that hawkers are a numerous and visible section of the informal sector, and the many unknowns that continue to remain about

the politics of informal sector workers, particularly when they organise formally, including the challenges of building durable, long-term movements, I decided to extend my inquiry into the NHF's movements and politics in Delhi, Kolkata (represented by the HSC), and its India-wide federation level functioning.

The second event was the Maruti workers' struggle in IMT Manesar, and the factory riot and uprising that took place on 18 July 2012. I recreate the sequence of events from Nowak's (2021) detailed study of the movement. [2] In June 2011, workers at Maruti's Manesar plant had registered an independent union called the Maruti Suzuki Employees Union. The management responded by sacking the office bearers and encouraging workers to join the management-controlled union at Maruti's older Gurgaon plant, the Maruti Udyog Kamgar Union. In response, in an apparently spontaneous move, workers occupied the factory, as opposed to what Nowak (2021, 137) notes is the more traditional form of strike where workers would gather outside the factory, and struck work for two weeks. A temporary compromise reached between workers and management ended the occupation and strike, but the issue simmered on as the union's registration was denied and the management again victimised workers involved in the process, leading to a lockout in August 2011, which continued for a month. Maruti workers continued protesting outside the gates, and workers of nearby factories also struck work demanding union recognition and increase in wages. [3] The lockout ended with workers agreeing to sign a good conduct agreement that the management was insisting upon. However, in October 2011, the management claimed that 1100 contract workers had participated in the protests during the lockout and barred their entry. Workers retaliated with another occupation and strike, and neighbouring factories went on solidarity strikes and occupations with them again. Four thousand policemen were sent inside the Manesar factory to end the occupation.

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[2] This is drawn from pages 135-143 of Nowak (2021).
[3] (John 2012,19) referred in Nowak (2021, 138).

Turbulence continued until March 2012 when the union was finally registered, under the name of Maruti Suzuki Workers Union. Confrontations between union and management continued after that too, with workers being sacked on various pretexts. Things came to a head with the riotous incident on 18 July 2012, which saw violent confrontations on the factory floors, leading to the death of an injured General Manager of Human Resources in a fire of disputed origin. While Gurgaon had seen several other incidents of industrial unrest, particularly from 2005 onwards, what had stood out in this case was the unprecedented and repeated joint actions by formal and informal workers in the occupations and strikes, the duration and intensity of the struggle, and the solidarity it had generated, not only amongst fellow workers in neighbouring factories but also among the local community. Nowak (2021, 143) reports nearly seventy percent of the workers were from Haryana, which likely contributed to this support. This was not unusual to this area at that time, and hiring practices within the automobile sector indicated that almost half the workforce tended to be local (Monaco 2017, 127). The protests had spread like a live ember across Manesar, and the management and the state realised it needed to make an example of the 'punishment' meted out to the workers. It fired 546 permanent workers and 1800 contract workers. A hundred and forty-eight workers, including office bearers of the Maruti Suzuki Workers Union, permanent workers, contract workers, apprentices and trainees, were arrested and slapped with criminal cases. It was treated as more than an incident of industrial unrest. 'After Manesar, be prepared for more urban class wars' declared a news headline, with the by-line reading 'The violence at Maruti's Manesar plant is not a one-off, but a symptom of the likely radicalisation of India's urban workers' (Jagannathan 2012). The extreme reaction of the state and Maruti management in the aftermath of the incident indicated they were aware of this likelihood and the potentially larger political implications of this particular incident. It was likely for a similar reason that the Maruti workers' struggle caught the attention of and energised the Left within India and workers' movements across the globe

who sent in solidarity messages. In general, people recognised the significance of the fact that in this instance, formal and informal factory workers, who had historically tended to act separately in India, were both initially a part of the stir. This had radical implications for factory workers' politics, where informal workers had generally been thought of as reluctant to unionise or protest and had tended to be marginalised by formal workers. This prompted the choice of the focus on the informal factory worker in the formal sector for my second case. As I go on to mention in Chapter Two, I sought and did not actually find a union which organised formal and informal workers together. Thus, instead of following a union and its membership, I ended up choosing to do a more dispersed study of factory workers in four locations within Delhi NCR 'anchoring' myself to a collective that publishes a workers' newspaper called Faridabad Majdoor Samachar (FMS). Interactions with the FMS towards the end of 2015 also alerted me to an apparent contradiction that existed within factory workers' politics-on the one hand most mainstream academic and activist accounts framed these recent, frequent incidents of industrial unrest as stemming from the violation of the right to unionise. However, for reasons explained in Chapter Five, a majority of the workforce-composed of informal workers-also seemingly had no interest in unions, at best, and outright antipathy towards them at worst. How was one to understand informal factory workers' politics if one were to decentre the desire for unions from the framing of their protests and mobilisations? This ended up becoming the focus of my approach to my second case study, the findings of which ended up changing the way I was looking at informal workers' politics for this project.

To say that a lot had changed on the ground between 2013, when I started this project, and 2019, when I was able to start pulling the chapters together in earnest, would be an understatement. For one thing, the research began towards the fag end of the Indian National Congress-led United Progressive Alliance II regime. Most of the fieldwork was done when the Narendra Modi helmed Bharatiya Janata Party-led National Democratic Alliance was elected

to power for its first term in 2014, and most of the writing was carried out when it was re-elected to power in 2019. Between 2014 and 2019, India has been sliding rapidly towards extreme right-wing politics. Around February 2020 I saw on my Facebook timeline a beautiful piece of artwork, by a student from Bengaluru, that depicted various ordinary individuals sewing together the rips in the fabric of Indian society, ravaged by the communal violence in the North East Delhi riots in the same month. As India collectively took in the events of the preceding few months (including the huge nation-wide wave of protests against the CAA-NRC-NPR, [4] state violence and clampdown on them, state violence against students at Jamia Milia Islamia, Aligarh Muslim University, and right-wing mob violence against Jawaharlal Nehru University students), I was sat before my laptop trying to draft my chapters. A month later, the World Health Organisation was to declare the novel coronavirus (Covid-19) outbreak a global pandemic. The lockdowns to follow ushered in a unique historic moment which held a mirror up to society and self, allowing for a rare, shared moment in which large sections of the global population was able to witness itself and the world it had helped create. Work and working lives were upended, and the most vulnerable were left to fend for themselves and suffered the worst outcomes of the situation. That piece of artwork felt deeply meaningful and symbolic, and made me wonder about the relevance of my research project in the times we were living in.

This research had been prompted by the tangible hope for the future of workers' politics and labour movements represented by the HSC's militant struggles on the streets of Kolkata and the militant struggle by the Maruti Manesar workers which had spread to other factories. However, material conditions and political situations on the ground got grimmer and grimmer every consequent year. The Left seemed glaringly absent in the political space. The

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[4] Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019 (CAA), National Register of Citizens (NRC) and National Population Register (NPR).

parliamentary Left retained no power, and seemingly, no influence with an odd exception or two, such as in the electoral resurgence of the Left represented by the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation in the state government elections in Bihar in October-November 2020. Other sections of the Indian Left, organised and non-organised, representing mass organisations, struggles and movements, as well as individuals, intellectuals and activists, carried on as best as they could. Crackdowns by an increasingly authoritarian state on democratic protest and constitutional values posed distinct threats to their lives and liberty. The Left had collectively been unable to prevent this rightward turn. What did it mean to study workers' movements under such circumstances? Was that preliminary moment still valid several years down the line, towards the end of the project? Were the left and/or progressive movements, including workers' movements, making any impact on the economic and political course taken by India? This was a question that applied globally too, for similar waves of right-wing authoritarianism seemed to have swept across a world increasingly rent by conflict, and where there was growing violence on the working class and their rights, in the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Hungary, Turkey, amongst other places. Did Left and working-class politics have any significant impact on all this? It did not appear so. Why? How come?

While it was outside the scope of this research to even begin to address those questions, it did prompt another shift in focus, late into the project mid-2020. When this project began, social, economic and political justice for workers had been the heart of my query. But what seemed more relevant to the time and near future were slightly different questions- ones increasingly thrown up by the social, political and economic climate, related to the project of building the 'Hindu Rashtra', actionalised by the Hindu Nationalist BJP, with increasingly blatant disregard for the democratic institutions and the constitution of India. As the institutions and processes of democracy, and the constitution itself, were systematically subverted by the regime in

power, violently and faster than many had anticipated-one wondered how important or relevant questions around informal workers' politics were.

Changing external circumstances, including the rupture caused by the pandemic and how people experienced work in that time, made it clear that I had to shift the perspective from which I was approaching questions of informal workers' politics. The most significant repositioning was in how the heart of the query now shifted from how workers' politics could attain 'justice' through their movements and struggles, to a more expansive notion of a workers' politics that sought leisure, pleasure, self-fulfilment, a politics informed by a desire to thrive. Another shift was in how it now felt imperative to step back from just looking at how informal workers organised and spend some discussion space looking at what came before-i.e., on their relationship with work itself. This allowed me to arrive at a more complex notion of where a worker's politics arises from. It also helps me make some speculative observations about workers' politics and why it can tilt towards the Right more than the Left at times, which I touch upon in Chapter Six and Chapter Seven (Conclusion).

This research does not offer any policy recommendations or prescriptive analysis of any sort. It only seeks to offer readings of the struggles on the ground that were studied and connect it to existing narratives of informal workers' politics, both within literature and in the sphere of practice. It, however, remains more invested in the practice of politics and movements as opposed to theorisations of the same, in so far as a gap can be said to exist between them. Accordingly, it hopes to remain in conversation with those on the ground who, in various capacities, are seeking to build workers' movements and/or progressive movements of various kinds. It hopes to engage with a broad audience of domain specialists as well as interested 'outsiders' who may not have any prior experience of engaging with labour studies or workers' movements.

Intervention in Debates and Gaps in Literature Pertaining to Informal Workers' Politics

This dissertation seeks to intervene in three kinds of literature that are linked around the question of informal workers' politics. That is, it seeks to intervene in literature that addresses informal workers' politics as a whole, and literature specific to hawkers' politics and factory workers' politics. I discuss these briefly below.

Three key issues that have tended to feature in works on informal workers' politics have been the matter of reading their agency, whether they are able to organise or not, and the impact, progressive or depressive, they have on labour movements. To begin with, one might point out that speaking of informal workers' politics separately from formal workers' politics is increasingly becoming challenging, because as discussed within the dissertation, the formal/informal binary itself is being tested. How far does the binary hold today? There has been a gradual disappearance of the secure, formal worker with well-defined and established rights-even if inadequate and/or frequently violated- within stable jobs, and a proliferation of the insecure, 'informal' worker in formal and informal sectors. The current manifestation of capitalist work regimes, globally as well as in India, rest on informal workforces. Within that structure, informal workers arguably assume greater relevance, numerically and structurally, than formal workers.

To speak of workers' movements and politics today is thus to talk of informal workers' politics, and the various shapes and forms it takes. The future of the labour movement is arguably going to be emerging and emergent forms of workers' movements in informal work settings. While many scholars feel that traditional labour movements are in decline, as mentioned in Chapter Three, new initiatives are growing in many parts of the world (Bonner and Spooner 2011, Agarwala 2013, Chhachhi 2014, Bandyopadhyay 2016).

This dissertation does not, however, hold that the political challenges of workers' struggles are the same or similar for informal workers and formal workers, or across informal and formal sectors. For example, formal organising in the informal sector: as Chapter Four notes, we are seeing increasing instances of this. However, despite that, challenges remain significant and 'success stories' are not easily replicated.

Historically, formal workers' movements and struggles have tended to draw greater attention amongst academics and activists. Models and frameworks for informal workers' politics have often been drawn from that history. Today, however, we are arguably at a point in time where the reverse is taking place given the proliferation of informal work conditions. Despite this shift, what remains relevant is the importance of grassroots and 'bottom up' movements of workers. We are seeing more research attention being turned on informal workers' politics in recent years, which points to the fact that we need more ethnographic studies, from as many instances as possible, of successful collectivization efforts that have endured, or of sporadic/periodic short-term eruptions that have managed to create ruptures, from diverse informal work settings. Both create the conditions for and push things along the path of transformational change.

On the matter of agency, traditionally, certain approaches to labour studies have been more attentive to and cognisant of workers' resistance and agency compared to others. Scholars working with labour process theory, for instance, have been alert to various forms of worker resistance-individual or collective-and patterns and trends therein, that have manifested during the labour process, irrespective of whether it has coincided with the ebbs and tides of the trade union movement. We know from such work that just as we see cycles of increased and decreased workers' resistance at different historical junctures, so too we see a periodic cycling of what labour scholarship and labour activists focus on. For instance, there have been periods when focus on management control and power has been disproportionately more than on

mapping and reading worker resistance to the same. [5] Optimism and pessimism regarding the agency of the worker against capital has fluctuated in tandem with these cycles. A lot of this scholarship has mapped formal workers within the formal sector, especially industrial workers.

The agency of the *informal* worker has generally been read with more pessimism than optimism, even today. Agarwala (2013, 5), for instance, notes that activists and recent scholarship have tended to focus on the consequences of neoliberal reforms on workers' movement (i.e. the undermining effect), but not so much on how workers have responded. Noting the lack of data on the politics of informal workers, she points out that existing literature tends to depict the direction of impact flows from the state to labour (i.e., highlighting how state actions harm labour), while some scholars have shown how this impact can also flow in the reverse direction (Agarwala 2013, 22). Arguing in this vein, some labour geographers have pointed out that this kind of one-way flow does not exist in the capital-labour relationship either, and that we need to be cognisant of the fact that the relationship is mutually constitutive. That is, it is an ongoing, interactive process in which capital responds to the agency of labour, and labour responds to capital's strategy (Carswell and De Neve 2013, 64). Thus, we see how workers' resistance, for instance, shapes labour processes, forcing capital to adapt and react. For instance, after the 2011-12 Maruti Manesar workers' struggle, hiring practices changed in the automobile sector in the belt, with companies avoiding the hiring of local labour from Haryana. Field responses also indicated that companies across the board began given shorter contracts to workers, to try and abolish future claims towards permanent worker status, and Maruti itself made several changes to the composition of its own workforce.

Agarwala (2013, 3) suggests that part of this pessimism regarding informal workers' agency likely stems from the fact that agency is generally linked to the success and failure-mostly failure, especially in India- of informal workers' struggles to attain formalisation and/or receive

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[5] See, for instance, Thompson (1989).

legal protections equivalent to formal workers in the formal sector. One can see shades of this perhaps in how Nair and Friedman (2021, 18), referring to militant protests by automobile sector workers in China and India, including the Maruti Manesar protests, ask 'Why did these protests not materialise into something more?', seeking to understand the 'failure' of these protests. While I discuss the issue of 'failure' of struggles focussing on unionisation amongst factory workers in Chapter Five from a different perspective, arguing that this process ends up hurting collective mobilisation of formal and informal workers, I would argue that they were nonetheless not 'failures' in the way Nair and Friedman (2021) appear to read them, i.e., that they died down and did not become a global movement. I would argue that creating a dichotomy between short-term and long-term struggles and/or politics is sometimes misplaced and not helpful because there is a dynamic relationship between the two. Based on my case studies, I also see no reason to assert, as Carswell and De Neve (2013, 69) appear to briefly do in the conclusion to their paper on Tiruppur garment workers where they argue for a broader view of a worker's agency, that '… workers' focus on particular interests and individualised tactics…' adversely impacts collective action and trade union activity. From my fieldwork, I find that both coexist and that individual action and collective action are not in opposition to each other, and that collective action should not be solely equated with trade union activity.

Agarwala (2013) calls attention to how the tendency has been to highlight the vulnerability of informal workers, shorn of agency, despite simultaneously recognising the centrality of informal labour to economies everywhere. In India, the state's need for informal labour can be seen in its evolving perception of the kind of labour it requires. The perceived need was of one kind in the years immediately following independence, as discussed in Chapter Three. Agarwala (2013, 20) argues that in recent decades a different picture has emerged, one where the state has been extending itself more to informal workers within the informal sector, moving

away from its post-independence focus on the formal sector. There has been a perceived need to provide some protections to informal workers in the informal sector, as I mention in Chapter Three while discussing the hawkers' legislation of 2014. Agarwala (2013, 21) makes a compelling case for reading this policy shift as being as a declaration that the informal worker is the new ideal worker for the Indian state.

She attributes the pessimism in the Indian case to the fact that activists tried to draw from the earlier twentieth-century factory-based labour model, and apply it to informal sector workers. Given the vastly different structures of production, they assumed informal sector workers could not organise (Agarwala 2013, 7). I would note, in addition, that in applying that older model, activists and scholars also miss productive readings of the kind of politics one sees amongst informal workers in the *formal* sector, especially factory workers, where the twentieth century legacy is even more pronounced.

Drawing from her specific case studies in the construction and tobacco industries, she makes the argument that informal workers focus their attention on the state and wrest the recognition of being workers from the state-for example, through state certified worker identity cards (Agarwala 2013, 192)- while 'informal workers' relationship to capitalists remains tenuous' (ibid., 193). Their innovation, she argues, is the forging of a new contract with the state, bargaining for welfare benefits in exchange for political support and the provision of flexible, low-cost labour. This highlights their agency and ability to organise, she points out, although she does not argue that this is 'better' in any way from a politics that engages with capitalists directly and wrests rights as workers from them (Agarwala 2013, 195). Roy Chowdhury (2017) in fact highlights how multiple scholars of the informal sector and informal worker politics increasingly have been arguing in a similar vein. That is, that informal workers are looking to/must look to the state for social benefits as opposed to employers for workers benefits like wages etc.

Drawing from my own case studies, I argue that while this kind of framing resonates with the kind of politics hawkers' movements have pursued in India, the factory workers' case reveals that direct confrontation with capitalists still very much exists. I would argue that we must not overdetermine the tenuousness of the connection of the informal worker in the formal sector to their capitalist employers. The tenuousness may exist in the legal regime, but in practice, on the ground, bargaining power vis a vis the employer remains strong under certain conditions of collective coming together, as I show in Chapter Five. The contrast that my second case study provides to my first helps me assert that what is important in informal workers' politics is not so much the shift in who they bargain with and for what (i.e., welfare benefits versus workers' rights), because this would vary based on what kinds of informal workers we look at. Rather, what we need to do is understand anew what we recognise as politics and/or legitimate forms of struggle, and the goals and motivations of resistance, which I go on to discuss in this dissertation.

In literature specific to hawkers and their politics, there is a dearth of close studies of hawker unions and associations, which is where this dissertation intervenes. The focus, rather, tends to be on the multiple strategies for horizontal and vertical negotiations with the state and urban authorities, deployed by individuals or localised, transient collectives. Indeed, some scholars argue that this-insufficient primary studies on union organising- is a problem that plagues research on organised informal workers' movements in general (Schurman and Eaton 2012, 4). This research gap, I would argue, has self-evident implications for how we read and understand hawker movements. For example, scholars have noted that socio-economic hierarchies on the street tend to get reflected within hawker politics (Forkuor, Akuoko and Yeboah 2017, Lindell 2018), leading to legitimate concerns about whose interests are represented, and gatekeeping (Bandyopadhyay 2016, Lindell 2018). I discuss in Chapter Four how unions appear to have space and agency to choose how far they wish to accept these hierarchies in their structure, and

that when asking questions about representation and exclusion it might be a good practice to differentiate between deliberate exclusionary political practices and more circumstantial ones. This is because the difference between the two could indicate future political direction and potential.

One notes that the research gap mentioned above has implications for our understanding of broader informal workers' politics as well. I argue that if we are to research and theorise politics of informal workers, we must disaggregate the study of the urban poor and sharpen our focus, separately, on the politics of each of the various categories of informal workers. Although hawkers form a significant segment of workers within the urban informal sector (and of the 'urban poor'), they have remained arguably understudied[6] and frequently subsumed under the category of this 'urban poor' encompassing diverse occupation groups. Further, with broad ranging and numerous empirical studies, we are also able to challenge and complicate our understanding of informal workers' politics. Electoral power, for instance, has often been seen as a key leverage point for informal workers, based on certain cases studied (Chatterjee 2004, Roy 2004, Agarwala 2013). However, the NHF study reveals that while electoral power does have a role to play, it cannot be considered a leverage point (discussed in Chapter Four).

Theorisations on the politics of the urban poor in the Global South don't always adequately capture hawker politics or explain the existence of unions like the HSC and NHF. Hawkers making legal, long-terms claims for rights to livelihood security, mobilizing on class politics in unions don't fit neatly within the explanatory frameworks. For e.g., take Chatterjee's influential political society formulation, where he argues that the law-transgressing urban poor, in third world developing societies, mobilise into groups he calls 'political society', make moral (as opposed to legal) claims to rights to livelihood and shelter from the state. The state and

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[6] Indeed, it is possible that much of the emerging body of work on hawkers in the Global South owes a considerable debt to Sharit Bhowmik's extensive and pioneering activism and scholarship.

political society interact with each other in a terrain of politics that is predicated upon quasi-legal negotiations, temporary and non-justiciable rights, all of which are subject to the political calculations of the moment. Political society groups in turn accept that their activities are illegal and contrary to good civic behaviour and ask to be seen in the state of exception (Chatterjee 2004). However, in India, formally organised unions like the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), National Association of Street Vendors of India (NASVI), NHF and HSC have included but gone beyond the typical tactics of political society. Hawkers have a history of pushing their claims beyond temporary, non-justiciable solutions, and expressing them, instead, as rights under the law, visible as far back as 1967.[7] Therefore from the point of view of hawkers articulating a demand for legalisation, eventually winning the struggle for a law in 2014, and making their political claims from that vantage point, it would appear that we would need something more than the political society argument for their politics, which this dissertation tries to provide.

Literature on factory workers' politics betray a disinclination to take cognisance of and/or treat seriously forms of politics that do not resemble struggles to form unions. This is the main entry point for this case study and where this dissertation intervenes. Within literature there is often a gap between what actually exists on the ground, versus how it is interpreted and narrativized. Such forms of (non-union) resistance and mobilisation often remain invisible in literature, because there is a tendency to read them in terms of older models of workers' struggles. Some scholars have recently been highlighting this, as I mention in Chapters Three and Five.[8] This gap also impacts how we understand and theorise informal workers' politics. Mainstream narratives favouring the trade union focus often end up portraying workers as helpless victims,

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[7] See the manner in which the food hawker petitioners challenge the authority of the municipality and speak of their fundamental right to ply their trade in *Pyare Lal Etc vs New Delhi Municipal Committee & ... on 20 April, 1967.*

[8] See Atzeni (2020), Buckley (2021).

with managements always having the upper hand.[9] This is further discussed in Chapter Five. As mentioned, my fieldwork confirms this is not a true picture. The balance of power between workers and employers remains in play, and workers' agency is reflected in a range of actions that theorisations of informal workers' politics would do well to not underplay. This dissertation thus aligns with literature and perspectives, such as that of the FMS, that emphasize the 'stream of warmth' aspect of labour movements (Bloch 1991 cited in Nowak 2021, 1) which '…runs against reducing workers to leading a 'heroic struggle' and sacrificing their individual and legitimate needs' (ibid., 1), which is a common trope, running the danger of turning into a 'bourgeois type of pathos' (ibid., 2). I connect this to the narratives of agency-less victimhood of suffering workers that I critique. As Parry (1999a) and others note, we must remain mindful of *who* is crafting such narratives, including the elevating of pastoral pasts in agricultural fields over the 'unfortunate' compulsion to leave that behind for the drudgery of industrial work-for it isn't always workers themselves, many of whom find industrial futures more freeing than the older exploitative rhythms of work in the fields. It goes without saying, that in so doing, one must remain cautious of not creating a different kind of romanticisation-of urban industrial workscapes. These perspectives allow one to enter somewhat into the territory of a worker's inner worlds- of choices made, and hopes, desires and ambitions, which this dissertation goes on to have a discussion on in the three chapters of fieldwork discussions, especially Chapter Six.

Drawing from this, I submit that three big limitations presently exist in the slowly burgeoning corpus of literature on informal workers' politics, which this dissertation attempts to address. These are a) insufficient data because of a lack of close studies from a diverse range of informal work, b) a focus on pro-union framing of the same and c) reading workers' agency. The two contrasting case studies attempt to address the first limitation, and the second case study of

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[9] For example, see Bhowmik (2012).

factory workers particularly highlights the problem of pro-union framing. Regarding the limited way in which agency tends to be read, in this research I attempt to address this by taking a broad view of agency, and not equate it to just collective, organised labour activism, whether within institutionalised forms like trade unions and workers organisations or outside of them. This is also addressed by reading agency as more than just resistance. That is, seeing agency in the way workers relate to their work and make life choices around work, such as through their threefold relationship with work.

Research Questions

There are two key questions within this research, which in turn have certain sub-questions. These are:

1. How do informal workers experience work and how does one understand their relationship with work? How does this influence their politics?

    a. What are the characteristics of work for informal workers in factories and hawkers on the street? What are the dynamics of work in post-Fordist factory spaces and what form do workforce profiles and concerns of workers take in this scenario? How do new forms of governance in neoliberal urban spaces affect the concerns of hawkers?

    b. What are the social aspects of work and how is the selfhood of workers affected by the work they do?

    c. How do the three aspects of a worker's relationship with work-i.e., the relationship with work at the site of work, and the social and selfhood aspects of work -influence their politics?

2. How does one understand the politics of informal workers today?

a. How do informal workers organise and protest today? In the specific case of hawkers-what are the internal dynamics and organisational processes of long-term organised collective movements? What do we know of how they function, and the factors contributing to and detracting from their stability of form and continuing connection with their membership?

b. What is the relationship between traditional modes of labour organising and current forms of worker organising?

c. How does this differ across sectors (factory workers and hawkers) and spaces (Kolkata and Delhi NCR)?

d. With the passage of The Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014, how is the terrain of hawker politics changing? How is it impacting the organised hawkers' movement in India?

e. How does the labour law regime interact with factory spaces and workforce?

f. How does one read the political articulations of workers in terms of motivations, triggers and end goals? In what ways do informal workers exercise agency?

Chapter Two and Chapter Three introduce the case studies, the spaces they are located in, and set the context for the discussion of fieldwork data in Chapters Four, Five and Six. The first question is primarily addressed in Chapter Six, barring 1(a) which is address across Chapters Two, Three, Four and Five. The second question cuts across Chapters Four, Five and Six, barring 2 (a) and 2(b) which are also addressed across Chapters One and Three.

Plan of Chapters

This dissertation is arranged in a total of seven chapters, including an introduction and conclusion, and a postscript.

This chapter is followed by Chapter Two which sets out and discusses methodology. It sets out the period of data collection and introduces the two cases and the two spaces in which they are located. That is, the politics of hawkers' movements and the National Hawker Federation and its membership in Delhi and Kolkata, and factory workers in the Delhi NCR locations of Okhla, Gurgaon, IMT Manesar and Faridabad. It also introduces and briefly discusses the Faridabad Majdoor Samachar, which in many ways anchored my fieldwork with factory workers, as mentioned. It also flags the asymmetry that exists between the worksites of hawkers and factory workers and the consequent asymmetry in how the fieldwork chapters discussing the two cases are organised.

Chapter Three sets the context for this research, with discussions situating the informal worker within the changing nature of the urban and post-Fordist changes in the world of work which are braided together. This feeds into some discussions on informal workers and the informal sector, where I firstly lay out how this dissertation defines the hawker and the 'workman' for the factory workers' case, specify what kinds of hawkers and factory workers are a part of formal organising that I came across (in the form of unions and organisations) and briefly engage with definitional and classificational issues around who a 'worker' is and what comprises a workers' movement. I contend that in today's world of work, such definitions are being stretched and modified, as they have been in the past as well, allowing me to include both hawkers and factory workers within the concept of the informal worker today, and to read their politics as examples of politics of informal workers. The chapter also discusses how the post-independent Indian state created the formal/informal divide in the first place, choosing to extend legal protections to a small minority of workers in the formal sector which had a strong influence on the nature of the Indian labour movement. The latter came to be comprised predominantly of permanent workers within the formal sector, a majority being government employees, since the government was the largest formal sector employer for many years. This

came to shape the fault line between securely employed permanent workers and precariously employed informal workers which strongly impacted the Indian labour movement represented by the trade union form of organising. I note that today's labour movement continues to be informed and shaped by this lingering legacy. The dissertation briefly traces the changing place of labour in the state narrative and shows how post-2000, responding to various global policy currents and transformations in the world of work, it has increasingly been turning its attention on the informal sector from the former focus on the formal sector. We see thus the institution of the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (NCEUS), and the various discussions that arose from the reports they released about informal workers and the informal sector. The discussion briefly traces how the above, i.e., the changing nature of the urban, transformation in the world of work and growing numbers of informal workers across the world, has impacted workers' movements and their politics. Questions emerge on how to read struggles in the present context, since earlier narrativizations of workers' movements do not necessarily apply, on how one needs to revisit the question of representation within workers' movements, the history behind the pro-union framing of workers politics that is still popular in the mainstream, and a critique of the same. This then feeds into a discussion on the relationship with work itself, which this dissertation draws from in order to understand informal workers' politics. It argues that the way we think about our politics is greatly influenced by how we relate to and think about our work. Setting up the threefold relationship with work (at the worksite, with the social and selfhood), I note that workers experiences of work are not homogenous and uniformly negative, even in the post-Fordist regime. Thus, what a worker wants and is seeking need not necessarily be found within labour movements, or even progressive politics focussing on issues stemming from the worksite. I argue that we need to keep this in mind when reading acts of resistance and thinking about workers' politics in general.

Chapter Four dives into a reading of the fieldwork with the NHF, after first locating it within existing literature on hawkers' politics. While the NHF's movement is very strong and influential in Kolkata, in Delhi, at the time of fieldwork, it was considerably weaker. I analyse factors that contribute to their relative strength in both cities, highlighting what has worked well where and why. The discussion on the NHF's functioning at the federation level is attempted at the level of understanding internal dynamics and structures, what it takes to keep such a structure together, issues considered important by its membership and seeks to give a glimpse of its overall approaches to politics, struggle and strategy. The chapter also discusses some limitations of the movement.

Chapter Five discusses the second case study of factory workers in Delhi NCR, following a brief literature discussion. By choosing to foreground wildcat strikes and riotous political articulations that characterise this industrial belt, I seek to make visible and understand individual and collective acts of resistance and mobilisations, both as events and in the everyday, uncoupled from a pro-union framing. I argue that making the right to unionise the central focus of understanding strikes, conflicts and unrest amongst factory workers is very limiting. This is because trade unions have very little to offer to factory workers who are not permanent workers in India today and also because it does not account for the social and selfhood aspects of their relationship with work. Drawing from literature I contrast how the lifeworld of factory workers in some of today's model industrial zones differs from the lifeworld of an earlier generation of workers who had permanent jobs within elite Nehruvian industrial enclaves. I discuss from my fieldwork the changing dynamics and experiences of factory work in the context of workforces becoming predominantly comprised of informal workers. I also discuss how violations of statutory laws are the norm today, i.e., on pay, benefits, hours of work etc., which adds to the precarity of informal workers and frequently triggers a range of struggles, resistance and politics. Drawing from fieldwork, the discussion

looks at the complex relationship that exists between factory workers and trade unions. I argue that while the changing landscape of industrial work is somewhat mitigating the historical fault lines that have existed between formal and informal workers, leading to common collective mobilisations, the process of unionisation almost inevitably reintroduced those fault lines and adversely impacted collective mobilisations and the pressure such mobilisations were able to create on employers. On the other hand, there were many examples where workers were able to have their demands met when they prioritised non-union forms of resistance and mobilisation.

Chapter Six returns to the threefold relationship with work and the aspects of a worker's motivations and desires that exceed worksite related issues and contributes to shaping their politics. Drawing from fieldwork, it discusses the social aspect through a) discussions on the push and pull factors that bring workers from villages to cities, and how this was not necessarily seen as a negative or painful move, b) how desires for greater social respect, reputation and prestige motivated work, life and political choices, even if it contradicted economic rationality and logic at times, and c) the various experiences of work that were communicated including experiences of enjoying apparently 'bad' work. The discussion on work and selfhood is arranged around experiences of a) leisure and free time, b) drudgery repetition and pain and c) ambition, hope and desire.

Chapter Seven is the concluding chapter which sums up and presents a reading of informal workers' politics, reading discontent and the pacification of discontent in view of the discussions and critiques presented in the dissertation. It speculates on the political possibilities that could exist if workers' discontent cannot be pacified, if workers' movements and/or progressive movements are able to work with a political imagination that accounts for the complex experience of work that workers have (beyond just workplace issues). It also sets out

the limitations and shortcomings of this research and mentions future research that can follow from this.

Finally, the postscript, which was not originally planned. Towards the end of the dissertation, however, its inclusion began to feel very urgent, even though I did not fully know how to write something of this nature within a formal piece of research. Feminist praxis trains one to navigate the 'I' in research, and the role the self plays in the process of gathering, processing and producing research. However, ways of knowing is seldom addressed in mainstream labour studies literature, and the complexities of navigating a PhD journey seem to almost never be addressed within the formal piece of research and writing itself. One's own process of labour is generally effaced in academic productions, and I don't think it should be. The postscript is an attempt to address these concerns, however imperfectly.

Chapter Two

Methodology

Introduction

There is an unavoidable asymmetry in the two cases studied, which begs, at the outset, an explanation.

This research began with a desire to understand informal workers politics through the two case studies of hawkers and factory workers, for reasons mentioned in Chapter One. This was an exploratory study so going in I did not know what I would find, and how the findings would speak to each other. How I would frame the research would depend on what emerged on the field.

For the first case of hawkers' politics, fieldwork was primarily conducted with the National Hawker Federation's (NHF) membership in Kolkata and Delhi, with a smaller focus exclusively on its federation form represented by leaders and organisers from the different states it draws its members from. The fieldwork with the Kolkata membership, i.e., the Hawker Sangram Committee (HSC), began in March 2012 as part of an earlier research,[10] and continuous ethnographic contact was maintained with the HSC during this project, ending with a second round of formal follow-up interviews of member sites between January-March 2017. After first initiating contact with the Delhi leadership of the NHF in October-November 2013, fieldwork with the Delhi membership of the NHF was carried out in May 2014, and then between August-October 2014. In both cities my primary sources were local member site organisers/leaders and those organisers/leaders who were a part of the central leadership in

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[10] See Lahiri (2013).

charge of the city in question. This choice was made in order to map the NHF's city-wide presence of more than 50 member unions in Kolkata and 51 member unions in Delhi.

Ethnographic fieldwork with factory workers in Delhi National Capital Region (NCR) was carried out from November 2015-August 2016, and then in March-April 2017. The chosen locations were the Okhla industrial area, Udyog Vihar Phase 1 (Kapashera border between Delhi and Gurgaon), IMT Manesar (two locations- Sector-3 JNS Cut and Naharpur Village), Dharuhera (two interviews only) and Faridabad (two locations- Sector-24 industrial area and Majdoor Library at Autopin Jhuggi where the Faridabad Majdoor Samachar collective meets). My respondents were formal and informal workers, members and leaders of factory unions, leaders of central trade unions, members of the FMS collective, a few management personnel and owners of factories and a Micro Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME) industry association. I also draw from a 2009 (qualitative) fieldwork-based research on women garment workers in factories in Chennai[11] and from a 2013 General Assembly and International Conference of the New Trade Union Initiative (NTUI).

While both studies sought to understand the politics of organising, its method of doing so had to be different. The nature of the worksites for the two cases were different, and that, coupled with the fact that both the case studies, especially the NHF one, were constantly evolving during the period of fieldwork meant that certain asymmetries emerged. There was firstly, the asymmetry of the worksites, which was anticipated. Secondly, there ended up being an asymmetry of the methodological approach to the hawker study (following a union) versus the approach to the factory workers study (non-union, dispersed study). Thirdly, the chronological sequence in which the NHF studies were pursued in Kolkata and Delhi produced yet another asymmetry. The Kolkata study began before the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and

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[11] See Lahiri (2010).

Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014 was passed, and thus was able to map the HSC's movement before and after this seminal moment. The NHF Delhi fieldwork, on the other hand, was conducted entirely in the aftermath of the passage of the 2014 Act, resulting in scant data on the Delhi movement prior to that. Fourthly, a natural asymmetry also exists in the factors that emerged as being key shapers of the NHF movements in Delhi and Kolkata. The thematic areas of discussions are not equally balanced for both cities, because of uneven information that emerged from field interactions. On some themes I have information from Delhi that I do not have from Kolkata, such as, for example, the frequency of raids and the manner of retrieving goods after such raids in Delhi. This is because it seemed to be a more common and recurring feature for the hawkers I spoke to in Delhi, compared to Kolkata. These absences are, simultaneously, a limitation to the research and also an indication of the different experiences of hawking in these two cities, since hawkers tended to highlight the issues specific to their context.

The fieldwork chapter structures reflect these asymmetries, with the hawker fieldwork being written up in Chapter Four with a literature review pertaining to hawker politics being followed by discussions on the HSC, on the NHF in Delhi and the NHF as a national federation. The factory workers fieldwork in Chapter Five is written differently with a literature review pertaining to factory workers being followed by a discussion on the conditions of work and dynamics of work at post-Fordist factory sites in the fieldwork locations. It discusses the changing profiles of the workforce, the predominance of temporary workers in the workforce and the issues that come up around that, the ubiquity of violations of laws by employers and how these changes give rise to the range of political articulations that I encountered. Chapter Six dwells on the experiences of the social and selfhood aspects of work and draws from the two case studies, the earlier fieldwork amongst women garment workers in Chennai and secondary literature.

There are, however, also several equivalences and points of comparison between the two cases. A short note on them follows.

The two cases of hawkers and factory workers allow for a study of informal workers across informal and formal sectors, respectively. Hawkers' unions and organisations in India, such as the NHF, are made up of 'owner-hawkers' as opposed to the 'employee-hawkers' that some 'owner-hawkers' hire, either regularly or seasonally. The matter of this distinction is engaged with in greater detail in Chapter Three. In this dissertation I therefore focus on 'owner-hawkers', some of who began their working lives as 'employee-hawkers'. In the case of factory workers, my conversations were with both formal and informal factory workers. The distinction between the two is engaged with in Chapter Three. However, given that the workforce in this sector is comprised of an overwhelming majority of informal workers, and given that today's 'permanent' workers are mostly permanent just in name, [12] my focus remains on informal factory workers.

Another register of comparison is in terms of the spaces hawkers and factory workers occupy. Hawkers can be mobile (circulating) or stationary (operating without a permanent built-up structure) offering goods and services for sale to the public at natural markets throughout the city. These are areas where demand is naturally high for goods and services that link logically to the location. Examples of these include traffic signals and transportation hubs, food stalls near office complexes and commercial hubs, fruit sellers around hospitals, flower vendors around temples, fruit/vegetable/fish/meat sellers around residential settlements, tea stalls at strategic locations, ready-made garment sellers on footpaths etc. While hawkers operate in rural areas as well, this research focusses on urban hawkers. The hawkers' organisations and unions that this dissertation refers to operate in urban areas. The 2014 Act only applies to urban areas

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[12] This is engaged with in greater detail in Chapter Five.

across India (except in Jammu and Kashmir), though hawkers operating in areas that fall under the jurisdiction of the Railways under the Railways Act, 1989, including within trains, are excluded.

Most of the member sites of the NHF in Kolkata and Delhi comprised of hawkers operating from footpaths and in clusters of hawking markets throughout the city. They largely operated from publicly owned land though some were also present on private roads such as near gated residential communities. Delhi also had some members who were circulating hawkers, although such hawkers tended to be absent within the membership in general as I discuss in Chapter Four. By virtue of their location, they had to regularly negotiate elements like the weather, urban authorities and the police, and other local power lobbies including residential community associations, political parties etc. Experiences of hawkers can vary tremendously from site to site within a city. I found during fieldwork, for instance, that the expanding edges of the city tended to be more hospitable for hawkers, including those who were newly setting up. City centres and established commercial areas (like Connaught Place in Delhi, and Gariahat or Esplanade in Kolkata) tended to be saturated, had higher competition and tended to be costlier to operate out of. Experiences also varied in different administrative areas, as I mention in Chapter Four.

With respect to the factory workers' study, it is useful to highlight that the space of the 'factory' today is not a single production space, but forms a part of a long chain, which is discussed in Chapter Three as part of post-Fordist changes. Factory production in that sense is highly dispersed: both locally and globally. That is, mother plants tend to be surrounded by local clusters of suppliers. Supplier factories can also be located in different states and countries. Many factories in Delhi NCR, for instance, supply automotive parts to European car manufacturers and readymade garments to European and American brands. While factories are present in rural areas, a 2013 World Bank report notes that a) 'sophisticated' industries tended

to cluster around large cities, and that b) thirty percent of Indian export manufacturing jobs were concentrated within 50 kilometres from the core of large cities (World Bank 2013, 32). However urban cores of cities/metropolitan areas-i.e., within ten kilometres of the centre- were getting de-industrialised, and its peripheries were experiencing a manufacturing boom (World Bank 2013, 3). This is quite visible in Delhi, as will be later discussed in this chapter.

The factory workers I spoke with across the fieldwork sites of Okhla, Gurgaon, IMT Manesar and Faridabad were all located within planned industrial areas. Of the four, IMT Manesar was the newest, and least embedded in 'city life' compared to the other three. Residential areas and facilities, such as public transport, markets, schools and medical facilities, tended to be limited and restricted to the surrounding villages of Manesar, some distance away from the lines of factories. Many of the workers commuted from neighbouring areas like Gurgaon.

There were many similarities in the experience of factory work within the four Delhi NCR locations. That is, the working conditions in a large garment factory in Okhla, for instance, would resemble what existed in similar sized factories in the other locations. The differences within Delhi NCR-of conditions and experience of working- are arguably better mapped/contrasted in terms of tiers of production for sectors. For instance, fieldwork findings hinted towards the fact that smaller factories sometimes tended to default more on statutory payments. Most of the workers I spoke with worked in factories towards the top or middle of the production chain, across sectors. This ranged from large factories employing thousands of workers to MSMEs (micro, small and medium enterprises). Workers by virtue of their location broadly needed to regularly negotiate the material aspects of production (machinery etc.), managements and employers and the state via the official dispute redressal mechanism within labour law. During times of heightened conflict, they also have to deal with the police and paramilitary forces sent in by the state.

Yet another register of comparison is in terms of the key features of precarity identified for both occupations. Hawkers are numerically significant in urban spaces and arguably crucial to the economic health of India, not least because of their role in circulating the products of small manufacturers and in providing low-cost services and products to economically vulnerable sections of urban populations. With hawking, it is always the case that there are certain universal aspects to how hawkers experience their occupation and certain highly localised, context specific experiences and issues. Common to all kinds of hawkers is that they work in informal work settings and are experientially bound by some common occupational experiences, such as the constant looming threat of evictions, rent-seeking and regular harassment in regimes of ambiguous regulatory frameworks. This is as true at a global level, as at a city-wide level. So, while hawkers everywhere in the Global South have certain common experiences of harassment, there is nonetheless a certain specificity that applies to hawkers within India. Similarly, just as hawkers in India have certain universal experiences of harassment, the specificities differ city to city, and within cities, at different locations. To speak of hawking, therefore, is to be able to simultaneously speak of the universal and the highly context specific conditions of hawkers in different locations. I discuss this in greater detail in this chapter as well as in Chapter Four, and show some of these differences in the case of Delhi and Kolkata.

Of these, eviction most often represents the crisis moment, that which creates the final push to organise and resist. Other issues that create pressure, such as bribes, are still tolerated and treated as an inevitability to be accepted by the (mostly) unorganised hawker. As such, I identify eviction as the most pressing cause for insecurity for a hawker. How much does a hawker's multiple vulnerabilities, and need to be able to return to their hawking spot day after day, determine what their movements ask for-or think they can ask for-from the state? One aspect we observe is how, for instance, the resulting asks can be small, as I discuss in Chapter

Four. For instance, this can be seen in terms of how their movements end up a) agreeing on how much space a hawker is entitled to occupy with their stall, and b) deciding how prosperous a hawker is allowed to be while still deserving state protection. We also observe how the multiple vulnerabilities of hawkers leads to most organised hawkers' movements seeking accommodation within existing development paradigms rather than taking a stance of outright rejection of such paradigms. Within movements, variations exist regarding how they view the paradigm itself. The NHF, for instance, critiques aspects of neoliberal urbanisation, centres questions about the right to the city, the hawker's right to it and the hawker's economic contributions within it in their politics.

Factory work, too, is marked by several features of precarity such as the temporary nature of most jobs, violations of labour laws by employers, terrible and frequently dangerous working conditions, amongst others. Just like with hawking, factory work too has universal and context specific conditions and experiences in different locations. The universal aspects are linked to post-Fordist changes to the structure of production (discussed in Chapter Three), producing, for instance, certain common patterns in the profile of workers employed, category of employment preferred by employers, duration of employment etc. which are discussed in Chapter Five. Specificities vary not only from sector to sector (such automobile, garments etc.), but also region to region. For instance, the garments sector in some states provide dormitory style accommodation to migrant women workers, though this system does not exist in Delhi NCR. Within Delhi NCR, however, the difference in experience of work did not vary drastically in the four locations I looked at, unlike the inter-city differences I saw in Delhi and Kolkata for hawkers.

For factory workers, I identify informal work as the primary feature of precarity, and explain in Chapter Three why I draw an equivalence between formal work and the employment category of permanent workers, and informal work and various categories of temporary employment, under which I consider contract workers, casual workers, apprentices and trainees. As I discuss in Chapter Five, this aspect of precarity, and the knowledge that most temporary workers will never become permanent workers, frequently fuels militant resistance and retaliation by workers. The resistance posed can be issue based and piecemeal-from demands to be made permanent, to protests against working conditions and violations of laws (minimum wage, bonus etc.). They can also be for more simmering longer term issues such as about the experience of work itself as discussed in Chapters Three, Five and Six. While organised movements and activists take up the former, the latter may or may not feature in their demands.

How this feature of vulnerability determines the range of what can be asked for by factory workers and by movements of factory workers is discussed in Chapters Three, Five and Six. Great variations exist in asks and imaginations based on how work is thought of and imagined. On one end of the spectrum are those who reject work itself, whereas on the other are those who have ambitions within the system, who seek 'good enough' work within the system.

Drawing from this, I contrast the forms of struggle I focus on for hawkers and factory workers respectively. While the many ways in which hawkers seek to secure their existence on the streets are traced out in Chapter Four, for both Kolkata and Delhi, this research focuses on the union form of their struggle. I argue that the forms of precarity that mark hawking, especially evictions, *produced* this form of struggle, i.e., unions and other hawker organisations. These forms allowed hawkers' movements to advocate for long-term, stable gains. They were seen as providing (much greater) security against evictions, and going forward, they are expected to

proactively increase gains to be made under the law. Within hawking, this form of organising is relatively new, especially in India, as I discuss in Chapter Four.

There are limitations of the form, which I discuss in Chapters Four and Six, including the fact that in the post-2014 Act regime, it will be harder for non-unionised hawkers to be protected. But overall, I argue that, at this point, this form of struggle is meeting a political need and resonating with hawker memberships under certain conditions-i.e., where the unions retain their willingness to continue militant place-based struggles even after the passing of the law, and not see the law and legal regime as the final answer and solution. What will happen going forward as the law ages is an open question and not yet a decided outcome, since the history of struggling under this form is in the process of being made.

With factory workers, while Chapter Five traces the range of actually existing struggles and resistance on the ground as well as ways of exercising agency, my emphasis is on the non-union forms they take. I argue that it is the ubiquity of informal work and the precarious nature of employment and work life associated with it that produced a contemporary iteration of this form of struggle and resistance-i.e., non-union forms of resisting and mobilising. Unlike with hawkers, the union form has an older history for industrial workers. Union struggles of factory workers in post-independent India has shaped the terrain of labour politics in a particular way as is discussed in Chapter Three. Its legacy continues to impact workers' politics today in that workplace unions protect permanent workers and have almost nothing to offer to informal workers. For example, they are unable to address issues of secure employment and violations of labour laws for informal workers. Non-union forms, in contrast, appeared to be more successful in wresting piecemeal victories from employers such as on matters of pay, bonus, hours etc.

There are limitations to such non-union forms of struggle, and critics question how they can be 'stabilised' in some manner in order to create long-term impact and continuity of experience and struggle. However, as I note in Chapter One, a short term/long term dichotomy is not always useful while thinking of politics, given how experiences and memories persist and inform the long-term. That said, one can certainly examine how impactful wildcat strikes, collective mobilisations and struggles can be strengthened and sustained in the long term without necessarily falling back on the default option of the union form. Going forward, especially in the face of the new labour law changes that were made in 2019 and 2020, [13] one expects that the role of union politics in its present form will shrink further and one will need to emphasise these other forms of struggle even more.

This chapter is structured to follow this introduction with sections discussing the background and context provided by the cities in which fieldwork was carried out, the methodological approach to the two case studies and some challenges faced in negotiating the field as a researcher.

The Cities of the Field: Kolkata and Delhi NCR

The cities in which the two cases are studied are not incidental to the story that emerges of the politics of informal workers, and the following section attempts to provide a broad picture of aspects of Kolkata and Delhi NCR relevant to this story. The context and background of

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[13] The Narendra Modi-led NDA government undertook labour reforms that amended and condensed 29 existing labour laws under four labour codes. These were pushed through in 2019 and 2020, and are likely to be implemented soon. They are the Code on Wages, the Industrial Relations Code, Social Security Code and Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code. Discussions on these reforms, unfortunately, lie outside the scope of this dissertation.

Kolkata, applying only to the HSC study, is presented through a much smaller discussion in comparison to the one on Delhi NCR.

Kolkata [14]

> "Few modern cities have bred so many myths as Calcutta...The chief Calcutta myths are depressing ones, relating to poverty, over-population and urban blight. Almost as compelling, however, are the equivocal myth of political awareness and political turmoil..."
>
> - **Sukanta Chaudhuri** (Chaudhuri 1990, xv)

> "Oh, we are much better off (than other cities). We have a history of struggle. We know how to fight."
>
> - **HSC hawker and organiser** at Chowringhee (Fieldwork interview,2013)

Kolkata has for long been twinned to the myth of political agitation. Like all myths, there is a kernel of truth to this one as well. Das (1990) and Chatterjee (1990) point out that as the British colonial capital, Kolkata came in early contact with anti-imperialist struggles and was a hotbed for political activities during the Rowlatt Satyagraha of 1919, the non-cooperation movement, the civil disobedience movement etc. along with more militant, violent, anti-imperialist struggles that emerged a little later. Kolkata reacted to economic pressures that were felt during the world wars and the Great Depression, to communal tensions and riots, the trauma of partition and the massive influx and pressures of refugees in the city, which itself marked a key point in the history of agitational politics of Kolkata. Das (1990) and Chatterjee (1990) speak of the labour politics in the late 1920s and early 1930s and Chatterjee (1990, 30) points out the

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[14] This section on Kolkata is drawn from Lahiri (2013).

role played by Left parties in the late 1950s in widening and strengthening 'instruments of mass agitation'. He also mentions the radical movements of the 1960s and 1970s as having added to Kolkata's history of political restiveness. Without entering a discussion on the changing political currents behind these agitations and the evolution of the political culture of Kolkata, one might still point out that what is relevant is the impact this has had on the political space of contemporary West Bengal and Kolkata. Agitational politics has most often found an outlet through the medium of party politics. Party politics in fact emerged during fieldwork as a defining feature of the political landscape that Kolkata's hawkers have to negotiate, just as for Delhi hawkers it is the city's complicated governance structure and regulatory regime. As Roy (2008) notes, West Bengal had not witnessed the emergence of powerful NGOs, like other regions in India and South Asia. There was '…no Grameen Bank or SPARC or SEWA here...There are no federations of slum dwellers; no transnational networks of squatters...' Roy (2008, xxix). The political space is entirely saturated with party politics.

Economically speaking, West Bengal has gone from a 'premier industrialized region' to one that is severely bereft of industry and investment (Roy 2008, 89). Roy (2008, 89) notes that massive capital flight began in the 1960s, continued through the 1980s and that by the late 1980s West Bengal had slid to eleventh among twenty-five states with respect to state domestic product and had one of the nation's highest unemployment rates. Referring to the Economic Review of 1996-97, she goes on to say that even when the Left Front 'attempted to liberalise, growth rates remained substantially lower than national averages, with the state garnering less and less of nationwide investment' (Roy 2008, 89). Both registered and un-registered manufacturing had declined she notes, indicating a pattern of de-industrialisation. Roy (2008, 46) also takes the much-lauded land-redistribution success stories of the Left Front and finds a key weakness in them: that very often this distribution only included non-viable homestead land which could not provide the livelihood that a larger landholding could. Owners of such

plots were effectively landless, she argues, and her fieldwork of migrants reveals that there is a tremendous limitation of agricultural employment in villages. In the cities too there is a lack of steady access to urban work for migrant men, she finds (Roy 2008, 89). The increase of hawkers in the city is arguably contiguous with this deindustrialization, unemployment and related increases of employment in the informal sector in Kolkata.

Delhi National Capital Region

The Delhi NCR experienced by hawkers and factory workers has a common thread- that of the strain of neoliberal logic underlying changes in the urban.[15]

Delhi as a city has seen many radical transformations. From British measures undertaken after the declaration of Delhi as capital, to the massive transfer of population following Partition, to the Emergency period slum clearance drives that affected over 700,000 people, to the closure and relocation of over 8000 industrial units by court order in 1995 ("Order that felled a city" 1997), Delhi has seen many upheavals. It has always been the poor that has borne the brunt of these changes. Writers on Delhi point out that though it has never enjoyed the reputation of being an inclusive or egalitarian city (Viswanath 2010, 56), the nature and scale of exclusions has become far more acute in the 2000s as Delhi struggles to become 'world class'. It is not the only metropolis to harbour such ambitions, as Chaturvedi (2010) points out but it is where the ambition is playing out very acutely. Jain (2013, 16) points out that this process was visible in planning and governance bodies in the 1980s itself, when the Rajiv-Gandhi led Indian National Congress government began its moves towards liberalisation and the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) began to enter the world of public-private partnerships, leasing land to private cooperatives for luxury homes in parts of Delhi. 'New consumerism demanded shopping complexes around these areas,' she notes (Ibid., 16), which then went on to increase

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[15] Touched upon briefly here, there is an explicit discussion on neoliberal urbanization in Chapter Three.

real estate value. As discussed in Chapter Three, it is not long after this that the poor begin to be seen as having less of a right to public spaces by the judiciary (Ramanathan 2006). Jain (2013, 16) notes that in these areas where the luxury apartments were to come up, the slums were the first to go. The post-1991 moment created additional pressure on the city's working poor as it began to chase millennial city dreams and global status, and one notes, as already mentioned, that a similar process unfolded after 1994 in Kolkata, when the Left-Front West Bengal government unveiled its New Economic Policy, leading to Operation Sunshine. As the new middle-class imaginary for urban utopia unfolded across Delhi, so did the 'neoliberal urban dystopia' for the city's poor, as Jain (2013, 16) puts it.

The concrete manifestation of the process of neoliberal urbanisation, however, comes up in different ways for the occupations of hawking and factory work and the discussion to follow reflects that by highlighting the complex governance structure and regimes of regulations for hawkers and the industrial context for factory workers. For the industrial context, I draw from Barnes' (2015) discussion on the contemporary industrial history of NCR.

Delhi National Capital Territory

With respect to the case study of hawkers, in order to contextualise and make sense of the Delhi movement of the NHF, it is helpful to have a broad sense of the specific relationship that Delhi the city has had with its hawkers over the recent decades. In understanding the NHF's membership in the city in Chapter Four, as mentioned, I go on to show how the factors of neoliberal urbanisation, governance structure and existing regulatory regime for hawkers have actively shaped the movement. I give a summary of these factors below.

I begin with Delhi's governance structure. Unlike the HSC, which had to contend with a political space dominated by party politics, the NHF in Delhi had to contend with the exceptional complexity of the calculus of power in the city, which jumped out early during

fieldwork interviews and conversations. The number of players a hawker had to negotiate in the street economies of Delhi were very, very high, and there did not appear to be a single powerful city-wide hawkers' organisation with significant sway across the city. The political space that hawkers and hawkers' organisations acted in was strongly shaped by this.[16]

Consider first and foremost the fact that the Delhi government does not have full control over the territory of Delhi NCT.[17] As a union territory, with a very limited statehood, it shares power with the Centre,[18] with the Centre controlling most of it. Its limited statehood came into force in 1992 (following the passing of an Act in 1991). Delhi's autonomy increased in 2018 following a 4 July 2018 Supreme Court judgement (which reduced the power of the Lieutenant Governor to that of other state governors), but faced a recent amendment in 2021 in which that autonomy was practically taken away and power was further concentrated in the hands of the Centre-appointment Lieutenant Governor, who remains the constitutional head. Unlike in Kolkata, Delhi hawkers and Delhi hawkers' organisations need to simultaneously negotiate the state government as well as central government for local issues of eviction etc.

Tied to this was the sheer number of urban authorities and agencies in place. These include the five urban local bodies:[19] the New Delhi Municipal Council (NDMC), the Delhi Cantonment Board, the North Delhi Municipal Corporation (not to be confused with the New Delhi Municipal Council), the South Delhi Municipal Corporation and the East Delhi Municipal Corporation.

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[16] Chapter Four discusses in detail the various ways Delhi hawkers negotiate this political terrain.

[17] The National Capital Territory (NCT) does not include the surrounding regions of Gurgaon, NOIDA etc. that fall under the larger National Capital Region (NCR)

[18] For more, see Centre for Policy Research (2015).

[19] The former Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) was trifurcated in 2012 into three-the North, South and East Delhi Municipal Corporations

The government of Delhi retains responsibility and accountability for basic service provision- it has under it the Delhi Jal Board,[20] the Urban Development Department, Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board and six companies for the generation, transmission and distribution of electricity.

The Union Government of India controls the DDA, which is under the Ministry of Urban Development and accountable to it, and the Delhi Police, one of the largest metropolitan police forces in the world,[21] which reports to the Ministry of Home Affairs.

Thus, urban planning in Delhi, undertaken by the DDA, is entirely controlled by the centre, and not the Delhi government, with the elected representatives from municipal corporations and the legislative assembly within it only having advisory roles. Zuberi (2021) points out that the Delhi government governs the day-to-day issues of the city on matters of housing, environment, urban development and road transport, using the agencies it does have control over, i.e., the Delhi Jal Board, the Urban Development Department and the Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board. Crucially, and helpful for understanding how hawkers and the urban poor in Delhi have navigated the city politically-i.e. in how they navigate electoral politics, discussed in Chapter Four- Zuberi(2021) points out that while the citizens and stakeholders of Delhi have always had an almost non-existent role to play in urban planning, '…at local levels such as in matters of road construction, water supply, and sanitation and power, elected representatives to the municipal corporations and MLAs have been important stakeholders'. However, after the 2021 amendment, this too looks set to disappear, with the LG's powers being restored to pre-2018 Supreme Court judgement levels.

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[20] This is for the trifurcated MCD corporations only; NDMC and the Delhi Cantt. Board retain responsibility of water provision in their own areas.

[21] See https://dmsouthwest.delhi.gov.in/departments/police-department/ accessed on 6 September 2021.

This was further complicated by how the jurisdictions of these bodies and agencies was spatially distributed-it was not uncommon to find cases where one section of a road was controlled by one urban authority, while another (of the same road) was controlled by a different one. Or cases where two sides of a road were administered by different urban authorities.

If this looks confusing, it is. It is not only a terribly complicated structure, it also leads to several problems, understandably, in the actual execution of governance. Jain (2013, 171), for instance, points out how much of the funds allocated to councillors and MLAs, for development projects, in their annual budgets go unutilised at the end of the fiscal year because approvals are needed for said projects from not only the executive wings of the municipal corporations,[22] but also a whole host of state and centre appointed executives. This highlights how not only is it challenging for various constituents of the urban poor, including hawkers, to apply political pressure successfully on the state machinery and elected officials in Delhi, but how, often, in such a structure, the latter's' hands too end up being effectively tied. That is, when the power of elected officials is officially reduced in the governance structure, then the potential for hawkers to use electoral politics in their political strategy-even for local infrastructural purposes- is also reduced.

Moving on to the next factor, Jain (2013, 170) argues that the operationalising of the neoliberal logic of urbanisation mentioned earlier is carried out largely through the non-elected members of the executive, particularly the commissioners and assistant commissioners. Such officials come through the Indian Administrative Service, she notes, and bring with them ideas and notions of western modernity and its desirability, which has no place for the likes of hawkers and squatters, whereas elected councillors and MLAs feel at least somewhat of an electoral

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[22] That is, the civil servant, non-elected commissioners and assistant commissioners.

obligation to accommodate hawkers. She notes that following independence, Delhi's Master Plan '…follows the same interventionist biopolitical rationality, western modernist vision, and politics of segregation through arbitrary laws as well as semiotics that exclude the marginalised' (Jain 2013, 15). Constituted in 1957, the DDA's Master Plans have consistently failed to recognise and provide for the workers who would be needed to build the Delhi of its dreams- '…a modern city, prosperous, hygienic and orderly…' (Baviskar 2003 cited in Jain 2013, 15), and eventually, hopefully, 'world-class'. The DDA is also infamous for violating many of its own regulations in the fevered pursuit of this dream, as has been seen during big ticket events in the city such as the 1981 Asian Games, the 2010 Commonwealth Games. Jain (2013, 16) notes how the Commonwealth Games of 2010 gave the government an excuse and added motivation to push through several such infrastructural changes and projects aimed at enhancing the city's prestige in the world. She cites Bhan (2009) noting how several media campaigns then lauded the transformation of Delhi from the 'Walled city to World city', and used it to justify the banning of hawkers from several prominent areas of South Delhi (Bhan 2009 cited Jain 2013, 141). In my conversations with them, several hawkers spoke of facing routine violence, such as getting beaten up and bloodied by the police, and immense difficulty in being able to ply their trade for several months before and after the 2010 Games.

Additionally, one cannot miss the role that Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs) play in operationalising this neoliberal logic, especially alongside the *Bhagidari* scheme of Delhi, introduced in 2000, which was a scheme for citizen participation in governance, though as many have pointed out, it was effectively a scheme for propertied citizenship. The term *Bhagidari* translates to 'partnership' and this scheme added to the power of RWAs in the city and led to their rise as the main partners to the government, represented by bureaucrats from Municipal, State and Central governments, along with Markets and Traders associations and

Industrial associations. Further, RWAs had to be of authorised colonies in order to participate. Thus, the scheme made it very clear who are *not* considered legitimate stakeholders of the city- the informal, working poor living in unauthorised settlements and slums, on whose sweat and blood, nonetheless, the city runs. To put the structural and financial power of RWAs in context, and their power to undermine democratic channels, Jain (2013, 169) cites Ghertner (2011a) who learnt that some of them received as much by way of funding as elected councillors of some wards. Given the neoliberal origins of RWAs in the *Bhagidari* era and the aesthetic imaginations and aspirations of the new middle class it was a vehicle for nurturing and championing, there can be little surprise about their stance towards hawkers and squatters and their crusade of using the courts to sanitise their neighbourhoods of slums (fashioning themselves as the victims).

I now move on to the final factor being highlighted as influential in shaping the politics of Delhi hawkers, that of previous regimes of regulation.

I preface that discussion by noting how as a city, Delhi is full of people who migrated here looking for work. Frequently this is first generation migration, and many of these are hawkers (full time and part-time). Numerically speaking, Delhi has the second largest population of hawkers after Bombay, according to the 2006 national policy on street vending.[23] According

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[23] We will probably never have accurate figures for the total number of hawkers in the country, or even a city because it will always be a challenge to count them. This is because of definitional issues and sheer methodological ones as well, for how does one prepare to count numbers in a profession that includes mobility, part-time shifts, multiple hawkers doing part-time shifts at the same hawking location, etc.? This is a challenge that the Town Vending Committees will have to tackle within the Street Vendor Act of 2014.

However, people have hazarded numbers. The NHF estimates the existence of approximately 4,00,00,000 hawkers (4 crore; with an additional one crore families running small industrial units that supply them depending on them) and a daily national turnover of Rs. 8,000 crore a day in 2020. Bhowmik (2010) approximates that hawking is practiced by about 2% of India's urban population, and various sources suggest that there could be anything between 2,00,000 (te Lintelo 2017) to 6,00,000 hawkers in Delhi (Shah and Mandava 2005).

One also notes that there is deliberate undercounting by the state at times. At one national consultation of the NHF in 2014, it was pointed out by the leadership of Haryana that they face a problem whereby if they give the government a list of 10,000 hawkers, the government takes out a list of 600.

to Singh (2000) about 1,00,000 people come every year seeking brighter economic opportunities. One can make a tentative connection between migration, poverty and hawking in Delhi based on a study that reveals that a majority of poor migrants to the city take up petty trade and hawking and that petty traders and hawkers have the largest distribution of poverty amongst migrants (Gupta and Mitra 2002). Threaded through the vast city are migration networks of kinship, region and possibly caste and religion too, although this has not been verified during fieldwork. While I caught frequent glimpses of this, it was unfortunately not possible to pursue the functioning of these networks closely because of the limitations of this research and its fieldwork goals. These networks, I saw, often determine what occupation the newly migrated will take up. Thus, while during my earlier MPhil research (which looked at Kolkata hawkers) I wondered what made a rickshaw puller a rickshaw puller and a hawker a hawker- and concluded it depended on one's relative socio-economic power- I now realised that one has to account for other factors as well. If one's contact in the city is a rickshaw puller, there is a high likelihood that the newcomer to the city will begin as a rickshaw puller as well. This is because newcomers needed someone to vouch for them in an existing market. Without such personal references, I was told, no market leader allows the entry of a new player, although the entry rules seem to be a whole lot looser in markets that are just coming up, frequently on the outer edges of city limits. I gauged during conversations in Delhi that the reverse also holds true: a hawker's contact cannot easily become a rickshaw puller, even though the latter is a 'harder' and poorer paid occupation in comparison.

Hawking markets in Delhi thus many times get constituted based on village, neighbourhood or family ties (and therefore possibly caste ties). The political and/or VIP connections that Delhi hawkers had also frequently originated from the 'native place' or family connections and ties of marriage. This also applies in the process of formation of hawker associations: I found that

hawkers frequently reached out to organisers or organisers approached new sites based on shared connections of neighbourhood, village/region of origin or family.

The law in Delhi was that any sale of goods and services in public spaces required prior permission (te Lintelo 2017, 79). Towards that end, four types of permits called Tehbazaris were categorised by the Supreme Court in 1992 (Shah and Mandava 2005, 79). Jain (2013, 97) points out that only about ten percent of Delhi's hawking population held Tehbazari permits issued in the city by its municipal corporations and NDMC. Shah and Mandava (2005, 58) put the official number of Tehbazari permits at 24,000. Some of the sites I visited for interviews and conversations (NHF membership) had been converted into markets of Tehbazari holders. During fieldwork I found that while Tehbazari holders were more secure than the non-permit holding, and therefore 'illegal' hawkers, the permit did not make all the problems go away for hawkers. It was still possible for state authorities to relocate them, and often the permits were issued for locations so far away from the spot the hawker was presently at, or at such an unviable location, that the hawkers chose to not move. For example, organisers of one site told me how hawkers with hand carts, which they parked at home, were given a location eight kilometres away. The inadequacies of the Tehbazari system, its limited numbers and complicated route to possessing one naturally led to a system where the norm was an alternate informal, exploitative official regulatory regime, i.e., bribes, participated in with gusto by state agents (corporation officials, the police) and private agents (*dalals*, market Pradhans, etc). The police were especially deeply involved in the street economy, from posing a threat to hawkers' existence as executors of the ambiguous regulatory regime in place, while also simultaneously playing a key role in 'settling' and 'protecting' them within it through bribe regimes in place. Most hawkers I spoke with considered their power to be greater than even state government or central government ministers. The 2014 Act supersedes all existing laws, but at the time of

fieldwork, it remained unclear how it would impact existing Tehbazari holders-i.e., would they have any advantage over the others in the new regime?

A final feature, and complication for the process of unpacking hawker politics in the city was Delhi's additional system of regularised hawking markets. These were the weekly *haats*/markets across the NCR, which operated within a different ecosystem, although in some cases overlaps were present with hawkers and weekly *haat* hawkers sharing the same market space. It was, unfortunately, not possible to include them within this research. Conversations with NHF organisers and a former *Pradhan* (President) of a weekly market association suggested that many differences existed between the weekly *haat* system and other kinds of hawkers. The former apparently tended to be better off and more secure.

Moving on to the case of factory workers but before engaging with Barnes' (2015)[24] discussion on industry in NCT, it would be useful to visualise an indicative structure of today's long industrial manufacturing and supply chain. I base this mapping of the local automobile sector in the Gurgaon area and the ready-made garments cluster in the Okhla industrial area of Delhi on articles published on the libcom.org website (Steven 2010a) (Steven 2010b)[25] (P.T.O.).

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[24] All references to Barnes (2015) pertaining to the discussion on the industrial context and background of Delhi NCR draw from Pg. 109-144 of Barnes (2015).

[25] The article on libcom.org states that it draws information on the garment sector chain from a 2003 National Institute of Small Industry Extension Training (NISIET) study. The NISIET report is unnamed but another website quotes this data, crediting it to NISIET 2003 (http://www.clusterobservatory.in/clustermap/cluster_read.php?map_id=24220&div=121) (accessed August 2016).

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Automobile industry structure

Main assembly plant (Maruti, Honda, Escorts tractor, JCB etc)

⇧

Tier one supplier (Bosch, Delphi etc)-technological standards similar to main assembly plants.

The website reports Maruti alone has 400 tier-one suppliers.

⇧

Small and medium sized factories

⇧

Medium sized workshops-largely doing sheet metal work

⇧

Garage sized workshops- eg. galvanising small metal parts like hinges

⇧

Slum production-largely home production with mostly women and children

⇧ Capital involved increases the higher we go in the chain

There is a whole network of horizontal and vertical linkages between suppliers and manufacturers in the industry. Parts often pass through many tiers-and over a hundred kilometres-before ending up at a main assembly plant. Lower in the chain, owners of companies are also likely to be workers.

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Figure 1: Structure of the automobile sector in Gurgaon

Structure of the Okhla Readymade Garment Cluster

Raw material comes mainly from outside Delhi after the displacement of raw material industries in Delhi in the 1980s and 1990s. After arrival of printed cloth in Okhla, cutting, sewing, embroidery, finishing, washing, ironing and packaging is carried out.

Different categories of companies:

Buying house

⇓

Manufacturers (some buying houses also manufacture)

Subcontract to machine embroidery units

Contractors receive contracts from manufacturers and embroidery units

Workshops   Home-based units
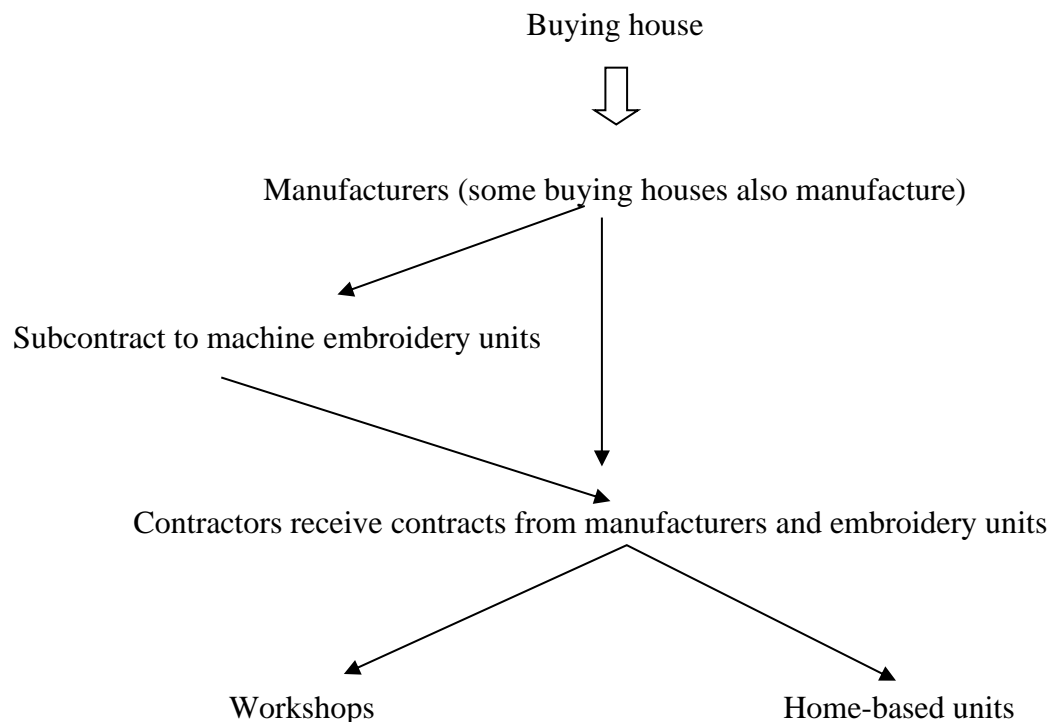
Within this structure there are also:

- Traders, manufacturers of threads, buttons, fittings
- Machine manufacturers and maintainers
- Packaging and transport units
- Training and administrative bodies

Figure 2: Structure of the readymade garments cluster in Okhla industrial area

Barnes (2015) mentions the role played by partition and the need to manage refugees in the city in the eventual establishment of industrial hubs like Okhla in Delhi NCT. The population of refugees settled in slums, camps and evacuated residences of those who became refugees on the other side of the Indian border, and many of them took up employment in the informal economy. By the 1950s, the urban economy had become a hub of small-scale manufacturing and trade and to encourage this, in the 1960s new industrial estates were established. The Okhla Industrial Estate was one of the most important ones and it was established to provide work for first and second generation refugees in South Delhi. Barnes (2015) notes that towards the end of the decade some producers here became major manufacturers, establishing factory production in the south of the city in steel, pharmaceuticals, refrigerators and textiles.

Barnes (2015) identifies certain patterns in industrial production in Delhi NCT. He traces changes to economic activities between 1998 and 2005 and notes that manufacturing remained central to employment in the region but the contribution of manufacturing to growth reduced in comparison with financial, real estate, business services, transport and communication activities. He notes that employment in manufacturing grew in the 1980s, grew at a faster pace between 1990 and 1998, before falling between 1998 and 2005. In this period, retail trade became a major player. This coincided, he says, with a changing geographical division of labour whereby industrial employment became concentrated in the outer districts of the Delhi urban region. This led to a comparatively large share of employment being concentrated in establishments in the southern part of the region, close to Gurgaon, Faridabad and Greater Noida.

He attributes this geographical displacement of industry to the periphery to New Delhi's slum clearance policies and highlights that, as it historically happens, this led to a clustering effect whereby large-scale industry ended up attracting and being surrounded by informal enterprises, including home-based-work. This was compounded by the 1996 Supreme Court orders for the

closure and relocation of 'hazardous industries' and 'non-conforming industrial units' in Delhi, affecting a vast number of workers. He notes that this contributed to a substantial decline in manufacturing employment in Delhi NCT between 1998 and 2005, coinciding with a rise in employment in informal enterprises, which got pushed to the periphery. That said, he also notes that these (lower)numbers could also just be reflecting companies misreporting the number of workers employed, to bypass legal obligations. The fudging of records kept by companies also makes informal workers (statistically, officially) invisible.[26]

The following subsection discusses the displacement of industry from the core of Delhi NCT to the NCR locations of Gurgaon, IMT Manesar and Faridabad.

Gurgaon, IMT Manesar and Faridabad

Barnes (2015) notes that this region's development has been profoundly shaped by trade and investment liberalisation since the 1980s. The state of Haryana, within which Faridabad and Gurgaon, including IMT Manesar, lie, is the base for many large transnational corporations and Barnes (2015) notes that by the late 2000s the Haryana Government claimed that about half of India's cars, half of its motorcycles, a third of its fridges and a quarter of its tractors and bicycles were manufactured in the state. This is by design- the state government has actively facilitated industrial activity, often through partnering with private players. Land acquisition and the promotion of the Special Economic Zone policy has been crucial to this. It promoted 'industrial model townships' of which IMT Manesar was treated as a shining example. Other such examples of model townships developed or being developed include Bawal, Sohna,

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[26] This practice of fudging records frequently takes on comically farcical proportions because, as I learnt from conversations with workers at Okhla, many companies maintain two registers for worker wages- one 'official' for government records, and the '*do number wala* register' (a duplicate register), with the actual figures. A worker will sign on both. The parallel system, clearly, had also got to be meticulously recorded and maintained!

Rohtak, Mewat, and three spread out in Sonipat district. In 2008 Haryana had eight percent of the national total of SEZs (Barnes 2015).

Although of all these locations it is perhaps Gurgaon that best symbolises India's new modern, its millennial desires and dreams, it is useful to pick Faridabad for a quick discussion because it contains within it industries from two phases of industrialisation– Nehruvian and post-liberalisation.

Post-Independence Faridabad was yet another ambitious experiment of the Nehruvian state towards the building of modern India. It was a two-fold experiment, lasting from 1949-1952, aimed at a) rehabilitating more than 30,000 partition refugees who were housed at the temporary resettlement camp in old Faridabad town through b) self-help via the building of industrial cooperatives, where the power structure would be horizontal as opposed to pyramidal. As it grew into an industrial township, it also registered some of the early successes of the cooperative movement, with the township being built through labour cooperatives (Jain 1998). For a brief while it had a system of social health, basic education and worker-held ownership of industries, although they were unable run the factories they had built because they were ultimately denied registration as a cooperative. The experiment unfortunately failed and ended, with Jain (1998) attributing its destruction[27] to various vested interests.

Today it is still an important hub of industry, counting amongst the largest industrial estates in India, and is a hub of small, medium and micro enterprises (MSMEs) supplying to factories in Gurgaon and Manesar. Following its initial years, it became a hub of production of tractors, motor cycles and power looms, amongst others. By some estimates it had at least 15,000 industrial units at one point, including big family-owned enterprises like the Escorts Group,

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[27]The factories built by the refugees were ultimately sold at extremely low rates to private enterprise, with many of the refugees joining as workers.

and Lakhani India Limited. It grew till about the mid-1980s, but after the Maruti factory was established in Gurgaon in 1984, policy attention shifted to Gurgaon. With infrastructure stagnating in Faridabad, industry, particularly Multinational Corporations, preferred to go to Gurgaon.

Policy focus shifted back to Faridabad in the mid-2000s after Gurgaon started reaching a saturation point. Development focus was now on transforming Faridabad in keeping with the logic of the moment, with the state government using JNNURM funds for the desired transformation-an expected Rs.2200 crores to be used over a ten-year period (Yadav 2007). This phase thus saw an explosion of premium housing projects, malls and shopping complexes, business parks, i.e., all the trapping of the 'world-class' city previously discussed, alongside the acquisition of upwards of 1800 acres of land for the creation of an Industrial Model Township that would house 500 new industrial units. In this redevelopment and expansion, the private sector has been allocated a big role by the state government of Haryana-they are being seen as partners in this project of transforming Faridabad into the millennial city of dreams, one that will leave even Gurgaon behind. For a sense of scale, these private developers are aiming to purchase a total of 5000 acres of land from local villages, half of which they had already acquired by 2007 (Yadav 2007).

Barnes (2015) notes that the Gurgaon-Manesar belt is one of the three main automobile producing regions in the country, and is hence a key constituent of the region's industry. Most major global automotive manufacturers have had a presence in India since the 1990s and the Gurgaon-Manesar belt has factories of Maruti Suzuki- the largest passenger car producer in India, Hero Motocorp-which produces two wheelers, Honda Motorcycle and Scooter. At one time, in 2001, Hero Honda produced in its Manesar factory the largest number of two wheelers in the world and represented 50% of the domestic market for motorcycles (Barnes 2015).

Several major firms that supply parts and components to Hero Honda and Maruti Suzuki are also naturally located in Manesar.

It is important to keep in mind the importance of the scale of operations of Maruti and the former Hero Honda[28] as a factor determining and forming industrial relations in this area. Indeed, Barnes (2015) notes the manner in which the rise of Maruti Udyog's[29] dominance in the domestic passenger car industry transformed the automotive industry across NCR. It set the tone in production practices, workforce composition and industrial relations that came to be followed by other firms. Barnes (2015) traces the link between these changes instituted by Maruti and an apparent rise in industrial conflict in the past decades.

Early on Maruti adopted the Japanese concept of subcontracting to supplier firms and the Maruti management played a pioneering role in the informalisation of industrial labour (Barnes 2015). The firm in the 1980s and 1990s gradually introduced 'Japanese work organisation and culture', including concepts such as 'team work', 'job rotation' and 'continuous improvement' (Barnes 2015). These were eased into place with the help of productivity-linked pay incentives in 1988. However, he notes that in the late 1990s there was increased competition and management responded by making major changes to pay and work conditions. The falling share of workers' income became an issue raised by the then union, the Maruti Udyog Employee's Union. Barnes (2015) notes that this industrial conflict ended with the management defeating this union in January 2001 and establishing a company union- Maruti Udyog Kamgar Union (MUKU) which persists till date. Simultaneously, Suzuki also increased its equity share in the company, which allowed for greater control of decision-making in the company.

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[28] The joint-venture between Hero Motocorp and Honda was terminated in 2010.
[29] Maruti Udyog Ltd. was a flagship Government of India owned automobile manufacturing company. It was established in 1981 in Gurgaon and sold to the Japanese Suzuki Motor Corporation in 2003. The name of the company was changed to Maruti Suzuki India Ltd. in 2007.

Barnes (2015) further notes that after 2001 the company increasingly relied on outsourcing and used voluntary retirement schemes to drastically reduce the size of its permanent workforce. By 2004 it employed fewer permanent workers than it had in 1986-when the scale of production was significantly smaller. The informal workers who replaced the permanent workers earned about a quarter of their salary (Barnes 2015). Informal workers hired through labour contractors were frequently denied entitlements of permanent workers like productivity and holiday bonuses for attendance, dearness allowance, and allowance for rent, child education, transport and uniform cleaning (Barnes 2015).

This radical restructuring of workforces and conditions of work by firms in the NCR led to turbulence in the terrain of formation of formalised channels of representing workers interests-that is, trade unions. This vast population of informal workers ended up lying outside the ambit of the existing legal structure for industrial relations, which I go on to discuss in Chapters Three and Five.

Methodological Approaches to the Case Studies

National Hawker Federation

The NHF was formed in 2000-01, and with 1188 member unions,[30] it claims to be the largest federation of hawkers in India, with a presence in 28 states. Within Delhi, its membership comprises of several member unions and federations, while its Kolkata membership constitutes of the Hawker Sangram Committee (and its member unions). The HSC, formed in 1996, is a powerful federation of hawker unions in Kolkata. Its leadership speaks of the HSC as a trade

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[30] See the website of the NHF at http://www.nationalhawkerfederation.com/, accessed on 5 August 2020.

union and the organisation stays unaffiliated to political parties, though its member unions are free to do as they wish. The HSC was also a founding member of the NHF.

My engagement with the NHF began with the HSC. As mentioned in Chapter One, I came in contact with the HSC after witnessing an instance, in 2012, of how hawkers at several prominent markets and roads in Kolkata, including in my neighbourhood (on the EM Bypass), had faced brutal demolitions and eviction. They had turned to the HSC, and, keeping up a constant militant struggle on-site, won that fight against the evicting authorities, which in this case was the Kolkata Metropolitan Development Authority. Most managed to retain their space unchanged, or, in some cases, through freshly built official rehabilitation structures, though some did not. To put this victory in context-it is highly unusual for hawkers to firstly, successfully reoccupy sites they have been evicted from, and secondly, to build powerful, long term, formal unions like the HSC that manage to repeatedly win the fight for rights and space in the contemporary urban context in India, as I go on to discuss in Chapter Four. The engagement with the HSC prompted an expansion of the study into the NHF's Delhi membership, with the intended goal of developing an understanding of the ways and workings of each city's membership and leadership, issues faced by hawkers, as well as getting a glimpse of the workings of the federation (NHF) at the national level.

NHF Kolkata: Hawker Sangram Committee

My interactions with the HSC began as an ally in 2012, and then continued as a researcher when I undertook ethnographic fieldwork with them. I recognise there are methodological implications for such involvement in long projects such as this-I was present in my interactions with them sometimes as an ally and sometimes as a researcher though the lines between the two naturally began to blur once I officially decided to study the HSC's movement for my MPhil and PhD degrees. One complexity of such involvement is the obvious danger of

compromised responses from member hawkers, once I came to be recognised as being close to the HSC/NHF, and as someone who was endorsed by their leader Saktiman Ghosh. This is something I explicitly addressed in my MPhil dissertation, noting that there was no outright attempt to control or police responses by the central leadership, and that despite this risk, the responses and opinions articulated were adequately diverse to justify the approach (Lahiri 2013). On the other hand, an advantage of this kind of involvement was that it ended up facilitating greater access to its membership, for hawkers are rarely open to speaking with strangers (for good reasons!) and created a situation where the HSC/NHF invited me to internal meetings, national level consultations etc.

The process of putting together my field contacts began when, back in 2012, I noticed that the HSC had a list pinned to the notice board in their office titled 'Leaders of the Hawker Sangram Committee'. It was an MS Word document with names, areas of responsibility and contact numbers listed on it, and they very generously shared it with me so that I could carry out fieldwork. The list was not comprehensive-some names from the newer unions had not yet been added, some sites had more than one organiser listed, some contact numbers were missing. However, it had been enough to get started with, and I was able to put together the missing information as I carried out my fieldwork.

I spoke with hawkers and the site organisers from their vast network of over fifty member unions in Kolkata, with the central leadership of the HSC, including extensive conversations with their founder and General Secretary Saktiman Ghosh, participated in their events and internal meetings, amongst other forms of interactions. For material prior to 2012, I predominantly rely on secondary literature, including newspaper reports.

The first phase of research into the HSC's movement was written up for the dissertation I submitted towards my MPhil degree in 2013. Continuing that research for this project, I

extended the fieldwork to newer member sites within the city, followed fresh evictions and continued to follow the original sites and their unfolding stories. Using this, I revisited my reading, arguments and conclusions about the HSC in the city. My overall reading of the HSC's politics remains the same, with a little modification, which I incorporate in Chapter Four.

NHF Delhi

Chronologically speaking, my engagement with the NHF's Delhi presence succeeded my engagement with the HSC. Hence, inevitably, my readings of NHF Delhi didn't exist in a vacuum; rather I was constantly aware of the comparative presence of the HSC, whilst immersed in fieldwork. This carries a danger of my readings and arguments about NHF Delhi being compromised in that it never exists in isolation. However, I also believe this inadvertently ended up enriching my understanding of the federation structure of the NHF by providing a comparative glimpse of the presence of two very different memberships in two cities, within the same larger organisation, and its national level presence, form and politics. In writing the Delhi movement of the NHF I made the decision to keep the findings and readings in conversation with what emerged in Kolkata.

One might as well begin by asking: why study the NHF in Delhi at all? This would be a very valid question for Delhi does not represent strength of membership or militant history of struggle for the NHF. Unlike Kolkata, Delhi doesn't present as compelling a contemporary story of a hawkers' struggle and movement, nor do the city's hawkers have a history of a coherent political struggle the way Kolkata does.[31]

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[31] See (Bandyopadhyay 2016) for a history of struggle by Kolkata hawkers.

However, as the national capital, it is a node of power that makes it necessary for the NHF to establish a presence here. Additionally, as Jain (2013, 178) points out, Delhi is also a material and financial node of importance.

The NHF banners, by declaring a head office and a Delhi office demonstrate that the symbolism of its presence in Delhi is important for its self-fashioning, even though the movements in Kolkata, Ranchi, Hyderabad and Manipur, amongst others, are more frequently verbally cited as examples of strength by Saktiman Ghosh.

Like with the HSC, I went to Delhi in search of the story of patterns of membership within and the structure of the local chapter of the NHF. My point of entry into Delhi was through Saktiman Ghosh. I first met him at the Laxmi Nagar office of the NHF in Delhi in October 2013, where he introduced me to three organisers in Delhi. One of them headed a women hawker's association and two organised hawkers with disabilities.[32] A few more visits in later months led to interactions with the Delhi organisers, an introduction to and visiting cards and contact details of ten such organisers who I treated as my 'original contacts' in Delhi when I finally arrived in August 2014 for my formal field work.

Nine of them had hawker-related associations and/or federations of their own in Delhi, and one was floatingly associated with a few. Most were not hawkers themselves at that point of time. Some had been hawkers in the past, a few had a hawking stall at present, but from what I could gather, that was not their primary occupation and in some instances somebody else ran it for them. Also, interestingly, in light of the strong presence of left leadership within the NHF and the founding union HSC, eight of them were strongly associated with the BJP, with at least two of them being officially associated with the BJP.

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[32] The term they used, and the term the state used for them, via the vending permits issued to them, was 'handicapped'.

These core contacts eventually introduced me to other people who were either also associated with NHF in Delhi and attend NHF meetings and conduct NHF programmes or were leaders in their own non-NHF hawker associations.

A key feature of the Delhi structure during my fieldwork was its fluctuating membership. I write of this in greater detail in Chapter Four. By the time I returned for official fieldwork in August 2014, for instance, I found that one of my initial contacts was no longer an active part of the NHF. He said this was because there were evictions in the area he hawked and organised in, in a part of Lutyens' Delhi, following which lost his membership. He felt that other NHF leaders did not give appropriate support and solidarity in their moment of crisis, which disillusioned and upset him.

Two other contacts who I had spoken to in the first half of 2014 were in the process of setting up a new federation under the patronage of Anil Mittal (All Cells Coordinator, BJP, Delhi), when I made contact in September 2014. They too seem to have deliberately distanced themselves from the NHF, although neither they nor the NHF explicitly told me that ties had been severed.

Yet another contact, who had a relationship with the union of the two contacts mentioned in the preceding paragraph, and was an NHF Delhi post-holder was no longer in the picture by the end of August 2014.

Another NHF contact who helped set up the first substantial interview for me in August 2014 seemed to have had a falling-out with his site co-organiser as late as end-October 2014 and told me that he no longer had anything to do with the NHF. He came and went at multiple points after my fieldwork in Delhi ended too.

This kind of attrition forced me to modify my initial plan of how I had hoped to map its presence in Delhi: instead of identifying and speaking with its 51 member unions,[33] I ended up focussing on the core organisers, including some of the ones that eventually left, and those associations they led me to. I was hoping that these organisers would give me contact details of local leaders (i.e., situated in the markets in question) in unions in various areas, but that did not always happen. I was told that the local hawker leaders would not speak with me and/or that I would not be able to find my way to them unless I was physically introduced to them or taken there by the organiser. Thus, unlike Kolkata, my access to sites that were members of the NHF or had sections that were members, was always mediated through the core organisers, even in cases when the core organisers were not exclusively associated with or responsible for one particular site. My conversations with them almost always took place with them present. In most cases, this was because they had to take me from one location to another and there was no place like an office etc. for them to disappear into, while waiting for me to finish my conversations.

Further, it should be noted that I was unable to verify membership and meaningful presence in all the localities quoted by NHF Delhi leadership as having membership, i.e., the mentioned 51 member unions. It is only those conversations, and those localities which I actually was able to visit that I am able to speak of and about with any authority. However, the tenuous nature of Delhi affiliations that I witnessed in the short period of a year makes me hesitant to assert too strongly even about those sites. Owing to time constraints I was not able to repeatedly visit those sites for the full duration of my PhD, nor was my association with the Delhi membership as long and involved as my association with the Kolkata membership (HSC). How I read the

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[33] Fifty-one was the number of member associations with it then, according to its local leadership.

membership of the Delhi NHF, its movement and its politics, therefore, must come with the above caveats attached.

Factory Workers

The fieldwork sites at Okhla, Gurgaon, IMT Manesar and Faridabad all have planned industrial estates, with a cluster of informal workshops/home-based work that inevitably spring up around factories, as mentioned. At these sites I tried to ensure interactions (marked as 'personal conversation') and interviews (marked as 'interview' or 'group interview') across a diverse range of stakeholders. Fieldwork data collection was distributed across:

A) Thirty individual semi-structured and/or unstructured interviews with factory workers, union members who were factory workers, union members and activists who were not factory workers but full-time organisers and owners and upper management of factory businesses (mostly MSMEs) and members of an MSME industry association registered in Faridabad, and one official of the MSME industry association. The handful of MSME interviews and interactions were more out of a sense of curiosity, to see if anything interesting would come up. The choice of the MSMEs was both out of convenience- because I had found personal connections, I could use to request interviews- and because of the fact that structurally MSMEs play an important role in manufacturing in India. Some of these interviews ended up having multiple respondents who joined in the conversation, but I'm counting them as one interaction.

B) Six lengthy conversations with the editor of FMS, and others of the collective at Majdoor library in Autopin Jhuggi. Most of these were on Sundays which is when people are invited to walk in for conversations and chats, throughout the day. This invitation is explicitly extended in every copy of the FMS, along with the address and

phone number. Diverse groups of people can be expected on these occasions, such as workers, students, teachers, activists, artists amongst others.

C) Observations and conversations with workers, worker activists, friends of the FMS and other allies etc. at the distribution sites of the monthly publication of FMS in Okhla, Gurgaon, IMT Manesar and Faridabad. I participated in upwards of thirty distributions spread across the fieldwork period.

D) In places (largely in Chapter Six) I also draw from an earlier research (Lahiri 2010) which was fieldwork based. It looked at unionised and non-unionised women garment workers in factories in Chennai through interviews and group discussions translated to English in real time by a translator. I also draw from a 2013 General Assembly and international conference of the New Trade Union Initiative (NTUI) in Aluva, Kerala which I attended as a volunteer.

I had the maximum number of interviews in Manesar (10), followed by Udyog Vihar in Gurgaon (4), Faridabad (4), Dharuhera (2) and Okhla (3). The rest of the interviews were at miscellaneous locations with full time organisers and post holders of All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS), Indian Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU) and an activist, three owners/senior management personnel (two of them MSMEs and several interactions with other MSME owners at meetings organised by an MSME industry association) and one official of an MSME industry association.

In terms of how my conversations were distributed across unionised and non-unionised workers- I interacted with 16 non-unionised workers and 11 who were actively involved in unions, whether as a worker in a factory or as a full-time union organiser.

Most of the people I had personal interviews and interactions with I was able to connect with directly and indirectly through the FMS.[34] With respect to the union contacts, I reached out to some of them directly, and they put me in touch with other unions in the area. Some individuals agreed to speak with me when I directly approached them on their way to a shift. The last strategy was, understandably, the least successful of the three, although six workers very generously trusted me with their time and responses.

Through these interactions, coupled with observation and secondary literature, I attempted to arrive at an understanding of work and politics amongst factory workers in Delhi NCR, by reading against the grain. What did the steady informalising of factory workforces do to the experience of being a worker? What were some of the everyday experiences on the shop floor for workers? How had resistance manifested in factories in these areas from 2005-2016?[35] There hasn't been a particular trade-union voice that had gained the confidence of workers and/or dominated in any one of the four primary fieldwork locations in this period, nor across NCR as a whole. Thus, as mentioned, I was unable to study a particular union and its membership. Instead, my entry into the field ended up being through the Faridabad Majdoor Samachar.

Faridabad Majdoor Samachar

The FMS is a loose, non-organising collective that publishes a monthly workers' newspaper from Majdoor Library Autopin Jhuggi, Faridabad, which also doubles as the residence of its cofounder and editor. The newspaper is published in Hindi, with some English translations by friends and readers made available for readers over the internet. They have over the years also produced other publications, including but not limited to

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[34] That is, though some were a part of the collective or regular readers of the FMS, others were not a part of the collective and I met them at the distribution locations.

[35] I mention in Chapter Five that 2005 marked somewhat of a distinct point of departure from the point of view of militant struggles in the area.

Rosa Luxemburg's *Accumulation of Capital* (1990) (an introduction to and an abridged version of the text), *Majdoor Andolan Ki Ek Jhalak/A Glimpse into Workers' Movements* (1993), *A Ballad Against Work* (1996), *Reflections on Marx's Critique of Political Economy* (1997) and most recently, *A Glimpse of Social Churnings: attempts at conversational interactions during global Covid lockdowns* (September 2020) and *Fragments & Pathways for Imagining a Near Future* (November 2021).

The four-page newspaper had been in publication for more than 30 years.

It is the FMS that largely allowed the 'reading against the grain' because of the reports they carried. The format was such that the first page had an almost poetic editorial designed to provoke thought and debate drawing from content in the current issue, followed by three pages of first-person reports of workers at their factories (news, conversations, complaints of workers). These were collected in person once a month at all the locations (at a separate date from distribution). The editor would stand at the locations, and jot down first-person information and conversations that workers came up to him to give and have. Workers would also contact them over the phone and share stories and reports of what has been happening at their factories etc. Although I was unable to do a proper archival study of their material[36] this is certainly something that would be valuable to do at some point, because I wonder if any other single source has such a comprehensive documentation of incidents from factories in the NCR. This is probably a unique record of primary material available nowhere else, certainly not such a comprehensive record. Their documenting of these incidents is arguably invaluable.

Begun in 1982, the publication has undergone a few shifts in emphasis over the years, organically, as they allowed themselves to evolve with what they were newly learning from their interactions with factory workers. They document the shifts in their thinking and positions

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[36] I only read through issues from 2014, 2015, 2016 and a few issues from 2017.

on their blog, and I try and summarise that below from their 'About FMS' page (Faridabad Majdoor Samachar, n.d.).

The publication began with what they mention was a Leninist framework, by which I understand that they aligned with the idea that trade unions were workers' organisations with potentially revolutionary role to play, and focussed largely on Faridabad factory workers. Alongside the publication, they also had study circles and intervened in local industrial conflicts, which led to factory workers becoming an active part of the collective. However, they note that two years of experience in this belt, and interactions with various groups on the left (including European ones), [37] led them to question this understanding of trade unions, and after 26 issues they paused the publication, to take time to reflect.

They resumed the endeavour in 1986, and published their reflections in a work titled *Kamunist Kranti*. They noted that the thinking of left groups working with wage workers seemed 'stuck in the 1920s', and that they were out of touch and out of tune with contemporary workers, only concerning themselves with telling them what to do and not do, drawing from those older ideas. This phase of publication-during which they themselves saw the need to step out of their previous 'preach-teach' mode and adopt self-activity of workers as the 'axial position in Majdoor Samachar' by 1996 (i.e., an anti-activism stance)-saw pushback from 'union musclemen' who they note often snatched copies in an attempt to disrupt distribution of copies of FMS.

They arrived at this position through their interactions with factory workers, who, they note, were questioning representation even in the 1980s, i.e., when factories still employed large numbers of permanent workers. Following the changes after 1991, i.e., the event of liberalisation, when temporary workers began to predominate in factories, and factories saw

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[37] Their blog mentions the groups and political tendencies they interacted with.

re-structuring and technological advancements, the FMS contends that law and 'representation to control factory workers' (i.e., unions) began to lose power, with these temporary workers becoming an unmanageable force for managements, who struggled to control them.

They note that in the 1990-2000 period FMS was still largely concerned with 'defensive struggles' of permanent workers, privileging the framing of workers issues and industrial conflict around wages and conditions that existed in factories. They note that even though FMS had begun privileging workers voices in the post-2000 phase, as opposed to the top-down, instructing-the-worker mode, they continued to see and read these narratives in the worker-as-victim mode, highlighting the suffering of temporary workers. They did take note of and discuss some of the radical ruptures and potential that was beginning to be visible in this period, but only 'in fragmentary/convoluted form'.

What brought a shift was the radical 2011-12 Maruti Suzuki factory workers struggle in IMT Manesar which, they state, 'brought to the fore the radical potentials in the present and the radical ruptures taking place as a matter of daily fact at every workplace.' FMS mirrored this transformative moment in its position, and left the worker-victimhood focus behind. In the light of the Maruti workers struggle, and its domino-like effect-for a brief while-in the industrial area around it, something shifted forever, and it effectively gave the FMS a different way of looking at things, training their sight and gaze at a more politically productive perspective.

Not only was the evolving FMS stance and perspective organic and drawing from direct, meaningful engagement with contemporary workers, their distribution network too grew organically. They stayed within Faridabad for several years, and were drawn into the Okhla industrial area (post-2000), Gurgaon (2007), IMT Manesar (2009) when workers in these areas requested and convinced them into distributing at these locations. They note that towards the end of 2015 the use of the internet as a means of distribution and communication increased,

prompted by the growing use of smartphones by workers. Workers now started circulating copies of FMS through Whatsapp, and its consistently, steadily growing readership jumped drastically.

They note that, over the years, the readers of FMS, who were mostly factory workers, had more and more become the source of its distribution as well-worker readers would come collect copies for distribution at their factories in various industrial areas in the NCR, and also circulate soft copies over their smart phones. One of my two interviews in Dharuhera came about because a security guard at a factory in Udyog Vihar Phase I, a regular reader of FMS, had shared a copy with the Dharuhera security guard worker who enjoyed and resonated with the publication so much that he got in touch with them. Unlike some activist literature which I've seen distributed amongst workers in both Delhi and Kolkata, only to be put away or ignored, what was interesting is that in contrast it was very common for FMS readers to either immediately start browsing through the current issue on their way to their shift, or carefully, almost lovingly, fold it into their shirt pockets, presumably to be read soon. While some first-time readers would take a copy out of curiosity, or mistake it for pamphlets advertising jobs etc. and discard it,[38] it was very visually evident that FMS had real, engaged readers who eagerly looked forward to every new issue. There is no subscription fee, though it welcomes contributions, and I witnessed many readers making unsolicited contributions at most distributions (ranging from Rs. 1 to Rs. 10, and occasionally even more).

I began with conversations with the FMS, and then requested if I could be present and help distribute the newspaper with them at the various sites. The areas I end up focussing on- Okhla, Gurgaon, Manesar and Faridabad- came to be because these were some of the main sites of

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[38] After distributions, those distributing would often walk around picking up un-damaged copies from the ground, so as to not waste copies.

distribution at that time.[39] By default I ended up spending a lot of time here, with them, and by myself. I came into contact with several factory workers who were either a part of the collective or existed in its orbit, as occasional distributors, or regular readers etc., who generously granted interviews outside of the regular group conversations taking place. Through the collective I was able to make contact with some other factory workers (including the two Dharuhera conversations) who granted me interviews.

I end this section with a brief visual picture of what one of those distributions looked like, drawing from my fieldnotes-

> *When you get off at the Sarita Vihar metro station, walk backwards towards Apollo/Jasola on the service road to the left of the main road. At the point where the flyover begins to rise off the main road, there is a small* Shani Mandir *on your left and a narrow unmetalled road. If you follow it till you reach the level crossing, you will find, once a month, volunteers standing between 5-6 railway tracks holding copies of an independent workers' newspaper -Faridabad Majdoor Samachar (FMS).*

> *This is one of the major entry points to the Okhla industrial area and thousands of workers cross it on the way to work every day. I was there on a public holiday and yet workers kept streaming past between 8-10AM. The tide would ebb and flow according to the movement of the level crossing. Every now and then a passenger train or a longer, slower moving goods train would force workers to wait. Facial expressions and body language did not seem to betray a sense of rush or anxiety to reach work on time.*

> *Many, while making the crossing, would ask for papers and the editor of the paper, would tend to ask them which factories they worked in, while giving the paper. Most*

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[39] Soon after my fieldwork ended, distribution had extended to NOIDA, Ghaziabad, Sonipat, through readers who took initiative to distribute copies near their own factories in these areas.

answered, some didn't. One took a moment to leisurely but dramatically spit out betel juice, clean his mouth, and then answer. Interestingly, many would not know the names of their companies and mention instead a plot number or gesture with their heads to say "udhar kaam karte hain" ("I work there").

Some were regular readers and greeted him. Some mentioned problems or made statements.

- *One worker mentioned that there was no* talmel *(congenial collaboration) between workers in her company and people tended to appeal to the management directly for relief.*

- *A male worker complained that in his company employees were terminated every four months.*

- *Another made fun of unions by saying that every now and then union* walas *come, put down their* jhandas *(flags) and give speeches.*

- *Four young boys took the paper to a side and read aloud its contents. One of them said, "let us read this in our room". Another said, "Why go to work at all?" The third one objected- "I'm late, I must go to work." The fourth broke in with "*Arre *what will happen if you don't go for two days?" And they all laughed.*

It was not just these boys, quite a few others read the paper on the spot, lingering by their cycles or on foot. Others would carefully fold the paper, tuck it into a shirt pocket or bicycle handlebar and continue on. Also present on these railway lines was a garment hawker (some weeks later: two), and workers going to their shifts or returning from night shifts would bargain and buy sweaters and socks. There are footfalls of many different kinds: women collecting religious alms, papad *and other street snack*

sellers on their way inside the industrial area, as well as what looked like traders from

the hills with piles of cloth strapped to their back.

The papers are distributed till copies are exhausted or the last shifts of the morning,

usually garment factories, have all gone in. This routine is repeated monthly at all the

other distribution spots.

Ethical and Methodological Knots: Negotiating the Field as a Researcher

This research was undertaken through ethnographic fieldwork supported by secondary literature. Data was recorded primarily in fieldnotes, jotted on the spot for interviews, and longer notes written up from memory later for everything else, along with audio recordings, when permitted, and some photographs. I used observation, semi-structured and unstructured interviews with individuals and groups, and free flowing conversations. The latter was prioritised as far as possible. This is because, as I saw it, the form of the interview itself inevitably carries a pre-supposed narrative that it is trying to ascertain. The answer that an interview question can elicit is frequently implied in the question itself- it indicates to one's interviewee or interlocuter the direction one wants to go and the narrative framework one is favouring. If one's questions are about work conditions and acts of resistance, for instance, one is setting up the direction of conversation flow, even if it ends up being a semi-structured or unstructured conversation. Unstructured conversations-such as casual chats at tea stalls- have more scope to yield 'uninfluenced' responses, and responses that exceed the unsaid boundaries of the conversation that would otherwise be set-up by an interview question. This influenced my decision to not make interviews the dominant form of 'information gathering'; rather, I favoured group conversations, casual *baat-cheet* (conversations) and observations from my ethnographic presence in the 'field' as much as I could. I tried to observe and read as much, if

not more, through non-formal, non-verbal ways of speaking, as through formally requested one-on-one interviews, which were either semi-structured, or unstructured and free-flowing. However, I was not as proficient at doing things this way as I would have liked to be. The limitations of time often meant that I had less freedom than I would have liked to interact without the use of pointed questions. That said, in looking back, without regretting my decision, I also realise that tightly structured interviews yield more uniform and detailed information than what I was able to gather.

As a researcher, there were a few ethical challenges that one had to negotiate along the way. A significant challenge was both a question of ethics and a question of method. Like many dissertations, writing this dissertation too was a process of picking through notes and audio recordings, and picking up scraps of words, fragments of memories and figuring out how to place them and where to place them so to be able to build a narrative, a thesis. So many hawkers, factory workers and organisers gave me their valuable time, giving me their undivided attention sometimes for hours in the middle of a busy working day, or on their days off. There were so many interesting stories that emerged from each site that it feels as if one has short-changed them by choosing to write about only those aspects that fit the limited framework of the chapters. Choosing which parts to write about and which parts to put aside for another day is not just a methodological challenge but also an ethical one because it puts the researcher in an unfair power position over the source of their subject material. I reflect on this at greater length in the postscript after Chapter Seven.

Another challenge lay in how to think of my participation at NHF events, which continued to pose a conundrum. My position might have shifted to that of a researcher after my initial contact, but my closeness to the HSC and NHF and the tone of my initial involvement made detached observation very difficult indeed. It took several months before I was able to find a comfortable middle ground that allowed me to retain my sense of investment in the success of

the NHF's actions while simultaneously allowing me to step back and make relatively detached observations.

I was similarly invested in the factory workers' case. When I began this project, I was looking for instances of independent trade unions that had successfully made strides in negotiating the thornier challenges of organising workers. I had looked at this research as a way of equipping myself to be useful to the trade union movement, within which I had planned to work, after completion of the degree. Needless to say, being exposed to the perspective of the FMS- and the consequent fieldwork findings- disrupted my understanding of the union movement, as well as that plan, drastically. While I never became involved with the FMS to the degree I became involved with the NHF, the productive shock of the FMS perspective was such that I had to learn how to not lose myself in this new perspective and framing which I found extremely convincing. This was additionally complicated by the fact that such a perspective had implications on the ground, in the messy business of knowing how to engage in a politics of change; it was not just a matter of arriving at a 'correct' theoretical position. In this instance, it was nearly 2020 before I was able to arrive at a reflective, detached distance for a critical appraisal of what my field material was telling me from both case studies.

The challenges and conundrums that this research gave rise to continued to evolve till the very last months of this project. The cases being studied kept evolving, and so did I, which very much keeps this a work in progress. The changing cognitive framework from which I was approaching this research is reflected on further in the postscript to this dissertation, and is visible in the writing and framing of the chapters, as mentioned in Chapter One. This chapter, which lays out the methodological framework of this dissertation and introduces the cases, concludes on that note and feeds into Chapter Three which sets out the context against which the two cases and informal workers' politics are read and interpreted.

<div align="center">**Chapter Three**</div>

<div align="center">**Setting the Context**</div>

Introduction

This chapter seeks to provide the background and context for informal workers' politics within the framework of this research by addressing key thematic areas. The discussion to follow is divided into five sections and attempts to set up the dissertation's arguments that follow in subsequent chapters.

The first section looks at how the iteration of informal worker that this dissertation focusses on is a contemporary phenomenon, produced and proliferated by post-Fordist regimes of work, and living and working in urban spaces that have been and are being structurally transformed by neoliberal policies, aesthetics and imaginations. The chapter discusses both these processes and notes that neither of them unfolded as 'perfectly' as they were designed to and planned as, which is useful to keep in mind while reading the scope for and actual instances of resistance by informal workers experiencing both.

The second section defines two key terms from the case studies, that of the 'hawker' and 'workman', and explains why it chooses to see the politics of hawkers and factory workers as expressions of informal workers' politics.

The third section engages with the Indian state's relationship with the informal sector and informal workers. It does this through a discussion on the evolution of the place of labour in state narrative and nation building, and the way laws framed for labour mirror this logic and trajectory.

The fourth section engages with the question of politics of organising that Chapters Four and Five focus on. It first spells out how this dissertation reads struggles, noting that I came into this research predisposed to favour a union framing for informal workers' politics. Since the fieldwork findings necessitated a rethinking of that, this is then followed by a discussion on the history behind the predominance of this framing within labour studies. This is further followed by a discussion on the mainstream Indian labour movement and its limitations, followed by a critique of the pro-union framing.

The fifth and final section engages with the relationship with work, and introduces the dissertation's argument that a worker's politics stems from their threefold relationship with work, i.e., their relationship with work at the worksite, and the social and selfhood aspects of work. This is elaborated upon in Chapter Six.

Post-Fordism and Urban Transformations

Many of the issues this research engages with- such as an increase in informal labour, disappearing work security and changing ways of political organising by workers- emerge in the middle of a transformational period globally. These include transformations in the world of work, and urban transformations in India. In this section I draw from literature to highlight the nature of changes in the world of work that began from the 1970s and intensified, especially in India, from the 1990s, discuss the shift from Fordist to Post-Fordist production processes and neoliberal changes to urbanisation in India. This is the terrain that shapes the experience of work for hawkers as well as factory workers, which this dissertation goes on to discuss.

The shift to post-Fordism

The shift in the way global capital operated from the 1970s onwards accelerated, deepened and worsened the pressures on the poor, and on workers, resulting in a proliferation of informal

workers worldwide. Referred to as a period of globalisation, the end of the 1970s saw growing global integration of markets-except for labour markets- and a global shift towards economic liberalism and neo-liberal policies (Harriss 2010). Unlike earlier, such as during the period of colonisation, when capital relied on the nation state to nurture it, sustain it and pave its way, the political economy no longer appeared to be bound by the nation state and the relationship consequently changed between capital and the state (Munck 2010). There was now a de-coupling of the capital-nation state dyad as technological revolutions allowed for increased fluidity of capital. The nation state aided it, but did not limit financial flows and networks, nor production. It could now cross borders in an instant with the click of a button. As multi-national corporations grew, the production process became global, scattered and controlled by flexible global capital. This led to a fragmentation of the factory space which went on to contribute towards the production of the informal worker.

Concurrently manufacturing and industry transitioned from the Fordist era to post-Fordism. As is well known, the Fordist model of production, introduced by industrialist and auto-mogul Henry Ford just before the First World War, became dominant in the period between the 1940s and late 1970s. It was characterised by two key aspects: one was the actual production process, with the innovation of the semi-automatic assembly line and a doubling of wages for an 8-hour work day, and the second was the desire to produce a particular kind of new age worker who earned well, stayed away from unions and participated as a consumer in the American economy. These led to a sharp rise in labour productivity and tremendous growth in consumption. Peet and Hartwick (2009, 178) note that the Fordist period was also a time of compulsory collective bargaining between capital and labour, 'the hegemony of large companies', and Keynesian limited state control over the economy. Policies also ensured job stability through 'a class compromise or social contract' with workers earning wages that were adequate to support families (ibid., 178). This economic model led to rapid economic growth,

especially during the post-War period. What began in the United States of America was soon exported and internalised in other advanced capitalist countries after World War II, where the linking of mass production and mass consumption helped to steadily raise economic growth rates. The post-war Fordist model seemed to be 'inward' looking; as Peet and Hartwick (2009, 179) mention, international trade was not as important as the transformation of production processes linked to the expansion of internal markets.

This gave way to post-Fordism, also referred to as Toyotism or flexible accumulation, which began when the economy hit a turning point in the 1970s with the worldwide economic crises, gaining dominance and hegemony in the latter part of the twentieth century. It led to an internationalisation of production, state austerity programs, greater unemployment, and an eventual crisis of demand.

Post-Fordism was starkly different in that production took a turn away from mass-produced generic goods to diverse goods aimed at different groups of consumers and designed to respond in quick time to changing consumer demands and preferences. The turnaround time for new product lines to enter the market was very quick. Peet and Hartwick (2009, 179) point out that companies switched their investments from the mass-productions of single items and started building flexible systems of labour and infrastructure that could respond quickly to the market demand of the moment. Large factory complexes that housed the entire-or almost entire-production process gave way to production hubs along a lengthy supply chain that culminated in mother plants where assembly of product was carried out. 'Just-in-time manufacturing' became the norm where companies stopped the practice of keeping excess inventory. Parts required for assembly of a product would arrive literally just in time to be added to the product being assembled at the mother plant from its various suppliers along the supply chain, sometimes scattered across the globe. With manufacturing being treated as a service, i.e., catering strictly to the exact demands of the market, as opposed to earlier production models

where goods were manufactured in surplus or in anticipation of demand, companies no longer needed to retain a sizeable, stable workforce on their rolls. It was now possible, pragmatic and economically viable for them to retain a small core of stable, permanent workforce, if at all they did- companies now sometimes did away with permanent workers altogether. This kind of flexible production was only made possible by the role technology played in the production process and flexible labour market arrangements that allowed for a lowering of costs of parts production. The latter meant that, increasingly, flexible production had a geographical aspect to it: production began to be re-routed from advanced industrialised (Fordist) centres to newly industrialising countries of the global south, especially Asia. This was also a movement from 'expensive' unionised workforces in the global North to cheap non-unionised workforces in the global South. This production paradigm has been increasing income inequality globally and producing historically high levels of unemployment and vulnerable employment (Chhachhi 2014).

It needs to be pointed out, however, that there are challenges and barriers to perfect flexible accumulation, and post-Fordism does not function as unproblematically as it is often made out to be. Fieldwork conversations highlighted how this production model is not always able to respond to changes as perfectly as thought, which has implications for workers' resistance and the arguments this dissertation makes. This will be discussed in Chapter Five.

The fragmentation of the production process is often spoken of in terms of how it has benefitted capital and employers at the cost of workers and labour movements. For instance, a senior AITUC leader told me how the ancillarisation of companies that started in the 1970s ended the liability of factories towards permanent workers and simultaneously increased their profit margins because they now bought cheaper from ancillaries but continued to sell at prices as if everything was still made within the same single unit of a factory, like earlier (interview, April 2017). However, in my fieldwork there were some suggestions that it might not be all rainbows

and sunshine for companies financially, as is frequently assumed and that in some cases the violations of pay and benefits might perhaps be 'necessary' in certain situations. I draw this tentative inference from conversations on wages with company managements in the MSME sector and workers, such as one in Okhla where a factory worker reported that his employer, the owner of a small factory, had told his employees that his company would go out of business if he paid legal wages and benefits (group conversation, Okhla, December 2015). That is, it wasn't solely a matter of 'choice'-it was possible that some companies would struggle to pay for permanent workforces or even pay their mixed workforces properly, in the present structure. Put another way, in the present industrial context, not all companies are necessarily financially viable (though this is not to say none or most aren't). [40] There might be a possibility that many companies are only able to stay viable in this structure through these violations and defaults on payments. This implicates the entire structure of manufacturing because of the fragmentation of the supply chains- all companies need the entire chain, right down to its smallest units. The whole, so to speak, rests on a precarious fragility, frequently disguised, which lay starkly exposed during the covid lockdowns globally in 2020. This fragmentation process arguably hurt not just workers, which is often all we focus on, but manufacturing itself.

Some of the other challenges faced within this production model because of fragmentation and the low inventory keeping policy include the following. Fieldwork conversations revealed that buyers often delay payments to suppliers (i.e., vendor companies) down the chain, with even Tier 1 vendor companies facing delayed payments. According to an MSME industry association official I spoke with, this is a culture that exists and is a standard practice for all domestic orders (interview, July 2016). However, the biggest companies are apparently somewhat better in this matter, having a fixed payment cycle of 90 days (interview, July 2016).

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[40] It would only be possible to verify this with a closer analysis of the financials of companies, which this study is unable to do.

A seasoned middle-aged factory worker in Faridabad told me that delayed payments are also a form of exerting control. Drawing from his experiences at the auto-parts company he was presently employed at, he said that if a company places an order for three months' worth of parts, it pays for one month and withholds two. What this ends up doing is if the company that ordered the part goes out of business, the dependent vendor companies will as well since they cannot recover that amount (interview, July 2017).

There are also geographical limits to flexibility of location. Given the clustering effect of large-scale industries-i.e., large scale industries attracting smaller industries around it that supply to it and form a part of its supply chain-certain factories and plants are less flexible compared to others on the matter of easily relocating. The automobile industry is an example of that. One of the Tier 1 vendor companies[41] I spoke to mentioned having heard that at that point in 2016 two states were offering the best incentives to companies in India- Assam and Jammu &Kashmir. However, it didn't matter to them because neither of those two states had automobile manufacturing industries. For them, proximity to auto OEMS (Original Equipment Manufacturer) was very important because automobile mother plants relied on supplies received in the morning for what would be assembled in that day's evening shift. This, for instance, was the practice at Maruti. Even the vendor companies kept at most a few days' worth of inventory-this company capped inventory at 3-4 days' worth (interview, July 2016). [42]

What this effectively also means is that rapid transit is one of the most important factors of post-Fordist production. If logistics on that end collapse or are held hostage by workers, all production is likely to be brough to a grinding halt for a significant amount of time. What's more, delays in delivery are financially penalised. This particular company, which relies on

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[41] This company had a plant in Udyog Vihar, Gurgaon, and had originally come up to supply parts to Maruti Gurgaon. It had eventually diversified to producing for other automobile companies as well.
[42]They also had vendors of their own, who had vendors of their own and so on and so forth, all keeping a bare minimum of inventory.

road transport to send parts to Maruti and other companies, mentioned that they are penalised for delays over 30 minutes, even if there are traffic snarls.

Politically speaking, post-Fordist practices and changing dynamics of factory work, discussed in Chapter Five, are producing a rising wave of worker resistance globally, often on the matter of working conditions, wages, demands for social security and housing. This upsurge has taken two forms, as Chhachhi (2014, 898) notes: there are incidents of 'gross violations, public uprisings and spontaneous assemblies' which 'may well be evanescent' and the process of formal organizing by 'newly recognized workers on the margins'. This research looks at both kinds, and discusses them in Chapters Four and Five. Chhachhi (2014, 897) notes that this wave of protests and organizing is further driving capital from sites where conflict is high to newer, more vulnerable sites of production such as Bangladesh, Vietnam, Cambodia and is leading to talk of 'a new working class'.[43] These political responses are better understood alongside the context provided by the urban transformations that have been taking place, which the next subsection goes on to discuss.

Urban transformations in India

The Indian city has been undergoing rapid transformation in the past two decades, as it has sought to become 'world class'. Roy (2011) notes that it was the liberalisation process in the 1990s in India that began to bring state policy attention to Indian cities. Missing in the Nehruvian development model, a vision now began to take shape of what Indian cities ought to become. This period leads to the formation of a 'national common sense' about world class cities and in 2005, the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM) was

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[43] Formal recognition of some kinds of workers within the informal economy by the ILO, via the adoption of the conventions on Home Work (1996) and Decent Work for Domestic Workers (2011), has played a part in this expansion of recognition and understanding of who all constitute the working classes, as have processes of organising by many kinds of workers on the margin, such as sex workers, demanding labour rights.

launched which sought to concretise this vision through neoliberal models of urban planning (Roy 2011, 261). As Roy (2011) points out, the JNNURM set out the need for investments in urban infrastructure and yoked India's economic future to the urban sector.

In this period of rapid urbanisation, existing cities were struggling to cope, infrastructurally, as 90 million people became newly urban between 2001-11 (World Bank 2013, 1). The urbanisation pattern was such that a 50-kilometre[44] economic shadow of India's seven largest cities covered 1.1 percent of the entire land area in India, but contained 92 million people and 18 percent of the national employment (World Bank 2013, 31). By 2030, according to one estimate, another 250 million people are expected to make cities their homes, and cities could come to account for 70% of the nation's GDP (World Bank 2013, 77).

It can be pointed out here that there are definitional and measurement issues regarding what constitutes urban areas in India. World Bank (2013, 24) points out that such definitions in India have not been updated in over fifty years and that state governments might have different criteria for definition and measurement. It also points out that when areas expand, municipal boundaries tend to be slow to be redrawn. This is for various reasons, including the reluctance of local politicians to do so, since the reclassification to the urban might adversely impact their jurisdiction and power. This leaves many areas on the edges of 'large metropolitan areas', which have attracted people and businesses over decades, with 'urban characteristics' but which are officially classified rural (World Bank 2013, 24). As the World Bank report mentions, this creates a disjunction between what is 'urban' and what is 'municipal'.

Tracing patterns of economic and industrial growth, World Bank (2013, 38) notes, as mentioned in Chapter Two, that urban cores of large metropolitan areas/cities in India-defined as within 10 kms from the centre- are getting deindustrialised whilst its peripheries-with urban

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[44] 50 kilometres measured from city centre.

features but not always officially deemed urban because of restrictive definitions-are experiencing a 'manufacturing boom'. Some of my case study areas fall in such periphery areas, and issues that result from that emerge in subsequent discussions in Chapters Four and Five. These include governance issues, and how the specific form of industrial spaces that emerge in these areas are different from older industrial spaces. More sophisticated industries and thirty percent of India's export manufacturing jobs are also concentrated within 50 kms from the core of large cities. These include manufactured products in vehicles, pharmaceuticals, industrial machinery, electrical and electronic equipment, in which India has significant global market share.

This urban expansion and restructuring, coupled with the increasing informalisation of work, leads to a significant increase of migrants of two kinds. There is, first, a sizeable movement of rural migrants to urbanised areas, as Roy (2011) points out. And, second, even within urbanised areas there are always workers who keep moving within the same urban area owing to, amongst other factors, slum demolitions, displacement of industry and the Sisyphean task of searching for work, as my fieldwork revealed.

A consequence of this is that the urban space becomes a key arena in which politics is formulated and plays out. The changing imagination of the urban space naturally impacts the way the state reacts to, relates with and governs informality, and also the relations between different urban populations groups and stakeholders. One emergent feature key to the story here has been the strengthening of forms of middle-class politics around concerns of 'consumer-citizens' and the weakening claims of the urban poor to the city. I discuss this below.

Scholars have asserted that neoliberal urbanisation shaped aesthetic and consumption aspirations, in turn driving policy and governance. The middle-class voice and its purported

interests came to be particularly prominent as the vehicle through which these new aspirations and desires were conveyed and justified. This middle class is a new middle class that emerged with economic liberalization, classified based on a '*culture of consumerism*' rather than *income* (emphasis mine) (Fernandes 2004,2006 cited in Jain 2013, 172). An income-based classification would include 'rural farmers, shopkeepers, and small traders', but instead, this new middle class ends up referring to those who 'work for foreign banks, multinational companies, speak English, and consume modern day commodities such as cars, televisions, and cell phones' (Jain 2013, 173). She adds that this new social class becomes an aspirational reference point, that '…the new middle class 'serving as an ideal social class with fluid boundaries tempts other groups to adapt in terms of lifestyle and cultural practices in order to get access to this new category' (Jain 2013, 185).

This classification of a middle class based solely on a culture of consumption is fascinating for what it allows: it successfully shifts the focus from broadening income inequality to an ever more seemingly accessible consumer culture. This has obvious political consequences, and allows for, for instance, articulations like Ram's, an interlocuter from the field, in which he considers working folks like him middle class, and anybody who pays income tax as 'upper class'.[45] This is what arguably allows him to attach faith to the *chai-wala* (tea-seller) narrative that India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi successfully peddled during his election campaign for the 2014 win of the NDA government, believing it offered people like him a route to success and security. It gives an illusion of attainability, successfully subduing that reality that, with poverty wages and little scope for secure, gainful employment, it is out of the reach for most. Politically this has been very convenient for the NDA government, which has suggested, many times, since their win in 2014, and amidst a severely deteriorating employment scenario and

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[45] Ram's story is recounted in Chapter Six in a section on desire and ambition in working class lives.

job market, that people should just help themselves, take charge of their livelihoods like '*chai-wala* Modi' and that selling *pakodas* is a form of employment.[46],[47]

As Jain (2013) points out, this process of production of the new middle class is directly linked to the state-led restructuring that has been unfolding since the event of economic liberalisation in 1991. This process has been rendering many formally secure jobs insecure through the gradual abolishing of permanent positions, rendering swathes of workers jobless or in a perpetual state of temporary employment/unemployment/in the process of cobbling together self-generated livelihood options like hawking-they are not the gainers of these state-led reforms, but the infection of the aspirational lifestyle of the new middle class is all-pervasive and it impacts them too.

This strain of politics feeds into the matter of the urban poor within cities. Ramanathan (2006) has shown how the state's attitude to the claims of the urban poor is reflected in the judiciary's evolving stance on shelter, housing and the urban poor. She shows that the court goes from an 'activist' period, particularly in the 1980s, when claims of the urban poor were seen as needing to be resolved in a manner reflecting India's constitutional values,[48] to a period post-2000s when the courts come to treat public land as essentially privately owned by the state, and the poor, living and earning livelihoods on it, as encroachers.

She notes for instance how in the earlier Public Interest Litigations (PIL) filed by slum and pavement dwellers, especially in the famous *Olga Tellis* (1985) case, the courts, while not being unequivocal about including the right to housing and shelter within fundamental rights, did insist on rehabilitation in a manner so as to minimise the impact on their livelihood. The streets

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[46]See India Today Webdesk (2018) and Mastakar (2019).

[47] The intention here being not so much to validate and protect *pakoda* selling hawkers, of course, but to wash their hands off responsibility for the deteriorating employment market and job prospects.

[48] For instance, judgements would take into account and explicitly mention that India is a welfare state and that the word 'socialist' is included in the preamble to the constitution.

could still be cleared in the interests of 'public order' but it was to be counter-balanced by the right to constitutional existence of the urban poor. Ramanathan (2006) goes on to note that by the 1990s the definition of public interest began to change, with the courts focussing on corruption, misuse of discretion in the exercise of public power etc. along with a version of environmentalism that Baviskar (2003, 90) terms bourgeois environmentalism. As Ramanathan (2006) says, the original constituency of the PIL shifts. The stance of the courts on resettlements becomes more reluctant and grudging, seeing resettlements as a burden on the public exchequer, as a form of reward for 'bad behaviour'. Ramanathan (2006, 3194) notes this was the beginning of the de-legitimising of the urban poor who were 'cast as 'trespassers' and profiteering on public land'. The courts focussed on slum creation, over slum demolition, fuelling and reflecting (middle class) fears of the city being flooded by poor migrants who create filth in the areas they live in. Neoliberal urbanisation had caused an increase in rural-urban migration, but the city shapers wanted migrant workers to function as invisible labour. The labourer is not welcome to stay at the end of a day of work, they need to come to work and then preferably disappear at the end of the day.

This trajectory can perhaps be seen reflected in significant cases pertaining to hawkers and hawking rights. Joshi (2018) notes that the first published case regarding hawkers and their right to sell was that of *Pyare Lal etc. vs. New Delhi Municipal Committee and anr*. (1967). The Court in that case held that 'no person carrying on the aforesaid business of selling cooked food has any fundamental right to carry on street vending particularly in a manner which creates unsanitary and unhygienic conditions in the neighbourhood.' Following that several cases were filed, with more favourable judgements appearing in that decade of the 1980s,[49] conditionally recognising that hawkers needed to be accommodated (Sundaram 2008). Perhaps the most

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[49]See *Bombay Hawkers' Union and Others vs BMC and Others,* 1985, *Gulamali Gulamnabi Shaik vs Municipal Commissioner,* 1985 and *Municipal Corporation of Delhi vs Gurnam Kaur,* 1989.

famous is the landmark judgement of 1989 in the *Sodan Singh vs New Delhi Municipal Committee* (1989) case which led to a remarkable redefinition of footpaths. It held that hawkers and squatters have a fundamental right to carry on business on the public street subject to regulation. Justice Sharma of the three-Judge bench contended that the right of a hawker to transact business while going from place to place had been recognised in India for a long time and that, even if regulated, it could not be denied. Street trading was recognised as a fundamental right.

The Sodan Singh Judgement led to a National Policy for Urban Street Vendors formulated in 2004 by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Policy Alleviation, Government of India. A second national policy was released in 2009 which superseded the 2004 policy. In Lahiri (2013) I argue that the 2004 policy, created soon after UPA I came into power, as a part of their promise for a common minimum programme, laid more stress on protection of hawkers and their rights whereas the 2009 policy, which was the year UPA II, shorn of the weight of the Left, came into being, focused a lot more on regulation and the creation of hawking zones. The policies were followed by what eventually became the 2014 Act, which laid greater emphasis on even more regulation and less protection. I argue that the changes wrought by time bear out Ramanathan's (2006) thesis and reflect the changing socio-economic impulses and priorities of the state. That said, it is to be noted that the urban poor constantly undermine the bourgeois dream of re-making the city through resistance and their politics and struggles (Baviskar 2003, 96).

Definitions: Classifying the Hawker and the Factory Worker

The section below elaborates on the definitions of 'hawker' and 'workman', both terms important to the fieldwork discussions and arguments about politics of hawkers and factory workers to follow in Chapters Four, Five and Six. It also explains why this dissertation chooses

to consider the politics of both hawkers and factory workers as examples of informal workers' politics.

Class definitions and boundaries have historically not been static; ambiguities and definitional shifts have always occurred when newer occupations have come up. Given the transformations in the world of work and global growth of informal workers across sectors and classes, the definitional issue has continued playing out on the ground, especially for the past 30-40 years, illustrating and highlighting how who a 'worker' is remains a political question, in flux.

While the classification of the factory worker as 'worker' is never challenged, the question might be asked: how do informal factory workers fit into pre-existing legal definitions in India of who a 'workman' is? I define this below because it is of fundamental importance to understanding the way factory workers' politics and struggles are unfolding on the ground in India today. I argue in this dissertation that the politics of informal factory workers are greatly shaped by the fact that they are in practice denied the status of 'workman', and therefore left out of traditional unions. Secondly, what of hawkers? I argue that hawkers, within the framework of this discussion, reflect what Chhachhi (2014) and other scholars identify as self-defined/newly recognised workers, within the informal sector. The discussion below unpacks what this dissertation understands by the term 'hawker' and which kinds of hawkers are a part of formally organised movements like the NHF in India. I suggest that contemporary articulations of political struggles of both factory workers and hawkers arise from the transformations discussed in the section above, and form a part of these new emerging workers' struggles across the world.

Defining the street vendor/hawker

> "… a person engaged in vending of articles, goods, wares, food items or merchandise of everyday use or offering services to the general public, in a

street, lane, sidewalk, footpath, pavement, public park or any other public place or private area, from a temporary built up structure or by moving from place to place and includes hawker, peddler, squatter and all other synonymous terms which may be local or region specific…"

-**Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014**

It is pertinent to first clarify how this project defines the street vendor, or rather, what it holds central to the idea of the 'hawker'. At the very outset it is useful to point out that the terms 'street vendor' and 'hawker' are frequently understood differently in various global contexts. In India, however, they mean the same thing and are used interchangeably,[50] with the latter term being preferred amongst my fieldwork respondents and by the NHF. Hence, to avoid confusion, the term 'hawker' has been used throughout this dissertation.

I've noted in Lahiri (2013) that there is a certain fluidity to and diversity within the occupation that defies easy classification, both in terms of definition and by way of fixing a class position. The 2014 Act, as can be seen from above, takes into account the full range of hawking and its definition is too wide to be specific, even as its imagination of the hawker remains limited (mentioned briefly below). The way one resolves this-i.e., the definition and class position of hawkers- has consequences in terms of whether they can be considered informal workers or not. Perspectives vary on this, and in Lahiri (2022) I offer four points that might be useful to keep in mind while thinking this issue through.

Firstly, as mentioned in Chapter One, the secure, formal worker with well-defined and established rights within stable jobs is disappearing, and insecure, informal workers are

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[50]See Bhowmik (2006).

proliferating in both formal and informal sectors.[51] Thus one now needs to re-examine the formal worker/informal worker divide itself, forcing a potential reframing of the problem of organising informal workers. However, that said, hawkers remain a significant occupational group even within a very traditional (binary) understanding of the informal sector, and their acts of organising collectively and formally can be seen as examples of the emerging and emergent forms of workers' movements in informal work settings that observers of labour movements are drawing our attention to (Bonner and Spooner 2011, Agarwala 2013, Chhachhi 2014, Bandyopadhyay 2016).

Secondly, professional scholars on hawkers resolve the question of how to categorise in multiple ways. Saha's (2017) classification appears to move between that of workers and micro-entrepreneurs. Others like Bandyopadhyay (2016) suggest that hawkers have generated a separate category for themselves, and that while clear separations between owner of capital and the labourer do not exist for hawkers, in the Indian context unionisation represents the former. My fieldwork showed the challenges of binary categories of 'owner' and 'employee' within hawking. the Delhi fieldwork revealed a variety of sales setups within hawking. For instance, a common model in a prosperous commercial hub was the system of taking goods from a 'stockist' and selling for the stockist. However, they would also hire employees, who they would pay a fixed monthly wage. Another model was selling on behalf of *dalals* or agents (who 'owned' the stall outright), while also hiring of employees, where they (the hawker) got to keep a percentage of the sales, while paying a fixed wage to the employees. Thus while

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[51]This research aligns with the definitions of the former National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (NCEUS) in India, set up in 2004, where 'informal sector' is determined by the characteristics of the enterprise and 'informal employment' by conditions of employment. This allows us to recognise the presence of informal workers in both formal and informal sectors of work.

there are hawkers within the HSC and NHF who operate without hiring employees, and some who operate in miscellaneous sales set ups as mentioned, many owner-hawkers do hire employees on a daily wage system, either round the year, or for seasonal rushes. Like Bandyopadhyay (2016), I too found the NHF movement in Delhi and Kolkata to be comprised only of owner-hawkers,[52] and not employees. I mention in Chapter Four this can be attributed to who bears the most risk of the trade. Interestingly, I met owner-hawkers who had started out as employees, indicating that employees, owing to such mobility, might continue to have ambitions for and stakes in the unionization process.

Thirdly, hawker organisations in India themselves appear to take conscious political positions vis a vis class. Some, like Manushi Sangathan (Delhi) espouse rights in the language of and under the paradigm of the free market.[53] Others, like the National Association for Street Vendors of India (NASVI), may be considered to be positioned more towards the centre, accepting diverse forms of organisations into its fold, including NGOs, and deliberately declining to seek ideological common ground within its membership, in a bid to be as inclusive as possible (Kumar and Singh 2018).The HSC, on the other hand, uses the rhetoric of class politics, and takes a coherent position against capitalistic development models, including in the organisational alliances it builds. Further, in at least two national consultation meetings of the NHF in 2014, I witnessed discussions by the leadership that expressed the need, going forward, to keep ensuring that the movement and the law catered to the most vulnerable amongst hawkers. There was concern and anxiety about the 'genuine' hawker -its opposite being spoken of by the leadership as the opportunist who would try to gain vending certificates under the

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[52] Here I include those who take goods from stockists to be sold at commission as 'owner-hawkers' as well, to distinguish them from the employees they hire.
[53]See Kishwar (2004), and Kishwar (2020).

2014 Act, and profit by renting out those spaces- indicating a desire to keep the unionised hawker identified with the toiling masses.

Fourthly, within India, as mentioned and quoted earlier in the chapter, the law's definition is broad while still being premised on the notion of the 'subsistence' hawker, running on a bare minimum of resources, as if the prospect of prosperity makes them undeserving of state protection. The presence of the employer-employee relationship is entirely missing in the language, imagination and provisions of the law. Nor have any of the hawkers' movements thus far advocated for employee-hawkers. That said, the broad definition leaves scope for generous interpretation, accommodating well the diversity within the occupation. Despite the fact that even before the 2014 Act, hawking had rarely been outright illegal in India-the problem was more of legal grey zones created by conflicting municipal and police laws (Lahiri 2013)- experience on the streets was such that it might well have been. I argue that became a factor in creating a collective identity that still endures, for though the 2014 Act now supersedes all existing laws, harassment and evictions still continue, as hawkers' movements fight to operationalise it.

Defining the 'workman'

In the case of factory workers, as mentioned, the definition of the 'workman' plays an important role for it determines which kinds of workers are allowed to be a part of factory unions and impacts the terrain of factory workers' politics. Just as the 2014 Act has an expansive definition for who the hawker is, in the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947 (ID Act) the definition of the 'workman' too is left broad.

> "…"workman" means any person (including an apprentice) employed in any
>
> industry to do any manual, unskilled, skilled, technical, operational, clerical

or supervisory work for hire or reward, whether the terms of employment be express or implied, and for the purposes of any proceeding under this Act in relation to an industrial dispute, includes any such person who has been dismissed, discharged or retrenched in connection with, or as a consequence of, that dispute, or whose dismissal, discharge or retrenchment has led to that dispute, but does not include any such person-- (i) who is subject to the Air Force Act, 1950 (45 of 1950), or the Army Act, 1950 (46 of 1950), or the Navy Act, 1957 (62 of 1957); or (ii) who is employed in the police service or as an officer or other employee of a prison; or (iii) who is employed mainly in a managerial or administrative capacity; or (iv) who, being employed in a supervisory capacity, draws wages exceeding one thousand six hundred rupees per mensem or exercises, either by the nature of the duties attached to the office or by reason of the powers vested in him, functions mainly of a managerial nature."

- **Industrial Disputes Act, 1947**

As can be seen, the definition includes various categories of workers including apprentices, and its exclusions do not include categories of informal workers like contract workers.[54] However, despite this broad definition everyone is *not* treated as a workman in factories.

Firstly, in practice, managements refuse to recognise or accept unions unless composed solely of permanent workers as my fieldwork shows, and as the FMS stresses. Workers know this and union activists openly acknowledge this. A senior HMS organiser was very clear that they only

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[54] I return to the various categories of informal workers and the different terms used for them such as contract workers, casual workers, temporary workers etc. in Chapter Five's discussion of the Contract Labour (Regulation & Abolition) Act, 1970.

organised and had unions of permanent workers. Irrespective of what the law laid down, in practice, he noted, managements and the labour department did not allow unions to register if they included both permanent and temporary workers (interview, April 2017). A senior AITUC organiser noted that an operational standing order by the Haryana Government on the issue was ambiguous about the definition of 'workman'. We are facing very embarrassing position because of this, he said (interview April 2017).

Secondly, with laws, interpretation plays a big role and Supreme Court and High Court judgements have, on occasion in the past ruled that trainees and apprentices are not workmen,[55] despite the explicit inclusion of apprentices in the ID Act. What is more, section 18 of the Apprentice Act, 1961 seems to outright contradict the ID Act, defining apprentices are trainees and not workers.

This reality, however, is not always acknowledged. Pro-union scholars and activists frequently seek to draw attention to the broad definition that exists in the ID Act, and, based on that justify their pro-union emphasis for factory workers' struggles and politics. I critique this stance in this dissertation and return to this issue later in this chapter and in Chapter Five.

It would also be pertinent to highlight how it is not just managements who seek to limit the definition of 'workman' in practice and in courts. There has been a recent example, for instance, of a workers' union from an automobile sector factory in IMT Manesar that has argued in court that only permanent workers must be considered to be workmen, while their management argued the opposite-that the trainees at the company also fell under the definition of 'workmen' and must be considered a part of the workforce as workmen.[56] The issue at hand here was the recognition of the union- the workers' union framed it this way because otherwise their union

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[55] See the fifth point in *M/S Bellsonica Auto Component ... vs State Of Haryana &Ors,* 2014, which cites Supreme Court and High Court judgements on this matter.
[56] See *M/S Bellsonica Auto Component ... vs State Of Haryana &Ors,* 2014.

did not have the strength of numbers to satisfy the criteria for a trade union under the Trade Unions Act, 1926, which requires that 10% of the workforce needs to be a member of a union in order for it to qualify for registration. The workers won this case eventually.

Informal Workers, the Informal Sector and the Indian State

The following section briefly discusses how some of the factors discussed above have shaped and/or affected struggles from below. Firstly, it looks at the trajectory of how the state has viewed labour, which has moved from an emphasis on the formal sector in the immediate years following independence, to a gradual shift to the informal sector. It discusses the trajectory of labour legislations very briefly, such as how in the post-independence years it created legal regulations and protections for the formal sector only, hereby instituting the formal/informal divide, and then post-2000 tasked the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (NCEUS) with mapping the informal sector and suggesting measures to regulate and protect it. The lingering legacy of the state's emphasis on the formal sector is visible in contemporary factory workers struggles and the shift to the emphasis on the informal sector shows up in hawkers' politics, as I discuss in Chapters Four and Five.

Place of labour in state narrative and nation building

The newly independent Indian state, having decided upon a path of planned development undertaken by socialist countries, recognised the need for labour partnership in its nascent industrial policy. This was in order to meet its industrial requirements and development goals going forward as a mixed economy, with a heavily regulated private sector only allowed in non-core industries. As Bhowmik (2012, 64) notes, it was the Second Five Year Plan (1956-

61) that laid out the vision for industrialisation in India,[57] which included plans for large public sector undertakings in steel, coal, metals, heavy electrical and engineering, power generation and other infrastructure related industries amongst others, spread across the country in 'largely backward regions'. The plan recognised that workers were vital to this first wave of India's industrial growth, and had to be honoured and treated accordingly.

This led to the establishment of the behemoths of the public sector, including but not limited to Bharat Heavy Electricals Ltd. (BHEL) in Haridwar, Heavy Engineering Corporation (HEC) in Ranchi, steel plants at Bokaro, Durgapur, Rourkela, and manufacturing plants for railway coaches and engines. Private players also coexisted alongside in most of these sectors. As part of this endeavour, it also ended up creating the informal/informal distinction. Unlike in several developed nations where, after the second World War, the welfare state grew and workers were almost universally considered to be under legal protection, in India protections were not universally extended (Bhowmik 2012). As noted earlier, it was the formal sector that was protected. The formal/informal divide was also somewhat mirrored in the government sector/private sector divide, for the government has over the years been the biggest formal sector employer in India. Bhowmik (2012, 136) notes that till 2005 seventy percent workers in the formal sector were employed in government, quasi-government and public sector enterprises, and that the private sector employed only 31 percent of the labour force in the formal sector. Wages, benefits and working conditions of formal sector workers, particularly formal workers within the formal sector, were significantly better than that of informal sector workers and informal workers across sectors, protected as they were by labour laws (at least on paper).

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[57] The first Five Year Plan had concentrated upon the role of agriculture.

The first indications and moves towards reforms that would allow economic liberalisation and increased role for the private sector (domestic and foreign) were made by the government headed by Rajiv Gandhi in 1985. Slowed down by his assassination, this was eventually implemented from 1991, marked by the event of liberalisation and the formal opening up of the economy, and shrinking the role and scope of the public sector going forward, encouraging waves of disinvestment that continue till date. State attitude to labour changed drastically as it adopted increasingly unsympathetic attitudes and consideration towards labour. In the early years of privatisation, so to speak, there was still pressure on the state to look after the interests of the swathes of workers who would be impacted. The state made gestures, even if effectively only performative, towards the same, by assuring workers that they would be given some form of equivalent alternative employment or be adequately compensated. Examples include apparently attractive voluntary retirement schemes which were quickly found to be grossly inadequate to sustain a worker and their family for the rest of what would otherwise have been their working lives. This is in stark contrast to the situation now, when even these limited gestures are no longer seen as necessary, with ministers of the present NDA government asking the unemployed to help themselves by selling *pakodas*, as mentioned earlier.

It should be emphasized here that while the pressure on labour has grown after India liberalised its economy in 1991, and indeed many scholars and activists use 1991 as the point on the timeline which marks the Indian state embarking on anti-labour policies, the process had actually begun earlier. The pressures on Indian labour began around a similar time when post-Fordist changes were sweeping across the globe, in advanced capitalist countries. Hensman (2011, 102), for instance, argues that anti-labour policies were being undertaken by the government of India right from 1977. She notes that after the Emergency was lifted and the Janata Dal came into power, the government had made a shift in policy towards encouraging small-scale industries and industrialisation in less/non-industrial areas. They gave incentives

and inducements to the small-scale sector, which effectively encouraged the bigger companies to shift to the small scale and pushed jobs and work into these informal sector enterprises. These enterprises were excluded from the regulations of the Factories Act, and their employees were also excluded from the protections afforded to workers under the Act.

The state, law and labour legislations in India

As mentioned, the post-independent Indian state needed workers to cooperate for its immediate development goals-and therefore it extended protections to a section of the workforce-but for the same reason, it also needed to control its workforce. There was, therefore, a dual motivation for why the Indian state separated the formal and informal sectors and workforces. Ahuja (2013a, ix) notes that there was a phase of worker militancy in the 1920s and 1930s that made labour a powerful political force to respond to and contend with within the arena of Indian politics, both as an anti-colonial and/or an anti-capitalist revolutionary force. This motivated the post-independent state to focus on the formal sector to contain this force, by separating them from the majority of the workforce through a state-centred labour regime. That is, the design of the labour laws was such that provisions within them deliberately excluded large sections of the labour force. Bhowmik (2012, 137) notes that the most important law regulating industrial work was the Factories Act of 1948,[58] which applied to establishments employing a minimum of ten workers (if the unit used power in manufacturing), and a minimum of twenty workers (if the unit did not use power in manufacturing). All other laws pertaining to industrial work, such as Employee State Insurance Act, Workmen's Compensation Act, Provident Fund and Family Pension Act, and Payment of Gratuity Act only applied to establishments falling under the purview of the Factories Act. Thus, given that a majority of the Indian labour force

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[58] This is prior to the labour law amendments of 2019 and 2020, referred to in Chapter Two. The amendments do not feature in this dissertation, and all discussion/mention of labour laws refer to the pre-2019 labour law regime.

works in the informal sector or under conditions of informality, a majority of industrial workers escape-or, more accurately, were left out of- this net.

In recent years, the state has attempted to protect the informal sector with certain laws, particularly around the time when attention in global policy circles began to be focussed on this sector. Some are targeted at sections of the informal sector, such as beedi workers, construction workers, and recently, hawkers, amongst others, as is mentioned in Chapter Four. Others are broad based, such as the Unorganised Sector Workers' Social Security Act, 2008 that was passed in the Indian Parliament, addressing social protection.

The NCEUS was tasked with helping the Indian government carry out this policy shift. It was constituted by the UPA I Government in September 2004 in compliance with its common minimum programme (CMP) and under the chairmanship of the late Dr. Arjun Sengupta it completed its term in April 2009. It was tasked with examining issues of the informal economy and making policy recommendations based on its study and it released multiple path-breaking detailed reports and working papers quantitatively and qualitatively mapping the informal sector in India.[59]

At the time of its publication, the NCEUS reports made the then unprecedented quantification of the informal sector within the economy and the massive number of informal workers within it. The NCEUS had historical precedents in the First National Commission for Labour (1991) which proposed a legislation for agricultural workers and the Second National Commission for Labour (2002) which proposed a legislation for workers in the unorganised sector, both in the agricultural and non-agricultural sectors. However, the NCEUS's scope was far broader and

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[59]Oddly, as pointed out by many, despite the importance of the NCEUS's findings, its website was taken down after it was wound up and left to activists and interested citizens to locate and collate its reports. See Sanhati (2013), Society for Social and Economic Research (n.d.).

its research and intervention in the policy space was unprecedented. It identified 93% of the country's labour force as working under informal conditions of employment/work. It had noted something frequently missed by older debates and discussions on this in the global context, that the situation wasn't as simple as formal employment overlapping exclusively with the formal sector and informal employment overlapping exclusively with the informal sector. Drawing from the Indian context, it made the crucial intervention in global research on informality and the informal sector by recognising the presence of informal employment also existing in the formal sector.

The NCEUS in effect undertook a study on the working and livelihood conditions of a majority of the workforce in India and its findings were a damning indictment of India's 'growth' story, revealing how it had bypassed most of the population (Sanhati 2013). It showed very clearly how post-1991 growth in employment had basically been in informal employment (Sanhati 2013) and made multiple recommendations and policy and legislation suggestions. Most of its recommendations were, however, not followed. It also paints an interesting picture of the present moment when the state has appeared to adopt the informal worker as the ideal worker (Agarwala 2013, 21), and arguably appears to be testing out the optimal level of (lack of) protection extended towards this workforce that it can get away with. Movements and struggles of informal workers from below arguably have room here to decide, through their politics, where the line gets drawn.

Politics

The discussion below provides the context and background to the fieldwork discussions on the politics of organising to follow in Chapters Four and Five. It first sets out how this research reads the struggles it encountered in the field, from which it goes on to discuss the history of

the pro-union framing that I critique in this dissertation. It then gives a brief background of the mainstream Indian labour movement (focussing on the Indian trade union movement) and its limitations, finally moving on to the critique of the pro-union framework based on what emerged from my fieldwork and supported by some literature. Given that most of this section focusses on the mainstream Indian labour movement and trade unions in India-which have ignored informal workers, especially in the informal sector- the discussions focus more on what will come up in the factory workers case in Chapter Five. This section thus speaks more directly to the second gap this research is seeking to address, that of the bias that exists towards a pro-union framing in labour research.

How to read struggles

My earlier academic training during an M.A. in Globalisation and Labour, through my interactions with trade unions, and the kind of pro-union labour scholarship I came to read and follow as a consequence of both had predisposed me to ask the question 'how can informal workers be organised'. For this study, I went into the field expecting to find positive correlations between the spurts in industrial conflict, unionisation attempts in recent years in Delhi NCR, and the political agency of informal factory workers. I thought that the visible and high-profile conflicts around demands to form unions-most famously by Maruti workers in 2011-12- signified a new phase of union organising in the formal sector. A phase where unions were finally, successfully bringing together permanent and informal workers of various kinds and that because of this kind of unionisation attempt, informal workers were gaining greater political agency within a formal structure that had historically been unavailable to them within unions in post-independent India. I thought this indicated that the relations between formal and informal workers were in a transformational phase.

However, as mentioned, this view was challenged by the FMS perspective I was introduced to early in fieldwork, which made me notice and question what the limits were to these alliances between permanent workers and informal workers. And whether unions had anything to offer to informal workers at all. I was challenged to re-examine whether trade unions strengthened the political power of factory workers today, or weakened them. The FMS is very critical of unions and highlights their irrelevance particularly in the context of factory workers, and holds that unions adversely affect collective exchanges and collective power building of wage-workers. This position of theirs has been arrived at organically, after more than thirty years of regular, close interactions with factory workers, many of who are long-term members/participants of the collective, as mentioned in Chapter Two. This view contradicted the academic training I had, and consequently came to productively complicate my readings from the field. The FMS ended up being extremely important to my understanding and this research not only because of the contrarian perspective they offered but also because of how transparent they are regarding their political and publication history, and how they openly document their process of growth and auto-critique.

Thus, on the matter of how to read struggles, this dissertation aligns with, firstly, as mentioned in Chapter One, literature like that of Nowak (2021), Parry (1999a) (1999b) and the FMS that affirm a worker's self, legitimate needs and agency, and eschews perspectives that seek to position workers as heroic, sacrificial warriors fighting for the greater good at the cost of their own desires.

Secondly, it also aligns with the kind of literature that recognises and foregrounds the *contingency* of class in the lives of workers and protests (Parry 1999a) (Ahuja 2013a). This is something many within Left politics and well-meaning trade union movements continue to grapple with, with a desire to foreground class as the common point of solidarity for workers and as fulcrum of workers' politics. Chhachhi (2014, 914), while talking about the movements

and struggles of self-defined and newly recognised workers on the margins, and other counter movements from below, notes that they are 'confronted with common and difficult issues of heterogeneity within and between the various classes, sectional interests, sustainable organisations and representation'. The fragmentation of the working class by gender and caste, and other such competing identities has often been offered as an explanation of why class consciousness has failed to satisfactorily develop in India. Chandavarkar (1999) contested this by pointing out that class consciousness is not a seed waiting to germinate within every worker. It is the product of specific historical circumstances and is politically constructed, which he went on to trace through a detailed analysis of the Bombay general strikes of 1928-29. He concluded that the puzzle was 'not so much why the working classes have failed to realise the expectations theoretically imputed to them but *how and why at times they came together at all'* (emphasis mine) (Chandavarkar 1994, 15 cited in Parry 1999a, xxvii).

The challenges posed by this heterogeneity are recognised by some trade unions. For instance, identity versus class as an issue took up a whole session of the International Conference at the NTUI's General Assembly in 2013. Unionists and activists from various countries acknowledged that in the South Asian context, particularly, identity issues frequently trumped class and hindered class formation, thereby affecting the formation of trade unions. Whilst acknowledging the pull of identity over class amongst the working classes, they still spoke of, with hope, the idea that progressive union movements would be able to address issues of identity and ultimately be able to persuade workers into seeing class as the common unifier. I argue in this dissertation that this desire for a common unifier, and locating class as that common unifier, is a limited way of comprehending and approaching a worker's politics, and building movements. This is discussed in the last section of this chapter and addressed further in Chapter Six.

Two other interlinked issues on reading struggles pertain to:

a) the question of legitimate representation within workers' movements, the inherent domination/violence in acts of representation, and whether it is at all possible to represent the informal worker today. This comes up in different ways for hawkers and factory workers in the discussions in Chapters Four and Five. The limits of containing a worker's politics within representational structures such as organised movements and in forms such as unions is also addressed in Chapter Six.

b) the challenges of reading violent political articulations by workers: there is a tendency within the mainstream left and trade union movement to efface such violence by laying the blame for it on 'outside elements' and 'bouncers'. For instance, a CITU organiser I spoke with (interview, April 2017) told me that no struggle or revolution succeeds without public sympathy, and that it was important for political struggles of workers to work with this in mind. It was his belief that the 'extremist way' would not succeed because of this factor, and wouldn't end up helping workers.

While one understands the spirit of wanting to protect their members that might motivate such scripts, what it also ends up doing is, in many ways, adding to victimhood narratives of workers, and blunting the aura of fear that such incidents unquestionably evoke in managements and the state-something that can work to the advantage of workers if used wisely. Without celebrating violence, there is a need to not shy away from acknowledging and discussing it. Chapter Five discusses this issue in the context of wildcat strikes and workers' resistance in Delhi NCR. Chapter Seven also revisits the notion of 'violence' for a broader critique of contemporary work.

History of the pro-union framing: Marx, Lenin, workers politics and social change

Class approaches to workers' politics are frequently conflated with trade union organising. Anything outside of it, is sought to be brought within it. The trade union might take a non-traditional form, but what is nearly inescapable is a pro-union framing for labour struggles and workers' resistance. There is a specific history behind this.

Firstly, Thompson (1989) points out that Marx was writing during the nascent stages of class struggle in industry, making early trade unions a natural focal point. He notes that Marx was quite optimistic about the limits and possibilities of trade union action, seeing them as organising centres, political movements and 'schools for socialism' (Thompson 1989, 58). Thompson (1989, 58) states however that this optimism was not grounded in any viable theoretical and strategic framework, and argues that Marx did not adequately reconcile the form and content of workers' struggles with his analysis of transformation of work. He notes that Burawoy (1981, 85) points out that politics only appears 'as an external and unexplained given' in Marx's later works on the dynamics of capitalist production (Thompson 1989, 58). It was Lenin, instead who took forward ideation on politics, and Mao Tse-Tung who further developed Marxist-Leninist ideas in order to apply it to China's agricultural pre-industrial economy.

Secondly, there were various tendencies within the socialist movement, some of which were reformist and some of which were revolutionary. The reformists believed in the parliamentary route to eventual conquest of power, whereas the revolutionary current, led by Lenin and the Bolsheviks, believed in the overthrow of state power itself. However, as Thompson (1989, 59) notes, '… both wings accepted trade unionism as a necessary and restricted 'politics' of the workplace', which in turn led to an 'institutional boundary between political activity and trade

unionism'. He points out that Lenin firmly believed that only trade union consciousness, and not socialist consciousness, could develop within the labour process.

Thirdly, because the spheres of political activity were so separated-i.e., between the workplace and society- Marxism did not give adequate importance to the power of worker resistance as a force in the development of the capitalist mode of production (Friedman 1977,44 cited in Thompson 1989, 59). Thus 'official socialist movements' ignored or were hostile to a politics centred on workers' control, on actions of workers countering managerial power, several examples of which are discussed in Chapter Five (Thompson 1989, 59). Other currents within the socialist movement, like the syndicalists, remained engaged with these issues instead.

Thus, this separation of spheres of political activity led to Lenin arguing that spontaneous struggle at the point of production would not be turned into an adequately revolutionary force. In order for it to transform into something that consciously produces a socialist class-for-itself- a pre-requisite within Marxism for revolutionary struggles that would replace capitalism- struggle outside the workplace was needed which would be led by the external agency of a revolutionary party (Thompson 1989, 156). That is, spontaneous struggles of workers at the workplace had limited value, unless harnessed through a trade union movement by the external agency of a revolutionary party.

Fourthly, as Thompson (1989, 60) points out, the labour movement that developed from this engaged less with the critique of capitalism as a mode of production and more at the level of distribution. He notes that the mode of production itself was treated as neutral, and what mattered was where it was deployed: problematic if used by capitalists, but okay and even desirable for actually existing communist states like the Soviet Union. This was because efficiency of scientific management (Taylorism) and capitalist technology were seen to be

needed in order to develop productive forces adequately, freeing individuals from want, which was a prerequisite for transition into socialism within Marxism (Thompson 1989, 60). It was a temporary evil to be tolerated for the greater good. However, Thompson (1989, 62) points out that this took the concept of productive forces in isolation from Marx's analysis of social production, and ignored the fact that alienation is produced by the mode of production. The work experience itself would not change just because the mode of production was being used in a socialist state. This arguably contributed further to disengagement/inadequate engagement with worker resistance within the labour process of capitalist modes of production.

Political commentators and theorists within India have commented on how the Indian Left has been politically influenced and shaped by this legacy, including the challenges of applying Marxist-Leninist and/or Maoist thought to Indian conditions. Without going into it in detail, one can turn to some of the points raised recently by Nigam (2022) revisiting Lenin and engaging with the problem of dogmatic Marxism within an Indian Left steadily losing political influence, and frequently out of touch with actually manifesting politics on the ground. This connects with the discussion later in this section critiquing the pro-union framing of labour studies and labour movements.

Nigam's (2022) article highlights that the dogmas that develop within the left and tendencies to toe the party line, so to speak, often originate from what he feels are misunderstandings and misreading. For instance, he argues that a) Lenin had seen that identifying revolutionary potential was a dynamic process, and that one had to be alert to potential political battles on the ground that were seeded with such potential, b) one had to prioritise focussing on situations of revolutionary rupture over the need to follow the 'correct grammar' of struggle, and gauge ways in which such revolutionary ruptures arose, c) it is important to seize the moment, and

act in such moments, as opposed to letting them pass, losing initiative and allowing reactionary forces to step in and take control,[60] and d) that Lenin himself eventually emphasized the contextual nature of the organisational form in his practice, noting that 'they must always be subordinated to the political requirements of the movement' (Nigam 2022). One can perhaps revisit the question of trade unions in this light.

Brief background of the mainstream Indian labour movement

One must preface this discussion by noting that while the Indian labour movement is much broader than just the trade union movement, there is a great deal of overlap between the organised labour movement and the trade union movement in India, for reasons mentioned above. I focus on this overlap in this discussion.

Institutionally speaking, trade unions have existed alongside other forms of workers participation in management. Trade unions differ from each other politically and ideologically, even within the Left, as is only too evident in India. Different political and theoretical approaches interpret the role of trade unions variously. Without getting into that in detail, it is sufficient to note that for some, trade unions perform the key function of maintaining industrial stability and ensuring relative stability of the capitalistic system. That is, by institutionalising conflict and engendering compromise, they aid the management of discontent. While one can well understand why this would be appreciated by those who wish to retain this stability, such as the capitalist class itself and managements, one must also note that maintenance of order also plays a positive role in the lives of many workers themselves. Not every worker has the capacity to bear the consequences of disruption, either financially, or because some do have

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[60] Indian communists have repeatedly missed the bus, Nigam (2022) says, because they have ignored the importance of such moments of rupture, and stayed away from mass movements that '…aren't made up of forces to their liking.'

ambitions of rising within the system (this is discussed in Chapter Six). Thus, as also noted in the case of the hawkers in Chapter Four, not every worker is political, or political in the same way, and this is a reality one has to contend with. There are also situations, recounted in Chapter Five, where unions, sometimes explicitly and sometimes indirectly, take pride in and prioritise either not organising protests, or organising them in such a manner so as to not disturb production or the functioning of their factory too much. An example of this is the 'Sunday protests' organised by some unions, spoken of in Chapter Seven.

Factory production in India, aimed mostly at export, started under British Rule in the 1850s, with Calcutta, Bombay and Madras developing as major industrial hubs. Regulation of working conditions in factories began with three factories acts (in 1881, 1891, 1911). As with the rest of the world, the first world war and the demand for industrial goods it created, lead to an expansion of industry and the industrial base in India. Bhowmik (2012, 116) notes that India's first trade union was either the Bombay Mill Hands Associations (1880) started by NM Lokhande or BP Wadia's Madras Labour Union (1918). Many consider the latter to be more trade-union like because it was more organised and kept more detail records of membership etc. Around the same time (1918) Gandhi too instituted, based on his political principles of non-violence and on the model of trusteeship, the Textile Labour Association in Ahmedabad.

The period following 1918 was an active one for the Indian labour movement, with the working class being deployed, politically, in various ways in India, including in the freedom struggle against the British. Some of this activity came together and birthed the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) in 1920. In the early years, pre-independence, the AITUC contained multiple political shades, including liberals and communists. A few splits and re-mergers occurred amongst different political factions in the following years, though control was retained by communists towards the last few years of British rule.

Post-independence, the Congress party, being in power, needed a trade union movement sympathetic to its policies and goals, and began its own trade union centre-the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), seeking to distance themselves from the communist AITUC. Thus began India's tradition of multiple political parties, including regional political parties, creating multiple trade unions, and multiple splits endlessly occurring within political parties (including within the Left) and/or their trade unions. This led to a fragmenting of the working-class movement, and led to bitter-rivalries between trade unions and a culture of 'poaching' membership, as opposed to creating new members. A consequence of this kind of fragmentation and 'negative' competition between trade unions is a natural weakening of the overall movement. It is interesting and relevant to note here, as Bhowmik (2012, 121) does, how when existing progressive trade unions are ineffective, the space for the right wing grows-this was beginning to be visible in India right from the 1960s, when, for instance, the Shiv Sena's rise in popularity in Maharashtra coincided with a worsening economic situation. The issue of the right wing and its relationship with the working classes needs more attention than it gets, and is briefly engaged with in Chapter Six.

The Trade Union Act, 1926, under which trade unions are registered, allows for a minimum of seven workers to come together to be eligible to form a union. However, as Bhowmik (2012) notes that the act does not mandate *recognition* of a union by managements, irrespective of whether it is a majority union or not. This thus heavily empowers managements against workers, allowing them to recognise and bargain with any union of their choice, whether or not that union has the support of a majority of the workforce.

The sharp decline of the public sector from 1991 hit Indian trade unions hard for they had never seriously extended themselves to organising informal workers.

Limitations of the trade union movement in India

One of the biggest limitations of the trade union movement in India, as mentioned, is the way political parties are connected to trade unions which makes them particularly vulnerable to being controlled by political parties, and the state, depending on which party is in power at which time, both at the national level as well as at the state government level. Related to this is how some like Bhowmik (2012) argue that the common Indian practice of having multiple-unions at a workplace-and the competition and rivalry between them-ends up hampering political struggle.

Another issue is that of Left parties and trade union betraying workers' movements and struggles. This comes up in the discussions in Chapters Four, Five and Seven. Bhowmik (2012, 84) notes, for instance, that when the Left Front government was first elected into power in West Bengal in 1977, it came in with a pro-labour policy, but it too gave in to the neoliberal turn and the perceived need to draw in foreign investment after it was re-elected for the third time in 1987. The discussion on the HSC in Chapter Four mentions how this impacted hawkers, and Bhowmik (2012, 84) notes that amongst the trade unions in the state,[61] a message went out that they would need to reign in their antagonism of managements. Bhowmik (2012, 85) argues that while there was opposition to this from members and some union leaders, and even some CPM party members, the overall state government policy did strike a blow to labour. One significant casualty of this anti-labour stance was a successful tea plantation cooperative that has been much studied.[62]

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[61] A majority of the unionised workers belonged to CITU, the trade union arm of the CPM which had majority power in the Left-front coalition.
[62]See Bhowmik (2012) and Deb (2021).

The Saongaon Tea and Allied Plantation Workers' Co-operative Society on Sonali Tea Estate in Jalpaiguri, West Bengal was the first workers' cooperative of tea in India. Without going into its details, or the story of cooperative movements in India, which is beyond the scope of this dissertation, the gist of that wildly successful experiment was thus: 500 workers on 500 acres took over the running of the plantation after the former owners handed it over,

Additionally, in the case of factory workers, the process of industrial dispute settlement in India causes a problem. The system follows the tripartite collective bargaining system involving labour, management and government laid down in the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947. The ID Act forms the core of industrial relations in India, and other legislations on minimum wage, payment of bonus, etc. cluster around it. The state becomes an important party to these relations, particularly through the department of labour. The legal system is an extremely long-drawn process, expensive for workers to see through, weighed heavily in favour of managements and loaded against workers. The legal strike is so designed by the state to make it as toothless as possible, and to drain it of any power that it might have had. The legal process, because of its length, cumbersome nature and associated costs, arguably encourages militancy and produces the wildcat strikes that are so common in Delhi NCR in the contemporary period.

For example, Bhowmik (2012, 106) shows what the basic, stage-wise progression of dispute settlement is, which I note below:

- The management might first informally raise an issue with a worker or group or workers, following which it can escalate to issuing a chargesheet (asking the worker why action should not be taken against them) which can be responded to by an individual worker or the trade union representing them. The management, if not satisfied, can further escalate by suspending the worker and holding an enquiry.

- The next stage is conciliation (dialogue and persuasion attempted, but not allowed to be enforced, by the labour officer), which can be done locally between the management, the union and the government (the office of the labour commissioner), and can be

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including liabilities, to the workers, albeit based on a resolution passed in a meeting of the board of directors, and not through a formal deed transfer. The cooperative ran it successfully for five years, from 1974 to 1979, entirely from their income from the sale of tea leaves. It however received no help from the Left Front state government, especially in a long-drawn out legal battle that it ended up being involved in, involving a claim to ownership by someone (after the tea-garden became successful again) and the state government temporarily taking over management (and removing control of the cooperative).

initiated by either party (i.e., the worker/trade union or management). If no resolution is reached within two weeks, a failure report is filed by the labour officer and things progress either to arbitration or adjudication.

- In arbitration, a mutually agreed upon person is appointed the arbitrator, who then gives a judgement on the case at hand, which is expected to be accepted as the final decision. However, since the arbitration process is a voluntary one, the decision is actually not a binding one. Since agreeing to arbitration means both parties not being allowed to approach any further office, in case of a worker/trade union disagrees with a judgement, the next option is to proceed for a strike. Workers have seven days from a failed arbitration to do this, and they are legally required to hold a strike ballot. Should the strike ballot pass majority, workers are required to give a thirty-day strike notice in advance.

- In adjudication the matter is taken directly to Labour Court by either party, after getting approval to do so by the labour department of the state government. Either party can escalate to the High Court and then the Supreme Court. This is an extremely long process, and an expensive one, that can take over a decade.

Lastly, as mentioned, traditional trade unions remain largely interested in only defending the rights of permanent workers, as opposed to advocating for all workers. Many tend to read this as a matter of *inability* of unions to engage with informal workers, or effectively lay the blame at the doorstep of informal workers and their perceived vulnerability that makes them apparently reluctant to unionise. I argue instead, drawing from my fieldwork, that while the exclusions within the hawker movement are circumstantial (discussed in Chapter Four), they are deliberate in the case of factory workers (discussed in Chapter Five).

Critique of the pro-union framing

Some scholars, in recent times, have been arguing, in no uncertain terms, for the need to rethink trade unions vis a vis workers' struggles in today's world of transformed work. The points they make buttress the FMS's arguments, and are drawn from empirical studies. In this research, drawing from fieldwork, I align with this approach, arguing that this allows one to evaluate trade unions based on the role they go on to play, as opposed to treating them as inherently and universally a good goal for workers to fight for. Atzeni (2020) argues that within labour studies today there is a deep need to visibilise forms of workers' organisation and representation, since working-class representation is still largely framed in the trade union form. He argues that the research dependence on the trade union form as the preeminent form of organising is creating a fetish of the union form (Atzeni 2020, 311). One sees this, he notes, within debates on sources of power, on mobilisation and collective action, on migrant organising, on precarious work, on informal workers, amongst others. This preoccupation with a particular form 'hides from view broader processes of struggle and collective formation and of working-class mobilisations outside/in parallel/alternative to the union form currently occurring in the underworld of precariousness, the contemporary hidden abode of production' (Atzeni 2020, 311).

He acknowledges the fundamental role trade unions have played in most parts of the industrialised world, as well as in the rural sector in many parts of the Global South during the twentieth century. His contention is that the global transformation of work following the end of the 1970s changed many fundamental aspects of how capitalism functions, including labour processes and the composition of working classes, which I note in this chapter. In this new world, the political importance of older twentieth century forms of worker power-socialist parties and trade unions representing the industrial working classes, has indeed receded. Under these circumstances, he argues, it does not make sense to keep returning to the trade union form as a frame of reference in research. That said, he does not argue that trade unions or research

on trade unions become irrelevant in the present context. He only argues that their relevance and use is limited, and that the reification and fetishization of trade unions is making invisible the many ways in which 'the collective proletariat' exists, whether mobilised or not (Atzeni 2020, 312). In so much as studying trade unions was a study of class and organisation, he notes that in order to understand the same today, at a time when the categorisation of 'working class' has greatly expanded (beyond wage labour), one needs to enlarge the scope and aim of research looking at workers' organisation. One needs to look at actually existing processes of struggle. This will be critical for long-term working-class politics, he argues.

Buckley (2021) draws on Atzeni's (2020) arguments and builds on it with his study of workers from the garment and textile industry in Vietnam, a one-party state with a single state-led union federation. His study, additionally, demonstrates the success and efficacy of wildcat strikes. Much of his study resonates with my factory workers' case, and because of that I go over it in some detail.

His arguments are made in the context of recent (i.e., January 2021) freedom of association reforms in the country which made independent worker representative organisations (WRO) legal. While WROs are not unions, he mentions they are allowed to engage in collective bargaining and strike organisation at the enterprise level. These reforms were being hailed in labour circles, including by practitioners. Some saw it as a step towards genuine trade unionism and therefore in a positive light, while critics based their evaluation on the fact that WROs were not actually unions. Thus, both perspectives still approached the issue from a common bias towards a pro-union framing, assuming the political task is to figure out how to build genuine trade unionism. In contrast, he argues that these reforms are an attempt to reduce labour militancy and stabilise the industrial atmosphere frequently disturbed by a high volume of wildcat strikes. He makes the case for this by noting that a) these reforms were being implemented at a time when Vietnam was embedding itself more firmly into global neoliberal

capital flows and production structures, the very structures that weakened trade unions everywhere, b) for two decades workers had already been effectively using forms of self-organised, wildcat militancy to improve wages, work conditions and national policy, and c) because these forms of worker action had been effective, workers themselves had not been demanding independent organisations; rather, the demands had come from capital which, having failed to manage the existing form of resistance, sought to find better means of doing so. In view of Atzeni's (2020) argument that trade union fetishism hides actually existing processes of class struggle, Buckley (2021) argues that Vietnam's embrace of freedom of association reforms and WROs should be evaluated in comparison to actually existing struggle on the ground.

To give a sense of its frequency, Buckley (2021) mentions that there are hundreds of wildcat strikes in Vietnam every year, which have been continuing from the first decade of the twenty first century. These strikes are mostly concentrated in the industrial sector, but not exclusively so. He points out that these numbers are higher than what many other neighbouring Asian countries have seen, including China (where such strikes have increasingly been concerning state and capital both). Although strikes were made legal in Vietnam in 1994, he notes that the legal procedure was bureaucratic and lengthy, and had to be led by the state union federation. The latter, functioning under the mode of Leninist dual-functioning unions (where the role of unions in socialist countries is to encourage productivity while also providing protection to workers), has never called a strike. Thus, every strike ends up being illegal and wildcat.

A critique that is often made against this mode of collective worker action is in terms of its impact. Compared to the 'long-term' political action and implication of trade union movements, critics wonder what potential such uprisings have within a larger long-term political project of transforming work. Buckley (2021) shows that the impact of these wildcat strikes is not just restricted to the short-term and the local, and that they have forced broader

changes, on issues of wages, legal reform and forced changes to national-level policy. He argues, in fact, that the pressure created by these militant actions indirectly led to the reforms in question. That is, while the wildcat strikes did not demand these reforms, they (pressure from below) compelled state and capital (pressure from above) to find an alternative to the existing unmanageable situation on the ground.

Drawing from other work on the efficacy of the wildcat strike form, he refers to Alquati (2013) writing about the 1963 FIAT factory strikes in Turin, Italy and why workers liked this form and strategy. Alquati's (2013) conclusions, as recounted by Buckley (2021, 86), were that firstly, it asked for 'invisible organisation' that did not institutionalise itself as an autonomous organisation within the production process. Secondly, it operationalised itself through a continuous and unpredictable mix of 'tactics, methods, times and places of the strike' (Alquati 2013 cited in Buckley 2021, 86). And finally, that it 'demands nothing' (Alquati 2013, ibid.). Buckley notes that variations of this exist in different contexts-such as, for example, Vietnamese wildcats did not 'demand nothing'. He highlights why this form of struggle is appropriate for workers today, offering them immense leverage. Employers, for instance, are forced to respond immediately especially if a strike occurs at the precise time when a product order needs to be shipped to a buyer.

He notes that many variations also exist of the wildcat form, ranging from the more organised, with strike negotiation committees, channels of communication that come up and disband at the end of the strike [63] to the more dispersed, invisible forms of organising. Vietnamese forms tended towards the latter. They tended to be decentralised, with workers discussing amongst themselves when to go on strike in person, over social media, through graffiti written on walls, or signs posted in toilets, etc. Autonomous actions amongst small groups of workers abound,

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[63]See Campbell 2013 cited in Buckley (2021, 87) writing on Burmese migrant factory workers in Thailand.

such as throwing shrimp paste and rotten eggs on would-be strike breakers (Buckley 2021, 87), arranging for food and drink for all etc. Buckley (2021) notes that though scholars have tended to argue that such actions have informal leaders, his fieldwork revealed the need to rethink this assumption. He states that many strikes had no recognised leaders at all, and 'nobody knows who begins the strike and the first person to call for a strike or walk off the job may not even have known themselves' (Buckley 2021, 87). He quotes from other studies where workers stated 'we went on strike ourselves. *No one led us.*' (Tran 2013, 211 cited in Buckley 2021, 87). Workers would in fact be confused by such questions, he notes, and ask 'How can we possibly know that?' (Buckley 2021, 87). The phenomena of leaderless strikes were widespread. When some forms of leadership existed, these tended to be temporary and rotating, he found. This aspect made it harder for managements to identify key persons in the struggle and either victimise them or buy them off. Against this, independent unions with representation structures provide a clear channel for negotiation and dialogue, making evident why employers might prefer them.

In contrast with this kind of self-activity, the leaders of central trade unions I spoke with during my fieldwork highlighted the disconnect that leaders at the top have with their membership, and the almost paternalistic relationship between them. The CITU organiser I spoke with (interview April 2017), for instance, told me that the role of leadership in trade unions is a major one, because it is their job to see the larger picture and guide workers on the ground accordingly. That is their responsibility, he noted, because often workers on the ground do not see that big picture. A senior AITUC organiser mentioned that there is a difference between what the leadership at the top wants and directs and what workers want and do at the plant level (interview, April 2017).

Returning to the critique that wildcats strikes are fundamentally limited by the fact that there is no guarantee they will form movements that will, over the long-term, challenge capitalist

structures of work, he remains optimistic. He notes that even though proponents such as Alquati (2013) saw them as transitional phenomena until something better could be found, what nevertheless remains true is that they cannot be dismissed as 'primitive revolts' or 'outbursts of desperation and vengeance' (Buckley 2021, 90). He argues they represent real power held by contemporary workers, and in the face of the real gains they have been making through such forms of struggle, he notes that it is ironic that that this form of struggle is being seen as a problem to be solved.

I end this section by emphasizing Buckley's (2021) last point through two illustrative situations in NCR factories where wildcat strikes had erupted. These were turned into union struggles which ended the militancy of the struggle at the end of the unionisation process. Both these instances are compiled from reports in the FMS.

- The first of these cases concerns the second occupation of the Napino Auto factory, this time with women also staying overnight with the men (FMS March 2014). The Maruti Manesar struggle had apparently scared management all around badly. In the Napino struggle that had been ongoing since 2010, management felt a union would allow it to control its workforce better. It reinstated some sacked workers in August 2012 and got the union registered. It chose over 100 workers and made them permanent.

  The union initially took membership fees from 300 temporary workers but later started taking money from them against a receipt of 'union struggle fund' as opposed to membership fee receipt. It gave the management a demand letter that was expected to ask for pay parity between different categories of workers. The talks dragged on, unrest simmered and to assuage the mood, the union gave a call for a black arm band protest. It came under increasing pressure from workers and conflicts between workers and the

union body grew. Leaders kept advising worker to 'do work, give full production' and the situation increasingly became volatile.

The union took a sudden call to strike work on 24 March. Factory occupations took place at all three Napino plants in Gurgaon and the management finally held talks with the union. However, instead of the parity that was constantly promised, the wage agreement signed provided for wage hikes over three years of Rs. 8100 for permanent workers and Rs. 3100 for temporary workers. Anger levels were so high that union leaders did not dare address workers, and some got beaten up (FMS March 2014 and FMS May 2014).

- The second case was of Subros Auto where a union was made end of 2013, affiliated to AITUC. Wages were increased in March 2014 by the union in an agreement and a celebratory meeting was called at Kamla Nehru Park in Gurgaon. Workers were taken there in company buses. It was a celebratory affair with speeches and snacks. The union further reduced the production target.

One day suddenly company buses did not arrive to collect workers and they found out that workers had been brought in from its NOIDA factory. The union leader assured workers he would speak with the management. Buses came as usual the next day. However, suddenly the production target went up to unprecedented levels in the company and the company started sacking permanent workers. Within 6-7 months the company dismissed all workers from the first batch of the factory in 2007, including permanent workers.

In the meantime, the union leader had disappeared with Rs.60 lakhs in the union funds and four other union body members also were not where to be found (FMS April 2015).

That said, I would also argue that just as a blanket pro-union approach is limiting, so too is an approach that universally dismisses the union form. The union form can support a struggle, and people get various things out of union politics, some of which are discussed in Chapter Six, including acquiring a social and personal sense of fulfilment, which are important aspects of what makes for an informal worker's politics. (PTO)

The Relationship with Work

My Friend Fa	I Swallowed an Iron Moon
-Xu Lizhi	-Xu Lizhi
You're always holding your lower back with your hands	
just a young guy	I swallowed an iron moon
but to the other workers, you look	they called it a screw
like a pregnant woman in her tenth month	
now that you've tasted the migrant worker life	I swallowed industrial wastewater and unemployment
when you talk of the past, you always smile	forms
but the smile doesn't cover over hardship and misery	bent over machines, our youth died young
seven years ago you came alone	
to this part of Shenzhen	I swallowed labor, I swallowed poverty
high-spirited, full of faith	swallowed pedestrian bridges, swallowed this rusted-out
and what met you was ice,	life
black nights, temporary residence permits, temporary	
shelter….	I can't swallow any more
after false starts you came here to the world's largest	everything I've swallowed roils up in my throat
equipment factory	
and began standing, screwing in screws, doing overtime,	I spread across my country
working overnight	a poem of shame
painting, finishing, polishing, buffing,	
packaging and packing, moving finished products	
bending down and straightening up a thousand times each	**A New Day**
day	**-Xu Lizhi**
dragging mountain-sized piles of merchandise across the	
workshop floor	I want to look at the ocean again
the seeds of illness were planted and you didn't know it	to see the vastness of my half lifetime of tears
until the pain dragged you to the hospital	
and that was the first time you heard	I want to climb a tall mountain again
the new words "slipped disc in the lumbar vertebra"	to try to call back my lost soul
and each time you smile when you talk about the pain and	
the past	I want to lie in a prairie
we're moved by your optimism	and leaf through the bible my mother gave me
until at the annual New Years party, you drunkenly	
grasped a liquor bottle in your right hand, and held up	I want to touch the sky
three fingers with your left,	and stroke that swath of pale blue
you sobbed and said:	
"I'm not even thirty	But I can't do any of that
I've never had a girlfriend	so I will leave this world
I'm not married, I don't have a career—	
and my whole life is already over."	No one who knows me
	should be surprised by my leaving
	There's no need to sigh, or feel sorrow
	I came at the right time, and will go at the right time too

Figure 3: Poems by the Chinese Factory worker Xu Lizhi who died by suicide in 2014

This section sets up the argument being made in this dissertation regarding the need for a more nuanced and complex reading of informal workers' politics than what is captured by union politics and/or a politics that emphasizes worksite related issues. It sets up the discussion in Chapter Six regarding a worker's politics stemming from a three-fold relationship with work, i.e., relationship with work at the worksite, and with the social and selfhood dimensions of work.

The poems above were written by Xu Lizhi, a factory worker in China, who died by suicide in 2014. He worked at the Foxconn factory in Shenzhen, which produces iPhones, and was just twenty-four. He is not the only worker-poet; there are others, his contemporaries in China, all young men and women, working in factories, writing hard-hitting, poignant poems regarding their experiences of work and life in the rhythms of modern factory life, on their smartphones. In India, before its ban in 2020, TikTok was a favoured social media platform for expression by many young working-class men and women, as it was in some other countries like Turkey.[64] The life of a modern worker-factory worker, hawker, farm worker, amongst others- is no mystery, for those truly looking. The ubiquity of the internet and social media has enabled the production and circulation of various kinds of articulations, creative and otherwise, of workers that tells us exactly what the modern worker thinks of their work life and experience, and the state of the world. We can see this in Eleanor Goodman's translated collection of poetry by Chinese workers (Qin and Goodman 2016), the fascinating sub-reddit (discussion group) titled 'Antiwork: Unemployment for all, not just the rich!' on Reddit,[65] exchanges by workers on Whatsapp, and videos shot and released by them on social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook, amongst others. These first-person articulations and expressions productively

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[64]See Altay (2021).

[65] See https://www.reddit.com/r/antiwork/ . This sub-reddit had 1.8 million subscribers as of 19 March 2022. It describes itself thus: 'A subreddit for those who want to end work, are curious about ending work, want to get the most out of a work-free life, want more information on anti-work ideas and want personal help with their own jobs/work-related struggles.'

complicate prevailing narratives within the world of labour scholarship, which, as mentioned, sometimes has a tendency to be pessimistic about the relative agency of the modern worker vis a vis capital. The informal worker, particularly, is frequently seen as a victim reeling against the excesses of predatory capitalism, almost always on the backfoot, as mentioned in Chapter One. As Nayanjyoti (2020) notes, platforms like Tiktok 'removed the mediation of the written word, of editorial or expert hierarchies, and jumped over this 'translation' into unfiltered expression through/of the body'. He notes that the content that was produced by workers was expansive and asserted its own 'framing of life, work, leisure and time itself', subverting 'victimhood representations' through self-expression of 'skill, strength and joyous irreverence'.[66] He also points out the global connections and solidarities that were being forged over Tiktok by workers as they interacted with each other's videos, 'working class boys from south India with Korean Tiktokers, women coordinating dance moves, of lovers showing each other their living quarters and life-worlds to an old romantic tune or even critiquing heteronormative world views.'

As mentioned in Chapter One, one can only arrive at a nuanced understanding of workers' politics by first recognising that a worker's relationship with work is a great deal more complex than is frequently acknowledged. Within labour scholarship, it is now recognised that, contrary to what was commonly accepted earlier, the experience of work in Fordist production was not as homogenous and universally negative as thought (Parry 1999a). Drawing from fieldwork with hawkers and factory workers, the three fieldwork chapters produce a picture of post-Fordist work spaces,[67] workers and the working experience. It seeks to show how in the post-Fordist world of production today, a great deal has changed in the relationship of workers with

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[66]See the Tiktok video titled 'Irreverence of Labour', linked in Nayanjyoti (2020) and uploaded on Youtube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qGtSkcMsFWs. The Tiktok video is credited to user 'sachindagarVALMIki', @sachin53248426.

[67] These are not uniform-in this case represented by hawking sites in Kolkata and Delhi, and a few prominent industrial zones in Delhi NCR.

their work, but that, like what is now argued about the worker's relationship with work in the regime of Fordist production, it too is not homogenous or universally negative. These discussions set up the argument that this complex and not-universally-negative experiences and desires from work shape the form, content and articulations of politics by informal workers today, as was visible in the cases of hawkers and factory workers during this research.

…'Work-work-work

Till the brain begins to swim,

Work-work-work

Till the eyes are heavy and dim!

Seam, and gusset, and band,

Band, and gusset, and seam,

Till over the buttons I fall asleep

And sew them on in a dream!'

'O, Men with Sisters dear!

O Men! With Mothers and Wives!

It is not linen you're wearing out,

But human creatures' lives!'…

- excerpt from **The Song of the Shirt**

by Thomas Hood (1799–1845)

Figure 4: Excerpt from the poem 'The Song of the Shirt' by Thomas Hood (1799-1845)

In contrast to the poems by Xu Lizhi that this section began with, the above is a much older poem, intending to convey a more universal, timeless experience of work, instantly

recognisable. Through this contrast I hope to flag the tension between universal and contextual experiences of work, between a 'timeless' experiences of work and work under modern capitalism, a tension that discussions in this dissertation sometimes operates with, particularly in Chapter Six. As already mentioned, I argue that the way we relate to work influences the way we think about our politics. Here I mean 'work' as something broader than just the notion of work as livelihood; I'm referring to how we think about the role of work as an existential phenomenon. Why do we work? What do we want to achieve out of work? What apparently common-sense notions of work have we internalized and made into an essential part of our self-identity? The notion of work that I want to hold on to and emphasise is work to make a livelihood, yes, but also the various other roles played by work in our ways of being- work as self-expression, work as the basis of our self-worth, work as a way of crafting and moulding ourselves, work as a means of justifying our existence, amongst others.

While it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to engage with the extensive literature on work, leisure and selfhood, it is nonetheless necessary and pertinent to discuss and engage with certain aspects. These emerged from conversations in the field, from the insights forced on a global population during the catastrophic events of the covid-19 pandemic and forced lockdowns across the world which forced the treadmill to just…stop, for a while, and from my personal experiences in this time. The lockdowns that brought much of life to a standstill are unprecedented in recent memory, and tremendously seeded with potential for reimagining ourselves and our relationships with work, and therefore capitalism.

Work, when restricted to just an understanding of what happens at the worksite, might produce a politics restricted to said worksite and its conditions thereof. This is something that everybody is conscious of, nobody has to be 'taught' to understand it, or told what/ how to experience it or perceive it. What we *experience*, we <u>know</u> and nobody can take that away from us. Needless to say, one of the problems and excesses of formal scholarship and the 'educational' form of

activism that frequently prevails, is its missionary zeal to translate to the worker the worker's own experiences, and tell them how to save themselves. Such worksite related experiences are constantly producing political actions and movements, whether mass or individual, whether planned or apparently spontaneous, whether 'radical' or not, examples of which will be discussed in Chapters Four and Five. This current is constantly in flow, such as factory floor actions like sudden work stoppages, small and large skirmishes, and various other forms of everyday resistance. One also sees this with hawkers, in their confrontations with local governance bodies, RWAs, and in the various means adopted by them, including setting up bribe payments and the cultivation of political and administrative contacts within the state machinery, to ensure their survival on the streets.

I suggest there is another level of readily understood, easily comprehended and accessed, almost commonsensical understanding of work-i.e., in terms of its social repercussions, and work as a way to socially engineer yourself. Examples of this include the way in which work one does affects one's social prestige, the way work allows one to climb social hierarchies, and in the way it affects simple things like one's marriage prospects. Some hawkers in Kolkata, for instance, pointed out that they wanted to be seen as and called traders or shopkeepers, because who wants to marry their daughter off to a 'hawker'? In another instance, discussed in detail Chapter Six, Ram, a young boy in Manesar spoke with delight of moving on from a factory job to one as a real estate agent and then to a job within a Gurgaon discotheque. The delight, it seemed to me, was not because his life improved greatly in terms of financial security or ease of work, but because of the more elevated social image associated with the latter two jobs which held more space for him to imagine and dream of a life dearer to his heart.

However, when the mind and imagination are able to defy the physical conditions of exhaustion and anxiety that the structure of contemporary work deliberately creates for workers of all classes and categories, especially those doing low-paid, highly labour and time intensive work,

it begins to ask different questions. It begins to ask questions of why we are working, and what we hope to achieve by it- the bigger existential questions- and when that happens, the scope of politics exceeds just the worksite, and immediate social implications, and begins to question larger national and global structures of work. Or, the politics at the worksite becomes coloured by this larger perspective-the demands become bigger and more amorphous (discussed in Chapter Six). The usual questions-of minimum wage, time spent at work, social protections- are now free to be asked from the larger perspective of the ideal life one wishes to live, a life that isn't just about the bare minimum of *roti-kapda-makaan* (food, clothing and shelter) but leisure, pleasure, self-fulfilment.

A politics that emerges from that imagination arguably threatens existing structures of work and economic systems far more fundamentally.

Work, as has been pointed out, isn't always designed to produce useful and necessary things. It is, rather, designed to keep people busy.

> "...the manager is told to make profits...Usually he takes very little notice of the exhortation...But the teaching is so ingrained that he feels guilty if his lapses are brought to his attention...It is an interesting and illuminating experiment to ask a normal believer in the management creed simply to say, for instance: "The purpose of business is to give people something to do." He will prevaricate, argue, look uneasy, dismiss it as silly and perform all manner of expiatory rituals. Frequently he will simply refuse to say it-even if no one else is there to hear him. This is not rational behaviour."
>
> - **Cleverley** (1973, 33)

Regimes of work being created just for the sake of creating work, useless work in fact, as has been observed by critical commentators (Graeber 2013), suddenly come under the scanner when one is able to enter this mental and existential space. One saw multiple instances of this happening in public discourse during the 2020 lockdowns, when external circumstances forced many into such a mental and existential space. This led to a lot of mainstream engagement on the matter of jobs that actually turned out to be 'essential'[68] versus the jobs that get treated and remunerated as such but actually are not, such as upper corporate management, for instance. Discussions and conversations on alternative economic arrangements and production regimes, the necessity of universal basic income regimes, the long-term consequences of extractive capitalistic monopolies that are destroying our planet, amongst other topics, suddenly became mainstream. There was an apparent uptick in the volume of mass engagement on these issues and a willingness to see them as actual options-especially when consumers struggled to obtain basic commodities and perishables during the lockdown phases. There were discussions galore on seeds, growing food, community initiatives for urban farming that would create local self-sufficiency, eliminating the long supply chains via which we get everything from cars and washing machines to bananas and grains.

It is, however, difficult to begin the process of asking these existential questions of work, whether one earns very little or a lot, whether one is a blue-collar worker or white, whether a minimum wage-earner or an industrialist/billionaire owner of businesses, for a variety of reasons. One, as already mentioned, is how the work we do frequently saps us of the time and energy to think of anything but the bare details of life and how to re-live it day after day. But another reason is also psychological/emotional-we frequently grow up internalizing the notion that work is an essential aspect of the human experience, that work defines us. This feeling exists across classes, and arguably, pre-dates capitalism. In Lahiri (2010) I mention how a

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[68] These jobs tend to exist on the lowest poles of the totem, such as garbage collection, retail and factory work etc.

woman garment worker and trade union organiser-single, living independently in the city and responsible for supporting herself financially and also contributing towards her family's expenses in the village - spoke of how a job was important for her, not just for the money it paid. Even if she did not need the money, she would work, she said, because she saw work as a very important part of everybody's life. One should not sit idle, she noted. Thus, the notion of 'one should not sit idle' is not one that is held by just privileged classes. Of course, depending on one's need and class position, this almost religious/moral notion of work is also mixed up with a desire to improve one's lot in life-for a better existence. She was clear about the fact that she was working as hard as she was, at multiple jobs despite her gruelling factory schedule, was because she wanted to improve her economic situation. Her waking moments were literally packed with earning exercises. She mentioned wanting to earn enough to pay for a basic existence. And she did not consider as basic existence the leaky roof in a tiny, seven hundred rupees a month room that she lived in.

One doesn't have to look too far to find individuals who feel guilt for sitting still, sitting idle, not 'working'. Who feel shame when out of work, who feel shame to be without work even in voluntary situations where finances aren't an issue. Work, and here I include even unpaid forms of work like household chores, caregiving etc., frequently becomes a tool to escape ourselves, to escape difficult memories and trauma, as a substitute for self-worth and dignity or as a filler/plug for the gaping holes in ourselves that are our absent senses of self-worth/dignity. Work often has a frightening hold on our emotional selves-we are not free to feel joy, enjoy 'unproductive' activities and play; we feel a need to be yoked to work. And work is most often defined as something quantifiably and externally 'productive', geared towards capitalistic notions of output. 'Unproductive' pastimes rarely count as such, irrespective of their invisible but tangible, positive impact on one's self. To have and enjoy leisure-when it is even possible

to have it- is to be lazy, seems to be a common ingrained understanding.[69] We frequently feel a need to be constantly busy with socially approved and defined things to be busy with, to escape ourselves, which is frequently the only way we manage to live with ourselves. En masse, these anxieties suddenly came to the fore during enforced inactivity in the early periods of the lockdowns of 2020, as suggested by anecdotal and personal accounts that emerged in this period. We were confronted with ourselves when the treadmill stopped, and work as we knew it, life as we knew it, was topsy turvy for a bit.

Our relationship with work at the worksite, our relationship with work and our social and the relationship between work and self-hood, all influence and colour the political movements and actions that emerge apparently 'purely' around work and livelihood issues. We see, as I hope I'm able to demonstrate in this dissertation, strains of all three messily co-existing in organised and unorganised movements and/or political articulations of workers, in the demands raised (or not raised sometimes, interestingly), in the motivations as articulated by them. Which of these three (i.e., worksite/social/selfhood) we focus on and amplify, or which combinations, are important and I return to this in Chapters Six and Seven, after the discussions in Chapters Four and Five, on the politics of organising of hawkers and factory workers, which follow this chapter.

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[69]It is interesting here, in this context, to refer to discussions on the relationship between the austere early Protestant work ethic and the rise of modern Capitalism, begun most famously by Max Weber. See Weber (2013) and Kolbert's (2004) commentary around the nervous breakdown in Weber's life, after a decade of prolific writing and publications, that preceded the writing of his book.

<center>**Chapter Four**</center>

<center>**The Politics of Organising at the Site of Work: The National Hawker Federation**</center>

Introduction

> *"Aamra achhi; aar thhakbo."* ("We are here; and we'll always be here.")
>
> -**Patuli market hawkers** during attempted evictions in March 2012

One day in March 2012, I returned to my Kolkata neighbourhood to be met with the sight of bulldozers and rubble at two separate hawkers' markets.[70] One predominated by rows of roadside eateries, and the other a market of diverse offerings. Both flattened by the Kolkata Metropolitan Development Authority (KMDA) in a matter of hours. On asking, a few hawkers, who still stood amidst the broken shards of clay tea cups, scattered everywhere in the eateries market, told me that they had received verbal demolition notices of 48 hours. Others said they received less than 12 hours' notice. Later, newspaper reports mentioned demolitions and attempted evictions along an approximately 6 km. stretch of the E.M. Bypass, a high-traffic, multi-lane road in Kolkata, for a proposed broadening of the road and that such evictions had been carried out at other locations within Kolkata in the past few months.[71] The founding organiser of the HSC and General Secretary of the NHF Saktiman Ghosh released a press statement on behalf of the NHF stating that 4000 hawkers and 3000 slum-dwellers were evicted from that stretch, in a recent city-wide spate of evictions.[72]

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[70] The description of this incident is taken from Lahiri (2022) which was published from this research as an article as part of the requirements for the PhD.

[71] See Bhattacharjee (2012a), Bhattacharjee (2012b) and TNN (2012).

[72] Received in my personal email account. See Ghosh (2012).

In the next few days, I noticed the appearance of banners of the HSC inscribed with '*Ei uchhed kar shaarthhe?*' ('Evictions in whose interest?') tied at both markets[73] and daily protest marches by the hawkers. They said they were maintaining 24-hour vigils by their reoccupied spots, where I noted they continued to operate with reduced goods, to guard against re-eviction, running a community kitchen on-site with rations provided by other HSC members. Months later, when I began fieldwork, an HSC member union at a wholesale rice market mentioned contributing rice and pulses for the kitchen.

Attending their mass meetings, I heard strategy and action urgently discussed, and women hawkers militantly declare that if the bulldozers came again, they would have to go over their bodies. They also stated firmly that the sites must put up a united front: hawkers who did not add their sweat to the resistance would not be allowed to enjoy the fruits of the resistance. At one such meeting, Ghosh had declared "this is not Ramakrishna Mission, this is a union" (Lahiri 2013).[74]

At other evicted sites in the city, I attended various demonstrations. They kept this up, on a daily basis, I was told by organisers, until May 2012, when the HSC leadership, accompanied by its city-wide membership,[75] went for a formal meeting with the urban authorities and received official assurance of no more evictions and that these hawkers would either be accommodated at the same spots or be given mutually decided upon alternatives.[76] By this time, most of the evicted hawkers who had joined the HSC across Kolkata were back in full operation at the re-occupied sites.

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[73] The EM Bypass hawkers affiliated with the HSC in the immediate aftermath of the 2012 evictions, though not all hawkers along the affected stretch did so. Only members displayed banners.

[74] Here the Ramakrishna Mission appeared to be brought up as an example of institutional charity.

[75] Hawkers symbolically waved empty plates at the city authorities.

[76] On the EM Bypass, this took the shape of permanent stalls being constructed on-site by the KMDA, and the construction of one Bangkok-style floating market at Patuli. The handing over process began in 2018.

These evictions had engendered a universal sense of shock and outrage; countless hawkers told me they hadn't experienced anything of this scale since the infamous 'Operation Sunshine' in 1996. At that time the then opposition leader Mamata Bannerjee had actively participated in the resistance that followed, but in 2012 she was the Chief Minister, and it was her Trinamool Congress government that had ordered these evictions. These days it does not matter which party is in power, "only the chair changes," as one HSC organiser pointed out.

The 1996 'Operation Sunshine' they mentioned, in fact, birthed the HSC. It referred to a planned mass eviction of hawkers from twenty-one thoroughfares by the Left Front state government, in power from 1977-2011, as part of the development vision of their new 1994 Industrial Policy. This policy aimed to take advantage of India's economic liberalisation in 1991, and improve the region's poor economic performance. There was a new economic mood and determination to refashion the city to attract foreign capital. In recovering events from that eviction drive, some of which I share here, I rely solely on secondary sources. Ghosh (2000) speaks of how various hawker unions in the city had started to sense the impending evictions three months before it actually began on 24 November 1996, and went into a flurry of activity, realising their older methods of defending their space would not work this time.[77] This culminated in the decision to form an independent federation of hawker unions, bringing together over 30 hawker unions in the city and seven central trade unions, which moved the

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[77]One gathers from Bandyopadhyay's (2016) history of hawker organizing in Kolkata that prior to 1996, hawker unions were extensions of the trade unions attached to political parties and that they made their claims based on the logic of a) their loyalty to ruling government deserving the reward of protection, b) deserving exceptions because they were poor, hardworking, and partition refugees (articulations, in other words, as political society). During the CPI(M) led Left-front coalition government, he notes that it was common for hawkers who were unorganized till then to join non-CPI(M) Left front party unions, in order to take advantage of coalition factionalism and because that tended to make them more acceptable to the opposition parties.

In the context of this particular study, I would argue that perhaps the experience of Operation Sunshine taught Kolkata hawkers that they could not rely *solely* on their moral claims as part of political society negotiation with the authorities, particularly since the political conditions that gave rise to the idea of political society had changed since the 1990s, the neoliberal turn shrinking the space for such negotiations. They realised they needed a more strident independent organization of their own (HSC) and a stepping up of their campaign for a law.

High Court and took out rallies, launched public campaigns, forwarded proposals about rehabilitation and started to proactively guard their stalls.

Despite all this, amidst massive deployment of force, 1,640 stalls were razed and 102 hawkers were arrested (Ghosh 2000). By July 1997, however, HSC hawkers were back on all the cleared roads, following militant protest actions. Records of the HSC fightback and reoccupation can be recovered from newspaper reports,[78] Ghosh's (2000) personal account, oral accounts of HSC members, the HSC's archives, where I saw their photographic documentation, and Bandyopadhyay's (2016) comprehensive research. However, notable Kolkata scholars like Chatterjee (2004) and Roy (2004) appear to have missed the HSC presence and fightback.

Arguably, what stand out from 1996 and 2012 are less the evictions, which are routine for hawkers, and more the HSC resistance. In the context of a city and state known for having its political spaces controlled by political parties, how did the independent HSC wrest such reoccupations of eviction sites which are quite rare in India?[79] How did it keep its union going strong for (now) twenty-six long years, which is a long time, given the difficulties associated with organising hawkers across the world?[80] What insights could be culled from its organisational structure, and way of doing politics, that could further or complicate our understanding of hawker politics? The pursuit of these queries took me first, to a study of the HSC, and then to a broader study of the NHF, as mentioned earlier.

The study of the National Hawker Federation presented in this chapter addresses the goals of this research by offering an empirical study of the politics of organising of hawkers and makes a case for why, in this instance, unionisation helps and supports hawkers' politics. I argue this is because the form adopted by the NHF emerges *in response* to two of the biggest threats faced

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[78]See *Financial Express* (1997), TNN (2010), Bhattacharyya (2002).
[79]This is not something the NHF's membership in Delhi, for instance, mentioned being able to do.
[80] Kumar and Singh (2018) describe some of these difficulties.

by hawkers-eviction, and the various forms of harassment that stemmed from being outside the purview of the law.[81] The study also attempts to identify the kind of demands and needs that this form of struggle is able to accommodate and advocate for, and the kinds that remain impossible, at least officially. Some of this is addressed within this chapter, while other aspects are raised in Chapter Six.

By doing a close reading of the NHF through a) its membership in Delhi and Kolkata and b) observing its functioning as a national federation, this study also fills a gap in existing literature on hawker politics where there is limited information on long-term formally organised collective movements of hawkers and how they function. Little is known of internal dynamics and organisational processes of such organisations and the factors that contribute to long-term stability of form. I argue that this gap has implications not only for how we understand informal workers politics per se, but also because in the post-legislation moment that India entered with the passage of the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014, we need this information. The legislation gives hawker unions and organisations a very important role to play with regard to the future of hawking practices in urban spaces. Without knowing the politics, processes and dynamics of unionisation, including who it excludes and why, we are left guessing at how it will interact with the law, and what consequences this interaction is likely to have for the future of hawkers in the urban space.

The study presents, across both cities, the details of who the members and leaders are, what their politics look like, and what the internal organisational structures and dynamics are. It reveals that the NHF's movement in Kolkata -constituted of the Hawker Sangram Committee which is also a founding member of the NHF-is much stronger than its Delhi movement and it is instructive to read them both together to understand what contributes to their respective

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[81]The key features of precarity that I identify with hawking are mentioned in Chapter Two.

strengths and weaknesses. I argue that the HSC's ability to implement its politics and successfully organise rests heavily on its dual strategy of organising – simultaneously building the struggle at the macro and micro levels – that widened from space-bound little struggles to larger collective action, while still holding on to the former (Lahiri 2022).[82] The NHF's Delhi movement, on the contrary, at the time of fieldwork, had been unable to develop resistance and struggle at the micro level across its various membership sites. Unlike the HSC in Kolkata, it was unable to protect its membership from eviction or to advocate for them in the aftermath of one. It was also unable to protect its membership from exploitation by the police and *dalals* (agents). I attribute this to the specific way factors from above, such as the complicated governance structure of Delhi, interacted with factors from below, such as leadership struggles, a '*sewa*'-i.e., 'service'- mentality to political struggle as opposed to a rights-based one, amongst others, in Delhi which I elaborate on in this chapter.

The study also discusses the NHF at the national level, in its federation level functioning by examining who its target audience is, what its politics are, and its internal structure and dynamics. I consolidate the findings from all three discussions, i.e., on the HSC, on the NHF in Delhi and on the NHF's functioning as a federation at the national level, to reflect on and evaluate the NHF's politics, examining to what extent it is able to respond to the needs and desires of its membership.

This chapter is divided into five sections. The first section maps the contours of the literature on hawker politics. The second section discusses the HSC in Kolkata through the subsections of 1) its members and leaders, 2) its politics and 3) its internal structure and internal dynamics. The third section discusses the NHF in Delhi through subsections on 1) its members and leaders, 2) politics and 3) internal structure and internal dynamics. The fourth section discusses

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[82]The study of the HSC was published as an article in the *Global Labour Journal* as part of the requirements for the PhD and I thank Reviewer 1 for suggesting this formulation.

the national level functioning of the NHF through subsections on 1) its target audience, 2) its internal structure and internal dynamics and 3) its politics. The fifth section concludes with a discussion evaluating the NHF's politics and its limitations.

Context: Broad Contours of Literature on Hawker Politics

It is useful to first review the broad contours of existing literature on hawker politics in the Global South, and the following discussion is organised as follows. First, our understanding of the various ways in which hawkers intervene politically is given, along with the types that tend to either occur more frequently or get highlighted more. Second, I discuss the manner in which hawker unionisation is understood by scholars as a mode of doing politics, and the temporal context and impact of the 2014 Act in India, which has led to increased formal organising. Third, the problem of a lack of primary studies on hawker organisations is discussed, as well as why this matters.

Just as in India, the lived experience of hawkers in the Global South feature the constant looming threat of evictions, bribes and daily harassment in regimes of ambiguous regulatory frameworks (Forkuor, Akuoko and Yeboah 2017, Racaud, Kago and Owuor 2018). Literature tends to note their resistance and response in near binaries- either as using macro-level negotiations with urban authorities/the state (e.g., employing collective agency to negotiate with the state, via courts and the law) *or* micro level ones (employing individual agency strategies like building informal networks of security amongst themselves, setting up bribes, etc.) (Forkuor, Akuoko and Yeboah 2017); intervening as individuals *or* as organised collectives, with relatively muted mentions of membership-based organisations (Forkuor, Akuoko and Yeboah 2017). On the whole, literature appears to suggest that hawkers tend towards strategies at the level of the individual or, if at all they collectivize, they most

frequently mobilise into informal, transient collectives as opposed to long-term formal ones (Forkuor, Akuoko and Yeboah 2017).

Further, even in the arguably less common cases of long-term formal organising, we see that this takes various forms. Some scholars highlight formally registered organized groups that negotiate with urban authorities such as Self-Help Groups, street trader associations, NGOs (Racaud, Kago and Owuor 2018), and Horn (2014) mentions hawkers within national-level trade unions of autonomous workers, informal traders, informal economy organisations, informal economy workers etc. However, one notes that such formal organisations do not necessarily take the form of hawker unions and do not necessarily articulate their movements in terms of class politics. Literature also suggests that when hawkers do collectivise and organise formally, they encounter common challenges of membership, legitimacy, financial resources and rivalries of power and leadership competitions (Racaud, Kago and Owuor 2018). However, given the paucity of empirical studies, we have very little information on how hawkers' organisations negotiate these issues.

Early studies across Asia by Bhowmik (2005) had revealed that hawkers unions were rare. In addition, I'd also argue that absence of hawker unions within literature doesn't always mean absence of hawker unions on the ground; on the contrary, this could also be because scholars- accidentally or deliberately- sometimes end up making invisible existing hawker unions. For instance, as already mentioned, Roy (2004) and Chatterjee (2004) appear to have missed the HSC's presence while writing about the Kolkata-wide hawker evictions in 1996 termed Operation Sunshine. Another such example is the tendency within hawker literature pertaining to India, circulating in global academic circuits, to highlight the NASVI and erase other movements,[83] including the NHF, even though the NHF with 1188 member unions is arguably

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[83] See Horn (2014), Kumar and Singh (2018) and Joshi (2018) for an example of this.

a bigger presence than NASVI which has 888 member organisations.[84] This prompts the question of whether the rarity of hawker unions was/is a comment on the political efficacy of the union form for hawkers, leading to the second broad point that I wish to focus on.

In the existing literature on hawkers, opinion is divided on whether unionisation is relevant for hawkers. Some perspectives question its political relevance directly (Little 2005) or indirectly, by either being silent on the presence of unions or mentioning them in dubious contexts such as bribe aggregators for the local police (Anjaria 2011, 62).

Others are very clear about its value (Cross 1998, Lindell 2018). Bhowmik (2005) has always unambiguously correlated unionisation with subsequent security for hawkers, and advocated for the same. In his detailed and highly nuanced research Bandyopadhyay (2009, 2011) notes that in Kolkata hawkers, courtesy their movement, became the most numerically visible, organised and militant sector within the informal economy.

Deliberations on hawker unionisation as a desirable political practice take on an added dimension in situations where hawking comes to be legalised and the political space changes. Within India the 2014 Act, for instance, has led to a rapid increase in hawker unions and associations.

Before 2014, a central motive for collective mobilisation was eviction. Exploitative and coercive bribes and protection rackets rarely pushed hawkers to organise, despite studies showing that they would rather transition to a legal licence system and pay taxes instead. At national level NHF meetings, organisers and leadership from multiple states corroborated this by reporting how hawkers first reached out to them in the event of an eviction, or how organisers proactively reached out to hawkers when evictions were carried out, in order to collectivise and oppose. Singh et al., (2012) showed that hawkers chose to disturb the status

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[84] See the 'About NASVI' page of NASVI at http://nasvinet.org/about-nasvi/.

quo by organising only when they were evicted or faced the threat of impending eviction, and even then, only if post-eviction bribes did not work. Such organising, however, did not necessarily go beyond immediate issues related to eviction, and broader issues of right to livelihood, working conditions and social security largely remained unaddressed. Lindell (2018) points out that there is never a guarantee that such short-term mobilisations against evictions would translate into long-term ones-and this is arguably borne out by studies such as Bhowmik's (2005) that found low hawker union density in India.

It is important to briefly mention the temporal context within which the 2014 Act emerged, one that played an important role in the birth of the HSC as well-i.e., the post-1990s neoliberal turn in the logic of governance and ordering of urban spaces which has been discussed in Chapter Three. Two things were happening simultaneously in this moment. One, hawker organisations had been doggedly leading struggles on the ground for years, leading numerous campaigns themselves and through their allies, for a law. And two, as Roy (2005) and Chen (2004) have noted, there was a resurgence of interest in informality in global policy circles around the new millennium, which doubtless influenced the Indian state's attempts to enumerate and plan informality. As mentioned earlier, it set up the NCEUS in 2004 which found that around 93% of India's workforce was informal. Around the same time, it started formulating national policies on hawking. Thus, pressure from hawkers' organisations, and the state's understanding of informality, its desire to plan urban spaces and the ever-present, simmering anxiety around the urban hawker arguably all came together producing the 2014 Act.

Welcomed as a step in the desired direction by organised hawkers' movements across India, the 2014 Act was a landmark moment. One of its key objectives is the earmarking of vending zones and identification and survey of hawkers every five years by Town Vending Committees (TVC). Thus TVCs, composed of the municipal commissioner, representatives of hawkers, local authority, planning authority, local police, resident welfare association and other traders'

associations, are almost all-powerful under this Act. They must contain at least forty percent hawker representation and an additional ten percent from NGOs and/or community-based organisations. As a direct consequence of this, as mentioned, hawkers in India have increasingly been forming organisations and registering them, most frequently, under the Societies Registration Act, 1860, as opposed to the Trade Union Act, 1926,[85] to become active stakeholders within its framework. Across India, this pushed hawker politics into an interesting stage of flux, as hawkers began their struggle to operationalise the Act.

One doesn't know as yet how this wave of proliferation of hawker unions and associations will impact the overall livelihood security and rights of Indian hawkers and the hawker movement. My fieldwork in Delhi suggests this will motivate many fake organisations to emerge, as a way of capturing and exerting greater power in the fraught political and economic space of the urban. Further, because of the lack of robust research on hawker organisations, we have some literature-[86] though not enough- to have adequate ethnographic insights to assert, like Cross (1998, 44) does, that multiple competing unions will ultimately benefit hawkers.

Undergirding this entire discussion is a repeat mention of perhaps the most glaring gap of all within the literature- that of a lack of primary studies of hawkers and/or their organised movements and unions (Forkuor, Akuoko and Yeboah 2017, Joshi 2018, Lindell 2018). This happens even where the research focus is on hawkers within the informal economy.[87]There are

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[85] The decision of 1) whether to register and 2) which of the two acts to register under, are both political and strategic. At the time of fieldwork, the NHF had taken a political decision to remain unregistered, believing it to give them more freedom. Many of the HSC's older members are registered trade unions. All the Delhi members of NHF are either registered or in the process of getting registered under the Societies Act. Although today it is considered to be nearly impossible to get a Trade Union registration for hawkers' unions, fieldwork conversations suggested that it can still be done, with the cooperation of local legislators and councilors.

[86] Sales (2018) notes the fragmented union landscape in Mumbai, the mistrust present amongst smaller unions towards big union groupings or national level organisations.

[87]See Bonner and Spooner (2011).

exceptions, such as Bandyopadhyay's insightful body of work on the HSC,[88] and an article by Kumar and Singh (2018) documenting NASVI's movement history. However, neither provide a glimpse of internal organisational dynamics. Lindell (2018) notes that the 'dynamics and trajectories of street workers' organizations…vary widely and are poorly understood', including the incorporation of informal workers organisations into trade union structures, and on the dynamics and sustainability of broader, umbrella like organisations that street workers organisations sometimes form. The point she makes about how these organisations don't necessarily represent the concerns of the most vulnerable, and that they also frequently turn a blind eye to 'exploitative labor arrangements' within (Lindell 2018), pre-empts a discussion in a later section which attempts to illustrate how our understanding of important issues like these are directly impacted by empirical details generated by studies of unions and associations. I argue that it's not enough to know/ask who unions are representing and excluding. It's also important to understand *why* they do so. Understanding motivation provides insight into movement politics, which in turn gives a sense of intended future orientation. This research argues that for hawkers the identified exclusions are situational, more than active gate-keeping. For e.g., evidence from my fieldwork suggests that while 'employee-hawkers'-excluded from unions- are generally hired at daily wage rates, the risks and losses of the occupation, such as evictions, confiscation of goods and rent seeking, are borne by the 'owner-hawkers'. As already mentioned, the primary motivation to organise comes, in the first place, from one of these risks-eviction.

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[88]Bandyopadhyay's work is frequently referred to not only because of a common entity of enquiry-the HSC- but also because it addresses the literature gap through a close study of it. However, Bandyopadhyay's research focuses on the historical context of the emergence of post-colonial hawker politics in Kolkata, examines the politics of the HSC's claim-making on the state through its archival practices-which he calls 'archiving from below'- and the judicialisation of its politics.

The Hawker Sangram Committee in Kolkata

Members and leaders

Within the HSC's federation structure, decision and policy making is undertaken democratically through member union leaders and the central HSC leadership helmed by Ghosh, who functions as General Secretary for both HSC and NHF. It is a combination of these leaders who also represent the HSC within the NHF. The HSC deliberately does not adopt the banner of any political party and is independent.

Its member unions, more than fifty at close of fieldwork, are distributed across the city, with the newest unions springing up in the recently developed and developing parts-such as along the EM Bypass, and at the IT hubs in Salt Lake and New Town. It is from such areas along the expanding edges of the city that the greatest amount of membership is likely to come from in the future. It was interesting to observe how so many of the hawkers in New Town, amongst its 13 member unions, were those who a) had lost their land in land acquisition by the state,[89] b) had relatively recently migrated to the city or c) had relocated here from other parts of the city. These were the areas in the city where hawking territories were only just in the process of becoming solidified and therefore one encountered many 'new hawkers' here, compared to older areas of the city centre. Many of the hawkers here were local residents who had lost land in the Rajarhat land acquisition process,[90] others were those who began their lives working for

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[89] Of those, some had already received compensation, others were still awaiting it.

[90] It was a bit surreal to think of how the loss of land pushed many former land-owners into hawking-on the very lands that they once used to own. It was very interesting to observe, however, how ownership of land remains a source of power even after it is lost to a land acquisition process. I reached this tentative conclusion based on conversations which suggested that such individuals apparently retained more clout with local urban authorities such as Housing Infrastructure Development Corporation Ltd (HIDCO), which is the local urban body in charge of development projects, in comparison with those who never owned land. One sensed from conversations that many land-losers in New Town who chose hawking over (or in addition to) the syndicate business (that HIDCO apparently suggested as an alternative source of livelihood to land losers- "*byabsha koro*"), were more prosperous than the hawkers who never owned land.

Not all land has the same value though- owners of land in Dhapa (many of who were hawkers in that area), I was

other hawkers in different parts of the city, and had eventually set up their own hawking business here. Still others were relatively new migrants into the city, who found their way here to make a life and living. One encountered many hawkers who worked multiple jobs, alongside hawking, to, both, make ends meet and to aspire for something more than just subsistence; it seemed as if the edges of the city were more hospitable for entrepreneurial dreams. As one hawker here put it, "*Byabsha'r moton jinish hoye?*" ("Can there be anything as satisfying as your own business?")

Members include unions affiliated to United Trade Union Congress, Indian Federation of Trade Unions, All India Central Council of Trade Unions, All India Trade Union Congress, Indian National Trade Union Council, Trade Union Coordination Committee and unions with the Socialist Unity Centre of India. There were also members that were unregistered unions[91] with no party connections, and unions that were informally close to parties.

Member union leaders/organisers play a very crucial role-they connect the member unions and lay hawkers, scattered across the city, with the central leadership of the HSC. I explain later the critical role this structure plays within the HSC. These organisers had miscellaneous profiles-they included full-time or ex-hawkers, full-time trade union workers, social workers and activists, and even one journalist. Most of them were male, except a handful of women organisers, including the leadership of the Women Hawkers Adhikar Sangram Committee, formed in October 2012. At the time of fieldwork, many women leaders who had emerged from the 2012 resistance were in the process of being trained and groomed for greater responsibility within the HSC. This skewed gender balance is reflected in the membership profile as well.

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told, would eagerly sell their land against compensation, if ever offered, for it was not as fertile and did not yield as much as the farmlands in New Town (many of which, I was told, were 3-crop lands).

[91]Many sought registration after 2014.

Member hawkers range from second and third generation hawkers, to first generation hawkers, and membership profile is heavily skewed towards stationary, male hawkers operating out of temporary stalls in relatively well-established hawker markets. I attribute this skewed demographic to the fact that male stationary hawkers operating out of temporary structures face the highest threat and heaviest burden of eviction, and consequently have the highest motivation to unionise.[92] Men also apparently vastly outnumber women hawkers in Kolkata, which, according to HSC organisers, is unlike the pattern in other big Indian cities. Fieldwork suggested that women hawkers are more marginalised, tend to trade in less profitable goods like vegetables, are less likely to erect temporary structures, thereby escaping financial loss related to structure damage during eviction. Mobile hawkers who move from point to point selling goods don't face eviction pressures. I therefore argue that the membership profile rather than being a reflection of gate-keeping is a reflection of the primary motivator of collective organisation itself, i.e., eviction. Had it been the former, one would have come across evidence of the HSC *restricting* membership. However, my fieldwork indicates that the leadership has been trying to proactively reach out and broaden the scope of membership, such as through the new women hawkers' union in 2012.

While the primary expectation from unionisation was the securing of their hawking spot, members also articulated the hope that union membership would acquire for them government welfare facilities and schemes, and provide them an identity and dignity in the eyes of society. As one organiser said, "people will know we exist."

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[92]Eviction at this point continues to be the primary motivator for collective organizing, though one can expect that as the 2014 Act ages, the desire to benefit from it will become as important a motivator.

Politics[93]

The HSC's politics is prominently characterised by a strategic independence at the organisational level, allowing it to advocate for its membership irrespective of which political party is in power, and is therefore a factor that has contributed to its longevity.[94] It is also characterised by the ability to simultaneously and effectively deploy multiple instruments of struggle, and the determination to hunker down for the long fight, fuelled by a large and committed membership in Kolkata. Their politics is geared towards simultaneously building a hyper-local movement, ensuring its members are protected and able to function well, while also scaling up at the city-wide, national and international levels. While this is a common goal for many movements, at a practical level this is frequently challenging to achieve. The HSC, despite being limited in terms of financial resources, does this very well. It consciously emphasises long-term political goals, without compromising on its ability to respond to the immediate, as the events of 1996 and 2012 demonstrate. When the subject of the early activism for the law came up, many organisers said they used to think that Ghosh was mad and that a law was a pipe-dream. They emphasised how the politics of the HSC had encouraged a shift amongst hawkers from worrying about the immediate present to thinking about the long future.

The HSC interacts with the state machinery, other fraternal social and political movements, with the media and civil society intellectuals and the like, building alliances and connections horizontally and vertically. It has strong links with the National Alliance of People's Movements (NAPM),[95] with unions of agriculture workers, with forums against Free Trade Agreements, Foreign Direct Investment, Climate Change related UN summits and forums, amongst others. Like many hawker movements, they too deploy a wide-ranging array of

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[93] This section is drawn from Lahiri (2022).

[94] Change of power at the state government level in 2011 hadn't affected membership, which continued to grow, nor its ability to act for hawkers.

[95] The NAPM is an alliance of progressive people's organisations and movements in India.

strategies and tactics: from the militancy of reoccupation to more passive-aggressive strategies like deliberately irritating the bureaucracy.[96] From asking the bigger questions about the right to the city and the structure of the economy to taking a position that they would not oppose new roads and flyovers as long as hawkers were accommodated within it; from informal negotiations with the state and bureaucracy to a fully-fledged local and national campaign for legislation; from the deployment of court cases and an extensive archive (Bandyopadhyay 2016) to leveraging support from intellectuals and academics.

The leadership unambiguously positions the movement as one of class struggle and the HSC as a trade union. It speaks in class solidarity with other movements of the urban poor, and has always been very agile in reflecting the changing rationale and logic of the state back at them while claim-making.[97] The HSC distances itself from 'the NGO mode' of doing politics. Its leaders told me that they're against the concept of receiving external funds (a principle feature of NGOs, according to them), because it ties the hands of movements. Many leaders also strongly felt that NGOs within hawker movements frequently got away with merely claiming a membership on paper, while not actually having organisational presence on the ground. The HSC has never been, in the words of Ghosh, such a "laptop union", carrying out a movement solely over keyboards. In a similar vein, Ghosh negates the importance of micro-credit as a political need of the urban poor and claims instead that the most pressing problem of hawkers today is not access to credit which, given their frequently small capital requirement, is manageable, but harassment due to the absence (or non-implementation) of a law.

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[96]For instance, Ghosh told me that during the 2012 evictions, one of the intentions behind carrying out twice daily protest marches at all sites was to build pressure on the local police stations, which are required to write and submit reports of every such agitation.

[97]A perusal of important pro-hawker judgements by the Supreme Court, and the national policies that preceded the Act, quickly reveal the similarity of language used by the state and by hawkers' movements. For more on their sharp ability to couch their rhetoric in the circulating language of the moment see Bandyopadhyay (2016).

They've been at the forefront of resistance movements at Singur and Nandigram,[98] organised against the Indian banknote demonetisation in 2016, and joined the nation-wide protests in 2019-2020 against the Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019, the National Register of Citizens and the National Population Register and advocated for hawkers during the period of lockdowns in India owing to the coronavirus pandemic. At the state[99] as well as the national level, the HSC's multi-pronged fight- at street level, in courts, with elected representatives, with governance institutions etc.- along with the state's own desire to plan informality (as mentioned earlier) has resulted in a situation where they are acknowledged as political actors, and have wrested a permanent spot at the table for all official and unofficial policy making with regard to hawkers.

Leveraging electoral power as a tactic is not central to their politics, even though West Bengal (and Kolkata) is saturated with party politics. While Bandyopadhyay (2016, 677) appears to more or less reject the vote-bank thesis for hawker politics, noting that they, unlike slum dwellers, do not form consolidated vote banks, I contend that electoral politics play a slightly larger role than what he proposes, though not nearly as much as what Agarwala (2013), Chatterjee (2004), or Roy(2004) would suggest. While at a national level, I agree with Bandyopadhyay, for there appears to be no evidence to suggest hawkers sway elections, or that the hawker vote affects national hawker policy-making, I nonetheless argue that, city-wide, the power of the vote does apply in hawking markets where a sizeable section of the hawkers reside nearby, i.e., if they vote and work in the same electoral catchment area. They leverage this for limited, though not unimportant, local needs, often infrastructural, as mentioned by several member unions. The threat of eviction is however not something that can be adequately

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[98]These are two villages in West Bengal where the Left Front state government carried out very violent land acquisition moves for industrialisation in 2006-07. The moves ultimately failed in the face of sustained opposition and resistance.

[99]Other significant hawker unions in the county such as SEWA and NASVI do not appear to be active in West Bengal.

mitigated by political party patronage as the power to evict is spread out in a complex web of various urban authorities, the police, private interests etc. Thus, the meta-narrative that appeared to run through their responses is captured by the equation of "*pet-er-lorai*" (i.e., fight for survival needs) with the HSC, rendering relationships with political parties as matters of "personal choice". 'Personal choice' is an interesting phrase here, for, as pointed out by a local hawker leader, the occupation of hawking is such, that one cannot avoid being in a relationship with the party in power, irrespective of who one actually votes for. Such a relationship entails things like going for party events and programmes, essentially swelling the numbers with bodily presence. In addition, there are, of course, the obligations of *chandas* or contributions for religious and cultural celebrations. This leaves one speculating as to whether one can characterise the relationship thus: that the time of 'peace' is the time of the party, whereas the time of crisis is the time of the hawker union. When it came to evictions, they were clear that only the HSC had their back. That said, there is frequently a complex equation between a hawking site, local political party in power and HSC membership. I eventually came to understand that 'wins' from eviction struggles don't automatically go to affected HSC membership: often, a tense negotiation will ensue over the allocation of rehabilitation and the local hawker union doesn't always have full control over it. Further, the ability to reoccupy eviction spots also appears to be strengthened if the hawkers have a favourable relationship with the local political party in addition to its HSC membership. The manner in which member unions negotiate this relationship is mentioned in the following sub-section on internal structure and dynamics.

Following the passage of the 2014 Act, the HSC has made some adjustments to its political practices. Organisational focus is now greatly concentrated on ensuring the implementation of the law and the formation of TVCs. Since the pressure for this can primarily be applied via courts, this part of the HSC strategy has grown. The understanding appears to be that the fight

for TVCs cannot be conducted at the street level, though in their internal meetings they emphasize that the readiness and ability for militant street struggles must never disappear, should it need to be re-deployed. Organisers do not believe the law will end evictions; they merely feel that the law will give them more control over the struggle they are waging. "The law can go against us if our collective politics isn't strong. We have to follow it up with our struggle," observed Ghosh.

The HSC (along with the NHF) has also been focussing on consolidating and strengthening the organisation through leadership and legal training, because the post-Act world will require its members to be well-versed in the often obfuscating language of the law, court orders and judgements. In 2016, they formalised their national (i.e., NHF) structure with their first national conference in Delhi, elected a national general council, working committees, central secretariat and state leadership and adopted a constitution.

Thus, in the years immediately ahead of us, it would appear that the days of militant street level resistance by the HSC are over. This is not just because of the changes in the strategies adopted by the HSC, but also because the patterns of eviction have changed. Evictions are increasingly becoming more clandestine, targeting a handful of hawkers at a time as opposed to entire hawking markets in order to avoid collective resistance.

Roy (2008), in her work on squatter evictions and resettlements in Kolkata, found that formalisation could unleash great conflict in settlements in the sorting out of 'legitimate' claims. A question that looms, in view of this, is how this kind of formal organising impacts the overall rights position and livelihood security for *all* hawkers. This is addressed in the last section of this chapter.

Internal structure, internal dynamics

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, I argue that the HSC's success can be attributed to their dual strategy of organising, being able to scale up their collective action without losing their ability to act at the micro-local level. A study of its internal dynamics and details of organising suggests that this in turn rests on its internal structure and division of labour.

Within the HSC, member unions have a life and will of their own, which is not subsumed under the identity and authority of the HSC. The leaders of member unions, in connecting the local units to the larger HSC and NHF structure, make it possible to overcome fragmentation in the union landscape, and build a city-wide movement of scattered hawking markets. The rank and file at member sites are not usually in daily contact with the central leadership of the HSC although they retain freedom to do so. The latter, too, coordinates with these sites primarily through the site leaders.

As mentioned, most member unions maintain parallel relations with political parties and with the HSC based on a clear logic. This parallel relationship appears to function more or less fluidly; the hawkers did not feel that they needed to choose one over the other. It was a relationship constantly but reasonably comfortably negotiated, especially by those member unions affiliated to political parties.

This brings up a related question of when the identity of the member union prevails and when the identity of the HSC prevails. The HSC does not micro-manage its members who have considerable autonomy with regard to how they function. There are rules that member units have to follow, e.g., no party banners at HSC events, maintaining a level of cleanliness and hygiene around the stalls. Rules, that is, for a certain 'discipline'. Aside from that it's the prerogative of the member units to determine which hawkers to admit and the rules of

membership for their site. It is also their prerogative to decide what sort of relationship they want with political parties. They can choose to attend rallies and meetings of political parties, and also have some flexibility in deciding which HSC events to attend. Smaller ones, like localised demonstrations against FDI are frequently only peopled by local members, whilst larger annual events like the marking of International Hawker Day (26 May), Operation Sunshine (24 November) require full mobilisation.

I contend that this comfortably negotiated parallel relationship of member unions, i.e., with the HSC and with political parties/local power lobbies, is very important because it ensures that the local membership doesn't get subsumed under the larger city-level or national-level movement and feels powerless. It arguably allows for a stable base on which to scale up the movement at the national and international level.

To demonstrate how this structure enables the HSC's dual strategy of organising, one can look at how, in the period between 2012-2014, alongside the militant occupation by hawkers, the leadership was simultaneously pursuing cases filed in the local High Court, utilising a 2013 national stay-order against evictions issued by the Supreme Court for local eviction cases, while also mobilising across the city and in Delhi to pressurise the Parliament to pass the hawker Act. Between 2014-2017 I found member union leaders kept pursuing the official rehabilitation process, while also simultaneously working with the central leadership in pressuring the state government to operationalise the 2014 Act.

Without the wins from micro-place-based struggles, the HSC would likely lose its membership. Interviews suggested that knowing that the HSC was creatively building their movement at a national and international level was a source of great pride for active members. At the same time, many hawkers within member unions were more concerned with site-specific issues and judged the relevance of their membership with the HSC based on whether those issues got

taken care of. Not every hawker is political or willing to look beyond immediate issues. Thus, if the anti-eviction mobilisations of 2012 drew energised and charged-up participation, the event commemorating Operation Sunshine that same year in November, focussing on climate change and FDI in retail, drew noticeably less enthusiastic participation.

The National Hawker Federation in Delhi

Members and Leaders

As mentioned in Chapter Two, though the Delhi leadership mentioned 51 member unions with the NHF, establishing and verifying that had been difficult for multiple reasons. In addition to reasons mentioned there, it should be noted that many associations of hawkers, including NHF members, I found, did not 'commit' to a single umbrella organisation within the city.[100] Many hawker-organisers within the NHF mentioned that their market responded to calls from multiple hawker organisations in Delhi. This, coupled with the fluctuating membership I discuss later, made the NHF in Delhi quite interesting to observe. Once, in an internal meeting at the Delhi office, I pointed out what had seemed to me Delhi NHF's lack of identity and coherence, and the reluctance of hawkers to pay membership fees. Ghosh had responded that this was because the association[101] leaders were not doing their job, because a) a rights discourse was needed, not '*sewa*' and b) leaders did not disseminate amongst their members

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[100]Hawker associations and organisations in Delhi are highly heterogenous and highly numerous. Local NHF leaders estimated that more than 100 such organisations existed in Delhi NCR, including NASVI, SEWA and NHF. The relationship between many of these associations were not cordial, nor did I find any evidence that they work together as allies towards a common goal. That said, NASVI, NHF and SEWA (which does ally with/work together with NASVI) all participated in, and played prominent roles in the struggle for the hawker policies and the Act, as is mentioned elsewhere.

These organisations include NGOs and various federations that sometimes overlapped with social work organisations and even social welfare and religious (Sikh) organisations.

[101]Ghosh always uses the term 'union' but for sake of clarity and to distinguish the nature of Delhi organisations from the Kolkata organisations, I use the term 'associations' throughout

the training, knowledge and updates that they received at NHF meetings and events. Needless to say, the Delhi leadership present had not agreed with this!

<u>Who the members were and where they were located</u>

Member associations were spread out across Delhi NCR. While a few member unions were located in middle-class residential areas of Delhi, several were located in working-class neighbourhoods and industrial areas (the Jhilmil-Shahdara area), and there were many in commercial hubs like the Janpath area in Connaught place, Chandni Chowk, Nehru Place and in the vicinity of the Azadpur mandi.[102] Unique to Delhi, compared to the Kolkata membership, was the presence of mobile hawkers. There was a member unit in the Kashmere Gate ISBT which had hawkers who moved about on foot, carrying their goods on their person or backpacks, who routinely travelled inter-state. Their hope, they said, was that a union/association membership card would attest to their identity which tended to be suspected when they moved from state to state.

The sites from which membership arose and existed at the time of fieldwork, were mostly very old markets, the oldest being one that came up in 1954, as a post-partition market for refugees. Some of the newest sites, similar to the pattern in Kolkata, were markets towards the city borders, such as at Anand Vihar ISBT and NOIDA. These were also some of the younger markets, having originated around 2001-02, indicating again that border areas tend to be more hospitable for 'newer' hawkers.

While the oldest registered member organisation was from 1977, most of the member associations were registered between 2003 and 2014. This period saw the appearance of the first national policy on street vendors (2004), the second national policy on street vendors (2009) and the passing of the 2014 Act. This was also the period when the NHF was in the

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[102]One of the largest wholesale fruits and vegetables markets in Asia.

process of formation (i.e., 2000). It is also possible that waves of registration applications coincided with those periods when application forms were released for Tehbazari permits in the past. I surmise this based on one site where hawkers told me an MCD inspector told them that without a registered association, a Tehbazari permit would not be possible.[103]

The profile of the NHF's Delhi membership was dominated by male members-two member sites were all-women markets, but by and large the gender ratio was 3:1, or 70% to 30% in favour of men, even in markets where numerically that meant hundreds of women. Members were to be found in markets of varying levels of financial prosperity. Ages of members, both genders included, ranged from between 18/20 on the younger side to 55/60/70/85 on the oldest. Work hours varied depending on what was being sold, with some working all day (10-12 hours), others operating in evening markets and working in shifts in markets.[104] Some member hawkers also functioned by hawking a few months in Delhi, a few in other cities, annually roaming in 4-5 cities/states, whilst yet others were only seasonal hawkers.

What was interesting in the Delhi membership was what appeared to be a greater diversity in membership-members operated at multiple scales, from small stalls, mobile carts, small trays and baskets, to fully mobile hawkers, including foot-traveling mobile hawkers carrying all their goods on their person or off trays, making inter-state domestic journeys.

This diversity was also reflected in their financial profiles-some markets, like Janpath (especially some sections within Janpath) appeared to be fairly prosperous with some reportedly doing business in lakhs while other sections of the membership were not so well off. For instance, based on interviews, and if my calculations are correct, I gauged that some of the

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[103]I do not know if the MCD inspector was correct.

[104]In Delhi, I was told, many people, including new migrants, frequently supplement whatever private job they can get with a few hours of hawking either before or after job-hours. In yet another area, a working-class neighbourhood near an industrial cluster, I was told that it was common for all families to supplement their jobs (including within factories) with either regular hawking by another family member, or during season rushes such as during festivals.

commission-based sellers at Janpath made but Rs. 2000-Rs.2500 a month. Others apparently rented stalls and spots for Rs.2000/- a day in summers and Rs. 4000 in winters (2014 prices), which is a staggering amount, and must naturally reflect the volume of sales there.[105] Some other markets were so low earning that the local NHF leaders did not mind that they could not regularly pay their membership dues. Some members had strongly felt that there was a need to differentiate between those hawkers who were more needy than others, for all benefits, and that this section should be prioritised for support.

Irrespective of poverty levels, and earning capacity of a particular market, however, they almost universally kept up with bribe regimes frequently at the cost of association membership dues. Again, based on my calculations, hawkers sometimes had arrangements where almost 3/4th of their earnings went towards such bribe regimes.

As for the leadership, NHF leaders included site organisers who oversaw or directly coordinated and organised sites across Delhi and were of three types- hawkers without party affiliations, hawkers with political party affiliations and non-hawkers including a journalist here too,[106] with or without party affiliations.[107] Members were organised and coordinated by site leaders and/or a central NHF point person (by which I mean a leader within the NHF's central Delhi structure). The local site organizer usually met or made contact with central Delhi-NHF leaders through personal connections, as neighbours or friends. On occasion these introductory meetings happened because they both happened to be at the NHF office at the same time, with Ghosh being the common point of contact. There was also one case where two organisers met at a BJP workers' party function- several leaders were BJP members and/or post-holders, so they knew each other from there.

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[105]By no means, however, can this situation be considered the norm in all parts of the city.

[106]I found that many of the NHF leaders in the city, most of who are no longer/have never been hawkers, began their careers as organisers by being local social workers.

[107]Left parties were absent; affiliations were to the BJP, Aam Aadmi Party, and the Indian National Congress.

<u>Status of registration</u>

In the post-Act world, the prevailing belief was that registration improved a hawker association's chances of getting into a TVC.[108] Registration levels were thus very high in Delhi- most of the member associations were already registered, or in the process of doing the paperwork. At some sites, it was unclear whether they had a registered association, because the hawkers were operating fully under either the Tehbazari permit, or permits given by the NDMC to handicapped hawkers and stay orders.

Unlike Kolkata, Delhi had no member unions registered under the Trade Union Act. Here too the prevailing opinion was that it was impossible. although, as previously mentioned, this is not entirely correct. Another reason for choosing the Societies Act, as given by a few organisers, was that the process was much easier since they had to maintain less meticulous paperwork than those registered under the Trade Union Act.[109]

It is, however, not just a matter of technicality with regard to which law it would be easier to get registered under; as mentioned, in spirit, too, many Delhi organisations displayed the mentality of welfare societies as opposed to trade unions that demand their right. This was visible in how they named themselves- a very high percentage of the member associations had the term 'welfare' or '*sewa*' or '*kalyan*' in their name. An exception was one site with a leadership that had a very profound understanding and articulation of politics and the contemporary political economy of India and the way different issues of land, labour and industrialisation were linked. Their association's name included the terms '*adhikar*' *and* '*sewa*'.

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[108]This seemed to be validated by what was actually happening in those cities, including Delhi, where TVCs had begun to function.

[109]The latter had to maintain a detailed record of collections and show proof of membership as well as membership fees paid.

Many of the organisers saw themselves as social workers doing '*samaj sewa*' ('social work'). One encountered this recurring language and figure of the sacrificial social worker who devoted time to organising activity at the cost of their home and work life.[110] Sometimes lay hawker members also wanted just that-the *sewa*. Hawkers at one site told me, for instance that although they very much wanted to work with dignity, and wanted the right to space to put up their hawking trays and stalls, they did not want to fight. They wanted the association to fight for them, and preferred to provide moral support from behind.

Politics

The NHF in Delhi, at the time of fieldwork, unlike the HSC, had been unable to develop a foundation of successfully waging local site-based struggles on matters of eviction or overriding the exploitative power everted by the police and *dalals* (agents) in the street economy. It had a fragmented city-wide movement, leadership struggles and lacked a cohesive organisational identity. Many lay hawkers at member sites tended to only know the site leaders, but had little awareness of the NHF as an entity. While HSC members had been clear on the unique role the HSC played in securing their livelihood (because of their experiences), the NHF in Delhi had not been able to establish themselves into such a niche. It was not just the NHF; Delhi hawkers displayed distrust of associations and unions in general, not having benefitted from them.

While site leaders met regularly at the NHF's Delhi office, regular collective mobilisations of the entire membership were rare. During my fieldwork period I only saw that happen once for its first national conference in February 2016.[111] The politics were more limited, carried out in

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[110]However, this 'social work' is not too far removed from political party involvement and/or political ambitions as I go on to mention.

[111]I was told Delhi members from across the city also frequently mobilised in the lead up to the passage of the 2014 Act, but that preceded my fieldwork period.

a spirit of '*sewa*' (service), as already mentioned, as opposed to a fight for rights. The leadership pursued a strategy of going to courts, taking up the matter at hand with local police stations, using personal contacts in the state machinery or amongst politicians, over staging militant resistance on the streets. A good part of the leadership's political duties were limited to problem solving, dealing with the police and various urban authorities, frequently in fire-fighting mode, helping members procure documentation and paperwork, etc.[112] and pursuing the implementation of the 2014 Act.

On this, I encountered severe scepticism amongst hawkers that the Act would ever be implemented, and even if it was, that it would benefit hawkers. The law, and judicial judgements, were thought to remain on paper for the vulnerable. Thus, it did not seem that faith in the law was what was driving more and more hawkers to seek out associations, even though the latter had already begun to mushroom in the preceding year of 2013-14. At best, most sought these memberships as one amongst many strategies, with an eye on the post-law future.

In May 2014, the Delhi leadership said that apparently all 3 MCD zones already had TVCs. The NHF was trying to legally challenge this, because the correct procedure had not been followed in electing members into it. TVC membership was, inevitably, a den of corruption even then. Some of the NHF leaders alleged that lakhs of rupees changed hand in making someone a member of a TVC. Other allegations included that some individuals from hawkers' organisations were members of multiple TVCs simultaneously (which is not allowed). There were many concerns amongst the leadership at that point of time including on how accurate the proposed hawker surveys would be. Summing up the overall situation, one of the organisers

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[112]They also drafted letters on letterheads, shared appropriate documents with authorities, approached MPs and MLAs, documented the site's hawkers, thereby generating paper trail of existence and proof of existence.

had noted that "*kanoon ke baad laraiya badh gayi*" (referring to the increase in in-fighting between unions and organisations after the Act.)

I argue that the nature of the Delhi movement may be attributed to the city's hawkers having a different protest culture and history from Kolkata and to the consequences of the complicated governance structure, which was recounted in Chapter Two. The politics of Delhi hawkers grew from factors I discuss in the following sub-sections that shaped the nature of interventions by NHF leaders in the city.

Sources of harassment, main issues faced and mode of resistance

"*Sangathan ko paise kyon de? Police roti deti hai*!" ("Why should we pay hawker associations? It is the police that enables our livelihood!")

- **NHF leader**, reporting what he is

frequently told by hawkers

"50% *reriwallas* eat because of the police,"

-**Officers at a police station** in West Delhi,

speaking to another NHF leader

"50% policewalas eat *reriwalas*' *roti*,"

- **NHF leader**

The various urban authorities with power to harass and evict hawkers include the municipal corporations, the police, DDA and PWD, amongst others in Delhi. However, I was repeatedly told by hawkers that there is no authority above the police in Delhi, not even Ministers of the Government of India. No hawker can sit without the express consent of the local police. With the police, however, it was not just a simple system of bribe extraction that existed. There are

multiple forms of economic-transactions involved: "new hawkers", for instance, become an additional stream of income for them. "*Aap samjhe nahin…aatank kab machayenge*?" ("You don't seem to understand…why do you think they create terror?") I was asked, rhetorically, by some non-NHF hawker leaders in this context. In evicting/harassing and replacing, forcefully, older hawkers with newer hawkers various interested parties like the police (and corporation officials, *dalals* etc) periodically made money.

Further, as an organiser pointed out, the relationship is partly symbiotic, with the police also being customers of hawkers. Thus, some hawkers mentioned giving "*izzat*" ("respect") to the police, 'voluntarily'. Hawkers in one border area reported paying both Delhi and UP police.

The problem of bribes, however, disappeared or reduced in cases when hawkers attained a permit under the older system. i.e., a Tehbazari. Some local leaders indicated that those with Tehbazari permits had reached enough of an equilibrium to manage well with just police and municipality "settings" and had no need for associations.

Who the main threat was also varied a bit from location to location, with areas which had jurisdiction being shared between multiple urban authorities suffering the most. For instance, in Nehru Place, I was told, the DDA was a bigger problem than the police, and routinely removed hawkers' goods and that local shop owners[113] would frequently instigate the authorities against hawkers. Shop owners' associations were reported to be a threat from several areas in the city, though in many areas they themselves were violators. In Janpath, for instance, shops spread out onto the footpath with impunity. In other areas, it was common for shops, and, in some areas, residences, to rent out the area in front of the premises and charge fairly big rents from hawkers for its use. This ranged from Rs.2250 to Rs.12000/- monthly, according to hawkers.

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[113]The 'shop'/ 'hawker' distinction was thin in this market famous for branded and counterfeit electronics.

This too can perhaps be understood in terms of their economic interests- I was told that, following their mutual arrangements, police 'cooperate with hawkers', and that the *Vyapar Mandals* (shopkeepers'/traders' associations) disturb this arrangement. Seeing that they too have financial incentives for setting up their own 'systems' with hawkers, i.e., charging rent for using shopfronts, that might not be surprising. As several hawkers and hawker leaders mentioned- "*Sab paise khaate hain!*" That is, everyone extracts money from hawkers – from the municipal sweeper, to shopkeepers to associations and party workers. Harassment also tended to increase in frequency and pitch during festivals and other times of peak sales.

The NDMC was sometimes reported as a bigger problem than the three MCDs, for they would come on two to three raids a day. The reason for the higher pressure in NDMC areas can perhaps be attributed to how the zone under its control is visualised by the state. The NDMC jurisdiction extends to what is known as Lutyen's Delhi, while the modern version of the older walled city areas (i.e., the relatively messier, less elite parts) extend to areas under the control of the three municipal corporations. Lutyen's Delhi, as the NDMC's own website proclaims, is important because:

> "…iv. Efficient function of the Municipal services in this area *is critical for the internal image of the country* and is a factor which has an important bearing on the functioning of the Government apparatus itself. v. Historically, this area has enjoyed a system of Local Government very different from other parts of the National Capital Territory. On account of these special characteristics, it was felt that *any scheme for the governance of this area based on conventional pattern of representative local self-government, would be unworkable and out of place* since *the pre-eminent character of this area is that of the seat of the Central Government.*"

> -**NDMC website**, 'Introduction' (emphasis mine)

Following a raid in an NDMC area, recovering the goods confiscated involved, I was told, a payment of Rs.1000-Rs.3000 against a receipt, or a signature in a register. Thus, one's hawking business had to be big enough to be worth it- for the potato chips vendors at India Gate, for instance, it was never worth it financially.

Eviction and destruction of stalls, a problem faced across Delhi, was expensive business too- hawkers at one site told me it cost Rs.20,000/- to rebuild the structures, flimsy and temporary though they were, and that year they had already been razed three times.

Dalals were another huge Delhi-wide problem- middlemen/agent type figures that were very powerful in various areas. I was told they become the 'malik' of an area and control multiple hawking spots, stalls, trays, carts etc., becoming agents of space, in a manner of speaking. A lot of what passes for an association in a market is often nothing but a group of powerful people taking money to allocate space. These *dalals* work with the local police and municipality and make a power nexus nearly impossible to break. Interestingly, according to several hawkers and hawker leaders I spoke to, the hawker Sodan Singh of the 1989 Supreme Court Sodan Singh judgement mentioned in Chapter Three, had – in the post-judgement period – become a bit of a *dalal* himself. It seems as if the court case made him famous and after the landmark judgement, the favourable verdict led to the making of a new power structure and economy in the area where he was based which ended up turning Sodan Singh into a *dalal*.

Rivalry and competition between hawkers too were a cause of concern at times. Sometimes powerful people within hawker associations are left alone by the police, I was told and bribes were freely collected by such 'internal agents'. In some areas mobile hawkers who roamed the streets and traffic junctions on foot reported routine destruction of goods, despite bribe systems, and severe violence from police, and being prevented from hawking.

Other prominent issues included environmental factors, such as being exposed to the elements and having health suffer, and goods getting damaged as a consequence, and sexual harassment. Gujarati women hawkers in a market reported that policewomen would regularly lift the long skirts they wore to check whether they were hiding any goods there, during raids. People hawking from parked carts or *reris* also reported infrastructural issues like lack of access to electricity and toilets.

Conversations with Delhi hawkers made it quite clear that they responded to these challenges by relying heavily on the courts, filing notices against the offending urban authority, even after organising and forming associations. "*Court hi danda dega*," ("the Court alone will set them straight") some members felt.

As mentioned, there is an absence of a culture of militant hawker movement in Delhi; some leaders felt that people in Delhi were not aware of their rights, and that unlike in other cities, hawkers were okay with "settings." Part of the reason for this absence could also be because Delhi had not seen mass city-wide evictions like at Kolkata. The trend was for some hawkers in some markets to be targeted. Leaders concurred that in Delhi, the motivation for hawkers to approach associations and consider organising was only if police harassment was not letting them hawk at their location.

Hawkers at one site told me that 60 to 70 of them had tried reoccupation after eviction, but that the police did not allow it. They had since then been asked to submit proof of existence. A leader of a non-NHF hawker federation in Delhi pointed out that post-eviction action in favour of hawkers is very difficult in Delhi. Once eviction is carried out, it is very difficult for hawkers to return and resume business, and even bribing does not work at that point. However, there are occasional exceptions. For instance, one local leader claimed that NHF had successfully intervened in a case involving 20 to 30 women hawkers, hawking in trains in Anand Vihar,

who were being harassed by *dalals* and the Railway Police. This was in spite of the fact that NHF did not have jurisdiction over railway areas, which are excluded by the policies and the 2014 Act.

In the absence of the ability to re-take spaces through street-level struggle, an overwhelming majority of member sites relied on High Court stay orders, Tehbazari permits, or permits issued by the NDMC to handicapped[114] hawkers. There were very few member sites that mentioned that no one had any form government authorisation. A black market/alternative economy tends to grow around these stay orders and Tehbazari permits-I was told that multiple people use a single permit, and corrupt associations sometimes fooled members by printing stay orders on their letterhead, as if it had been attained by the association's labour, specifically for them. However, the Supreme Court stay order against evictions from 9 September 2013 was rarely acknowledged or obeyed by beat constables, or the lower levels of the police machinery which meant that evictions continued unchecked. Some urban authorities like the DDA also disregarded stay orders saying it did not apply to areas within their jurisdiction. Whatever hope there is of court documents like stay orders being obeyed, I was told, lies with senior officers within the police and urban authorities instructing their juniors appropriately.

However, as I saw, the various limbs of the state were clearly very uncoordinated and the more the state authorities present, the more the question of jurisdiction, turf, and number of actors hawkers have to deal with. For example, at a national NHF consultation in 2014, the Delhi leadership brought up how if they went to the Nagar Nigam (i.e., municipal authority), they would be sent to the police. The police would send them back to the Nagar Nigam. It was common for such representations by hawker organisers to be sent from one authority to another, "not my jurisdiction" or "not my responsibility" being the excuse. After one particular eviction

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[114]Their terminology.

by the police in the Akshardham temple area, in East Delhi near the NOIDA border, a letter was apparently issued by the Nagar Nigam to the police, but the latter paid no heed to it.

I once accompanied two NHF organisers to the office of the Deputy Commissioner of Police (DCP) East, who they wanted to meet because evictions had been carried out by a Station House Officer under his jurisdiction. They were only able to meet the Assistant DCP who looked at the Supreme Court papers they were carrying and nonchalantly replied that as he had not given the order for eviction there was nothing he could do. The next step is to threaten to agitate around the police station in question, but that, the organisers told me, does not create any pressure. This particular Asst. DCP said go ahead and protest. In another police station they were politely told "protesting is your democratic right; we will not stop you from exercising it."

Protest marches, demonstrations, militant mobilisations and occupations appeared to be rare, as mentioned. Some spoke of violent confrontation, liked the disabled hawkers at Janpath, who reported routine violent clashes with the police, jail etc. A disabled women hawker said she was once stuffed into a *bori* (sack) and shoved into a truck. However, even they most commonly tended to file court cases, RTIs, deploy individual contacts and flood police stations with letters. That said, not all hawkers could afford the process of filing cases, which was the situation with NHF hawkers of one site in the Janpath area.[115]

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[115]Case filing had a whole economy of its own, and sometimes became a corruption practice of unions and associations; something that I encountered with factory workers as well. I was told by some NHF hawker leaders that other associations and unions would take extra money from hawkers for ID cards and membership fees, and then for filing court cases. Advocates would apparently take a percentage for filing more and more cases, and the leadership of a particular association would apparently frequently fool their membership into thinking 'wins' were being made by printing, on their letterheads, existing Supreme Court judgements and rulings-*and* that they would charge their membership Rs. 5000 for it.

<u>The need for paperwork and documentation</u>

Helping hawkers procure paperwork was often a role that hawker associations took on as an entry point to further organising. This was tied to two issues- Delhi's governance structure and migration.

Things in Delhi frequently circle back to its ambiguous regulatory regime. The state's presence is very obvious and direct in Delhi. This works both ways: it looms exploitatively over hawkers and hawkers can also contact it relatively easily. The ambiguous regulatory regime coupled with the presence of many migrant workers in the city, highlights the need for paperwork and explains why all the hawkers I interacted with were well versed with the paperwork regime. They needed it not just to prove to the state their occupation and how long they had been hawking at a particular location, but also because the urban poor need an address and ID for various purposes such as to avail of subsidised goods provided by the state. The desire for and function of paperwork can further be understood in the context of the hope for eventual registrations and official recognition by the state- Tehbazari permits earlier, and now registrations under the 2014 Act.

Migration, as mentioned in Chapters Two and Three, becomes a factor to contend with especially in the contemporary political economy of Delhi. Other than the need for paperwork that it produces, discussed below, there are some other implications to it as well in terms of hawkers' politics. For instance, fieldwork revealed that the political and/or VIP connections that Delhi hawkers had frequently originated from what is called in local parlance the 'native place' or through kinship networks originating from villages and home towns. Migrant hawkers find it hard to get officially recognised or registered, where applicable, under pre-existing permit systems. Organisers told me that the Delhi NHF helps get them identification, for which the general mechanism and process is thus: they need to provide some proof of their 'native'

place, following which NHF gives them an association ID card. On the basis of this ID card an MLA's letter or document is procured, on the further strength of which Aadhaar cards, voter cards and ration cards are procured. If a hawker has no proof of origin, then they begin with a PAN card.

I was told by some local NHF leaders that this process of procuring identification and documents for members involves a lot of hard work, but is required since it is very difficult to live without a photo ID-everybody asks for one. Some leaders estimated that 40%-50% of Delhi hawkers had no proof, and only 20% had proper papers. The lack of documentary proof was seen as one of the biggest issues, since they weren't at that point sure what ID proof the government would ask for in the post-Act world. The 2014 Act had been passed merely months earlier. There was great uncertainty amongst hawkers and organisers in Delhi as to who the Act would benefit and how it would pan out. There was also some ambiguity about how the Act would treat overlaps. For instance, there was apparently already an Act for the registration of food hawkers. But it was not clear how would this be impacted by the 2014 Act, which is supposed to supersede all preceding legislations.

The value of this documentary proof is so well understood that in every hawker market that I went to, organisers, leaders and hawkers spoke of preserving challans and any paper issued by the state over the years. Most seemed to have their papers handy, including stay orders and court judgements: in a box in their stall, whether a tiny beedi stall or a broken-down table next to an open-air 'shop'. Perhaps as the only documents by the state acknowledging their existence, they knew to keep it. Interestingly, in one area, a local leader told me that "*saal mein kum se kum ek baar toh hum parchi katwa hi lete hain*" ("at least once a year we ensure that we are fined and given a receipt"); suggesting that they initiate the process of being fined to generate proof that they exist. Paper proof that could be used in potentially legal futures.

However, according to some NHF leaders, there were many hawkers in Delhi who had been hawking for 20 years, but did not have a single challan. This is because some hawkers hawked before or after government office hours, i.e., early mornings and late evenings, and therefore never encountered the officials who were responsible for giving challans. "Show me one *momo* vendor who has a challan. They set up after government offices close," a leader asserted.

Some of the NHF leaders estimated that there were about 4-4.5 lakh hawkers in Delhi[116] out of which one lakh were registered/authorised. As part of the paper regime, these leaders mentioned that in 2007 the municipality took out the red *pehchaan patra (*the Tehbazari*)* at Rs.100 each. At an NHF Delhi internal meeting in May 2014 it was mentioned that today there is no account of the money collected during the 2007 registrations[117] and that the (then undivided) MCD claimed to be short of money. In fact, these payments made over the years were yet another reason cited by hawkers, according to NHF leaders, as to why they weren't even ready to talk to unions and associations. They felt they had paid so much over the years-to politicians, unions, associations etc.-but had not gained anything in return.

Electoral power and relationship with political parties

It was clear was that no political party, unlike in Kolkata, stuck their neck out for hawkers during crises like evictions. There was a general feeling amongst the hawkers I spoke to that no political party bothered about hawkers and hawking issues didn't make it into agendas and manifestos. All the sites that I spoke to appeared to be 'independent', in that there were no party affiliated unions or associations, unlike Kolkata.

The specific experiences of hawkers with political parties varied, though not significantly. For instance, hawkers at one site- a case where the MP, Councillor and MLA all belonged to

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[116] As mentioned in Chapter Two there is no exact count.
[117] They speculated that the amount ought to have exceeded Rs. 1 crore. The actual amounts paid were much more than Rs. 100, because bribes were included- hawkers had paid up to Rs.500, I was informed by them.

different parties- mentioned that it was easier to bargain with a single party in power in an area. At another site-a case where the MP, Councillor and MLA were all BJP- hawkers noted that they got support from a political party to sit where they were hawking, but nothing in writing. Further, during '*tod-phod*' (i.e., demolitions), there was no support to be had, though an MLA helped once.

As mentioned in Chapter Two, Delhi's power calculus, including the reduced power of elected officials, made it harder for Delhi hawkers to leverage electoral politics for their needs. However, relationships with individuals within parties, especially elected officials like MPs, MLAs and Councillors were diligently sought and carefully cultivated. As one organiser put it, "*yeh uski majboori hai*" ("a hawker is compelled to do this"). Contacts within political parties were also leveraged for their letterheads and their letters to authorities on behalf of hawkers. These connections were most likely to work if the contact in question was high up in the hierarchy. Or, in the case of exceptional individuals. For example, I was told that some politicians, such as the late Sahib Singh Verma (BJP), the late Oscar Fernandes (Indian National Congress) amongst others, had been sympathetic to hawkers and helpful.

Internal structure, internal dynamics

The NHF Delhi structure is a lot looser and unstable in comparison with Kolkata, which can be linked to Delhi's overall weak movement.[118] To me it seemed in fact that their office (symbolically) seemed to provide the anchor and hold together the rather tenuous NHF Delhi structure. The role that an office space plays in the life of a movement is not accidental, as I

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[118]Returning to the field today, I suspect, would throw up a picture of a stronger Delhi movement. In a telephonic conversation with Ghosh in July 2022 I learnt that the Delhi movement had indeed strengthened in the years after my fieldwork-its membership had grown and some of the leaders that had emerged later had been effective organisers, leading militant struggles in the face of recent evictions. Earlier in the year I had also followed Ghosh's social media, where he had shared news clippings mentioning how some of those leaders had been arrested on non-bailable cases for leading resistance against police action. This indicated greater militancy of opposition than I had encountered during fieldwork.

gauged. Ghosh spoke of the need to establish an office, even if at considerable expense that severely strained their finances, in whichever city they wish to grow their movement (personal conversation, Ranchi, November 2014).

Three features of the Delhi structure and its internal dynamics that stood out were 1) the weak structure as mentioned, 2) the presence of multiple federations of hawkers and the sometimes complex connections between associations within them and the NHF; this could additionally explain why the lay hawker membership sometimes barely understood the NHF and 3) the desire of organisers to be seen as and recognised as a leaders.

Weak structure

Other than the organisers who directly dealt with the NHF in Delhi, i.e., had contact with Ghosh, attended and conducted meetings in the NHF's Laxmi Nagar office, very little of its membership seemed to know much about or identify with the NHF, as mentioned. So, while I was introduced to the associations of NHF leaders, while speaking to hawkers/local leaders in those associations I did not find a strong knowledge of or identification with the larger organisation that the NHF represents. Their point of reference used to be whichever organiser/leader they dealt with locally. Thus, if a leader left the NHF, they took their membership with them. Without question, compared to Kolkata, local hawker association-federation (NHF) relations were much more strained in Delhi. One site organiser even told me that he would like to convey an appeal to the central (Delhi) leadership to visit at least once in six months so relations could be kept alive.

Further, the NHF's membership in Delhi at the time of my fieldwork was strongly marked by a sense of fluctuation. A good part of its local membership and local leadership appeared to be constantly 'coming and going'; some were being expelled, and then invited back in, power centres shifted many times during my brief fieldwork stint. As many as five NHF leaders either

distanced themselves from or severed connections with the NHF in the space of the one year that I followed them (2013-2014), as already mentioned in Chapter Two. This kind of attrition indicates that the core of the NHF in Delhi was not as strong, at least at that point, as the HSC.

Presence of multiple federations

There was a clear logic behind the many federations, I was told, by some organisers. A federation, they said, has a specific use and need- one needs them to grow membership and to increase strength. Two prominent NHF Delhi organisers were at the time of fieldwork in the process of registering a 'Street Vendor Joint Action Committee', which was to be a new federation for the Delhi NCR membership. The intention behind it was to make it convenient to register NCR hawker associations in Delhi and not UP, Haryana etc., which they had thus far been forced to do.

One of these organisers was a part-time organiser devoting 4-5 hours a day to the work since 1998. He had a shop of his own, and was related by marriage and neighbourhood ties to a powerful local family, the Shuntys.[119] The federation he organised had three associations, and the relationships between the local associations, the federation and the NHF were clearcut and demarcated, including in terms of distribution of membership fees.[120] For instance, one association charged Rs. 30 as monthly membership from hawkers, and Rs. 10 from that went directly to the NHF. Additionally, the federation contributed Rs. 1000 monthly to the NHF, and extra for special occasions.

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[119]This family held political posts, was heavily involved in local social work and involved in Gurudwara boards in Delhi. The local hawkers had great respect for them and appeared to see them as genuine benefactors. During the devastating second wave of Covid in India in 2021, I came across social media posts of how one of them constantly helped carry out some local cremations, operating the system single headedly at times, during that terrible moment.

[120] One of the associations within that local federation had no financial relation with the NHF, nor were they members.

<u>Leaders and leadership dynamics</u>

Observing the tussle for power between the local leaders that was in process, was interesting. The chair changed at dizzying speed occasionally, although I found it very difficult to pinpoint and understand everything that was going on in this game, or the exact nature of their motivations, ambitions, and chosen paths to realising that ambition. There were underpinnings to and hidden (to me) dynamics of the shape of this power, as well as its makings. What was explicit, though, was the desire to be seen as powerful within the Delhi as well as national NHF structure. Visible markers of status and power seemed very important. For instance, I observed how every hawker organiser/leader in the Delhi structure had visiting cards that they handed out at every opportunity. This was a practice completely absent amongst the Kolkata leadership.

As mentioned elsewhere, they also led the demand within the NHF for formal designations and posts, in order to become 'official' in the eyes of the hawkers and state machinery. They wanted a way for them to prove their credentials, without which they claimed they got turned out of offices of state officials.[121] A heated debate had arisen on the issue of formal posts within the NHF on one occasion at an NHF meeting, both for and against, which I mention later in this chapter.

Photos with important people, including politicians were almost sacred and were assiduously collected and displayed in office spaces, as a validation, perhaps, of their own standing. The desire to be a leader and to be *perceived* as a leader was very strong. Two incidents in particular stand out as metaphorically capturing this:

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[121]When they mentioned this at a national NHF meeting, some other NHF leaders mentioned that even MLAs get booted out by bureaucrats, indicating the hierarchy that exists between civil servants and elected representatives.

- The metaphor of the chair-play in one of the offices of a local member unit: There was one big chair behind the office desk, more imposing than all the others, the 'Boss Chair', if you will. Initially when the office was empty, while waiting for the other Delhi NHF organisers to arrive, one of the organisers took that chair, when all other chairs were lying empty. When he got up to go outside briefly, a fellow organiser promptly took it. Yet another fellow organiser from the same site grabbed it next, when he found it empty. It was then offered ceremoniously to the senior most leader, by age and experience, within the larger NHF Delhi movement when he arrived. Clearly all the chairs in that room were not created equal. The symbolism of power and position embedded in that chair was (ironically, perhaps!) democratic enough to allow different people to lay claim to it, all within the space of a few minutes.

- The 'leader pose' photo session at a national-level NHF meeting in Ranchi (November 2014): At a national consultation of the NHF organised at Ranchi,[122] before the beginning of a day's proceedings, several organisers, including those from Delhi, had a small photo session. They climbed on to the stage, got behind the podium,[123] took the mike in hand and pointed in the air as if making a point/important declaration, and requested each other to take photos of themselves in that position. Delhi took the lead in this, as did Haryana and Telengana. Selfies in that position also abounded. Admittedly, I don't know whether those states that did not participate in this session did so because they did not perceive a need for it, or whether they simply did not have cameras![124]

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[122]This is another city, like Kolkata, with a history of militant struggle by hawkers.
[123] The actual sessions were taking place at the 'floor' level with circular seating around a desk.
[124]In 2014, the smartphone explosion had not yet happened.

The desire to be a leader also seemed to exceed the bounds of mere NHF politics: invariably the leaders had bigger ambitions and, sometimes it felt to me that they were maybe using the NHF as a vehicle to achieve those ambitions, as opposed to being single-mindedly concerned with hawker politics. Many had political ambitions and/or were already holding posts and playing a role in political parties (BJP and AAP).

Hawker leaders were apparently becoming corporators, according to someone who was towards the beginning of my fieldwork associated with NHF as an organiser.[125] Taking the example of one leader, officially associated with the BJP, doing 'social work' for them and having entered hawker organising through that route,[126] he told me that a corporator's ticket from the BJP awaited that person in the future. This route was also common to some other local leaders.

NHF's 'National Moments': Functioning of a Federation

Questions of representation and target audience

Jain (2013) has an interesting discussion in her dissertation on the question of what gives an organisation the right to represent hawkers. She does this by taking us through a public spat between Madhu Kishwar of Manushi, Tavleen Singh, journalist and political reporter and Centre for Civil Society (CCS), the organisation Jain studies (Jain 2013, 93). At stake was the issue of 'adoption of research' relating to hawkers, and a charge of plagiarism on 'huge chunks of research and documentation' in Shah and Mandava (2005) -a CCS publication-levied by Kishwar. Singh, having written a preface for this book, distanced herself later from it by writing a public article, in which she effectively said that Kishwar made her aware of the plagiarism

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[125]He was not a hawker, nor was he a full-time NHF worker- he did multiple things, including writing poetry.

[126] That person owned a hawking cart selling fast food and was thus organically associated with hawking as well.

and that 'Not one street vendor or rickshaw-puller or small shop owner would endorse CCS's claims to be the champion of their rights' (Jain 2013, 94). Kishwar's basis for claiming herself to be a rightful representative, notes Jain (2013) is her personal connection with hawkers, through the ground level work Manushi did with them. The response of CCS and Shah, one of the authors of that book, was interesting-in a public newspaper article, he refuted the claims and said they built upon Kishwar's research through case studies and surveys in more cities and towns, and, crucially, that they wanted to bring their message of economic freedom to those who are '…our current and future decision makers. *They are our audience, not the actual street hawkers or shop keepers*' (Jain 2013, 95) (emphasis mine).

That raises the question- what gives the NHF the right to represent? Who are *their* audience? At a national consultation in Ranchi, November 2014, the NHF General Secretary's report was summarized and read out to its gathered leadership, which gave clues to this. Its highlights were that a) (at that time) the NHF had 1135 unions and associations across India,[127] b) it was a matter of pride for them that when the central government needed information on hawkers now,[128] they asked them instead of a rival organisation and that c) officials expressed astonishment ("*tajjub*") on learning the NHF was drafting its own Rules in the aftermath of the 2014 Act to circulate to state governments.

To me, this seemed to be a confident public declaration of the fact that the NHF had actual membership strength on the ground and that they had strengthened their position of authority as representatives of hawkers, and that a part of what led to that was their active involvement in the post-Act regime. They did so by staying on top of developments and, not remaining restricted to ground struggles only, actively engaging with the state. In other words, perhaps,

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[127]At the point of writing, the NHF website notes 1188 members.

[128]The emphasis was on 'now' for earlier it was the other hawker organization that used to have a seat at the table at the national level, so to speak.

what the HSC was already doing in Kolkata since 1996, the NHF was beginning to do nation-wide in 2014. Like the HSC, their audience was primarily hawkers, but they also cultivated a broader audience for the various allied political concerns they took up as part of their own agenda, such as climate change, FDI in retail, amongst others.

Internal structure, internal dynamics

Part of stepping into this identity as a legitimate, national representative of hawkers more fully, meant better record keeping and consolidation of information. For, as pointed out within their meetings, they did not have a record of all their unions and associations, and there was an urgent need to do that across the organisation.[129] This information would also be necessary, as they saw it, to improve their ability to ensure their membership's interests were protected in the implementation process of the Act. One way of doing that was by consolidating their structure and creating a website. Built inhouse by a youth leader of the NHF soon after, their website notes that at their first national conference at Delhi, in February 2016, they elected 500 national General Council members, including 201 national Working Committee and Central Secretariat State Leadership, with Supreme Court Advocate Colin Gonsalves as President and Saktiman Ghosh as General Secretary.

However, an effect of this consolidation would be the 'freezing' into place of numbers and identity, and one does wonder if this is going to be good for the health of the movement in the long run or not. One can't help wondering whether a certain amount of fluidity and amorphousness wouldn't actually be in the best interests of a movement such as this, with a certain diversity of membership and political concerns (beyond just formalization of hawkers).

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[129]As I saw, for instance, in Kolkata there is an almost-but not quite-complete list, and Delhi's list was challenging because of the instability of its membership.

In the act and process of definition, would the movement self-circumscribe itself into smaller boundaries of political imagination and struggle?

Or would it, perhaps, serve to stabilize it to function better? There is no question that this demand for consolidation and state committee positions and ID cards came very vociferously from within. Many leaders, as mentioned, were firm they needed official documentation confirming who they are because otherwise it becomes difficult to work; state authorities ask who are you, what is the proof, they said (Ranchi, November 2014). They also demanded clearly defined posts and committees for every state. Delhi and Haryana leadership mentioned that many people don't want to work for NHF without that. Ghosh had responded then by saying "*kaam se pehchaan hota hai, pehchaan patra se kaam nahin*" ("identity/recognition follows the work one does, ID cards don't produce work"; in other words, one doesn't need formal posts and titles in order to do good organising work). A debate had risen on this and was settled for then with a truce-a letter on NHF letterhead, introducing leaders. Part of reasonably democratic federation politics would doubtless involve agreeing to such internal demands.

Another issue is how does one hold a federation together? Preceding sections gave a glimpse of how the federation structure functions, in both Kolkata and Delhi. Holding together a city-wide movement is challenging enough, as demonstrated. One can quite well imagine what this must look like at the scale of the national! It is akin to objects orbiting, held together by the constantly made gravitational pull of common political interests, with things delicately poised between orbital velocity and escape velocity. The Delhi membership, during my fieldwork

period, unsurprisingly, on occasion, threatened towards escape velocity.[130] Much effort goes into the maintenance of orbital velocity organisationally.

As I could see it, one small way of doing this was through performance of two kinds. One was conventional cultural performances, frequently deployed at national conferences for instances,[131] which probably serve to help create an affective bond within a diverse membership that might find it hard to relate or connect to each other in the absence of common language/clothing/eating habits. The other type were general assemblies, held a few years apart, national conferences, rallies and marches, which I would argue serve more than just their immediate, functional goals. Through such mobilisations, the membership also gets to witness itself, which it otherwise might not be able to, scattered as it is across cities and states. Perhaps they also help build the appearance of power as much as the actuality of it. And sometimes, both of these are used together in immensely effective ways-rallies and gatherings heavy on performance that go beyond just entertaining, and instead, nurture a sense of full out celebration of themselves.

I would include in this category also the manner in which their national meeting locations were frequently chosen with care. For some of these consultations, the locations chosen were beautiful. It was not just a 'meeting', it was also like a retreat. One such meeting was held in the tea gardens of Nagrakata, in the Dooars region of West Bengal and on the Indo-Bhutan border, hosted by a tea-workers' union. Another was in the state of Manipur, with a militant history of women hawkers struggle and an important member of the NHF, where after the

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[130]In one of the national meetings which was attended by only one representative from Delhi, the top leadership acknowledged that the Delhi leaders tended to do their own thing and function on their own, which was sometimes a problem. However, as mentioned, I note from afar that the Delhi membership appears to have consolidated itself quite a bit in the years since then, much after I concluded fieldwork.
[131]Not just by the NHF; it is a common practice of trade unions at their conferences and gatherings.

meetings in Imphal, there was to be the added attraction of making the passport-free overland day-crossing from Moreh (Manipur, India) into Tamu (Myanmar).

The role of performance in building and sustaining a federation, I would argue, is substantial, enabling a sort of temporary transcendence that allows its members from across hawking types and regions to find a common anchor. It arguably helps nurture the idea of the movement as something bigger than the way it is able to physically manifest on the ground, the idea being bigger than just a list of member names.

The challenges of meaningfully maintaining national federations and keeping them functional can range from, as I saw during fieldwork, the mundane to the more serious. On one end of the spectrum this involved regularly negotiating the intense love many leaders had for giving speeches, going off on tangents and polishing their rhetoric in time sensitive and important meetings. On the other end, this involved sorting out differences on ideological stances and differing approaches to struggle and strategy.

Politics

The following section attempts to give a broad picture of some of the discussions and issues that I witnessed at the NHF's 'national' moments and in its national federation avatar between 2013-2016. In this time period, the thrust of the internal and public consultation meetings I attended was largely on the discussion on the hawker bill and then Act, and the move towards formalising the organisational structure of the NHF at their first national conference in February 2016. During the last stages of my fieldwork with the HSC in 2017, I was told that leadership training also came to be an important focus of later national meetings.

Law, judicialisation and struggle

The NHF took pride in their mobilisation in Delhi, in the lead up the passage of the Act, to create pressure on the Parliament to pass their bill. They spoke of the march they organised in February 2014 preceding the passage of the Act in March 2014 as historic. Thus, what was possibly the biggest *national* mobilisation for the NHF till then,[132] it is worth noting, was because of the law and for the law.[133]

One of the concerns that Jain (2013) raises is with regard to making formalisation a demand, within the hawkers' movement in India. The organisation she studied, and another prominent national hawkers' organisation, looked at formalisation as the end to all problems, and she makes a good case for why that is problematic.

The NHF, however, recognised the limits of the law and judicialization, and their approach was quite pragmatic on both counts, with a striving for balance. At one meeting (Delhi, September 2014) Saktiman Ghosh mentioned how their movement had been building for decades, and that today just sloganeering and *juloos* (protest marches and demonstrations) would not work. They would have to provide an alternative to the government. This was repeated at other national meetings too. However, in multiple meetings, as they discussed various strategies and tactics going forward, Ghosh always made it a point to remind the leaders and members of those aspects of their struggle which had got them to this point- militant struggle and radical demands for space.

He went on to note that the law was only granted because the state saw the opportunity to cut the rights to hawking. They did not give it out of benevolence, he noted-they gave it because

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[132] Here I'm not referring to local mobilisations for local concerns amongst its membership, which could have been larger.
[133] Other hawker associations and organisations too were mobilising and demonstrating in Delhi in this time and towards the same end.

they thought they could play the game of hawking/non-hawking zones and limit hawkers' access to space therein. "Our fight is of law and land right," he declared firmly- otherwise, he noted, the Act would not work for hawkers. NHF leaders noted that they'd also have to be vigilant about ensuring that the post-Act regime did not end up stealing the individual character of markets and flamboyant local selling styles- "Take, take, no take, no take- *ek bar toh* see!" (Ghosh, Delhi, September 2014)- in a bid to create a particular neoliberal urban aesthetic.

The leadership discussed some of the changes that lay ahead of them. As noted, one impact of the Act was that it was forcing hawker associations and unions across India to move towards registration. At a meeting in November 2014 at Ranchi, the local leadership mentioned, that it was impossible for local unions to become TVC members without it. In another meeting (Ranchi, February 2015), they discussed their digital strategy. This included a plan for their website and a demonstration of the app created in-house by one of their youth leaders who was a software profession that they were considering using for a digital survey of members. The youth leader and Ghosh both spoke about how, with the law, there now needed to be a move made towards information, data and technology. That the NHF needed to be more conversant with information-it needed to produce it, become more tech savvy so its leaders could share information amongst themselves via website and app in order to stay a step ahead of the state and whatever issues might come up during the implementation process. For example, they pointed out that if local governments were lying, the NHF leadership would be able to counter it with their own information. Or, if one state government was trying to get away with some malpractice, the local leadership would be able to consult with leadership in other states in real time with the app and/or website, or remain constantly updated on best practices in different states, enabling them to strengthen local struggles. An example of such best practices would include the Ranchi membership's practice of collecting en masse on court dates and sitting in front of the Ranchi High Court to keep the pressure on. This had been brought up at a national

meeting in Delhi, in October 2014, when the Delhi leadership was questioned as to why it had not struck them to go sit near the Supreme Court which was to deliver an important judgement later that day. It would also allow them to follow militant actions being undertaken in real time, such as the Manipur leadership's report in Ranchi, November 2014 of an ongoing protest where a thousand women hawkers in Imphal were occupying their market space, eating and sleeping there, to protest against authorities who wanted them to remove the protective structures they had erected to protect from rain. In other words, digital technology would allow them to do what they now did through these physical national gatherings.

It struck me then that one way to interpret this emphasis on digital strategy was that the movement had transformed in the aftermath of the law-that they were willing to make changes like consolidating structure and shifting strategy in order to fit well enough within the legal regime to enable it to make maximum use of the law and other welfare measures the government had in place. However, while discussing what is available/possible under the law and the technological aspects of the movement, Ghosh intervened at one point to add that in case of eviction, the best weapon was still putting up a physical fight and building the strength to ensure they *could* put up such a fight. At another point he added that the movement needed to be careful to not get lost in Facebook and smartphones; that they need to learn to strike a balance. I remain unsure as to how much of a capacity for militant, street-level confrontations with the state is retained or is a reality today within the NHF, especially in the post-Act world. This would vary from region to region, influenced by local cultures and histories of struggle, and more primary studies of the same would provide insights into this.

They also spoke of the Supreme Court stay order on 9 September 2013, in the lead up to the passage of the Act- as historic, which amongst other things, ordered that-

"…all existing street vendors/hawkers operating across the country shall be allowed to operate till the exercise of registration and creation of vending/hawking zones is completed....Once that exercise is completed, they shall be entitled to operate only in accordance with the orders/ directions of the concerned Town Vending Committee".

-**PTI** (2014)[134]

Historic nature of such an order notwithstanding, they recognised the limits of judicializing their struggle, through their own experiences. At a meeting in February 2015, an internal legal training workshop, some of the leaders had raised the question as to what they could do if even after a contempt petition is filed, states refused to comply.[135] Their legal team told them the answer was-nothing, really; and that this was a limit when one took the Supreme Court route. This then generated discussions on how one can use this strategically, raising implied questions of how not to over-use it. They also spoke of instances where High Court orders and judgements contradicted Supreme Court ones and discussed how the power of the Supreme Court was actually quite limited in ensuring implementation of the law.

Another problem to be faced in the post-law moment by the movement was the lack of knowledge of law by their state units and membership. This was a multi-dimensional problem, including issues of language access. For instance, it came up in one of the NHF's consultation meetings that the text of the newly passed law was in English and had not yet been published in Hindi, and that official translation into regional languages would take time. Another more obvious dimension was of course the obfuscation of the language of the law and lack of legal

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[134] See *Maharashtra Ekta Hawkers Union* (2013) for the full order.
[135] They had been filing contempt petitions in response to the violation of the 9 September 2013 Supreme Court order across the country.

training leading to easy misunderstandings. Yet another dimension of the problem was illustrated by Ghosh who gave members an example of a TVC meeting in Delhi, when their union members returned, saying it went well. However, when Ghosh read the minutes of the meeting, he said he saw that the very first point stated that all main roads were to be declared non-hawking zones. So why did they think it went well? Ghosh pointed out this was because the corporators in the meeting kept referring to the union representatives as 'Sir' and were deferential, presumably misleading them into thinking that the corporators were on their side and cooperating with them.

Discussions on the implementation of the Act

There were, naturally, many discussions related to the Act itself and its implementation. These discussions were undertaken in the spirit of knowing that the law would come with many restrictions. There were philosophical and political concerns about policy making undergirding many of their debates and discussions. For instance, should they aim for policy keeping today's reality in mind or the future they want to build?[136]

One of the early urgent concerns with regard to implementation of the Act was on the matter of survey and registration of hawkers. In a May 2014 meeting at Delhi, for instance, they debated and discussed what process they would push for, and who they should insist should carry it out. Another major concern was how to ensure transparency in the functioning of TVCs-they wanted to demand physical copies of minutes of the meeting, instead of merely having broad decisions recorded as said minutes and uploaded on the internet. Beyond these technical discussions, they also brought up underlying systemic issues, such as how patriarchy

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[136]A small example of this was a discussion at a September 2014 meeting in Delhi, on the ethics of registering and recognising under-age hawkers. On the one-hand, an under-age hawker should ideally be at school, and not hawking. On the other hand, many vociferously pointed out that school education should not be romanticised, and given the livelihood scenario in contemporary India, they should be allowed to have licenses.

would express itself in this process. There were discussions around how patriarchal gender norms had a high likelihood of playing out during the registration process, and that there was a need to be vigilant against that. For instance, they spoke of how the Act allows one person per family to register even if they run multiple stalls in the family. This, they said, inevitably meant the husband would get registered, and not the wife. Women would get left behind, or would be forced to manipulate, and register under the names of relatives, etc.

Multiple other issues came up with regard to post-Act implementation. For this, they constantly needed to check with each other things like which states had taken steps towards implementation, what those steps were, and which ones had not. There was a recognition right from the beginning that they, of course, could not and should not leave the implementation process at the mercy of the state governments, that they needed to take initiative to consult on the next stage, i.e., the formation of Rules under the Act, and plan such consultations with NHF leadership, membership, and allies (lawyers, activists, academics etc). They needed to ensure that the rules would specify the facilities hawkers wanted. At a September 2014 meeting, Ghosh reiterated his position, mentioned earlier, that since hawkers had no need for micro-credit there was no need to pitch that as a demand. What needed to be insisted upon, instead, were low interest bank loans. Other demands included provision for a pension after the age of 65, health, support for children's education and daughters' marriages.

There were also issues of clarifications to be sought on parts of the Act itself. For instance, also at the September 2014 meeting, they agreed they needed clarity on what comprised 'planning authority', 'temporary structure' in the Act, what the distinctions were between 'seasonal' and 'part-time' hawkers and what the difference was between 'group vending' and 'family unit'. They discussed needing to find out details like who would give licenses to inter-state hawkers

under the Act.[137] They had agitated debates on migration and how that would function within the post-Act regime, with migrant hawkers being counted, given licenses.

There were other definitional issues and challenges to be sorted-for instance, they of talked about the possibility of inserting the Labour Department in the functioning of the Act via the Rules, which in turn raised the question of how to classify hawkers, again, in the room amongst those present. Amongst the participants at that meeting (Delhi, September 2014) was an ex-Labour Commissioner, later elected into the NHF state secretariat of Haryana in 2016, who was also a post-holder at a hawkers' union in Haryana. The members present were asking for 'Employee State Insurance', which is defined for 'employees'; they wanted to get included in ESI because Tuberculosis treatment cost was more than what the Rashtriya Swasthya Biman Yojana (RSBY) gave. At present, hawkers were only eligible for RSBY. On this note, they also recognised that provisions for insurance and protection were not afforded to employee hawkers within the Act, and could not be addressed through rules. Instead, it would have to be the unions and associations that would have to ensure that justice was done on this matter. The specifics, however, were not engaged with.

Concluding Reflections on the Politics of the NHF

On this note, what does the push for the law and formalisation say and not say about the NHF's politics and vision for hawkers?

Jain (2013, 120) argues that the National Policy of Street Vendors, which preceded the Act and arguably laid the groundwork for it, was an out and out neoliberal policy, ostensibly to safeguard hawkers, but actually serving to 'discipline hawkers and create an ordered urban

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[137]As noted, NHF Delhi had inter-state bus hawkers as members, and this was a good demonstration of how diversity of membership determines what a movement knows to focus on.

space for the transition to a neoliberal city' with their consent. She draws convincing connections between how it originated and what it turned out to become, i.e., that its origins lay within a coalition movement of organisations towards the end of the 1990s, which included a large number of NGOs and think tanks. She attributes a key role to the late Ela Bhatt, the president of SEWA and then a Rajya Sabha member for highlighting hawker issues at the highest levels and in bringing together scholars, activists and hawker movements. She argues that many of the recently emerged NGOs and think tanks that were involved in this coalition were 'organic intellectuals of neoliberalism' that were 'key for the smooth expansion of the neoliberal working order' (Jain 2013, 120). Further, as mentioned earlier, the hawker organisations involved had diverse orientations towards the question of class-some of them, such as Manushi, and CCS, were open advocates for free market ideology, while others like SEWA and NASVI could perhaps be considered positioned more towards the centre of the political spectrum at best, and disguised advocates of the neoliberal order at worst. Thus, it was perhaps inevitable that their politics would get reflected in the first draft of the NPSV in 2004. Although the HSC, stridently left, was also a part of the coalition, one doesn't know how many other left organisations were asserting-or not asserting- their influence in the drafting process.[138] What is visible, as mentioned in Chapter Three, is that there was a gradual dilution of the 'rights' and 'protection' aspects and increase in the 'regulation' aspects of the policies and Act, from 2004 (the first NPSV) to 2009 (the second NPSV) to 2014 (the Act).

However, one also needs to keep in mind that many scholars and activists have taken a more positive view about the role of the law. For instance, Anjaria (2006, 2146) argues that, "The experiences of hawkers in Mumbai, as elsewhere in India, have taught them not to fear a

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[138]Inquiring into this unfortunately lay beyond the scope of this dissertation, since the NPSV and Street Vendor Act are not being queried here. One would have to be careful in establishing who had how much influence in the coalition, since many organisations claim to have played *the* key role. Literature on this would also have to be carefully evaluated since, as this dissertation has already mentioned, there is a particular tendency and bias towards highlighting the role of one or two hawker organisations from India in global academic circles.

regulatory state, but a predatory one...against which a licence provides security… He adds that "…The local state's power does not come from acts of legalising hawking, but from keeping their legal status in a constant state of flux" (ibid., 2145). Further, "…Thus the subversive act of the street hawker is, ironically, not to circumvent the law or the surveilling eye of the state, but to find a place within it" (ibid.).

In light of such a position, one can perhaps see the importance and value of the NPSVs and the Act, and why the HSC and the NHF had adopted the law as a central demand.

Further, according to the NHF, these policies and Act also did an important thing: it was in the 2004 NPSV that – for the first time – the definition of 'hawker' included stationary hawkers as well (Delhi, September 2014). Before that cases would apparently get dismissed because Courts would only recognise circulating (mobile) hawkers. If we accept the premise that the demand for the law was desired across the spectrum[139] within the Indian hawkers' movement, and irrespective of the dilution of the Act that came to be passed in 2014, then what does it tell us of the NHF's politics?

How can we read the NHF, especially if we keep in mind what was told to some of its leadership when they expressed apprehensions about the new law and what would happen under it, at an NHF meeting for its national leadership (Ranchi November 2014). Other leaders had responded by reminding them that while the law was a "*hathiyar*", a weapon, their *primary* weapon was *sangathan* -i.e., their organisation and organised struggle. *"Lagaataar sangharsh karenge toh baap manega!"* ("If we keep up our struggle then they'll have to concede to us!") Saktiman

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[139]Jain (2013, 165) takes a stance against the NPSV and makes a case for why she thinks its 'true purpose' is to 'sedate the growing demands of street hawkers'. She makes a good case, and it certainly appears to fall within the purview of what I call the management of discontent and discuss in Chapter Seven with regard to informal workers politics. However, the key factor I wish to hold on to, while evaluating this is: how is the membership responding to this? What are the potential disruptions available within this? Hence, the discussion here focusses on those factors.

Ghosh thundered. "What law existed when we fought Operation Sunshine??"[140] He noted how hawkers fought when they were evicted, but forgot to fight at other times when they sit (hawking), and how this needed to change.

Taking stock, one might well ask if the NHF should be taken as a promising or cautionary tale as a political movement. Do they exist between radical questions and compromised solutions? Is the conscious occupation of that middle ground-such as via their position and stance on the Act (i.e., acceptance)- tame, or seeded with potential for greater extraction of rights of livelihood and to space from the state?

Bandyopadhyay (2016, 715) wonders whether hawker organizing, and organizing in the informal economy in general, is indicating 'a second phase of formalization', a 'wider process of institutionalization and inclusion of labour'. He wonders what this means for the future of the informal sector and politics of informal workers, and whether the process of what he calls 'institutionalizing of informality' is actually desirable.

It is my suspicion, based on what I saw during my fieldwork with factory workers in Delhi NCR, that if/when the process of institutionalization stops meeting the needs of the intended membership, its relevance will automatically dissipate. The process of institutionalization/formalisation arguably comes with many challenges and some limitations, but with hawkers there doesn't seem to thus far have been an alternative form that has been shown to provide as much protection and security.

Scholars have argued that the radical spatial claim of hawkers has always been tempered by court judgements (Joshi 2018) and that the 2014 Act erased the possibility for radical claim to

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[140] It is to be noted that this is in direct contrast to some other organisations in the movement which held that formalisation would naturally yield an end to all problems of hawkers (Jain 2013). It should also be noted that some of these organisations are ones that had fallen under Ghosh's categorisation of 'laptop unions'.

space (Bandyopadhyay 2016, 712). By seeking to come under the law and be regularized, the movements have, understandably, 'opted' for this limitation-officially. Instead of seeing this as a compromise or de-radicalisation of their claim, I would suggest seeing it from a different perspective-as a strategic, even necessary, move made to aid an expansion of their overall claim.

The HSC has, at a discursive level, always assented to many such limitations that have come with otherwise favourable legal pronouncements upon hawkers, such as the one-third pavement rule from the Sodan Singh judgement, while actual practice might have differed. Their dual structure leaves great room to interpret policy at a micro-local level. Visually this was so aptly symbolized by mobile hawker carts operating in some of the more newly developed parts of the city, such as the IT hub in Salt Lake Sector V and New Town. I was told that local urban authorities had mandated that all hawker stalls should be mobile, presumably so they could be ordered to move at any time. So, they all-dutifully-sported the 'idea' of the wheel-i.e. the wheels were physically present, but, as I noticed, were inevitably always half-sunk into the soil. This rendered actual mobility practically impossible, signalling the lack of any real intent to move.

For another example, in one of the early national level consultations I attended, called internally amongst the leadership of the NHF, they had decided that for the NHF (and hawkers) existing in between the Act and the implementation of the Act could be most beneficial, at that point. It was argued by many that if the Act was implemented right then, most hawkers would not only not be able to benefit from it, they would actually be harmed by it.[141] The implemented Act could become a noose. At that moment, they mulled, favourable Supreme Court judgements

[141]This is because the Act left several things to be better defined and clarified, which would be done through the Rules. The NHF saw their role in this process to be crucial, in ensuring that the Rules were drafted in favour of hawkers, incorporating all the demands they could formulate, within the scope of the Act.

and the 2013 stay order were valuable to them. Therefore, deferring the Act for as long as possible was ideal from their point of view.[142] It was decided to not hurry the framing of the model Rules,[143] because it needed to be thought out with great care. Instead, the pressure would now be created on the Centre to make Model Rules, to use moral pressure. I am not aware if they continued to hold on to this plan and strategy after my fieldwork with them ended, but it seemed to me a most fascinating and politically astute approach to making the law work *for* a militant hawkers' movement.

This suggests that in the relatively more secure world of post- Act hawking, ample unofficial breathing room will continue to exist, which the movement can, if it wishes, choose to capitalise on. What will continue to matter greatly, is the underlying politics and vision for hawkers held by the hawkers' organisation in question. Towards this end, a distinction has hopefully been established in previous sections between the NHF and those NGO-adjacent organisations in the hawkers' movement for whom formalisation was the end goal of the struggle.

With regard to representation and exclusion, Bandyopadhyay (2016, 680) raises an important question-what happens if the hawker organisations aggressively gate-keep not just the limits of their membership but the pickings to be had from the Act to within their limited membership? One suspects that this will be an area of genuine struggle for organisations within the framework of the Act-a struggle *against themselves* which can be waged well if there is political intent and self-reflexivity. There is a natural power hierarchy that develops on the street with hawkers of different categories and social groups (Forkuor, Akuoko and Yeboah 2017, Sales 2018, Lindell 2018). Whether or not this gets reflected in the movement is an open

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[142]They recognised that evictions hadn't fully stopped because of the stay order, but the stay order provided leverage nonetheless, if used astutely.

[143] The plan had earlier been to publish them and send them to state governors later that year, to create pressure.

question, not a foregone conclusion. With the HSC and NHF, I argue that the space to include marginalised hawkers, such as women hawkers, disabled hawkers and mobile hawkers is actively nurtured, as mentioned earlier. Part of this active nurturing happens through organising along social categories. It doesn't hurt that the 2014 Act mandates representation of socially marginalised categories including women hawkers and hawkers with disabilities within TVCs. By motivating movements to include marginalised and previously unorganised sections of hawkers, one might even argue that the Act expands, rather than limits, the scope of organising.

The final form a collectivization process takes is, arguably, not important in itself but needs to be evaluated on the basis of whether its membership believes its needs are being adequately addressed in the short as well as the long term. I argue that when viewed against the kinds of hawker mobilisations documented in literature, globally and within India, the HSC-a founding member of the NHF- appears to possess certain distinctive characteristics. It is clearly a long-term movement that has thrived for more than a quarter century, has a class perspective of politics, strength of membership on the ground and, through its dual structure, has the ability to effectively deal with the macro as well as micro state, and mitigate the otherwise usually highly fragmented union landscape. The Delhi NHF was a less coherent movement in comparison, but I have tried to demonstrate how the national presence of the NHF holds on to that HSC ethos and political vision within the space of a hawker movement in India that has many organisations advocating for settling the hawker question in India through the free-market ideology or within the ideals and politics of neoliberalism. Under such an evaluation, the NHF, arguably comes out quite well, and I would answer the question posed a little earlier by asserting that the NHF's is not a cautionary tale at present.

However, one must offer some caveats. Under the present changed historical moment for hawkers in India, it would need to constantly keep extending its own ideas of what is possible and what it must ask for, and, going forward, incorporate the needs of 'employee'-hawkers

within its fold, given that it has now won a slightly more secure position for itself. The law, as mentioned earlier, doesn't account for the latter and doesn't give them any social or economic protections. Will hawkers' movements speak for them and go in that direction politically? It remains to be seen.

The work ahead is cut out for the NHF. It must continue with the challenging struggle of ensuring fair implementation *and* expansive political interpretation of the law, whilst continuing to build a broader struggle against a hostile environment in India with respect to labour and informal workers.

That said, what the NHF's politics is likely never going to be able account for or accommodate are ambitions represented by declarations like "*byabsha'r moton jinish hoye?" ("*Can there be anything as satisfying as your own business?"*)*, mentioned earlier. That is, this form of politics limits how broadly a hawker's world can be imagined, and how much prosperity and upward social mobility it is able to demand from the state given its desire and need to advocate only for the 'subsistence' level hawker as previously argued. I return to this in Chapter Six.

Chapter Five

The Politics of Organising at the Site of Work: Factory Workers in Delhi National

Capital Region

Introduction

> "Unions are only possible for permanents. *Agar permanent hi nahi hai toh*
>
> *kya union*?" **("**If one isn't a permanent worker in the first place then where
>
> does the question of a union even arise?")

This was a statement in a conversation between some temporary workers that I overheard at a

bhandara[144] organised by a central trade union close to IMT Manesar in April 2017**.** The

bhandara had been organised on the occasion of *Hanuman Jayanti*, and was used

simultaneously for a meeting amongst central trade unions and some independent unions from

the Gurgaon belt. The atmosphere was interesting and differed from that of interviews and

conversations held in more private settings. None of the union leaders I spoke to were too

forthcoming here, including a union I had interviewed the previous year when they had been

trying to get their registered union recognised by their company in court, which had been

achieved by the time of the *bhandara*. Most union leaders present were defensive and evasive

regarding the issue of organising permanent workers and various kinds of informal workers

together.

As mentioned earlier, one of the puzzles of the political activity by factory workers in Delhi

National Capital Region is the seemingly simultaneous existence of a desire for unions and

animosity towards unions. The animosity and disinterest are undisguised. At one of the

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[144] A *bhandara* is a community kitchen organised on festive occasions offering free meals to large groups of
people.

Faridabad Majdoor Samachar distribution sites in IMT Manesar, a man had once left a message at the local tea shop where the collective went for tea after distribution. He wanted to meet them and had left his address, which was the office of an independent union nearby. I accompanied the FMS editor when he accepted the invitation to visit and chat. A worker himself, the man who had left the message had joined that union a month ago. He used to be vocal and political as a worker, and he began to recount his experience as an organiser with this union. He said that whenever he calls a worker and requests some time from them, first they would say "yes", but when they heard where he was calling from (as a union organiser, from a union office), they would say "*time nahi hai*" ("we don't have time"). He complained that workers would not read the literature he gave them, and they would have to have free union trainings at protests/rallies/meetings otherwise nobody would turn up. They also offered free legal consultations on Sundays. A bit disconsolate, he added, "*Majdoor chahte nahi hai, unme ekta nahi hai…*" ("Workers don't want this, they have no unity…"). "They don't want what's good for them, they don't know their rights," he said (personal conversation, July 2016). It is this puzzle that this chapter tries to unpack.

The study presented in this chapter addresses the goals of this research by offering an empirical study of informal factory workers in Delhi NCR and makes a case for why academics and activists need to pay greater attention to the diverse forms of political articulations, struggle and resistance arising out of present post-Fordist conditions of factory work. Further, while somewhat addressing the gap of inadequate primary studies mentioned in Chapter One,[145] this study centres attention on the limitations of a pro-union framing of informal workers' politics and on the inadequate recognition of the range and power of informal workers' agency. I argue

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[145] I recognise that the manner in which the fieldwork for this case ended up unfolding- i.e., in becoming a dispersed study not limited to an organisation, or factory, or particular sector of manufacturing- limits its ability to stand as a rigorous source of primary material. Nonetheless, I hope that this dispersed approach helps illuminate that the patterns of politics identified in this study is not restricted to sections of the informal workforce of factory workers, but is a general trend across Delhi NCR.

that the defining feature of precarity for factory workers today, as mentioned in Chapter Two, is temporary work amongst a workforce predominated by informal workers who effectively exist outside the jurisdiction of labour laws, either by design or because violations of the same are the norm. This terrain produces various forms of resistance and struggle, and I argue that the union form offers little, if any, leverage to informal workers, and that unionisation adversely impacts the process of nurturing solidarity amongst workers and collective mobilisation. By having an extended discussion on the diverse range of political articulations visible during fieldwork, I also hope to set the stage for the broader argument this dissertation makes about a worker's politics stemming from a three-fold relationship with work (i.e., work at the worksite, and social and selfhood aspects of work), which is pursued in the following chapter (Chapter Six).

While there is a general underestimation of the ability of informal workers in the informal sector to organise formally and collectively, as the previous chapter notes, a different 'common-sense' seems to operate with regard to informal workers in the formal sector- that unionisation is and should be a common shared goal.[146] This leads to the construction of unionisation struggles as the most 'legitimate' form of struggle. By attempting a reading of diverse political articulations of factory workers at sites located within the four chosen fieldwork locations in Delhi NCR (Okhla industrial area, Udyog Vihar Phase I in Gurgaon, IMT Manesar and Faridabad) and the material conditions they are embedded in, this study thus fills a certain gap in existing literature on factory workers' politics that was mentioned in Chapter One. That is, the disinclination to face and examine political activity/expressions that fall outside of union organizing, struggles and articulations that do not necessarily have a long-term vision or cohesive sense of 'movement politics' and which might well be violent, chaotic

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[146]The history behind this is mentioned in Chapter Three.

and riotous. I argue that this gap impacts how we theorise informal workers' politics, and which aspects of it we end up highlighting. For instance, having a well-rounded way of reading these riotous expressions, as opposed to keeping the narrative centred around suppression of trade union rights and the helplessness of workers to wrest victories on this matter, allows us to have a more realistic notion of which way the balance of power tilts between managements and workers. As mentioned in Chapter Two, mainstream narratives favouring the trade union focus frequently make workers appear helpless victims, stressing that managements always have the upper hand.[147] Counter-narratives exist[148] which recognise that managements aren't always able to create their desired workforces, which my fieldwork also attests to. The balance of power is constantly in flux, and it is politically self-defeating to miss this. In view of the recent labour law reforms (mentioned in Chapter Two), we have a greater need to understand these non-union forms of political articulations because it is likely that whatever limited space and scope exists at present for union politics (for factory workers) will shrink even further. I would argue that in that upcoming scenario if, instead of seeking to learn from alternate articulations, we continue to advocate for a form of politics that already wasn't serving the needs and interests of informal factory workers in the older regime, we would be ineffective at best and disingenuous at worst.

The study presents, across the four fieldwork locations in Delhi NCR,[149] the changing dynamics of work at the post-Fordist worksite of the factory, the experiences and issues that arise out of that, focussing on temporary work and informal workers, and the manner in which the labour

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[147]For example, see Bhowmik (2012).

[148]See Parry (1999a).

[149]As mentioned in Chapter Two Delhi NCR is a manufacturing hub and financial node of significant importance, with designated industrial zones surrounded by smaller production hubs that account for the full length of a contemporary supply chain. That is, it hosts Tier 1, Tier 2, Tier 3 factories at the top end of the chain right down to SMSES and garage workshops and home-based units at the bottom end of the chain for several industries like automobile, garments, pharmaceuticals, amongst others.

law regime interacts with this to produce the diversity of political articulations and struggles that I mention. The discussion takes off from how big industrial hubs in Delhi NCR have been regularly erupting in strikes and conflicts since 2005, the year which many recognise as marking the beginning of a new phase of industrial unrest.[150] Some of the biggest conflicts from 2005 to 2017 (the period being studied) have included the violent, militant strike and lockout at the Honda Motorcycle and Scooter India (HMSI) factory in Gurgaon (2005), which shook up the industrial belt and led to many management concessions and the now internationally famous Maruti Manesar workers' struggle of 2011-12. As mentioned, many of these struggles have demonstrated coordinated efforts and solidarity between permanent workers and various categories of informal workers, thus appearing to break the hierarchies between permanent workers and informal workers that have developed in the formal sector of the Indian industrial world since independence. There is a common narrative that seeks to explain this situation as follows: 1) Post-liberalisation, the pressures on workers increased, 2) Workers realised they could only protect themselves by unionising but it got harder to unionise, and 3) Permanent workers, seeing their limited numbers, recognised that they had to build a movement jointly with informal workers in order to succeed- i.e., they had the power to unionise, and informal workers had the numbers. In this chapter, I compare what emerges in my fieldwork with the above-mentioned interpretation to bring out a more complex picture of resistance and workers' relation with trade union politics.

The discussion in this chapter is separated into five sections, to follow. The first section addresses literature relevant to this study in two sub-sections. The first attempts to give a sense of some of the differences between older, elite Nehruvian industrial spaces and the newer industrial spaces represented by my fieldwork locations. The second sub-section focusses on

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[150]See Pratap (2017).

literature discussing politics of factory workers. The second section focusses on who I am talking about, i.e., informal factory workers. It draws from fieldwork to discuss the precarity of factory work manifesting as temporary work and aspects of this precarity. The discussion in the third section on the violations of labour laws that are the norm today leads to the fourth section on the politics of informal workers. This looks at how these violations interact with the terrain of temporary work and informal workers and become a significant factor of production of conflicts, struggles and resistance amongst factory workers. It also discusses the various forms and articulations of politics encountered during fieldwork, ending with an analysis of factory workers' relationship with trade unions in the NCR. Finally, the fifth section sums up the chapter through a brief conclusion.

Broad Contours of Relevant Literature on Factory Workers in India

An overview of some differences between older and newer industrial spaces

It is productive to attempt a broad overview of some of the characteristics of public sector industrial towns, and contrast them with post-liberalisation industrial towns and centres, in order to arrive at a sense of their differing underlying logic.[151] This is because, in many ways, the early public-sector industrial towns set the tone for and/or created some of the key issues related to work and labour that we are still grappling with today, including the creation of the great formal/informal divide and its leading to a trade union movement comprising largely of formal workers in the formal sector. In doing so, I draw heavily from the extensive study by

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[151] I acknowledge that the industrial spaces compared here are only one kind of (elite) space and also contained variations both then and now. Hence one would need to better define *which* kinds of spaces are being compared and justify this. It has not been possible to do this in detail in this dissertation. But to clarify, for the purpose of this discussion, I contrast Nehruvian industrial towns (such as Bhilai) that were meant to be exemplars of industry in post-independent India with industrial model towns and planned estates that arguably represent contemporary exemplars of industry (which my fieldwork locations represent).

Parry (2012) and Parry (2020) of Bhilai Steel Plant (BSP). This is a vast subject, but the discussion here is limited to how the changing place of labour in state narrative and nation building interacts with transformations in the urban and post-Fordist changes (discussed in Chapter Three) to produce differences in the spaces of these industrial centres and the experiences of working lives within them. This will link to discussions in this chapter on the changing terrain of politics for informal workers, as well as to Chapter Six in the discussions around ambitions and desires.

There are three main differences between the older and newer industrial spaces that I wish to draw attention to.

First, the privilege and stability enjoyed by what scholars have identified as the labour elite or labour aristocracy in Nehruvian public sector industrial towns is entirely missing in the post-liberalisation industrial towns and centres. The life and work worlds of workers in the older and newer industrial centres are thus worlds apart. To better understand the scenario with respect to the older industrial townships, the case of the Bhilai Steel Plant (BSP) is briefly considered. Parry's (2020) long-term work on Bhilai and the BSP shows how Bhilai was a symbol of national integration and modernity for post-independence India. Among other things, this meant that the state's interest and concrete actions extended to ensuring that the BSP's permanent workers had security of employment and various benefits that went towards nurturing a secure and fulfilling life (housing allowance, free schooling, healthcare, amongst other such facilities). BSP workers, for instance, drew wages that were significantly higher than what was available for steel workers in the private (formal) sector, to speak nothing of those who worked in the informal sector. Parry notes how this ended up constructing a class of privileged workers who were set apart from the rest because of their government job (*sarkari naukri*), thus arriving at his core argument of how this ends up making them a 'labour elite',

which was not the norm across India. He argues, further, that their privileges were not benign, but came at the cost of and was sustained on the backs of disadvantaged workers, including casual workers hired at BSP itself. In contrast to BSP and other such industrial townships, no such labour elite exists in the industrial spaces that this study focuses on.

Second, the differences between the labour elite (who came from a mix of social locations including marginalised ones) and the others was stark enough that some scholars like Parry (2020) identified an insurmountable schism between two classes of labour. Based on language used by workers in talking about their work, Parry points out that there were those who did *Naukri*, i.e., permanent, secure government jobs, and then there were all the others who did *kaam,* which referred to those who worked in the formal private sector as well as those who worked in the informal economy. This schism was deepened by things like a) how state provided workers' residences were arranged, with the permanent workers living in middle class settlements, and the less secure workers inhabiting slums in a separate part of town, and b) the division of labour on the shopfloor with permanent employees being in supervisory positions over the temporary, contract workers at the steel plant in Bhilai.

The difference between the two kinds of workers was evident in their different material interests and lifestyles, as well as the fact that a relationship of exploitation existed between them; this, in turn, also had implications for politics. Parry highlights how union politics has played out at the plant and at the BSP mines: the contract workers at the plant remained non-unionised and unions of BSP workers (comprised of permanent workers) did not support the unionisation efforts of contract workers in the mines led by the Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha (associated with Shankar Guha Niyogi) in the 1980s.

Parry's arguments have elicited a fair amount of often dissenting debate[152] which he parries convincingly.[153] Versions of his argument have been made by other scholars, preceding Parry, including Mark Holmstrom (through an initial study in Bangalore and a later one at Bombay), Jan Breman (through a study in Gujarat) and John Harriss (through a study in Coimbatore). For instance- Holmstrom's (1976) 'citadel' metaphor for this privileged class of labour, i.e., those with permanent, secure employment existed in a citadel that others could not enter, revised later to the metaphor of the mountain, i.e., those with permanent, secure employment existed at the peak, but others could make their way there, ultimately rejects the labour elite argument. The difference between Parry and the others seems to be located mostly in how they look at the question of how rigid the boundaries are between the different kinds and categories of workers, whether to visualise these differences as a graded class hierarchy or as a dichotomy like Parry does. For Parry, the distinction between *naukri* and *kaam* comes not just from material factors, but, as spoken of by workers, is a matter of *izzat*, dignity. I argue, based on my fieldwork, that one sees strains of both-the dichotomy *and* the gradation- on the ground, and that it is most productive to retain attention on the fact that they remain simultaneously in play. This offers one a way to understand the contradiction spoken of where on the one hand there is extreme disinterest in union membership amongst factory workers, while at the same time some of the biggest industrial conflagrations in recent times have occurred because of attempts to unionise. That is, perhaps some informal workers acquiesce to or embrace unionisation struggles in the hope of becoming permanent, except once formed, unions continue to serve the interests of only permanent workers, reinforcing the dichotomy.

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[152]See Breman (2021) and Ahuja (2019).
[153]See Parry (2021).

However, the relationship between different kinds of workers in contemporary industrial centres is also affected by the very different arrangements in terms of labour. Evidence from my fieldwork shows how entire factories are more and more commonly these days populated only by various kinds of temporary workers, so there is no question of a separation of labour based on permanent workers only performing supervision, and this often serves to increase a sense of fellowship and sense of being in it together. Further, since companies no longer take a similar kind of responsibility for providing residential facilities to workers,[154] it is common to have various kinds of workers living in common areas, including in slums populated entirely by factory workers. If anything, the newer divisions are likely between local landowners and migrant renters, with local landowners (who may or may not be factory workers themselves) exerting various forms of control on the renters, such as insisting they buy their groceries etc. from shops owned by the landlords.

Thus, in all my field sites, we see how the logic of neoliberal urbanisation intertwines with and exists as part of how new industrial centres now develop. That is to say, modern industrial centres reflect the neoliberal urbanisation turn as well as the neoliberal industrial turn, the latter of which is characterised by a predominance of private enterprise, production hubs fragmented across long supply chains, hiring temporary workers, and no responsibility being taken by either the state or these private enterprises in providing dedicated housing to workers, and being left to the devices of a decaying system of state-provided healthcare and education. As Cowan (2015, 65) notes 'Under the logics of neo-liberal capitalism, cities have undergone socio-spatial transformation from engines of industrial production to economies established on finance capital, leisure and technology'. He notes, for instance, how Gurgaon-that symbol of new

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[154]The provision of dormitory accommodation exists as a practice in some industrial centers although not in Delhi NCR, as mentioned elsewhere. However, one would argue that this is no way compares to the earlier generation of planned residential quarters.

modernity-has roughly '…43 malls, golf courses, a dozen five-star hotels, 30 of Haryana's 34 IT and biotech special economic zones and over a hundred Fortune 500 companies' (Cowan 2015, 64).

The third difference between older and newer industrial spaces relates to the question of aspirations for the future. In places like Bhilai, the anxiety of the labour elites related to reproducing the next generation into a similar life and work world, i.e., reproducing the next generation into *naukri* (Parry 2020). In contrast, today, the next generation might have lingering dreams of *naukri* (even those whose parents were born too late for this) but reproduction into it– and everything it represents including security and upward social mobility– is near impossible. I return to this while taking up a young worker's narrative on his ambitions and desires in Chapter Six.

On reading politics of factory workers

Drawing from existing literature, I argue that on the matter of reading struggle, there has been, and still remains, a tension between the event and the everyday, between the individual actor (or organisation) and the collective, in terms of ascribing agency, and understanding what moves the wheels of history and actionalises change. Both of these tensions challenge an observer's ability to understand and narrativize what has happened, what is going on, and what may come to be. From my field I see evidence of resistance and struggle across all these, and in Chapter Three I set out how this dissertation reads struggle. Here I make some further points in the specific case of factory workers.

Academic work on factory workers has been from varied perspectives. For instance, academic knowledge production around work and workers has often been motivated by a desire to understand how to make workers more efficient, to deliver more. Thus Bhowmik (2012) points out how industrial sociology is taught by many management institutes as a part of their

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curriculum. Conflict, in particular, came to receive much attention from management theorists. Bhowmik (2012, 4) notes how conflict theorists like Georg Simmel wanted to show that industrial relations actually strengthened *if* conflicts could be institutionalised-within trade unions. The latter would channel multiple and diverse opinions and views of workers within an organisation into one view-that of the union's, thus making workers manageable for managements. In other words, trade unions would become the means of institutionalising conflicts, earning recognition from managements in return for this role they play on the management's behalf, thus functionally making trade unions entities that are co-opted by managements. Naturally, such a perspective is interested in the upholding of the existing status quo between labour and management, and not looking for radical shifts in this terrain. This is a view of trade unions that continues to persist on the ground, as a critique of the form and scope, amongst some activists and workers, which I mention in Chapter Three and return to within this chapter and in Chapter Seven (while discussing the management of discontent).

It is also important to reiterate here, the importance of the question of who the union is actually representing-what kind of workers. As has been mentioned already, the history of post-independence India and its working-class movement is such that that the majority of unionised workers have been formal, permanent workers from the public sector. Such workers have frequently been hostile to temporary and contract workers of various kinds employed within their workplaces. The political interests of unionised formal workers is not going to be the same as that of non-unionised temporary workers of various kinds who don't enjoy the same job security or pay parity. It is arguably obvious which category of worker will have a greater interest in the maintenance of industrial peace and stability given the circumstances.

Ironically, however, conflict theorists assume that workers exercise more power and agency within this structure than what many on the Left hold and give workers credit for. As I argue, framing, language and narratives are not merely functional in nature as a means of description,

but have a more creative role in fuelling struggle, nurturing agency and propelling political imaginations.

Management perspectives on organisation of factory work also have a huge impact on the day to day lives of factory workers, and the ways in which they respond politically. Bhowmik (2012) points out that opinions have varied on how to socially organise industry and work, including on questions of how tight a control managers should have on workers on the shopfloor which would involve balancing the goals of increased production and preventing rebellion by workers in the face of reduced autonomy.

Moving away from management perspectives to the social sciences, Bhowmik (2012) notes that for a decade or so after independence, Indian industry and labour were not subjects of interest to sociologists, who preferred to instead study villages. This only began to change in the late 1950s, which was also the time that 'labour commitment'[155] began to be brought up by some western sociologists, the lack of which was thought to be an impediment in developing countries emerging out of largely agrarian economies, unused to industrial rhythms and ways of life. The lack of labour commitment theory began to be successfully countered by studies in the 1960s, which noted that if the job was stable, secure and had high wages, the worker tended to not leave it.[156] One big takeaway from this wave of studies was a critique of importing external models to study and explain local (Indian) labour and the importance of anthropological studies of the latter. They also highlighted how primordial ties to caste and religion etc., though convenient, weren't always good explanations for labour force instability, with enough evidence being generated to indicate that factors like wages and security of employment were, instead, bigger determinants of the same (Bhowmik 2012).

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[155] A committed worker, by some counts, being one who had severed connections with land and remained stable in a factory job.
[156] Such as Lambert (1963) cited in Bhowmik (2012, 114).

Parry (1999a) too draws attention to the absence of interest in studying labour and work in the decades following independence, barring a few exceptions. He draws evidence for this by noting how an important journal like *Contributions to Indian Sociology* had published not a single paper pertaining to the changes that had taken place in the world of work and labour in the past fifteen years (referring to the liberalisation related changes from the mid-eighties onwards). Work on labour had been principally published instead, he notes, in the *Economic and Political Weekly.* There was also a growing body of work on labour from the discipline of history, particularly in the context of specific cities such as Bombay (Chandavarkar 1999), Calcutta (Chakrabarty 2000) and Kanpur (Joshi 1999, Joshi 2006). However, in general, there was a division of labour (pun not intended) which, as Parry notes, highlights the shortcomings of how Indian labour was being studied- with sociology not paying it enough attention (having instead a preoccupation with matters of caste, kinship, ritual), and other disciplines studying it (including the kind of sociology of labour that did exist) but missing the kind of details that traditionally a sociological approach would bring to a subject. That is, good fieldwork, thick description, looking at kinship, religions etc, and a more comprehensive study of culture within the world of industrial labour than what existed.[157] This resulted in, he notes, unsatisfactory understandings of issues of 'commitment' of workforces, class consciousness and solidarity, and how and why Indian workforces (and those in the Global South) differ from workforces in western developed nations, which are by default treated as the norm and the inevitable, eventual 'model' for all industrial workforces. Increasingly scholarship is pushing back against such conceptualisations. For instance, Chang (2017, XI) comments that:

> The fact that Asian capitalist development is not creating a coherent working
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> class once observed in advanced capitalist economies makes us reconsider the

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[157]Noting that 'culture' was usually used as a one stop shop, so to speak, to provide an easy answer for why the Indian workforce was different in character from workforces in the advanced industrial nations.

usual strategies of the labour movement that the working-class movement in advanced capitalist economies once used and existed as a model for the labour movement elsewhere.

-**Dae-oup Chang**

Hence one needs to recognize that the usual strategies of a working-class movement modelled on western developed nations cannot be taken for granted anymore, and that instead of evaluating struggles in the Global South against that lifeless standard, one should more and more look to the Global South as the source of new and innovative struggles and strategies.

The thrust of Parry's(1999a) assertion seems to be that there is a need to bring these disciplinary approaches together in order to approach a more holistic and comprehensive way of studying a worker and their choices. Such an approach, as represented by the papers collected in the volume he co-edits (Parry, Breman and Kapadia 1999), allows for a more rich and nuanced understanding of the various dynamics at play in working class lives and workers politics. For instance, Pinney (1999) points out in his essay that a nostalgia for a rustic idyll and a suspicion of machines is voiced by the landed higher castes-who lose the labour of landless lower castes to factories. He finds that it is 'those who do not clock on in the factory that are most concerned with its dreadful consequences'-such as pollution (Pinney 1999 cited in Parry 1999a, xviii). Parry (1999a) notes that these concerns were ironically shared by left-wing activists. Those who did clock in at factories for work, felt the wages of factory employment were better, the work to be easier and liberation from the subservience and repression of the old rural order (Pinney 1999).

In the same vein, Ahuja (2013a) makes an important distinction between history of workers and history of the labour movement, noting that recent scholarship has refused to equate the two, or to confuse the former with histories of trade unions and their leadership, and that this has been a productive move. He notes that this has allowed a recognition of, amongst other things, that workers need to be understood as actively inhabiting various fields of social practice. This also, he adds, allows one to recognise and visibilise antagonisms between leaders and the rank and file, and also moments when workers have on occasion fought for personal autonomy and not against wage labour or capital (Ahuja 2013b, 110). All protests by workers are not against the latter (or fuelled by the latter), a point which this dissertation also very much wishes to make, and which might perhaps otherwise be missed if one conflates workers struggles with the labour movement/trade union struggles.

Changing Dynamics of Factory Work: Temporary Work and Informal Workers

Categories of employment: permanent workers versus informal workers

One of the starkest features of the changing dynamics of industrial work is the profile of workers in it, and the growing predominance of temporary workers in the workforce is one of them, as has already been noted.

At the outset it is useful to draw attention to the fact that there appears to be a lack of clarity in terms of the differences between various categories of informal workers. Within literature it is common to find contract workers, casual workers, apprentices and trainees all treated as temporary workers and referred to as temporary or informal workers (Nowak 2021, Barnes 2015). This domain is not legally defined and left ambiguous. The Ministry of Labour & Employment, for instance, acknowledged casual workers within government employment, but noted that 'There is no legislation exclusively for regulating engagement of casual workers',

and that no centralised data relating to casual workers was maintained (PIB 2012). For the government sector, casual work seems to denote employment on a daily wage basis (PIB 2012). The Central Government had however issued guidelines for recruitment of casual labourers under the Casual Labourers (Grant of Temporary Status and Regularization) Scheme of Government of India, 1993. For the private industrial sector, the Industrial Employment (standing orders) Central Rules 1946 classifies the workman as '(1) permanent, (2) Probationers, (3) badlis, (4) temporary, (5) casual, (6) apprentices' where it defines casual workers as 'a workman whose employment is of a casual nature', which is tautological. A report by Basole et al. (2018, 95) appears to suggest that given that definitional ambiguities and contradictions between regular workers and informal workers, arising from difference of opinion as to what the markers of formal employment are, it might make more sense to speak in terms of degrees of formality and informality. This opens out a way of considering varying levels of precarity within non-regular workers, with trainees and apprentices being, for instance, more vulnerable than contract workers. However, here too things remain unclear, for fieldwork respondents from an auto-parts company in Manesar spoke of how in their company contract and casual workers, on passing a written exam, were taken on as trainees on company roll, indicating a 'promotion' of sorts (interview, July 2016). Basole et al. (2018, 99) points out that field studies tend to provide more information regarding conditions of employments and forms of labour than secondary surveys. During my fieldwork, respondents used the terms 'casual' and 'contract' variously-and frequently interchangeably- while appearing to on the whole stress on the differences between permanent workers and the rest, as opposed to differences within the rest such as between casual/contract. One worker who spoke of being employed through a '*thekedar*' (i.e., contractor), also simultaneously referred to themself as 'casual' (interview, Dharuhera, June 2016). Another spoke of being on the company roll directly without being a permanent worker (interview, Faridabad, July 2016). Pritam, a young

worker I speak of later in this chapter, during the course of our conversation started explaining the different categories of non-regular workers at one of the factories he had worked at. He spoke of there being casual workers, and '*thekedar*' workers (contract workers); the latter kind could further be of two types- those with job cards and those without. Those without job cards had less job security (interview, Faridabad, May 2016). There are likely differences in benefits and perks between different categories of workers, but this seemed to differ greatly from company to company. Thus, for the purpose of this discussion and research I subsume the terms 'contract worker' and 'casual worker' under the term informal worker and/or temporary worker and treat casual, contract, apprentice and trainee workers as temporary workers.

Contract work has evolved to indicate various tenures of employment, which kept shortening with time, in order to escape statutory legal obligations of companies and employers. Phrasing it as temporary worker in that sense is more useful because it sets it up against the reducing numbers of permanent, secure workers.

Contract labour in India is governed by two major acts- the Contract Labour (Regulation and Abolition) Act, 1970 (CLRA) and the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947.

The CLRA seeks to ensure the payments of minimum wages etc by the contractor that employs the worker, and to hold the principal employer responsible for oversight and holding the contractor they are employing accountable to the law. It also seeks to prohibit contract workers from being used (i.e., exploited) in certain conditions, based on the following criteria- "… (a) the process or work is incidental or necessary for the industry, (b) it is of perennial nature, (c) if it is done ordinarily by regular workers, and (d) it is sufficient to employ considerable number of full-time workers" (Shyam Sundar 2007, 810). In certain cases, courts had ordered employers to absorb contract workers into their permanent workforce based on the CLRA.

An amendment to the ID Act in 1984 on the matter of retrenchment of a workman (and their entitlements therein),[158] created an exception for workers hired under fixed term employment contracts, thus cementing the legitimacy of contract workers. The contract worker still remained entitled to all statutory benefits and pay, but employers were not obligated to pay severance dues or follow the conditions for retrenchment otherwise defined in the Act, when their contract lapsed and/or was not renewed. This paved the way for companies to escalate hiring of contract workers instead of permanent workers, often giving a short break of a few days between two contracts to bypass the law against hiring contract workers long term or for jobs otherwise performed by permanent workers. In the wake of this unsurprising exploitation of the law by companies, and given the 1980s period of judicial activism, the judiciary stepped in to make a pronouncement that so long as an employee works for an employer for more than 240 days in a year (i.e., 8 months), the introduced exception in the ID Act, with respect to retrenchment and fixed term contracts, would not apply and the employer was not entitled to treat them as a temporary worker (Chakrabarty 2017).

To give a small example of the various kinds of temporary employment arrangements that companies get into with workers, one can turn to the case of Maruti. When Maruti Gurgaon started in 1984, Gurgaon's flagship transformative manufacturing triumph, around 70% workers were permanent and 30% were contract workers (but they eventually became permanent workers) (Interview CITU organiser April 2017). These proportions consequently shifted drastically. There is constant evolution on new types of contracts and types of workers hired. As of 2017, an AITUC organiser explained the different categories of workers at Maruti (interview April 2017). The permanent workers, who worked in production on the conveyor belts, were called Maruti Associates, and were distinguished from Contract Trainees with two

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[158]The definition and interpretation of 'workman' is engaged with in Chapter Three.

years training with a 6 month break in between through the colour of their uniforms. The Temporary Workers, in yet another colour of uniform, were given two contracts of six month durations each with a gap in between. Contractors also provided Helpers (lowest skill level of employees hired).

These hiring practices have implications on wages and pay gap. The gentleman I was speaking with in the Tier 1 vendor company that supplies to Maruti and other automobile companies mentioned that there was a big difference in the wages paid at Maruti versus what their company paid (Interview July 2016). At Maruti, he mentioned that the older, permanent workers earned between Rs. 70,000-Rs.80,000 per month.[159] However, this company, especially at their newest factories, started workers on the much lower minimum wage. The grade pay would increase with number of years a worker has worked-however, it is obvious that most temporary and contract workers will not accumulate those years, and therefore those pay increases.

Unpacking the desire for flexible workforces: skilled versus unskilled labour

Conversations with a handful of companies presenting management perspectives suggested two factors because of which companies leaned heavily on temporary workers.

The first was a requirement for a flexible workforce, but not in the case of the entire workforce. The Tier 1 automobile vendor company mentioned, for instance, that they wanted easy hire and fire laws: "Why pay workers sitting idle when there is no work*?*" (interview, July 2016). But they also said that they intended to keep a stable workforce of skilled production shopfloor workers who would stay on for years. This workforce would, however, still be on contract, and

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[159]It seems to be universally understood-i.e., across companies and activists and unions-that Maruti sets the industry standards. Therefore, whatever happens at Maruti has a cascading effect in other auto companies as well, whether it be in terms of setting wage standards or in terms of how to respond to labour conflicts and union practices.

not permanent. What they wanted was a flexible *unskilled* workforce-such as those who did loading and unloading work, who were easily dispensable in seasons of low demand. That particular plant had 135 permanent workers and 200-250 temporary workers. This basic division was followed by most companies. In the automobile sector, the shop-floor production workers tended to be the skilled workers companies were keen to retain (even though frequently only as contract workers), and in the garments industry these were frequently the sampling tailors who were the most skilled.

The second factor was affordability-they mentioned they cannot afford to regularise all contract workers. This particular Tier 1 company mentioned that their wage bill would go up substantially if the 200-250 temporary workers in their factory were to be made permanent. At present, their wage bill was 13% of their total turnover of Rs. 412 crore (for the previous year, i.e. 2015), and this included management salaries as well as wages of the workers. Another such example includes a fieldwork encounter in Okhla that I mention in Chapter Three, where a worker reported that the owner of the small factory he worked in mentioned that he would go out of business if he paid all statutory dues at the correct rates.

In this scenario it is also important to reiterate that these companies universally qualified the surplus of labour that India is thought to have. The Tier 1 automobile vendor company mentioned that although there is a big supply of labour in India, *skilled* labour isn't as abundantly available. According to an MSME company in Faridabad (engineering works), 15-20 years ago the situation was that labour supply was high, demand low, and it was common to not pay government mandated minimum wages, because even without that workers were willing to work, especially in the automobile sector. Today, however, he noted that the availability of skilled labour was a problem, so within the sector it was common to hire skilled labour at higher than minimum wages. Interestingly, he noted that while engineers were mushrooming everywhere, skilled labour was not. The gentleman I spoke to mentioned that

today you can 'get' an engineer (to work for you) for Rs.8000 per month, unlike skilled labour. Government Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs) from which most factories hire, he noted, are not adequately in touch with what is needed on the ground- there is no effective dialogue or interaction with industry feeding into their course and training material (interview, July 2016). He noted that many MSMEs do not bother to skill their employees, and just 'struggle' on as is. He noted that if a worker sticks to one company (implying that they don't) their value and loyalty would increase. One can connect the dots, and see that a high rate of worker turnover, especially for skilled workers, hurts companies financially, since new workers have to be retrained, even if informally on the job, and in terms of interrupting smooth and efficient work flows, since new workers would presumably take some time to adapt to production processes. But companies are not willing to give the skilled workers permanent jobs. I return to how workers perceive this institutionalised de-skilling and its impact on their experience of work in Chapter Six.

Thus, fieldwork suggested that the differences between today's 'permanent' workers and temporary workers has been steadily narrowing and nearly absent in some cases in terms of pay, benefits and security. I discuss this in the context of some unionisation struggles later in this chapter. Much hinges on the duration that such contract, or temporary workers, are hired for, and as I argue later, this becomes a major shaper of which workers are likely to seek unionisation, and which ones are not. It is mostly those who have some hope of becoming permanent who seek to unionise, though after union formation temporary workers are generally left out of membership. Field conversations revealed that companies these days are giving temporary workers direct company contracts for 6-7 months only (or less), including the big players Maruti Suzuki India Ltd. and Hero Motocorp. This is a way of ensuring a worker doesn't hit the 240 days of work-i.e., 8 months-that makes them eligible to become a permanent worker. Many workers reported that this became more widespread after the struggle of the

Maruti Manesar workers in 2012. However, skilled workers who companies seek to retain long-term (albeit on contract) potentially remained hopeful of being absorbed as permanent like the older generation of permanent workers at companies like Maruti, and they, I speculate, remain the section invested/interested in union struggles, at least in the beginning of such struggles. The conclusion of such struggles, I show and argue, most often led to companies widening the gap between permanent and temporary workers, with the acquiescence of the union -especially in cases where little or no gap had existed-with temporary workers left feeling betrayed.

Under these circumstances, the role of the traditional figure of the labour contractor today appears to be shifting and diminishing. The quintessential figure of the contractor sourcing labour for companies from villages and providing replacements is changing, according to many of my field respondents. Factory workers and companies are increasingly dealing directly with each other, but because the latter do not want them on their rolls directly, they insert (sometimes dummy) contractors for the sole purpose of avoiding direct relations and legal obligations. That is, the contractor isn't involved in the actual bringing together of worker and company.

Workers in search of work sometimes go directly from factory gate to factory gate inquiring about vacancies. This was visible in three of my locations.[160] Some gather at labour chowks and wait to be picked up by contractors. FMS collective participants pointed out that earlier labour chowks used to be the domain of construction workers, carpenters, masons etc. However, now it was becoming increasingly common for factory workers too especially for the garments industry. They pointed out that the labour chowk near the Udyog Vihar FMS distribution site, for instance, was only about two years old. Some factory workers also joined jobs through existing contacts in factories, and sometimes the contacts might also lobby for

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[160] In Okhla the FMS distribution site was away from the factories themselves, so observation was made harder.

their own people with the HR departments, especially if they had managed to build good relations with them.

Contractors, according to participants of the FMS collective, rarely roam the streets anymore, going door to door offering employment. They don't need to, given the surplus of (largely unskilled) labour available. Many of the 'contractors' today are big firms, which are more like placement agencies. Job seekers mostly approach them (rather than the other way around) through word-of-mouth advertising or pamphlets. These pamphlets are usually plastered all over lamp posts and walls in industrial areas, as I saw. Sometimes, I was told, shopfloor supervisors or other workers themselves become contractors.

Changing workforce composition

Several aspects are changing in terms of workers' profiles too. First, companies display a bias towards younger workers. It is common to find entire factories populated by workers under thirty. Conversations revealed that many companies don't like to hire workers above twenty-five and that this age bias extends towards both women and men.

One MSME company I spoke with (garments sector and allied) employed a total of 35 workers, almost round the season, and their workers were men and women in their twenties and thirties who came from villages and who were very precariously positioned financially (interview, July 2016).

Small workshops-especially those that exist towards the lower end of the supply chain-frequently hire under-18 workers. One can say with almost certainty that every big company, including Maruti and big clothing brands, and therefore also consumers of their products, use child-labour, although they remain legally distanced from culpability owing to the fragmentation of industrial production and manufacturing in the post-Fordist age.

It gets increasingly challenging for older temporary workers, both men and women, to find new employment, and to be retained at their jobs as I found during fieldwork. A middle-aged man involved with FMS who used to work at a utensils company was fired for reasons he was unaware of (personal conversation, Manesar, May 2016). After distributing copies of the FMS, he resumed his rounds on his cycle looking for new work. He said many places were turning him away because of his age. At another location, I met a middle-aged woman worker who had worked as a packer in a garment export factory for two years. She was asked to leave the job, and replaced with another worker, when she was ill and in the process of getting treatment. When I met her, she was doing the rounds of Udyog Vihar daily, looking for a new job, though with no luck despite the 'labour chowk' had sprung up in the area in the past two years (personal conversation, December 2015).

Second, the gender profile of workforces, too, is rapidly changing. The number of women workers have been growing, not just in ready-made garment companies, but also in the more traditionally male dominated automotive parts companies. However, companies are not gender blind. During conversations I came to understand that although women were now hired in factories that used to earlier be considered male domains, they were generally not allowed to operate heavy machinery, and it was rare to have mixed-gender production lines. This also therefore indicated that they held the lower skilled, lower paid jobs, although there were exceptions such as the security guards I mention below. Mixed-gender production lines were more common in the garments export factories, although certain jobs within it, like sampling tailors, were almost all exclusively male. I did not meet or hear of a single woman sampling tailor. Within garment factories it is the sampling tailors who are the most skilled and the highest paid and during lean periods it is the lower skilled women workers who are the first to be let go of.

Some of the exceptions included women guards who had better wages and hours than men at an auto-parts company in IMT Manesar. At another location in IMT Manesar, a worker who joined in the post-FMS distribution tea and conversation session mentioned another factory he knew of where women guards got higher pay and correct overtime compensation which the men did not get. "*Yeh bhi fact hai*," he noted ("this too is a fact"), in the context of the conversation we were having about how male workers tended to be paid more than women workers (group conversation, November 2015).

Expanded female presence creates some interesting situations revolving around sexual morality and propriety. An older female garment worker in Gurgaon mentioned how female workers are not allowed to exit the company during work hours because "girls are the companies responsibility, they can't allow love affairs to develop" (interview, June 2016).

With the numbers of women workers not only increasing in the workforce of factories but also in workers' struggles, including during overnight occupations, it appears as if managements are at a loss. They try to exert control on them through patriarchal structures such as by visiting their homes and complaining to their husbands (interview with senior AITUC organiser, April 2017). During the mixed gender workers struggle at a pharmaceutical company in Manesar, the company management tried to- unsuccessfully-bring striking young women workers under control by calling up their parents and telling them that their daughters were roaming about with boys at odd hours (group interview, June 2016). Belying more than one stereotype, many of these young women were first generation migrants, some from Uttarakhand and one from Orissa.

Strategies used to mitigate financial vulnerability/uncertainty caused by temporary work: multiple jobs and their impact on workers' politics

It was very common to hear of varied work experiences in a short period of time from workers, which too is a characteristic contemporary feature of industrial work, owing to the prevalence of temporary work. This was both because of terminations by employers and workers exercising choice and making the decision to move elsewhere. Examples abounded such as the woman factory worker I met who began working in 2014 and had worked in ten places in two years (interview, Manesar, April 2014). She had moved companies for a variety of reasons-in some places she was let go off, in others she quit because they did not pay enough and some she quit because they did not let workers wear a saree to work (she only wore sarees). Terminations lead to frequent change of employment as well and could take place for different reasons. The middle-aged woman packer referred to earlier lamented how prolonged illness means a loss of a job in the garment industry. Another worker spoke of losing his job after returning from a leave that had been formally sanctioned by his company. One worker mentioned a factory where every four months workers were let go of.

The FMS perspective on this is very interesting. They point out that today's industrial workforce, owing to the temporary nature of their employments frequently moves from factory to factory, sometimes in different cities and sometimes even within the NCR, as my fieldwork corroborated. During distributions of FMS, as mentioned, I observed that many of the workers did not know the name of their factory. The editor of the FMS mentioned that this used to puzzle him earlier until he realised the reason why-his analysis was that workers these days are in and out of factories so frequently that either which company they work for holds no meaning for them or they just don't know or bother to learn/remember the names any more. It was his contention that this builds a young workforce of temporary workers who internalise the fact that they have very little to lose. This, coupled with their extensive industrial experience in a

short period of time (even if forced by circumstances), is creating a 'dangerous' workforce-and managements are aware of this (personal conversation, November 2015).

His analysis is persuasive; this aspect of multiple jobs within a short period of time combined with an opening out of communications via the internet (Whatsapp, social media platforms) creates not only repositories of accumulated experiences and memories of struggles and the ways factories and managements function, but also allows them to be shared within their social networks and communities. Most workers I interacted with, for instance, were very well aware of production cycles not only of their own industry but others as well since they interact with it continuously in this process of regular employment hunting/changing. One company mentioned that workers are very well informed. If wages or benefits go up in another factory in the same sector they know immediately and ask for an increase here too (interview, July 2016).

One long-time FMS activist and former factory worker noted that Faridabad had gone through three cycles of factory closures over the decades; it had a longer history of industrialisation than Gurgaon and Manesar. Workers here had lived through this history and knew in their bones that a factory has no *malik* (owner). "Factory *kisi ki sagi nahi hoti hai,*" he said ("a factory is no one's blood relative"). They run according to production demand and orders always comes from above. "They are soulless entities that run and run-until they equally soullessly stop," he noted.

He characterised companies as paper boats that sail in the ocean-sooner or later they will sink. The fact that the immortal company is a myth is best understood-or realised-by workers through their own experience, he noted, which becomes a shared understanding informing their responses to work. "*Workers ka anubhav hai*" ("it is a worker's experience") (personal conversation, Gurgaon, December 2015).

The Legal Regime and the Factory Worker: Violations as the Norm

It is commonly known and acknowledged today that labour laws exist in violation. Statutory benefits and pay are routinely withheld, and this is done in many ways, including incorrect or absent documentation. Informal workers lack documentation proving they are workers. At the time of employment, they are made to sign many forms, including blank forms, but nothing remains with them, I was told by many. A security guard in Dharuhera mentioned that his security agency issues ID cards for 6-7 months, and no one cares if it isn't renewed after that. In some cases, as mentioned Chapter Three, companies also maintain a parallel documentation system involving the "*do number wala* register" ('duplicate register'), i.e., actual records that they keep for themselves.

Across all my field sites, I heard multiple reports and complaints about minimum wages not being paid and overtime not being correctly compensated except for Sunday work. Minimum wage is set against skill level- skilled, semi-skilled, unskilled. During fieldwork I learnt that several times there is a dispute about the skill level of a worker. Sometimes the worker clearly falls under a higher category, but the company pays them under a lower skill category. Resolving this involves going to the labour department, followed by the labour court. Date delays can drag for years, and the law doesn't really help provide a resolution here. Another payment related issue is that workers are paid, as a norm, after a month and ten days. That is, they receive the wages for a month's work on the 10th of the following month. When workers leave a job after a month, or are sacked at the end of a month, they are told to work for ten days and only then the company would clear their payment. In most cases, I was told during conversations, the companies did not end up paying for those additional 10 days.

An MSME company owner who asked me not to quote him, readily acknowledged these violations, noting that they don't face labour problems despite defaulting on legal wages and

benefits. He mentioned that newly hired workers received wage rates of unskilled labour as a general practice. According to him, workers accept this because they know they can be easily fired. He also noted that companies are getting away with doing so, therefore they continued to do so. India has a surplus of unskilled labour, he reiterated.

Violations on PF and ESI payments were very common too. These are legally owed to both permanent and temporary workers, but in many cases companies only made these payments to permanent workers. Another common corruption practice is for companies and contractors to deduct PF and ESI components from wages, without actually depositing it (personal conversations, Okhla, April 2016). Tailors from a big garments export company mentioned that their company did not pay bonus, and only made PF payments into their accounts. After a then recent official state-wide increase in wages, their company showed an increase in their wages, but the amount they got in hand remained the same as before the increase. Workers from another location and another company mentioned that their hike was 'compensated' by the company docking other perks and benefits so their in-hand amount did not increase (personal conversations, Manesar, April 2016). Many also reported in conversations that while their companies had not increased their wages according to the latest Haryana Government notification, they had started deducting the higher amount from their PF component. Yet other companies had apparently put the increased amount under the House Rent Allowance head, so that they did not have to increase their PF payments (which is calculated based on the basic).

Workers while taking a copy of the FMS would frequently talk about a violation being committed by their company, and on one occasion I heard someone asked what they could do about the PF violations. Usually, as I observed, the collective's participants did not give advice or such suggestions, encouraging them instead to speak amongst their fellow workers and figure something out. In this instance, when pushed, they pointed out within the newspaper where the contact details of the relevant offices and officials were given, and advised them to

send them a postcard mentioning the violation. I asked them whether this helps at all. They pointed out that interestingly, the state machinery is such that it *has* to move once it is put into action. They cannot and do not ignore complaints and queries-the paper trail once started has to end in its prescribed manner, the file movements have to occur and end in the prescribed way. It may take time, officials might delay and cause obstructions, it may go through all the lengthy processes of the bureaucracy, but it cannot not take place. Officials are reluctant to directly flout the law because they don't want to risk losing their (secure, government) jobs. Thus, there is scope to use this strategically, even if only to provoke the bureaucracy.[161] That said, this has its limits. They pointed out another instance where an elite security agency, one of India's largest, a multi-national firm that supplies guards to places like embassies, UN offices, including the ILO, had been caught out on a blatant and grievous PF related violation (they had been improperly calculating the amount). Their guards apparently protested across multiple worksites-including at these elite institutions and offices-and the labour department took up the case. However, the firm apparently had contacts within the Government of India so in the end, unofficially, the labour department conveyed they couldn't do anything. The company apparently got away with a rap on the knuckles amounting to a small fine/compensation they were asked to pay their employees which was nowhere close to the actual amount due to them.

An interesting contemporary development regarding PF is how workers regard it. Feelings on it varied-some workers mentioned that workers work *for* the PF since the wages they get in hand are a joke (personal conversation, April 2016). One remembers very clearly the riotous, violent protests of Bengaluru garment workers in April 2016, following an amendment to the Employees Provident Fund Act, 1952 on 10 February 2016. The amendment had placed

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[161]As mentioned in the previous chapter, burdening the bureaucracy is one of the many political tactics the HSC routinely deploys to exert pressure.

restrictions on when a worker could withdraw the entire amount of their PF, i.e., they could withdraw the employer's contribution portion only after turning 58 years old. Alarmed, not having anticipated the scale and intensity of protests, the Labour Ministry had withdrawn that amendment-one of the rare cases one saw in recent times of labour successfully exerting pressure on the state.[162] In the context of the larger argument being made about the role being played-and not played- by trade unions in the industrial sector, and questions of agency etc., it is pertinent to note here that not only was this was not an organised protest called for or managed by trade unions,[163] they had probably not even realised this protest would occur. The Labour Minister's statement on the rollback was telling, because he stated that the central trade unions had assented to this amendment, in the first place, and were now requesting a rollback (PTI 2016).

Another simultaneously held perspective seems to be that, especially for the younger workers, they prefer the entire amount in hand since there is never any guarantee that deducted amounts will actually be credited to their PF accounts. A middle-aged factory worker whose children were also forced to go into factory work told me that earlier, PF was thought of as security for the future. Today, he said, the meaning of 'future' has changed. Every six months there is a new job, one gets smaller amounts every six months, and workers stop bothering, he noted (interview, July 2016). This was corroborated by many others as well, the common sentiment being that under present conditions of work, where violation of mandatory wage-linked social security benefits are the norm, workers don't care as much about ESI and PF. Many preferred that these deductions not be made and the amount be paid in hand both because it pushed up a

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[162]See PTI (2016).

[163]See TNN (2016). "A police posse, headed by DCPs Satish Kumar, Boralingaiah and additional commissioner P Harisekharan, began talking to workers and tried to convince them to disperse. "The workers were not organised. They had no leaders and convincing the huge group of workers, most of whom were women, tough," a police official said…"

meagre wage and because this way there was at least a guarantee that the amount will go to them, and not disappear.

The 8-hour workday too, as mentioned, is dead in practice. It was very common for workers to work 12-hour shifts, seven days a week sometimes because they were made to by employers, and sometimes because they sought it themselves since without it they couldn't financially sustain themselves.

Politics

The legal regime that defines the rights and protections of factory workers exists in violation and this exacerbates the precarity of informal workers. In this section I discuss how this relates to the varied political expressions that are visible amongst factory workers today. By unpacking the functioning of trade unions and workers attitudes to them in Delhi NCR, I make my case for why the trade union form does not appear to be an effective form to support factory workers struggle in this present paradigm and that privileging trade union politics invisibilises and undermines the range of such articulations and expressions of resistance that actually do exist.

Workers' politics: industrial conflicts, conflagrations, and unrest

In this sub-section, I returning to the earlier discussion in this chapter regarding the challenges of reading struggle and what kinds of struggle to ascribe agency to in terms of propelling transformational change. As noted, perspectives vary on whether to highlight events of resistance or everyday resistance, individual acts of resistance or collective acts (whether formally organised or not). In the discussion to follow my goal is to map[164] resistance, protest

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[164]Collated primarily from fieldwork, supplemented by secondary sources like the FMS and news outlets, and academic literature.

and struggle across these registers and present the diversity that exists before arriving at my arguments regarding the trade union form in this mix.

The frequency of the 'event'

I begin this discussion with 'events' of industrial conflict which have erupted regularly in Delhi NCR in the period between 2005-2016, with a large number of strikes, many of them of the wildcat variety, riots and lockouts. These are the ones that tend to capture most attention because they make it into the news and therefore become extremely visible. Some of the more notable conflicts, put together from news reports and FMS issues are recalled below to give a sense of the conflicts and what the issues involved were.[165] As can be seen these include issues of pay (parity and demands for hikes), regularisation of service, the right to unionise and deaths and injuries of fellow workers.

- July 2005: Honda Motorcycle and Scooter India (HMSI) at Manesar. Workers demanded pay parity with shop-floor workers in Hero Honda. Protests, simmering unrest, work slowdowns culminated in a violent confrontation between workers and the police, leading to deaths and injuries (Ghosh 2013).

- 2006: HMSI workers struck work again and contract workers at Hero Honda's Gurgaon plant went on strike demanding regularisation of services and higher pay.

- 2009: HMSI workers went on a three month 'go-slow' agitation after the expiry of the agreement with the management signed in September 2006 (Ghosh 2013) and at Rico Auto Industries Ltd. there was one death and several injuries in violent confrontations at factory. Rico workers were in a union formation struggle. The management had expelled 17 workers on disciplinary grounds (but co-workers say because of union involvement), after which workers struck work (Srivastava 2009). Solidarity strikes in

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[165] Since a large percentage of these events do not follow the official procedure for strikes and are therefore 'illegal', getting official data on them is challenging. Thus, the list above is not exhaustive.

neighbouring factories followed (apparently called by the AITUC led Trade Union Council).

- 2011: the first Maruti Manesar joint occupation of plant by permanent and temporary workers and solidarity strikes and occupations of factories by Maruti Suzuki, Maruti Engine, Suzuki Casting, Suzuki Motorcyle, Satyam Auto, Bajaj Motors, Endurance, Hailax, Lumax, Lumax DK, Dighania Factories.

- 2012: The second Maruti Manesar occupations and the violent confrontation of 12 July occurred. Over a thousand workers in Gurgaon were also involved in violent confrontations with the Police over two separate incidents-a worker being stabbed by scissors by a contractor, and the death of another worker.

- 2013: workers went on a rampage in the Okhla industrial area on 21 February 2013. Workers in NOIDA also went on a mass rampage on the same day. This was on a day when Central Trade Unions had called a nation-wide bandh, though not all workers involved in this were responding to that call (AngryWorkersWorld 2015, PTI 2013).

- 2014: there were apparently 30 large-scale strikes in the belt, with workers struggles at ASTI Electronics, Baxter Pharmaceuticals, Bellsonica Auto Components, JNS Instruments-Jay Ushin Autoparts, Napino Auto and Electronics, Sriram Piston, and workers going on rampage in Udyog Vihar following the death of a tailor from electric shock at Orient Craft (1200 workers took to the streets, workers from other factories joined them, there were clashes with the police-source: FMS, April 2014 issue).

- Another incident was workers of Baghola-Prithla industrial area (in Haryana) creating a 13-14-kilometre-long chakka jam on 23 January 2014 on National Highway 2 at the 49th milestone. They were shouting slogans against the companies and government.

On 21,22,23 January there was a national strike call, but 21 and 22 hadn't seen traffic jams. On the 23rd, workers went from factory to factory, shutting down production. They also forced management to leave the premises. Police came and 850 workers went back to work. But 45 minutes later 250 workers again came and turned everybody out. A local union leader arrived and the management asked workers to listen to him. He asked workers to keep peace and spoke with management; that day was declared a holiday in all factories in the area.

Workers took this action without consulting any union or labour organisation. The Faridabad Industrial Association complained to the state government of workers destroying factory property and police standing by mutely. The complaint stated that under such conditions it was difficult to run a factory. No arrests were made until this complaint was registered (FMS, February 2014 issue).

As the above indicates, there is clearly a lot of militant activity happening in the industrial areas of Delhi NCR. The question is how we understand and characterise them. The most commonly understood explanation, as mentioned, is that these are struggles for the right to unionise. What's more, as mentioned in Chapter Three, the narratives that come up around these events are frequently sanitised. During the period of research, I witnessed the manner in which mainstream narratives tended to get construed- journalists and academics sympathetic to labour and writing in the aftermath of the Maruti riots of 2012 were mostly referring to the same sources and constructing similar narratives. That is, of the 'bouncer' theory, of outsiders who carried out the violence in the factory leading to the death of the HR executive, for instance. They highlighted the victimising of the workers, the exploitation, the work conditions, over the radical potential of the rupture that this moment signified-of the power of the anger of the workers, which spread in solidarity strikes and actions all around IMT Manesar. The language

of 'bouncers', as mentioned, is frequently deployed whenever there is violence in industrial areas, distancing workers from acts of violence and removing them from the discourse as agents of violence. This leaves an impact for narratives are powerful and dominant narratives have the potential of shaping the contours of movements.

Such characterisations also elide how there is often an ambiguity about workers' demands. Often the source of workers discontent cannot be pinpointed, reduced to demands, and therefore formalised. FMS holds that the question 'what is it that workers want' puzzles companies who find that extending concessions do not 'solve' the problem. For example, significant concessions, including an easing of production pace, extended by the Maruti Manesar Management after the 2011 struggle were not enough to prevent the 2012 struggle. In another instance, in the March 2014 issue of FMS, a report noted how companies were struggling to retain workers even in cases where they extended legal wages and benefits. It gave the example of an auto parts company on the Delhi-Jaipur Highway where a strike had been ongoing for a month. Contract workers there were paid the legal double overtime wage (a common violation otherwise) but the company still had trouble retaining workers because work pressure and conditions were terrible (FMS March 2014).

Further, such characterisations also belie how challenging it can be for managements and the state to regain control of the situation. In many of these incidents and events, there are often no leaders or representatives for managements and the state to negotiate with, just like in the case of the Bengaluru women garment workers. For instance, the March 2014 issue of the FMS noted that sudden work stoppages in several garment factories at once had become common and that managements complained that there were no representatives or leaders to talk to. Without that, they noted, protests and unrest tended to continue unchecked.

<u>Manifestations in the everyday</u>

Everyday resistance occurred in two forms-carried out by individuals or by collectives, not necessarily formally organised. These exist in a complex matrix of power and agency, particularly for individual acts of resistance.

For instance, I came across instances of workers who articulated doubts regarding their own power and scope to be active agents of change. Many spoke of how it was common for co-workers to complain and discuss amongst themselves how they were not being paid the correct amount for minimum wage, but when it came to going up and verbally raising the issue or taking some action, only a handful did it. There was an understandable reluctance to become a target. I observed several such interactions during FMS distributions. Workers would speak of some ongoing issue at their factory, and express helplessness, saying if they raise their voices, they would lose their jobs. On one occasion some workers at IMT Manesar mentioned that their company had obeyed the state government notification for increase of minimum wage, but had taken away their attendance bonus (they used to receive an additional Rs. 1000 if they had full attendance). To this someone from the FMS responded that they were free to interpret this as an announcement from the management that workers were no longer obligated to turn up for work every day! "It is up to you and your fellow workers now how frequently you turn up for work!" they laughingly noted.

And yet, posited against this, I also heard of countless actions of resistance and protest.

Once, for instance, I met a group of young women workers (they looked to be in their early twenties) in a share auto to IMT Manesar, on a day when it was raining very hard and the roads were flooded. They were in a tremendously cheerful mood, chatting about various things like how the air conditioners at work would dry their clothes. One of them recounted how there were many women in her company who came all the way from Najafgarh in Delhi, which was

over 30 kilometres away, with a commute time of almost three hours one way, and the company used to exploit them because they were perceived to be more vulnerable than the locals. I assume this is because of the long travel they undertook, signifying the depth of their need and lack of more local options. When the management tried to exploit her similarly (she didn't mention details), she refused and told the HR person "*Mere ko Najafgarh wali mat samajhna*!" ("Don't mistake me for a Najafgarh person"-the implication being- "I won't take it!") (overheard conversation, July 2016).

Non-union collective actions were frequently triggered on matters of payments or bonus delayed, or withheld, and when fellow workers were on the receiving end of violent interactions with management. A worker in IMT Manesar gave an instance from his factory where the operators all stopped work because wages had not been increased according to the latest Haryana Government notification for other categories of workers (only the operators had received the increase) (personal conversation, December 2015). Workers at another IMT Manesar factory spoke of once creating a *chakka jam* (road block) while agitating against their management.

The FMS recounts many instances of workers articulating their protest through their hands and feet very cleverly. The October 2015 issue mentions how fire alarm training was given in a company. All workers understood very well how the system worked. After that whenever there was some delay in payment or workers wanted to stop the line, somebody or the other would pull the fire alarm. Another report in the February 2014 issue mentions how workers at a Faridabad factory were subjected to constantly changing shift timings. Timings at the time of the report were 8AM to 8PM. When workers started to leave at the earlier timing of 5 PM, management apparently blocked gates and called the police. To this the workers apparently said that the company could stop them from leaving but they couldn't actually make them do any work. And for three hours they roamed here and there but did not carry out production. A

November 2014 report mentions how an Udyog Vihar company did not give the Diwali bonus that year stating they were running at a loss. The day after Diwali workers apparently stopped work right in the morning and only started after the management paid up the bonus in the afternoon.

<u>Range of acts of everyday resistance</u>

This discussion highlights how, as mentioned earlier, the balance of power isn't always already eternally loaded against the (temporary) worker and subverts the narrative of the docile/cowed down temporary worker. Companies are constantly made to respond to acts of resistance by workers, and I highlight some such acts carried out at an individual level on the shopfloor, including routine machine sabotage. However, I also note that the realities of industrial work can limit the extent to which a worker is able to shape their experience of shopfloor work.

One instance is costly production errors which cause huge losses to companies, some of which I learnt of from interviews and interactions and many of which are reported in FMS issues. It was hard to identify which ones were accidental or deliberate, or a mix of both; but workers recounted them with undisguised glee. Some were deliberately done, as attested to by a conversation with a young woman worker at a Manesar factory. She said that many girls and boys intentionally made 'NG' pieces (not good pieces) at her factory when their wages were not increased when due. When managers asked why workers were making NG pieces, they would reply saying that "We are not making them, the machine is making them!" (interview, May 2016).

The worker may be sacked in response, but the problem itself and the losses do not go away for the company. Other similar incidents reported in the FMS include a case of a 32,000 trouser consignment being returned to the vendor's factory by the client because it was found that on all the pieces one leg was 32 inches and the other was 34 inches (November 2014 issue).

Another was a 2008 case at a pipe making factory in Okhla where a setting got changed on a machine and the wrong size of pipes kept getting produced. Three days' worth of output was rejected (November 2014 issue).

Then there are the ways workers casually spoke of subverting production pressures. Conversations revealed that the uniform pace of work which is a central feature of Fordist and post-Fordist systems, does not exist in practice, especially during night shifts in many cases. Workers would put in a burst of work at certain hours, finish the target, but would not leave. If they left, they noted, the company would then say, "if you finish in four hours, why should we pay for twelve?" They would mutually figure out ways to plan their pace of work to 'last' the entire night shift, including managing to catch a few hours of rest. Others reported 'settings' in place with factory guards and leaving a night shift a few hours early. Then there are the instances reported of workers taking their rest at leisure, chatting in parks outside even after their breaks have ended ignoring supervisors' threats and pleas. There are instances of them quietly executing mass no-shows when companies try to force overtime on Sundays, etc. One FMS report mentioned how at an IMT Manesar factory, supervisors had chosen a school-teacher like punishment of asking workers to quietly stand in place for 10-20 minutes if they made a mistake in production. "How is that a punishment?", the issue noted the reporting worker saying. "We get rest from work!" (April 2015 issue).

Underlying many of the instances involving subversion of production was the relationship that workers had with the machines they worked on. The intimacy of this relationship, as it emerged through conversations, was very interesting. A worker knows their machine so closely that they are able to manipulate it to their will, without managements being able to understand how they were doing so. Seeing examples of this helps one complicate the narrative of the Fordist and post-Fordist worker who lost all control over their work and managements who drove– or aimed to drive– production rhythms entirely through how *they* calibrated machines and how

much was to be produced and when. Sometimes this involved working as allies with their machines, producing 'extra' or finishing their targets early when they liked the work (as discussed in Chapter Six, some workers do enjoy and take pride in their work).

At other times this involved acts of sabotage when they did not want to work or desired a short break. For instance, an FMS collective participant and garment worker who worked for a high-end fashion designer mentioned that in his workshop, despite the installation of multiple CCTV cameras throughout the shopfloor, workers had managed to break their machines many times without the cameras being able to identify when it was done and who the culprits were. *"Kaam ke daman tod diye,"* he said ("We broke the symbols of oppression at work") (personal conversation, April 2016). Why? *"Kyunki humko kaam nahin karna thha"* ("Because we did not want to work"). Why? *"Achha nahi lagta"* ("Because we don't like work"). Another FMS collective participant and former factory worker who has been there from the FMS's inception remembered how, in his days, machines would be regularly broken/sabotaged to slow down work. This went on until the introduction of the incentive system, after which they stopped because machine breakdowns no longer served them. At that time, in the 1980s, modern technological surveillance was absent, but human spies spread out across the shopfloor were a common practice. However, they were equally ineffective in catching culprits, he noted (personal conversation, November 2015).

These are not just individualised acts of small resistance carried out because workers are helpless to carry out more provocative collective acts. Conversations suggested that such individual acts existed *alongside* collective acts like entire floors stopping work or entire workforces of a factory erupting in riotous protests such as what had happened in Udyog Vihar in 2015 (Joshi 2015, Tiwari 2015) and Okhla (TNN 2013).

If the machine is a site of resistance, it is also a site of negotiation. The Tier 1 automobile vendor company I spoke with mentioned, for instance, that productivity is a point of conflict with labour. They mentioned that if a machine had a capacity for an output of 500 units, but workers had previously had a target of 300 units, they didn't want to produce an additional 200 units for free, "they want money for that" (interview, July 2016). I heard other stories from the older generation of Faridabad workers about how when their companies moved to automation and procured machines capable of greater productivity, managements began to require higher targets. In response, workers, without giving a formal call for it or planning or organising, apparently nonetheless managed to slow down and produce even lesser than what they had been producing pre-automation, until managements were forced to roll back the new targets.

Yet it is not as if workers have full control of machines, as is evident in the propensity of machines to injure and damage the workers on them, which is a normalised part of industrial work and frequently the result of management negligence. 'Accidents' are engaged with in greater detail in Chapter Seven in a section looking at the violence not only of work but of consumption as well.

In other instances, it is the very resistance to work, the defiance that the most vulnerable of workers routinely display in the face of management power, that is worth taking note of. One of the young boys I spoke to epitomised this spirit (interview, Faridabad, May 2016). In his early twenties, coming from a family where his father and brothers were also factory workers, he had begun his working career in 2012, after graduating from a government skill training scheme. In those four years he had worked at two shoe factories, a company that produced syringes, a company producing fans and electric lights, and at a shop for one month as a loader and delivery boy. He had just quit his last job when we spoke and was about to join an auto-parts factory. His co-workers at the shop were two boys younger than him who were, according to him, "*bahut purane workers*" (i.e., long-time workers), with "*bahut purane*" in this case

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denoting four months, demonstrating how if the meaning of the 'future' had changed today as another worker pointed out, so has the measuring of time with regard to experience. This boy, Pritam,[166] did not like the work at the shop, and said he would never do such work again, involving heavy difficult labour, low pay and employers he did not like. They also did not like him, he said. They found him too argumentative right from his first day at work, he would refuse work that he didn't want to do (such as cleaning the owners' car), and he didn't 'know his place', so to speak. He would drink from the glasses kept for the exclusive use of the owners, following which the owners went out and bought a new set, with a distinguishing pattern so that no one could mistake which ones were theirs. He continued drinking from the new set as well. He routinely dis-obeyed instructions of not using the shop tap to wash his hands (this was forbidden because when used, it caused water to leak into the owners' office).

The bottom line was that Pritam did not like work, a sentiment shared by many other workers too, as I will discuss in Chapter Six. His only ambition was to get any type of permanent job- specifically, the ambition was for an office job, a government job if possible. He switched employers frequently, with the highlight of any job for him being the "*masti*" (the fun) of chatting with other boys and girls at work. The way he told it, it was as if the only reason for him to survive factory jobs was the social aspect of it. In the shoe factory that he worked at, he and his friends would appropriate rolls of leather for themselves and make themselves personal items like belts, mobile covers and wallets, which he showed me. They chose to base them on the latest market designs, and iron on brand labels like 'Puma'. These were exclusively for their personal use. He and his friends clearly operated under an unspoken code of ethics, because they would not sell them to others and he got upset at me when I asked if they had ever

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[166]Not his actual name.

considered doing so. Besides, what was the need to do so, he asked, when he was getting for free products that would otherwise cost upwards of Rs. 1000 in the market.

Perhaps this was a way of stamping an assertion of their autonomy, creativity and rebellion against work on the very materials of production, on factory time.

On this note of resisting work itself, as one person related, "*Hamare mein ek kahawat hai-naya worker pura josh se sar utha ke kaam pe jaata hai*" ("We have a saying-the new worker goes into work with great enthusiasm and extra energy"). At the end of the day, he went on, "*thhake hue, sar jhuka ke laut ta hai*" ("he returns, head hanging low because of exhaustion"). The experienced worker goes to work like a buffalo, hanging his head low, and at the end of the day "*changa hoke laut ta hai*" (i.e., returns energised). "He knows how to work at his pace" (personal conversation, Gurgaon, December 2015).

Factory workers and trade unions: a complex relationship

> "*Hartal-wartal nahin ho raha hai…kuch karo, problem aa rahi hai humein*" ("no strikes have been happening…do something, we have been facing problems").

> -**Overheard conversations amongst workers**

> heading to work in Okhla (December 2015).

> "*Union wale bekar hai. Collection lene ke liye aate hain, phir gayab ho jate hain*" ("Union leaders are useless. They only come to collect dues and then disappear")

> -**A worker** at Okhla (December 2015)

One can begin the discussion on the complexity of this relationship with first showing the fragmented union landscape in Delhi NCR. What is the pattern of distribution of unions in this region?

One CITU organiser I spoke with divided the union movement in India after independence into three phases: phase one starting immediately after 1947, phase two in 1970s/1980s[167] and the current phase following the event of liberalisation in 1991 (interview, April 2017). According to him, before what came to be referred to as LPG in 1991 (liberalisation-privatisation-globalisation), there used to be a trend of general worker unions for the formal sector at the Zilla parishad (district) level with membership across factories and industries in that Zilla parishad. This trend apparently continues to apply to the informal sector where he gave examples of recently registered general workers unions for brick workers, construction workers and Anganwadi workers. However, according to him it no longer applied to the formal sector where apparently such registrations tended to be denied, although legally they were still allowed. The preference in the formal sector, according to him, was for 'own' unions at the plant/factory unit because managements believed that such independent plant/factory level unions tended to limit themselves to issues that affected their particular plant/factory.

A senior AITUC organiser I spoke with also offered a phase-wise break-up of industry and the union movement in India (interview, April 2017). In the 1970s phase of ancillarisation and resulting rise in contract workers, the companies still remained the principal employer. This was followed by the next phase of outsourcing in the 1990s when the contractor became the direct employer, followed by the third phase around 2004-05 when there were often no permanent workers in factory at all, only temporary workers. There is a fourth phase he spoke of, the Special Economic Zone phase (SEZ) which saw old factories closing down and shifting

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[167]This was also the period following the passing of the Contract Labour Act in 1970, and the period in India when the ancillarisation of companies started.

to SEZs to avail of incentives[168] which include no labour laws,[169] phasing out/forcing out of older permanent workers, tax breaks and cheap land which they would sell at profit later on, if they relocated. This trajectory, he noted, weakened workers and trade union struggles allowing factories to easily (without push back) shut down and move elsewhere.

Today unionisation is sparse in the locations I chose for my fieldwork, although there are differences across areas and sectors (as we will see below). Further, the union landscape is quite fragmented and the unions that do exist are distributed between independent factory unions and those affiliated to the big national trade union federations like AITUC, CITU, HMS and INTUC. In my fieldwork I did not encounter any factory union that represented both permanent as well as temporary workers together.[170] Conversations suggested that of the national federations, either AITUC or HMS had the greatest number of unions, followed by INTUC, with CITU having a very small presence. For instance, a full-time CITU organiser, giving me a break-up of unions in the Udyog Vihar to Bawal belt, mentioned that approximately 30 unions were with HMS, 20-22 with AITUC, 8-10 with INTUC and 6 with CITU.[171] The rest, according to him, were mostly independent unions (interview, April 2017). AITUC numbers in Faridabad and the Gurgaon to Bawal belt (as conveyed to me by two different AITUC organisers organiser) were 35 unions (including 3 new unions in turbine manufacturing) and 40 company unions respectively, with the Gurgaon belt unions including 15-17 auto parts companies in IMT Manesar (interviews, April 2017).

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[168]However, as I discuss in Chapter Three, companies are not always as footloose as they are made out to be-some, particularly vendor companies, are constrained by the nature of their sector and are less flexible in relocating.

[169]Although this is what he said, it appears that while on paper labour laws are supposed to apply in these zones, in practice they do not.

[170]CITU claimed to have one union with permanent and contract workers together in Bawal, Haryana, in an automobile sector factory (interview, April 2017).

[171] Of this, three unions were in the formal sector, with a membership of 500 spread across 6 different factories. Most of these were automobile sector workers.

It is important to note that the exact numbers of unions, however, might be hard to establish for two reasons- one being that different counts are kept and offered by different sources, and two being that here too, like within the hawkers' movement, there are cases of unions existing just on paper, or not even that, with no actual presence on the ground (a sense gathered through multiple private conversations). For instance, in the interview with an HMS organiser, I was told they had 65 unions in the Gurgaon belt, 30 union units in Faridabad, with a maximum presence in the automobile sector (including Maruti Powertrain India Ltd and Hero MotoCorp), with a presence till Tier 1 companies (interview, April 27). They also had some small garments unions, and all their unions only included permanent workers.[172] However, when I asked him how he saw the relevance of unions in a world of work now dominated by temporary workers, he stated outright that the union movement is finishing, especially because in practice managements and the labour department refuse to allow registration of unions which represent both permanent and temporary workers.

There are also differences in the presence of unions across geographical areas. The HMS organiser characterised Faridabad as being an older industrial area, and relatively calm today in terms of industrial unrest, compared to the Gurgaon belt which is agitating. He also stated that Gurgaon workers don't do any "*parwah*" of unions (i.e., they don't give the time of day to unions). One of the AITUC organisers I spoke to noted that Faridabad had more diversity of industries, unlike Gurgaon. Further, the Faridabad unions were evenly distributed across the automobile sector, shoes (Bata factory), electrical sector and printing press and container making.

Gurgaon had no contract worker unions according to the second AITUC organiser (another source said there was one casual workers union in the belt), and like the other areas, it had no

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[172] They did however apparently have an informal forum of contract workers in Faridabad called Engineering Majdoor Sabha.

union that included permanent and temporary workers both The senior AITUC organiser explained the lack of unions in the region, especially unions including both temporary and permanent workers, by stating that trade union consciousness has fallen amongst workers, which is made worse by the rivalry that exists between unions. Along with the other organisers I spoke with, he also noted that factory-based unions don't fight for both categories of workers together because of management pressure. However, the Gurgaon Belt did have a joint Trade Union Committee (TUC) comprising of AITUC, HMS, CITU, AIUTUC (UTUC), INTUC and Independent unions, which took up issues jointly such as the programmes held in support of the Maruti workers. Overall, the model that AITUC was trying for contract worker organisation were the general unions at district level (as opposed to plant level), which the CITU organiser also spoke of, and organising in labour colonies. He said they ask temporary workers at factories whether they have the strength to shut down their factory, and if they answered in the negative, they encouraged them to join the general workers union instead.

Certain sectors had more unions compared to others. Auto parts factories were much more unionised, for instance, than garments exports factories where it was rare to find one. Reasons posited for lack of unions in garments export factories by a CITU organiser were that a) a majority were migrant workers, b) Most of the workforce were temporary and/or contract workers on piece-rate wages, and c) garments production has a very long production chain, predominated by temporary/contract workers-workers have acted, but not in an organised form (interview, April 2017). A senior AITUC organiser offered similar reasons, noting that a) the piece-rate system was predominant in the garments sector, b) there were strong fluctuations in seasonal demand (so workforce strength changed frequently), c) contractors play a bigger role and d) most were migrant workers (interview, April 2017). However, as noted earlier in the chapter, none of this prevented garment workers from breaking out into regular protests.

With this mapped out, one can return to the lament of the garment union organiser this chapter began with- "*Majdoor chahte nahi hai…*" ("workers don't want this…"). Why don't so many workers want 'this', 'this' being unions? "*Sochne ki baat hai,*" the editor of FMS noted ("This is something to think about") (personal conversation, December 2015). In a later conversation, he told me I needed to ask more pointed questions, uncomfortable questions in my union interviews. The question to be asked is WHY, he said. Why, despite knowing that 90% of the workforce cannot be a part of unions, were they *still* trying to create unions? With the underlying subtext being what are their motivations for doing so, especially when it was clear from fieldwork conversations that unionising created breaches between permanent and temporary workers, rather than solidifying and strengthening relations.

How then does this explain the struggles to unionise in the region? This cannot be explained simply through a permanent worker-temporary worker difference because many of the early stages of the struggle for a workers' union in factories have seen joint activity by both categories of workers, as I note.

The CITU organiser I spoke with felt it came down to the fact that while no company wanted a union to begin with, if pushed into a position –through militant joint struggles of workers – where it had no choice but to register a union, it would do its best to co-opt and use the union whenever it got a chance. At the seeming softening of management stance towards the formation/registration of the union being demanded, workers tended to feel that they were at least about to get a union and hoped to figure out the next steps along the way (interview, April 2017).

The editor of FMS had a similar take- that companies don't unions when there is no *talmel*[173]

amongst workers. They only want it when relations start to strengthen between permanent and

temporary workers. In many companies, including at Maruti Manesar and another Manesar

company where workers were locked in a legal struggle over the formation of a union with the

management, such relations had emerged owing to the fact that permanent and temporary

workers had similar conditions of work and pay. According to him, this led to the managements

stepping in and trying to foment a distance between them through the union and consequent

wage settlements that drastically increased the pay and improved work conditions of permanent

over temporary workers (personal conversations 2015, 2016). This reasoning appeared to be

corroborated through multiple sources.

One such corroboration came from an interview granted by a senior management professional

of a Tier 1 auto parts vendor company located in Udyog Vihar, Gurgaon (interview, July 2016).

They had an independent union. They didn't have a policy to encourage any union, but, said

the gentleman I was speaking to, "it's okay." They didn't mind a union with whom they could

have a "mature" relationship. They were clear they did not want an "outside influence." They

made three-year agreements with the union and had last experienced 'labour pain' in 1993-

when Maruti had given their workers a Rs. 3000 hike. This company's workers had also

demanded a similar hike. Although the gentleman I was speaking to said the conflict did not

escalate, I gauged from his tone of voice and body language that things had got fairly heated. I

tried to probe for more information about the kind of conflicts they face with workers, but he

wasn't too keen to go there. All he would say, without elaborating, is that "*Chhote chhote*

labour trouble toh hote hi rehte hai' ("small-small labour troubles are routine").

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[173] Congenial collaborations and relations; an interesting concept that the FMS stresses over '*ekta*' or difference/individuality flattening 'unity.'

Another source of corroboration is a brief look at highlights from three prominent cases of union struggles in the NCR, and what happened at the end of such struggles, which I recount below. Some patterns stand out from these struggles as well as several others in NCR: the presence of young workers and, in many struggles, mixed populations of young male and female workers. The absence of significant differences in pay and work conditions of permanent and temporary workers before union struggle. Solidarity and common struggle by all categories of workers, frequently supported by fellow workers from neighbouring factories. Companies initially resisting the attempt to make the union and then, on realising that workers were not relenting, conceding, or even in some cases, like in the case of a female-worker majority factory where temporary workers led a militant struggle for a union, sending SUVs, with a gunman for protection!, to ferry the union members for registration purposes to Chandigarh. They would also extend concessions to workers in a bid to appease them, and try and increase or introduce divisions between permanent and temporary workers. For example, a worker involved in one such struggle told me their company gave permanent workers an increment of Rs. 10,000, and only Rs. 3900 to temporary workers after union formation. Temporary workers who lost their jobs in the unionisation process were seldom taken back, though permanent workers frequently were. Temporary workers also ended up being left out of union memberships, after union formation. This was almost always seen as an outright betrayal by permanent worker comrades they had struggled shoulder to shoulder with, especially as permanent workers almost never had the numbers to successfully agitate by themselves.

Case I: Interview with the Maruti (Manesar) Provisional Committee that was set up after the union leadership went to jail (interview, June 2016)

- After union leadership went to jail following the incident on 18 July 2012, a provisional committee of seven was formed with district wise representation of members, which expanded to include twelve members. At the time of the interview it was down to four members. The actions and responsibilities of the Committee included organising support rallies etc. for ground level actions, pursuing the case filed against Maruti workers in the Labour court on the matter of suspension and termination of workers, and pursuing the case of the workers jailed on non-bailable warrants in the Criminal court. Their campaign spread to 15-16 states which they visited via organisations giving solidarity and they received solidarity and support in terms of finances and solidarity protests etc.

- On being asked, the Provisional committee counted the impact of the Maruti Manesar workers struggle as 1) inspiring a number of union struggles in the belt and 2) more and better wage settlements for permanent workers by managements, both in Maruti and in other companies in the area. While both of these were corroborated by my fieldwork findings, it is instructive to peruse some of the other outcomes of this landmark struggle.

- They mentioned the many concessions that the company had extended to workers after the agitation initially began in 2011, which included providing one reliever per twenty workers, increasing the time workers had to work on a car from 48 seconds per car to 55 seconds, a new wage settlement, sixteen holidays (up from zero) without docking performance related pay. However, as noted earlier, this did not prevent the event of 18 July 2012. They also mentioned how the situation at Maruti prior to 2011 was such that permanent workers had more work pressure than contract workers, since the latter would simply refuse extra work. After 2012, however, permanent workers were given

largely supervisory roles. The company now increased the number of hires of various kinds of temporary workers and the work pressure on them increased.

- They mentioned that the Labour court case ended in March 2015 in favour of the company. The criminal case continued at the time of interview in 2016, as did the periodic ground level campaigns, public appearances etc. They regretfully admitted that they hadn't been able to adequately pursue the Labour court case relating to the dismissed workers (the criminal case was doubtless taking greater energy). Apparently once three years pass, a dismissed worker cannot go to court over illegal dismissal. The labour case kept hanging because the now bought-over (initial) union leadership-[174] who were parties in the case-obviously kept not appearing. They had sent an application to the labour department to reintroduce it/pursue the matter of unfair dismissal, since only the labour department could forward it to court. From their tone, words and body language it seemed to me that the dismissals wouldn't be pursued that much, that that chapter was more or less closed.

- The Mazdoor Sahyog Kendra, of which the provisional committee were founding members, is where their future seemed to be. Their future role would likely be that of helping other union struggles in the belt.

Case II: Interview with the union at a pharmaceuticals company with a factory in IMT Manesar (June 2016)

- To give a brief background of the company, the maximum number of workers in this company were under 30, and most were single, hired from ITIs. They had an equal

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[174]Mentioned in Chapter One.

number of male and female workers, and most were from out of state. When the company started in 2002, it only had women on the production shopfloor. Unpaid overtime-of even 3-4 hours daily-was the norm. Men were introduced in 2004 in the nightshift. Initially only two men were appointed, though at the time of the interview that number had gone up to five. In 2005 January, men were appointed in the production shift as well (night shift was not production, it was cleaning and preparations for production in the two day shifts-A and G).

- They mentioned that one of the motivations for deciding to unionise in 2013 was a fellow worker's cousin who worked in the neighbouring automobile factory. That factory had seen a wage increase for workers when they had been on the brink of applying for a union registration. Encouraged, the workers of this company applied for union registration on September 3, 2013 and received a registration number on May 29, 2014.

- Prior to this, women workers had gone to speak to the management on issues of salary, washroom restrictions, and unavailability of drinking water on May 13, 2013. They had done a work slowdown, before the management called the meeting. One thing that got immediately implemented was free snacks with tea.

- Their first union application was rejected and those who were the signatories were transferred to the company's Aurangabad plant. They gave the second application the same year. Management transferred all signatories and office bearers to their Aurangabad plant. They put in a third application; the management transferred these signatories also, a total of 42 workers.

- They had gone to the High Court and filed writ petitions over the transfers, which were illegal. Accompanied by women workers, they also went to the Haryana labour minister with a petition and to the Mini-Secretariat Welfare Board Chairman. On February 18, 2014 they stopped production in their plant. A and B shifts stayed inside and occupied the factory. This was planned and they stayed inside till 10 PM February 19, 2014.

- Shut-downs by the company became very common after union registration in May 2014 and the duration of shut-downs could even exceed a week. The company thought of the female workforce as a vulnerable section and tried to put pressure on them. As mentioned earlier, they telephoned the parents of female employees and told them that their daughters were "roaming around with boys at night". They also threatened to sack female workers-most of whom came from other states. To that their response was "*koi dikkat nahi, bahar kar do*'" ("no problem, remove us.")

- The company made settlements with workers at various stages of the struggle. After June 2013, when the struggle for unionisation had begun, but the union application had not yet been submitted, overtime started to be paid at the correct rate.

- It appears that conditions in Baxter were such in 2009 and 2010 (by then 3 full production shifts had started) that the difference between permanent and temporary workers was negligible. "*Hum sirf bolne mein hi permanent thhe*" ("We were permanent only in name"). They had neither the pay nor the security associated with permanent workers. The salary-which had stayed the same for two years after permanent workers had joined-had not gone up since the first batch had joined in 2003.

However, they said that there was also competition amongst workers, some of who were pro-management. Union support came from outstation workers only. Most local workers did not support it. Workers hired in 2013-who were trainees in their first year-were anti-union and pro-management because they had been led to believe that if they supported the management, they would become permanent after the first year of employment, but if they joined the agitation they would be terminated.

- Even after registration the company continued to oppose the union. There was a lockout in May 2014-workers sat outside for about 3 months. During the 3-month lock-out production inside was carried out by temporary workers, Junior Engineers (who were company staff and not workers) and pro-management permanents. At this point 22 workers were suspended. The union demand came down to this: except these 22, take the rest back in. This compromise was accepted by the company. Sitting outside during the lockout were also 10-12 temporary workers who did loading/un-loading work, who had supported the union. They were terminated.

- After lock-out was lifted for all except the 22 suspended workers (and of course except the terminated 10-12 temporary workers who sat with them), workers were given training programmes in Haridwar. The subject of the training was relationship and anger management. The trainers told them, "You are only a small speck in the universe...learn to do *sewa* like us, we work for free...*samne wale ko badalna mushkil hai, khud ko badlo" ("*It is difficult to change others, change yourself"). While recounting this to me the workers could not stop laughing.

- They had more than two hundred union members which included trainees and those who had fake documents. The union members were very clear about one thing. That "casual workers are separate-the union has nothing for them. They are over-worked." "*Humara wala* burden has been passed on. A layer has been created of casual workers below us."

Case 3: Interview with the union of an auto-parts vendor company that supplies to Maruti Suzuki and is partially owned by Maruti Suzuki (July 2016 and April 2017)

- To give a brief background of this company, all the workers here were male and under 30 years of age. The company was started in 2007 and the first lot of workers were hired from Maruti Gurgaon (not Manesar)-all the hired workers were ITI trained apprentices and casual contract based.

- On June 29, 2014 they filed an application for a union. On October 10, 2014 they received a registration number.

- There were immediate consequences on the workers. On the same day they received registration 45 union members were suspended, including seven post-holders. All were permanent workers. In between August to September 2014 the company had isolated and harassed these 45 workers in various ways-they gave them a separate bus, separate seating in the dining hall and a guard would follow them on *beedi* and toilet breaks. The management also spoke to Sarpanches of neighbouring villages for support, and apparently hired 40-50 bouncers and put them in company uniform.

They had also terminated 39 workers. The Assistant Labour Commissioner and High Court passed order in favour of the terminated workers and asked the company to take them back.

- This harassment continued well beyond and in July 2016, receiving pressure from their fellow workers in the struggle, they decided to organise a protest on a Sunday, from 9AM-5PM outside Vikas Sadan, Gurgaon, a government complex that is shut on Sundays. Their factory is also shut on Sunday, which was intentional- "so production is not affected."

- The struggle resolution was thus: in August 2016 they reached a settlement/understanding with the management. A little over 700 workers had been made permanent as a result. Some (but not all) of the temporary workers who had struggled with them still retained their jobs, but were not included in their union.

A dismissed woman temporary worker who had been a very active part of her female-dominated factory's unionisation process summed up the situation perfectly in an impromptu speech she had ended up giving at a meeting organised by a labour activist organisation in Manesar. Recounting that forthright speech to me she said she told the gathering that, "My permanent worker brethren must be here today and if they don't like what I say then I apologise, but the division that exists between permanent and casual workers today is being made worse and deepened further by permanent workers." (interview, June 2016).

Referring to what had happened at her factory's struggle, she went on- "You know how it is said *majdoor-majdoor bhai-bhai*?" ("all workers are brothers") "*Mujhe nahi lagta hai,*" she

said ("it doesn't appear that way to me"). "It is so easy to say "*hum tumhare saath hai*" ("we are with you"), she said. "They don't see themselves as *majdoor*, they think of themselves as 'permanent'. A union is made with efforts of casual and permanent workers together," she told me. "If the casual workers hadn't given their support to the permanent workers during the movement, then the permanent workers would have lost their jobs and been outside with us (i.e., the dismissed casual workers), because we had the numbers, they didn't"[175] she noted. She said she told them that she was very clear about the fact that unions would not be a success as long as the sense and experience of being permanent and casual remained strong.

Astutely she also noted that, "*hala ki aaj ka jo time hai, woh permanent ke liye bhi* suitable *nahi hai. Company kabhi bhi nikal sakti hai. Lekin phir bhi ek darr hai casual ko*." ("In today's time permanent workers are not exactly safe, they can be dismissed any time by companies. But still, casual workers have a fear about their jobs.") There are some temporary workers, she said, who work hard on the hope of getting re-hired after their 6–7-month contract lapses. Others, she said, think why bother? They'd only be there for 6-7 months after all.

Workers' politics, I argue, swing between these two poles: between desires for securing their future through unionisation and between recognising its impossibility in the current situation, between organised struggles and demand-less, violent articulations and eruptions, apparently spontaneous. However, as the next chapter argues, we need more than material conditions to understand the political articulations always simmering in the hands and feet and hearts of informal factory workers.

Conclusion

The picture that emerges from the above is more complicated than what narratives of helplessness and victimhood would have us believe which tend to focus on the speed at which

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[175] There had been 310 temporary workers and only 150 permanent workers.

one has to eat, drink tea, use the toilet and the kind of verbal and physical violence that is used to whip workers into greater productivity. One sees the emergence of a new generation of young temporary workers who often have the experience of 10-15 jobs under their belt before they hit 25. They move from company to company with a growing bank of experiences, having no loyalty to any, and building relations with the many workers they come in contact with. They work in terrible conditions, with terrible pay, no job security and this translates sometimes to little agency and frequently to them being a militant force.

There tends to be, as mentioned, a relative silence in literature and activist reports on political activity of informal workers (particularly in the formal sector) when it does not take the form of union politics. In such literature and reports, speculating about and theorising the future of informal workers' struggle is usually not far away from the desire for innovative trade union movements that are able to adapt themselves to the conditions of informal employment. However, my fieldwork reveals that in the case of informal factory workers in the formal sector in India, trade unions do not appear to advance the political interests of informal workers nor strengthen solidarity and collective struggles of permanent and temporary workers. In fact, my evidence suggests that it is the collective relations and actions of workforces that begin to threaten managements; workforces that comprise of permanent and temporary workers together or even just temporary workers, who are the ones who have the numbers these days. Unions, which companies resist so long as they feel in control of workforces, tend to become a way for them to contain militancy and break struggles.

Unlike in the case of hawkers, where the form of struggle adopted served their political interests and demands better than the alternative, in the case of factory workers, one arguably sees quite the opposite. Since the 1990s, a majority of the industrial workforce has become informal, and therefore out of the purview of many labour laws extended to the formal sector. Those laws that do apply exist in violation, often even for permanent workers in the sector. The collective

response of workers has thus increasingly tended towards activity without the involvement of trade unions, bypassing the legal framework for industrial disputes (which has been loaded against workers from inception) and the state. Wildcat strikes and occupations and lockouts have steadily grown in number, as have apparently leaderless and organisation-less acts of resistance. The trade union format of demand lists and wage agreements etc. seem to exist alongside more and more appearances of demand-less struggles. This is challenging managements and the state because how does one address a demand-less struggle? What is equally interesting is that if one cannot resolve or address a struggle that has no formal charter of demands, nor a representative/leader who can be bargained or negotiated with -how does one quickly return to status quo? If the return to status quo is deeply threatened, or delayed (time is money in the 'Just-in-Time' production regime) who do we think stands to gain politically? I found compelling evidence in my fieldwork that managements capitulated to workers in those situations where they saw very clearly that they had no option, when neither the carrot nor the stick worked. Factory workers' struggles in Delhi NCR, and by extension India, therefore prods us to rethink the form they are embedded in, or at least the form that much of the left seeks to embed them in.

To conclude this chapter, I return briefly to the earlier alluded to 'demand-less' struggle, in order to clarify that 'demand-less' here does not mean that workers want nothing. Instead, it often means a whole lot more than just an improvement in material conditions of work and pay, as argued in Chapter Three. This was also fleetingly visible in some of the discussions in this chapter around their relationship with work at the worksite, and is taken up more explicitly in the following two chapters.

Chapter Six

The Social and Selfhood Aspects of an Informal Worker's Relationship with Work

Introduction

This chapter, also drawing from fieldwork, addresses the goals of this research by illustrating the diverse ways in which agency is exercised by workers and by expanding on the threefold relationship with work that I argue workers' politics stem from. As mentioned in Chapter One, this research takes a broad view of agency -seeing it as more than just resistance, and not seeing it as just labour activism- and locates it in the various ways they express it within this threefold relationship. As mentioned, I see these three aspects of workers' relationship with work as 1) pertaining to the site of work and conditions and issues arising from that directly (which is stressed on in Chapters Four and Five), 2) the social aspect of work and 3) the relationship with work and selfhood.

This chapter expands on the social and selfhood aspects, which, as Chapter One mentions, are not rigidly separated in a worker's life. The separation is drawn in order to enable a discussion where selfhood refers to a worker's inner worlds (with the external social context muted) and the social refers to a more outward focus where the worker is embedded in their social context. I venture that looking at these two aspects of a worker's relationship with work is important because political movements make choices, even if not explicitly, in terms of which aspect they lay stress on. The social and selfhood aspects arguably do not receive as much attention from progressive movements as issues related to work at worksite, leaving a vacuum, I tentatively assert, for right-wing and/or regressive politics to step in and occupy.

A limitation of this discussion is its lack of a cohesive theoretical framing. Instead, the chapter privileges fieldwork responses and insights that arose from such conversations and interactions

and from my own personal experiences.[176] This is not to say that such concerns have not been discussed elsewhere. The points made here gesture towards literatures on critique of work, the nature of work and leisure within capitalism, neoliberalisation, desire and the transformation of desire. The discussion in this chapter is also potentially related to very inter-disciplinary bodies of literature on the mind, consciousness and selfhood, both from materialist and non-materialist approaches, which usually have trouble talking to each other.[177] However, given that the main thrust of this research is on the politics of informal workers and their organising, these literatures could not be rigorously engaged with. Insights from the field, however, made it impossible[178] to not bring these issues up, even if all the discussion does is give a glimpse of what is inadequately accounted for in informal workers' movements and the politics of their organising. This is important because, as noted above, and like Bhowmik (2012) points out, when progressive workers' movements cede space or (as I add) limit themselves in terms of what parts of a worker's self and experience they are engaging with, the vacuum is occupied by the right wing. I venture that the right wing is sometimes able to step into the space of the social and selfhood and mobilise/attract on those grounds, which sometimes appear to have greater appeal/speak to something more enduring than external material conditions. For example, we are arguably seeing this in action increasingly these days in the troll armies of the young online who produce and circulate large volumes of hate content.[179] Denied any real

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[176]I refer to this in the selfhood section of this chapter, and I speak more extensively about this in the postscript.

[177]Materialist approaches to the same would include bodies of work such as those 1) looking at the production of the neoliberal self and subjectivity with the goal of identifying how it produces the desired economic subject (See Upadhya 2016, 15) and 2) attempts at understanding the psychological processes involved in a worker's acquiescence to capitalism, to factors that legitimize social relations at the workplace, which Thompson (1989) notes has remained understudied in labour process theory. Many examples of non-materialist approaches can be found within the rapidly evolving and highly inter-disciplinary field of consciousness studies drawing from the hard sciences, the social sciences and humanities, and previously, within non-materialist conceptualizations of the psyche such as the approach taken by the Swiss psychologist and psychoanalyst Carl Jung.

[178]This applies especially given the shift in approach to the research that occurred in mid-2020 as mentioned in Chapter One.

[179]See Kumar (2022).

scope of changing the material and social circumstances of their lives, the only agency that allows a semblance of satisfying these inner longings and remains accessible are through actions like this, and other violent modes of affirming the self, discussed later.

The consequences are, of course, dangerous, as the present lived reality demonstrates so well, not just in India, but globally where we have seen many instances of authoritarian, right wing turns in the recent past. Thus, recognising this threefold relationship with work and recognising its importance in a worker's life is of relevance not just for workers' movements but also in the larger political battles waged in the shaping of societies. This is, however, not meant to portray a picture of defeat and hopelessness. The dissertation also shows, drawing from the example of the Delhi membership and leadership of the NHF, that the potential also exists for those with right-wing histories to be re-routed into progressive movements of workers, on the issue of work.

The data in this chapter draws from the ethnographic fieldwork with hawkers and factory workers, and as mentioned in Chapter Two, from an earlier fieldwork with women garment workers in Chennai. Additionally, I also read a memoir of a working-class British actor with and against the narrative of a young former factory worker in Manesar in the discussion on ambition, desire and hope. There was an uncanny resonance between these two narratives, situated very differently in time and space, which I thought productively illustrated how these abstract longings that fuel and drive the self (i.e., of ambition, desire and hope) have a universal as well as a contextual dimension. Reading them together also allowed me to trace and demonstrate how the structural capping of these hopes and pursuits are very contextual, and that the possible trajectories that workers' lives can unfold along tend to depend on the political economy they are embedded in.

The discussion that follows is organised into three sections. The first section discusses experiences pertaining to the social aspect of work. It is divided into three subsections discussing the push and pull factors that draw migrant workers to cities, the manner in which social respect, reputation and prestige drive work choices and decisions to enter organising activity and the diverse experiences that workers have of their work including the enjoyment of it. The second section looks at work and selfhood and also has three subsections discussing the experience of leisure and free time, drudgery, repetition and pain, and ambition, hope and desire. The third section has a small discussion to conclude this chapter.

The Social Aspect of Work

This section hopes to illustrate how one's relationship with the social aspect of work complicates unidimensional narratives and understanding of how workers perceive the work they do. That is to say, it hopefully illustrates that even bad work offers something 'positive' to workers. To miss this would be to limit one's understanding of workers' politics.

Just as the type of work one does (and the role of work itself) impacts social respect, similarly that aspect becomes a factor in how one thinks about work and what one wants from work in terms of political demands and articulations. In situations where the material conditions of work and the experience of it doesn't change much, one could argue that one ends up leaning more heavily on the aspects of the social and the self/selfhood in expressing oneself politically.

From the village to the city, happily* (*conditions apply)

This discussion illustrates some transformations wrought by urbanisation, which was discussed in Chapter Three, and how it comes to impact working lives. It highlights how both push and pull factors bring workers to the city, and how this move and the experience of the city isn't always viewed negatively.

Personal stories and specific instances during fieldwork often illustrated the process of rapid urbanisation that I speak of in Chapter Three. For instance, during fieldwork with the Delhi NHF, I learnt that one of the member sites in NOIDA (on the Delhi border) was an example of such transformation of land use. A market operated for many years on Gram Panchayat land, until the hawkers there were evicted in September 2012 by NOIDA Nagar Pallika to supposedly make way for an electricity plant. The market relocated itself on adjoining municipality land.[180] The NHF organiser who took me there pointed out NOIDA's fast pace of industrial development since about 2004-05. All land in that area, for instance, had already been acquired for industry; no farmland remained, which displaced landowners and agricultural labourers, many of who were now involved in that market. It had also led to migration into NOIDA by people seeking jobs in factories and otherwise. These migrant workers might not earn more than Rs. 10,000-15,000 per month and so they came to live in these villages. This area was cheaper than the more urbanised parts of NOIDA and because of the convenience of being close to a metro station (there are e-rickshaws and autos connecting to it), main road, etc. Like in Gurgaon and Manesar, landowners converted their property into rental units for incoming migrant workers. The power equations in that hawking market, and the power dynamics of the local economy clearly reflected how administrative boundaries do not mark the beginning and end of cities and villages. Not only were the most powerful administrators and brokers in that market local land owners, Panchayat members including the Sarpanch continued to hold (unofficial) power in an administrative area that had transitioned to a municipal area.

In another instance, Harish,[181] a 27-year-old security guard who was from a village near Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh and working in Dharuhera, Haryana, since 2012 spoke of the

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[180]The NHF strategically used this relocation to their advantage, for it brought the hawkers there under the jurisdiction of the newly passed law in 2014.
[181]Not his real name.

transformation of rural areas around the city such as the industrial zone that came up at Rania, Uttar Pradesh (interview, June 2016). According to him, the land there was either privately bought or leased by companies at very cheap rates. For instance, he spoke of government acquisition rates at a site for a power plant three kilometres from his village being much higher than market rate, and definitely higher than private players. He also spoke of the kind of industries developing around Kanpur, which were mostly Gram Udyog factories (and other factories that sounded like they would belong to the MSME sector) with labour strength ranging from 60-70 workers to 200-250 workers. According to him, there would be around 200-250 such companies operating there. Workers there tended to have 12-hour shifts and the highest wages would apparently not exceed Rs. 6000 per month, with no ESI or PF. This highlighted that while the hours were similar to the areas I did fieldwork in, the wages were significantly lower.

This particular industrial development apparently came up in 2010, around ten kilometres from Kanpur, on farm lands. The villages that gave up land now provided rooms on rent to workers in these companies. Dharuhera, too, which formerly had an agrarian economy and was now an industrial hub beyond Manesar (mostly of auto-parts) had many owners of agricultural land converting their land to rent use for workers in local factories, since that yielded more income. According to him, a lot of agricultural land here lay unfarmed, with focus on real estate use conversion. There were many sky scrapers and housing colonies under construction or newly constructed in Dharuhera, which were visibly still under-occupied or lying vacant when I visited in 2016, possibly in anticipation of future growth. He noted that the profile of workers in the Rania industrial zone included many middle-aged workers who carried on both factory work and farm work or managed livestock businesses. They either split their time between the two in day/night shifts, or, in peak farming seasons, they would take holidays from their factory

jobs to tend to farms.[182] Harish's father owned agricultural land and his family works on it full-time. He, however, goes home to contribute his labour on it for 3-4 months in a year and prefers to spend the rest of the time in Dharuhera. He noted that while security guards employed in Gurgaon factories had a lighter workload compared to Dharuhera companies,[183] and the pay was similar, the cost of room rent in Dharuhera was a third of Gurgaon rates. He hadn't wanted to work on his family farm, wasn't keen on "working under somebody" (which I interpreted to mean working under the authority of family members, since here too he technically was working for somebody). It was then that a maternal uncle who had worked as a security guard in Dharuhera encouraged him to take up this work, "there is no work, you are your own boss," being what attracted him in the way his uncle described it. Thus persuaded, he took it up. He was familiar with Dharuhera now, and would not relocate to either Gurgaon or Manesar, or elsewhere, he said, even if pay was higher.

Another worker who joined in the conversation- a former temporary worker at an engineering company that was apparently owned by a local BJP MLA and supplied parts to the biggest local company of Hero Motocorp Ltd.- came from a non-land-owning family from a village two kilometres away from Dharuhera. His family used to earn a livelihood through ferrying goods on donkeys for local customers, and he came to Dharuhera to work as the industrial economy began to grow, for a better livelihood option (interview, June 2016).

The above instances are recounted to highlight the significant transformations that occur in local economies when rural areas are urbanised. In the movement from villages to cities, from rural livelihoods to urban ones, many processes are involved. One notes that there are push and pull factors that draw workers to newly urbanised economies which, in these examples, are

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[182]This pattern sounded very similar to patterns Parry (1999b) identified in his study of some categories of local workers at the Bhilai Steel Plant.

[183]The former apparently assigned one post to one guard, whereas Dharuhera guards were frequent tasked with manning 2-3 posts simultaneously, according to him.

dominated by industries. These factors involve more than just financial considerations for more remunerative livelihood opportunities; for many the city represents an emancipatory space, not just as the location for inhabiting the neoliberal dream (which I will get to shortly) but also to get away from family. Some of the workers who spoke with me, for instance, had run away from home and come to Gurgaon and Manesar to strike out on their own. Others including young women migrant workers enjoyed the freedom and adventure of being in faraway Delhi.

As noted in Chapter Three, neoliberal policies have made cities the engines of growth and spurred on urbanisation. Newly urbanising areas like the NOIDA hawker market area, IMT Manesar, and Dharuhera feel like transition zones, where the remnants of older agrarian economies coexist with the newer industrial ones. As noted earlier, this process has led to the transformation of desires and local social relations which sometimes leads to conflicts. The latter is not just about the role that power lobbies of land owners and village leadership sometimes play in supporting factory managements during labour conflict, there are other tense situations that occur which can escalate very quickly. For instance, Cowan (2015) writes of unwritten codes of who is and is not welcome inside Gurgaon's malls, which have come up on acquired agricultural land. This, then, results in periodic conflicts and bouts of violence between local villagers and malls that resist their entry through security guards and bouncers at the bars located within them. One particular conflict in 2011 escalated to a standoff between local villagers who demanded closure of all bars and rights of entry. These villagers, supported by 3000 villagers from surrounding areas, destroyed water and electricity lines to the mall (Cowan 2015, 70).

The social outcomes of such transitions also include existential ennui and dread amongst the land losers who are unable to transition to the new economies. Conversations with the editor of the FMS suggested that the process of production of new social classes can be quite painful. He spoke of the 'social death' that frequently happens when farmers sell their land, even if

under financially profitable land acquisition schemes. He mentioned that in Haryana, while these transactions frequently yield a lot of wealth to the former landowners,[184] it was common for this wealth to vanish very quickly. This is because, he noted, the younger generation does not know what to do with such a sudden influx of wealth. Some may end up chasing the trappings of the new middle class consumer culture (referred to in Chapter Three), thereby exhausting it very quickly, and then are left with no further way of earning a livelihood, given their background in farming and the absence of alternative employment. The older generation is frequently left existentially stumped, not knowing what to do, now that their old way of life-farming-no longer exists for them.

One possible reason why windfalls from acquisition disappear quickly in the hands of the younger generation is because transition into this kind of moneyed economy is a learnt skill. While some easily became landlords, small shopkeepers or took up other forms of petty trade, others struggled. At an interview with an official of a Tier 1 auto-parts company in Gurgaon, Udyog Vihar, I was told of how locals in the vicinity of their factory (presumably belonging to families of land losers) sometimes came seeking work after land acquisition money ran out because of excessive spending. Illustrating the uneven and often devastating effect of such large sums that they received in return for their land, the official gave the example of a shopfloor worker at their factory who had received crores in compensation for his land. He used to drive to work in an upscale sedan. Yet another of their workers had received Rs. 40-50 lacs, exhausted that sum, and then died by suicide (interview, July 2016).

Younger generations are also more likely to get caught up in the sweeping changes of neoliberalism and the resulting shaping of desires as well as the rise of a culture of new middle-class consumerism, discussed in Chapter Three. These changes, as mentioned, shape particular

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[184] He mentioned that remuneration, post-2000, was much higher than earlier waves of government-led land acquisitions.

aesthetic and consumption aspirations. In this context, it is pertinent to contrast the factory workers of the Bhilai Steel Plant that Parry (1999b, 2020) looks at in his work with the thousands I encountered heading to work at factories in Delhi NCR. The former were public sector workers of an earlier generation and their aspirations for the future included setting up the next generation within the same jobs. In contrast, the factory workers in my field sites knew that no such future existed for their children, given that their own jobs were precarious on a daily basis. The difference between these two (temporally separated) worlds is vast. Further, this gap has been steadily narrowing from the later 1980s, as noted earlier. In IMT Manesar, for instance, I met a retired BHEL production line worker who now worked in an auto-parts company supplying to Maruti (with no ESI, no PF, but also no compulsory overtime) in order to fund the higher education of his children who were pursuing engineering and a business degree. His wife was a government school teacher in Punjab (personal conversation, December 2015). What was striking was how a PSU worker-once considered quite privileged and financially secure- married to another government employee, was still struggling to ensure that their children would have good futures in spite of not having the option of the secure employment of their parents. A second job post-retirement became necessary, even though the difference in working conditions and pay compared to his earlier job was stark.

As Baviskar (2003) notes, these dreams and aspirations get produced across class lines amongst different sections of urban populations, including migrants who come dreaming of a better life. Others also talk about the need to recognise the cultural transformation of desires (Ghertner 2011b, Srivastava 2010). Jain's (2013) stress on the culture of consumerism rather than income in this process of production of a new middle class (mentioned in Chapter Three) is perhaps key to understanding emerging social relations and fault lines. I return to this in the discussion on Ram in the selfhood section of this chapter.

These cultural transformations of desires must be recognized as complicating and undermining blanket narratives of deprivation, depression, scarcity, economic and social pressure, lack of access etcetera frequently associated with the transforming urban and the disappearance of the public city. The shape of workers politics- all our politics- is moulded by the shape of imaginations, desires, memory-both immediate family history and a broader conversation around history, and what was possible. The future that today's generation of workers imagine need not even be similar to an imagination of the future that was considered acceptable to an earlier generation of workers. It leaves an impact on the language, imagination and articulation of contemporary politics of workers.

For instance, Kalpagam (1994) points out the class nature of ambitions and desires from work and how the middle-class movement- whose beginnings she traces back to the nationalist movement that grew around the Indian independence movement- gave ideological legitimacy to the idea of a woman who worked at home as well as outside of it, even though poor rural and urban women had always done the same. She mentions how today it is commonly understood that the desire to work outside the home is largely a middle-class phenomenon, and that for a working-class woman, the aspiration was to stay at home, which was considered a privilege. And certainly, this view is held by many women workers, including by some women I spoke to in Gurgaon, who had left their villages with their husbands for the industrial hub in Udyog Vihar because of financial distress and problems in the extended family back home. Some women hawkers in Delhi and Kolkata also mentioned a desire to stay home, if they could afford it. However, in Lahiri (2010) and during fieldwork for this project, I also encountered many who felt differently.

In Lahiri (2010) I mention, for instance, a single woman who worked at a garment factory in Chennai and was a trade union organiser speaking of how her mother and sister would look at her struggling alone on a daily basis and ask her to pack up everything and go live with them

in the village. They were poor, their logic went, but at least they would be together. However, going back to the village was definitely not a part of her plan and she never did return. Social reactions to her work and her way of life varied, she noted. Some saw her struggles and sympathised and empathised with her. Many of her neighbours, however, only saw the amount she earned through the several jobs she did before and after her factory hours, and were jealous of her, without realising what it cost her physically, she said. Thus, factory work for a single woman became the source of envy for others in this instance.

Another woman garment worker mentioned in Lahiri (2010) had said she would rather be at work than at home. It was not only about the money, she had noted. At home, she said she'd be alone and end up thinking about all the problems in the world. She would get confused and depressed, whereas at work she was around friends and people, chatting with them and sharing each other's problems. She said she enjoyed meeting so many people. At the factory she was working at that point, this kind of socialising was not possible, but everybody chatted at one of her older, smaller factories, she had noted. This was an interesting observation, at the intersections of work to avoid the self, and leisure, pleasure and fun. She preferred working at the much lower-paying smaller factory (in the past) because it was easier paced, she could chat with friends, unlike where she presently worked, where the pay was higher and the factory was bigger. Yet another woman garment worker had spoken of how, when she had first moved to Chennai from her village, she hadn't known anybody other than her family. Once she started working, however, she made a lot of friends. She had noted that it was only because of work that she had friends. A neighbour, a home maker, who had been listening in our conversation had interjected that she, on the other hand, lived at home, did not go to work and consequently ended up looking at her husband's face all day and he at hers. It was only because of work that these women had so many friends, she had said.

There is a gender angle to this aspect of the social life that work offers to women, and although this is not something this particular dissertation explores in great detail, I bring this up because this prospect of a social life was also brought up by men. Young boys spoke of "*mazaa*" (fun) at work, of friends being a strong motivator to turn up at jobs, and highlighted their social life at work which they enjoyed. Friendships that (even bad) jobs offer have the potential to change one's existential experience and motivation to work, as Parry (1999b, 130) also noted. This becomes even more pertinent in today's age of 12-hour shifts and overtime as the norm, when the time of work and the time of life overlap so much. This makes work a primary source of social life for many.

The compression of time and this overlap of work and socialising also came up some times in how the NHF conducted its activities. This was evident in its careful choice of scenic venues for national meetings as well as instances where national meetings were timed to coincide with weddings and other such family and social functions of local leaders. Arriving delegates were extended invitations to both via their WhatsApp group, and asked to RSVP for both by sending in their details (name and state).

Similarly, women spoke of getting to leave home and come to big cities like Delhi because of work, and the FMS points out how gender dynamics at the shopfloor and the workplace had been changing as a consequence of changing gender compositions in factory workforces. As spoken of in Chapter Five, it has increasingly become common for both women and men workers to stay together in overnight factory occupations- something that was rare earlier. Further, as some older workers, including some women, pointed out – occasionally disapprovingly – workplace romances between young people would spring up on the shop floor because of these changing dynamics.

As a last point here, I'd like to refer to the dichotomy that has frequently characterised villages versus cities and the images, feelings, expectations and symbolism associated with them. In Chapter Five I mentioned the tendency within Indian social scientists to privilege the study of the village over the city for several years after independence, and Bhowmik (2012) and Parry (1999a) mentioning how the study of industrial labour got neglected as a consequence. This dichotomy also exists in how industrial work has frequently been contrasted against the agrarian work and the economy that replaced it following industrialisation. Parry (1999b), for instance, argues against EP Thomson's characterisation of the rhythms, intensity, and alienation producing effect of industrial work bound to the tyranny of the machine versus agrarian work which was more 'natural' to human rhythms and less intense. Based on his fieldwork at Bhilai, he critiques Thompson's underlying assumptions, which are shared by many writing on industrial work rhythms. He concluded that agricultural work in the field tended to be romanticised, and was not easier nor necessarily more preferred than factory work. Further, he noted that factory work was not homogenously monotonous and intense, and that great variation in rhythms of work existed depending on the industrial process involved (varying sometimes in different departments of the same factory). My evidence also suggested the same. While certain industries (e.g., automobile) tended to have more intense work pressure on the moving conveyor belt production lines, and many workers (across industries) spoke of how they were always asked to produce under 'urgent' basis, other workers from the same industries-working at various points along the descending order of the fragmented supply chains- spoke of a more variable pace of work. In fact, this variable pace of work was sometimes engineered by them-with tacit agreements between themselves about what pace they would follow during night shift work, as mentioned in Chapter Five. A Gurgaon garment worker had also illustrated this by mentioning how, when some finished work early, they would

help out others in their group so that one could take a strategic break and so that no one would get in trouble for seemingly sitting idle with no work before them (interview, April 2016).

Social respect, reputation, prestige

<u>Choosing work</u>

Another aspect is the social reputation and prestige that the work one does offers. The political fight for dignity is as important as the fight for economic rights for informal workers, as some delegates at the NTUI General Assembly had noted in 2013, because the political economy has social dimensions. This is particularly true for informal workers within the informal sector.

A senior management professional of a Tier 1 automobile vendor company in Gurgaon spoke of how a local Sarpanch from a nearby village had once come to them seeking a job for their son. The son had an engineering degree, but like most engineering degrees these days, he said, it was of poor quality, and therefore the company had refused. For the Sarpanch, the fact that his son was an engineer was a matter of village pride. He had spent Rs. 25-30 lacs on his degree, and had wanted to know if they could at least hire him for four months, until he got married (interview, July 2016).

The above story represented for me a situation where old markers of social prestige and power-the wealth and position as a Sarpanch-were giving way to newer ones in a transforming economy. Both the engineering degree and the factory job, at a company that supplied parts to Maruti,[185] symbolised new markers of social prestige. In India, the marriage 'market' is usually a good indicator of the social hierarchies of occupations. The request for a temporary four-month job, for the purpose of elevating the son's marriage prospects thus tells us the social value of belonging to the neoliberal order, and puts 'bad jobs' in perspective.

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[185]There is a certain prestige to working for Maruti, even down the supply chain, as I found out.

I witnessed this concern with some male hawkers, too. Some hawkers in Kolkata had pointed out their disadvantage in the marriage market because no one wanted to marry their daughter off to a 'hawker'. They would rather be known as small shopkeepers and traders, some said, and this was something they held on to as a potential subject of their politics (i.e., reframing terminology to dignify their labour). In Delhi, I had also been told of weekly market hawkers, who are relatively prosperous, who 'upgraded' to running shops for the same reason, even though they usually ended up making less money in these shops.

While there definitely is a hierarchy in social prestige of various occupations in society, the process of grading one over another is not a straightforward one. That said, the evidence from my fieldwork certainly corroborated what scholars like Parry (1999b) have pointed out about youth becoming alienated from agricultural work today. I did not encounter a single voice amongst the factory workers I interacted with who expressed a longing for farming or returning to villages. Amongst hawkers, responses from Kolkata indicated that all agricultural land was not the same. Owners of fertile land were keener to hold on to it and to generate agricultural income from the land (as opposed to using it for other purposes such as real estate related income streams) compared to those who owned land that was less fertile.

A government job, representing peak security and prestige, is valued, no matter what it is. Stories are rampant of upper caste and/or overqualified candidates scrambling for jobs as sweepers, and Parry (1999b) speaks of the market in fake SC/ST certificates for upper caste people desiring desperately to get a foot in (the door of a government job) which, given the role caste plays in Indian society, speaks volumes.

Personal calculations, innate preferences, and sometimes the sheer comfort of familiarity, also play a role in this process. Many hawkers, for instance, preferred the satisfaction of their own business and being the master of their time, and did not prefer to scramble after insecure private

employment that they perceived as more taxing physically, psychologically (having to work with someone sitting on their head during work hours) and frequently paying less. In one of the more established hawking markets in an older part of Kolkata, I was told that since secure, industrial employment was not really there in Kolkata it only made sense to explore alternative sources of employment, such as in factories or offices, if those paid more than Rs.12,000-Rs.15,000 a month. This amount was the average monthly income for a hawker in this market of predominantly ready-made-garments. In yet another old and established hawker market, I was told how hawking provides a more stable income in today's world of temporary employment in the job market or *"chakri'r bajar."* Popular and prosperous markets like Gariahat draw in young hawkers, where even the smallest of hawkers apparently make Rs. 2000 per day. This, I was told, means they get to take home, after costs, at least Rs.500 per day or Rs.15,000 a month. Other viable livelihood options for young, working-class people in Kolkata today, I was told, include joining syndicates, or plying app-based cabs.

Some hawkers in the New Town area in Kolkata relished the entrepreneurial aspect of hawking, and hoped to scale up in future. This was quite different from how some factory workers spoke of stints when they operated small businesses, or worked as 'independent consultants' of sorts within sales roles when they had been laid off. Examples included the middle-aged ex-factory worker who worked for an aloe-vera products company in Faridabad, and another middle-aged factory worker who had in the past taken up various sales and advertising related jobs (where he was paid largely on a commission basis). The language used in these instances were not the same kind of language those hawkers used; here it was spoken of more like instances of slipping into or being forced into entrepreneurship to sustain their families. Several amongst hawkers and factory workers also spoke of choosing to stay within their occupations, and always choosing to look for opportunities within the familiarity of their occupations because that is simply what they know best.

Returning to the first example, factory jobs, despite everything, have a certain currency, for multiple reasons, aside from the prestige mentioned earlier. My earlier fieldwork with women garment workers in Chennai, highlighted that women were attracted to the garments industry because there was always a job available, and it did not demand much by way of academic qualifications.[186] Factory jobs were also seen as more dignifying than other alternatives such as becoming a domestic worker. Further, in order to be employable, one did not need to have a particular skill, as everybody got a brief training at the point of joining, I had been told. A woman worker in Gurgaon during my present research also spoke of how women frequently supplemented family incomes (where the husband worked in a factory) by picking up factory shifts as daily wagers only on weekends, other holidays, or when their husbands were out of work (interview, April 2016). Factory work provided a flexibility there. The corollary to that, of course, is that women remained concentrated in low skilled, low paying jobs within the industry, with little or no scope for skill up-gradation, a pattern observed in the fieldwork for my current research as well. Thus, the very thing that is a negative becomes a positive, and vice versa, depending on where one is coming from.

Sometimes one had to juggle notions of prestige with more practical matters too. A young boy, whose father used to be a factory worker, had to hide the fact that he had an MSc. degree while looking for a factory job. He and his brothers returned to industrial employment because teaching jobs in the private sector paid much less than factory jobs (personal conversation, December 2015). Another older worker, who had retired after his factory had shut down in the late 1980s/early 1990s after being forced by a labour struggle into give settlements to workers, had taught in two places in his village in Uttarakhand in the 1970s. However, even back then,

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[186] At that time, most garment companies only required that the person have passed class eight, I was told.

factories paid more, and so he eventually moved to Faridabad to work in factories (personal conversation, December 2015).

Social motivations to get involved in union politics

Like the kind of work taken up, union involvement too can be spurred, sometimes even exclusively, by social motivations as against a desire to build a workers' movement or because of deep beliefs in workers' rights. This is because being a part of a union, especially in leadership roles, adds to one's credibility and respect in society. Hawkers in Delhi and Kolkata attested to this, as noted in Chapter Four, when they said "we have a voice" when they register as unions, that "people listen to us…". Union members of Penn Thozilalargal Sangam (PTS) (Women Worker's Union), a union for women workers in the informal sector in Chennai, had attested to this during my 2009-10 fieldwork. Membership with PTS changed the way the police treated complaints filed at police stations, I'd been told- they treated it with seriousness. Some union members had felt that it was the only way for under-educated and time-strapped women to know their rights and the benefits guaranteed to them by the government. This also led to respect amongst one's immediate peers, as some attested. They spoke of being more respected when they became known as union members, and how if anyone had a problem involving the society, property, marital issues or otherwise, they would come to them for help and advice. Thus, union membership can help a person gain more traction with the state and society. What is more, in that earlier research, those women who were active members of a union also reported that their sense of self-worth and self-perception had improved because of it.

Many times, union activity and leadership are also used as a stepping stone to political power within the electoral system, to embark on a political career. This was particularly visible within

the NHF, and during my interactions with factory workers, I heard a rumour, circulated by many, that a prominent Manesar union leader was poised to enter politics.

In the context of union politics, social rewards and electoral politics, I was struck by the fact that the BJP had a formal structure and organisational attention on informal sector unions in Delhi. This was explained to me by a BJP politician and post-holder who was the patron of a rival (to NHF) hawkers' federation. The fact that BJP recognised the political importance of the sector and placed themselves within it as a mainstream political party, and that many of the local level organisers of the NHF were post-holders with the BJP pointed to, if nothing else, the party's political canniness and attention to detail and long-term cadre/membership building. It also pointed to their network-and therefore possibly influence- at neighbourhood, locality and therefore city-wide levels. At least two interviews- one with a woman hawker leader who was then with the NHF in Delhi and one with a factory worker and union organiser (HMS to begin with, and then the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh, the BJP's trade union)- revealed that they began their political activity and organising career as teenagers with the RSS. In the first case, it appeared that the RSS connection was a coincidence in the early stages, but later, their natural instinct for and ability to stand for issues and lead[187] was channelised through the RSS and later, the BJP. In the second instance, it sounded more like the consequence of training received within the RSS, with him using typical language of "doing one's duty" and "*samaj sewa.*" Their stories painted an interesting picture of the broader workers' movement in general, beyond left politics, and is worth pursuing, for later projects, in order to comparatively contrast organisational dynamics with that of the left.

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[187] This woman spoke of taking up issues at the ITI she had studied and graduated from.

Enjoying Work

> "(Company) Directors come and go, wages go up and down, but what changes? Today also we are *majdoor*, tomorrow also we'll be *majdoor*."
>
> -**A factory worker** at Okhla (personal conversation, December 2015)

Workers have varying perspectives on the work they do, and this discussion highlights first, the negative experience of the same (i.e., the familiar narrative of monotonous work in Fordist and post-Fordist regimes) particularly in the present context of institutionalised de-skilling of workers. That is followed by the more counter-intuitive instances of those who, during fieldwork, evinced a pleasure in the work they did, even though on the face of it conditions were hard and the pay was poor.

In Chapter Five, I mentioned employers talking about skilled and unskilled workers in India today, ruing how the system produced more of the latter, and did not attend to the needs of production. Workers too had a perspective on the kind of skilling being produced for the post-Fordist system of production. Speaking of an excess supply of doctors and engineers in the job market, a male factory worker in his fifties in Faridabad spoke of how many workers with ITI degrees leave companies because they had a higher skill level than what was being demanded of them in the chain system, and they had no scope to learn anything further. "*Pehle dimaag se kaam karna hota thha,*" he noted ("Earlier we used to have to use our brains during work"). "Today work is more brainless and mechanical because computers regulate production," he said (interview, July 2016).

Another worker, a young male tailor in his twenties spoke of the skill hierarchy that exists in the garment sector. Sample tailors, who are at the top of the chain, construct whole pieces that vendors show potential clients. Next come the piece-rate tailors who frequently are the ones assigned to tackle small orders, and might experience some variety in what they are asked to

stitch- sometimes a collar one day, sometimes maybe a cuff the next day. At the bottom lie the chain system tailors who are more commonly used for large orders. There is not much of a salary difference between sample tailors and piece rate tailors, according to him, but a huge difference between them and those working on the chain system. He felt that this kind skill divide was one of the reasons for the lack of unity amongst workers.

As someone who has worked in all three positions, he said that the training schools focus on producing chain system tailors who could be stitching the same part (e.g., a cuff) all day for six months. "*Pura pakwa ****. Pura* boring *ho jata hai!"* he exclaimed (equivalent of "it becomes extremely boring and your brain turns to mush"). He had come to the city from his village in Uttar Pradesh with his uncle, and initially worked as a sample tailor making full pieces of garments in an export house. Then he worked on his own "*masti mein*" he said initially, and then amended to say *"Masti kya,* night-*vight bahut lagti thhi. Usme band baji"* (i.e., he left his uncle and branched out on his own and enjoyed himself, he said, before correcting himself to note it was actually not that fun, because there used to be a lot of night shifts and that was very tough) (interview, June 2016).

Such experiences existed alongside those who, for various reasons, enjoyed work.

A positive relationship with work was, for some, because they were willing to play the game and wanted to rise within the system. Line workers can become promoted to supervisors, supervisors can begin parallel income streams as contractors, tailors in garment factories could start parallel businesses and become vendors down the chain. These were just some of the examples that came up during field interactions. As the previous chapter pointed out, the temporary nature of jobs these days could produce either of two responses in people-a nothing to lose, why bother attitude (*"kaunsi* permanent *banni hai!"* as one worker noted; or, "It's not

exactly as if I'll become a permanent worker here!"), as well as the opposite attitude, with hopes of improving livelihood security.

Others keep their heads down at work and prefer to fly under the radar for reasons of vulnerability or lack of mental bandwidth because of problems at home. A former temporary factory worker I mention in Chapter Five, a woman who took up a job as a security guard after she was sacked for being an active part of a unionising process at her factory, stressed to me that women have a particularly hard time at work. She said that her personal experience was that more than ninety percent of the women who went to work in factories here were those who ran their homes solely on their income. Some of them travelled long distances for this, and frequently lacked the support of their spouses, both of which meant that women would sometimes be keen to avoid confrontation and political battles at work (interview, June 2016).

Then there were those who drew satisfaction from a job well done, from the human satisfaction of getting to enjoy being used to their full potential and training. Parry (1999b, 119) points out workers enthusiastically sharing innovative improvements they had engineered at work. In a limited way, one can think of this notion of 'enjoyment' applying even to the choices one made of which department to work in within a factory, and under which production process. For instance, a garment factory worker spoke of preferring the "*azaadi*" (freedom) of working on piece rate, as compared to the fixed wage chain system, because supervisors did not bear down on this category of workers; one could do whatever one liked so long as one was meeting whatever personal income target one had set for oneself. One didn't have to sit "*gunga-behera*" ("dumb or deaf"), he said, and could socialise and chat. Of course, in his case, he added with a laugh, he had done that even when he had worked on a fixed wage basis ("salary system"). "*Muh band karna mera aadat hi nahi hai!*" ("it is not in my nature to keep my mouth shut!") (interview, June 2016). He also preferred the piece-rate system because there was more scope

to learn and improve one's skills there (since one stitched a variety of parts and pieces) than in the more repetitive chain systems where one sewed the same part over and over for months.

The other, more expansive nature of enjoyment was embodied by the woman factory worker-turned guard I have spoken about here and in the previous chapter. I end this section with her story. Brought up in Delhi, married into a family from Dehradun, and living in Dharuhera, she spoke of how her husband's and her incomes helped established two modest homes owned by the family, one in Dehradun and one in Dharuhera.

She began her working life in 2003, working in an auto-parts company in IMT Manesar at a time when it wasn't as yet teeming with factories. She worked at that company for four years, she said, and it was in her habit to tackle her targets ahead of time. The supervisor would tell her that "'Suman,[188] today I want this much target, you have to give me this much,'" she said, "and I used to try and ensure that I, at least, should meet *my* target" (interview, June 2016). She said that after finishing the day's target, she used to get started upon the next day's target- "*doosri din ki* pending *karwa deti thhi.*" "Target *mere* under *aa gaya thha,*" ("I had gained control over targets"), and she became promoted to managing the line. Line managers also worked production in that company. She said that if she saw that someone behind or ahead of her on the line was struggling or lagging behind, she would ensure they got help.

She then moved to the auto-parts company,[189] also as a temporary worker and this time employed through a contractor she was related to by marriage, and there too she finished her targets early. She worked on tube-cutting here, and would produce so much that workers down the line had more than enough to work on. So much extra, she said, that if by any chance she

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[188]Not her real name.

[189]Where she later organically ended up becoming an active part of the militant struggle to unionise- referred to in the previous chapter.

did not turn up the next day, it wouldn't matter. Here too, if any line had people unable to meet targets, she used to be sent to help.

However, it was a lonely job since she worked on her own. She said she wished many times that she was removed from that tube-cutting machine because of that. She used to cut the bigger tubes by hand, whereas the other workers who worked together cut smaller tubes on machines with pre-set calibrations. However, the managers and line leaders would not reassign her because they told her they couldn't get anyone better than her at that position. The person who worked there before her was slow and inefficient and other workers would complain that that person was holding up their work.

Even if the target was high, she said, she'd be done by lunchtime. She would then create extra 'stock' for the next day, and even that would be done by tea break. "*Main free bhi thhi, kaam bhi karti thhi*" ("I was free also, and did my work also"). She wasn't chatty on the floor, she said. "Other people hadn't even heard my voice before the union struggle. I would roam about the whole factory, yes, and do *baat-cheet* (casual conversation), but nothing "extra", no gossip," she mentioned. "My work required me to move about the whole plant, asking people how many tubes they had left, how many more they needed," she went on. Her roaming about the floor made some workers envious and they would complain to the line leaders saying "Suman has so much work, but look how she's just wandering about." However, the line leader would defend her by saying, "do you know how much work she gets done? Even if she doesn't come for the next two days, the work can continue, so *koi tension nahi hai mujhe*" ("I am not bothered at all by it").

The solitary nature of her job, along with the perception of some at the workplace that she was close to the management[190] resulted in her being kept in the dark in the initial stages of the coordination for the struggle to unionise. The union was supposedly going to be for permanent and temporary workers both (though that did not happen in the end, as usual). It was only in the later stages when her fellow workers noticed her inherent tendencies of standing up for what was right, that she organically began to emerge as one of the prominent faces of the struggle, trusted by her fellow workers. During the period when the workers were sitting outside the premises, refusing to go inside to work, she was the only one to loudly question the slapping of a worker by the driver of one of the company buses. The police stood by and did nothing, she said, and when in the resulting altercation and scuffle she was shoved, she promptly lodged an FIR against two people-the bus driver and her contractor-relative.

Her circumstances could have easily motivated her to think only of herself, and seek to use her connections with the contractor, and his connections within the company, to secure her future. But just as her attitude to work seemed to come from some well within her that did not calculate in terms of what her actions would yield and how much,[191] so too did her political actions- learnt through her experiences at work- stem from an inherent internal compass of right and wrong, what was acceptable versus what was not. What would be the difference between the union *walas* and us, she had asked, if we had betrayed, for instance, other batches of temporary workers who were initially more at risk than us? She naturally engaged with questions of ethics in politics, and brought it up in conversation.

As far as she was concerned, one simply had to do the right thing, consequences be damned. She was also very understanding of those who could not damn the consequences, like the

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[190] This perception arose from the fact of her efficiency and because she was related to the contractor, who happened to be a permanent worker there, and close to the production manager.
[191] She was clear that she needed work, but did not calculate the minimum she could do to get away with while still coming home at the end of the month with the set wages.

women who had to travel long distances to keep showing up during the struggle days, involving costs and pressures at home with husbands threatening divorce. Most of them eventually started dropping out of the movement. "I don't blame them at all," she had said. Very clear eyed and sharply analytical, she had reached her own conclusions about the role permanent workers had played not just in betraying their struggle, but in other union struggles in the area, as noted in the previous chapter.

Her personal belief, she said, was that "whatever be your work, do it with responsibility." "*Kyunki kehte hain na ki achhai kahin na kahin aapke kaam mein aati hai*" ("because, as they say, no good work is ever wasted, it comes to stand by you at some time or the other"). "Today I may no longer be at that company," she said, since she had been sacked, "but the line leaders still talk about me…I get to know this through the girls still working there." "My reputation lingers on." She said that some of the workers remembered her and rued the fact that the union *walas* had given them "*dhoka*" (i.e., betrayed them) leading to this situation. However, not everybody inside the factory wanted them back, she said. "We've become the '*dabang*' types (i.e., fearless, audacious), we've changed." That struggle, she said, taught them that no matter who it is, if someone wrongs you, you have a right to respond. "I now carry that spirit with me," she said. "In my present job (as a university security guard) people come up to me and ask '*leadership karti ho kya*?'" she laughed (i.e., are you an activist/do you lead?).

Similarly, on the issue of whether it was futile for workers to struggle or not, given the outcome of the militant workers' struggle at their company she remained convinced that there was no alternative to struggle, and believed in not-fighting dirty. "I've put in 4.5 years in this company," she said. "If I go to another, I will have to start from zero, from scratch. And anyway, what is the guarantee that the same issues will not happen again at the new company? Would one then go to another company and then another company and then another company? In the end, where will we go," she asked. "Casual worker *kabhi sthhayi nahi ban pate…bhagte*

rehte hai. Do mahina idhar, do mahina udhar…kab tak?? Ek age limit *hoti hai…*" ("a casual worker can never find stability/become permanent…they keep running. Two months here, two months there…for how long can they do this? Age begins to catch up!") "It is better to stay put and fight," she firmly stated. "*Lado! Lad ke haro toh har nahi hai*" ("fight! If you fight and lose then you haven't really lost"). Following the end of the confrontation between workers and management, their struggle had entered the tedious court stage. However, she had no intention of budging from that fight, she said. "The day the judgement comes in this case-if the judgement grants us not even a single rupee, no problem. I will know that at least we fought," she declared.[192]

"*Samay aata hai toh sab seekh jaate hai*," she had noted in the context of her growth as a politically aware and active person, which had surprised many of her fellow workers (i.e., "when the time comes, everyone learns"). "Till the time one gets everything without raising one's voice," she noted, "one continues as is." "When one knows that without speaking up one won't get anything, then one by compulsion becomes active."

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[192]They were being guided and helped by an activist workers' organisation in Gurgaon, which had also been advising and guiding them through the unionisation process. I mention this in the context of the larger point I make about the pro-union beliefs of many such activist organisations and parties on the left, despite the situation on the ground and the legal regime, as discussed in the previous chapter. This was a clear case of the management using the unionisation process to break a workers' struggle that had severely challenged them for several months, to the extent that they reached out to local village Sarpanches and involved them in breaking up the struggle. The struggle might perhaps have unfolded in a different direction, had the collective pressure been allowed to build, given that an overwhelming majority of the workers were temporary workers. If all the workers had remained sitting outside, they would have hit where it hurts-production would have been at a standstill, which she noted. The management might have been forced to cede to their demands, and the sackings of over three hundred workers would not have been possible or necessary. Towards the end of the struggle, workers had been willing to return to work *if* the company guaranteed, in writing and unconditionally, that they would not be sacked. Instead, the company used the union to sack them. The court stage of a struggle always leads to a thinning of participation and motivation and one must question its impacts long term. Who wields the weapon of the law is an important question that the NHF repeatedly grappled with, for this reason. She herself had become less active in the court stage, three months after the struggle ended.

Work and Selfhood

This section turns to the self-i.e., inner selves and their workings that exist autonomously and do not just react to external forces, but interact with them in complex ways. I hope for this discussion to throw additional light on discontent, longing and the pursuit of meaning in our lives, and on how they may come to shape one's natural politics and intuitively expand imaginations of possibility.

Leisure, free time

> "The ruling class has figured out that a happy and productive population with free time on their hands is a mortal danger..."

> - **David Graeber** (2013)

More than a decade ago, at the beginning of my journey as a research student during my M.A., I had naively included in my questionnaire for women garment workers in Chennai a question about what they did in their free time, what they did for leisure. Every single person I spoke to had laughed out loud at that question- I hadn't realized at that time how naïve and ignorant it was. Or how I'd inadvertently landed upon perhaps one of the most radical phenomena and concept in this present economic paradigm-free time.

Free time and what we do with it, today, is a loaded concept and is universally inadequately present for, or even absent from, all, even children. Of course, this must be qualified by adding that, as with everything, social and economic privilege plays a huge role in determining the degree of its absence. Some, like factory workers on shifts, have almost none. Neither do, for instance, many white-collar workers who work in corporate set-ups such as lawyers, bankers, management professional. They, however, are at least compensated heavily for the time that is stolen from them, while the factory worker doesn't even get adequate compensation. Non-corporate set-ups too can steal time, such as what has now become the norm for grossly over-

worked and underpaid academics and graduate students in PhD programmes in North American and certain European systems. The question is what is adequate compensation for stolen free time? Can there even *be* adequate compensation for this? Hasn't time become the most precious commodity, priceless even?

Further, as Hardt and Negri (2004) note, this pressure on free time has increased in the contemporary economic paradigm of what they call hegemonic immaterial labour. The conditions of work have changed. The working day, they note, has transformed, with work time becoming intertwined with leisure time. Contrast this, they say, with the industrial paradigm when workers produced during a fixed work day, solely during factory hours. Now, in contrast, the time of work overlapped with the time of life, at both ends of the labour market (Hardt and Negri 2004).

The preciousness of truly free-time-unspoilt by a heavy, always endless to-do list running in the back of one's mind even as one is supposedly taking a break or having 'free time'-became startlingly visible to me during the early lockdown months in India in 2020. The nature of any long project, such as a PhD is such that even in the best-case scenario, where one is working full-time and exclusively on the project, and being paid to do so, a position I was incredibly privileged to be in, one is always, in a way 'working' on the project. On holiday, on a break, the project weighs heavy until completion, in many cases, certainly mine, leading to constant at least low-grade anxiety, fear and worry.

During the 2020 lockdowns I experienced 'free-time' in a radically different manner. The PhD fell away from my mind, as did any thought of paid, professional work, as the world stopped. And for the first time it felt justified. I felt that it was right that I shed my 'work' entirely from my mind, given the scale of what was going on globally and the much more important concerns of the moment. I cannot express how incredibly clarifying this was; the same free time-which

was now all the time- now functioned differently. From time driving me and me chasing it, I suddenly switched to feeling like *I* was the driver of my time. The crisis made it very evident that the world was/is at a critical point of transition in human history, and that we were all called to urgently examine and reconfigure our lives, societies and priorities. It made it possible to, in fact even demanded, a prioritisation of activities that were vital to one's self and well-being, alongside an intensification of the questions we were asking regarding the ordering of our worlds. It was suddenly ok, even necessary, to choose. Like many others, I was still active and working, quite hard at times, but at things of my choosing that were not a compulsion, most of which was not geared towards 'output' or on anything that could be put on a CV. (Of course, my privileges are what allowed me to experience post-pandemic 2020 this way; I'm only trying to make the small point that the same privileges have been with me every year, when I have not experienced time the same way).

What this free time, and being unshackled from 'work', did surprised me. It clarified my thoughts, generated creative pursuits and an enhanced ability to work on them, and, most relevantly, gave new direction and meaning to this project which Chapter One mentions. This is not intended to be a self-indulgent insertion of myself and my experiences into the dissertation. Rather, by writing this, as I mention in the postscript, I hope to highlight how my own experiences helped me better understand some of the issues and questions I've thought about in my research, that I'm dealing with in this project. Towards the end of my project, I realised that I myself have been heavily a part of my fieldwork and have been as much a subject of the fieldwork I've undertaken, along with the hawkers and factory workers, in terms of thinking about work, productivity, labour process and politics, and it only seems right to make that explicit.

It also helped me understand the seemingly contrary viewpoint,[193] and (as usual) seemingly provocative proposition put forward by the editor of FMS, where he invited the reader to draw their attention to how the pandemic lockdowns gave factory workers that precious thing-time. That workers were experiencing enough time to sleep and rest, possibly, I would imagine, for the first time in their working lives, for some of the younger ones.

Leisure and free time appeared in conversations more frequently with factory workers, and less with hawkers. This might have something to do with the way time operates in each occupation.

The hawkers I spoke to had variable work days-many began days as early as 3.45 AM in order to go buy the goods for the day. Their days ended not before 10 PM in most cases. Some hawkers, within their work day, moved from one hawking site to another, others switched occupations during the day. These were long days, with very little time to spend at home. Or, more accurately, very little time to spend away from their work sites. However, the minutes of the work day in themselves did not suffer from demands mandated by anyone other than themselves (in a manner of speaking). The hours flowed with greater flexibility, the pace of work picking up at certain rush hours, and slowing down in non-peak hours. There were hours in the afternoon when they could and would shut down for washing up, eating and resting. The time to be physically still was also to be found during work hours. There is time for tea, time for conversations, time to do what they pleased in between customers. Time was, arguably, less compressed, their experience of it less taut than that of factory workers. I don't wish to suggest that they were masters of their time (nor that factory workers had uniformly compressed experiences of time at work-I've shown variations exist)-they still lived working class lives

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[193]Compared to how most commentators and observers were reacting to the migrant worker crisis created during the lockdown, especially in factory hubs –i.e., with justified despair, outrage, sadness.

marked by too-long days, with no elbow room for taking days off. It is just that possibly their days were less frantic second to second, minute to minute, than factory workers.

In contrast, factory workers fought for and won the right to 8-hour days in the previous century, the gains of which have since been enjoyed, at least on paper, by workers at the high and low ends of the labour market. That is one of the things we celebrate on May Day. However, as the FMS keeps pointing out, the 8-hour day has not been the norm in factories in quite a while. Twelve-hour shifts are the norm, with even more hours of forced overtime being pretty common during busy seasons. In my fieldwork I encountered people who supplemented their twelve-hour shift jobs with double shifts and/or second and third jobs to make ends meet, as mentioned. Their doing so is obviously a comment on the gross inadequacy of the wages being paid. But also, this highlights not only how little time a factory worker has away from the work site, but the nature of factory work is also such that, by design, their minutes and seconds inside the factory are frequently to be accounted for by work-repetitive, fast-paced work. Doing the same thing all day, faster than they have ever had to work historically, producing more by way of targets than they have ever had to, despite automation. Literature abounds on timed toilet breaks, and 3.5-minute tea breaks. By design, there isn't much elbow room within the work day to rest, to converse, to be physically still, to reflect.

However, what a lot of the contemporary literature leaves out, and what interactions with the FMS and fieldwork revealed is that workers routinely subvert this pace through innovative means, as mentioned, sometimes individually engineered, sometimes collectively, without any apparent planning and pre-decision, and that they have always done so. Leisure on the factory floor is wrested and snatched, and is very political that way. Leisure/rest/conversation on the factory floor is time stolen from company time, and is treated as such by management. Such an attitude prevailed even in the 1970s/1960s with Cleverley (1973, 117) recounting an instance of a worker in a tobacco factory in England who, by discovering a more efficient

process, managed to cut his working time down and used the gained minutes to take a break-to smoke, read papers and do crossword puzzles. However, despite the efficiency he added to the production process by his innovation, he was berated and made to promise he would revert to the more inefficient process. As he notes:

> "The appearance of idleness must be avoided, whatever the reality of the situation. The labourer has learned that for him the rest room is a forbidden place except at the ritually prescribed times."
>
> -**Cleverley** (1973, 117)

The intense pace of work on the factory floor, for extended work days that are the norm, coupled with the second and third jobs, make the absence of free time away from the work site even more critical, perhaps, in comparison with hawkers. It leaves the bare minimum time for a worker to take care of personal and household chores, eat and sleep before beginning another day of factory work. Unless a worker manages to wrest time on the shop floor or at home, they have no time for anything but a bare existence. No time to rest and/or think, individually and collectively, about agency, and different political futures.

It is in this context that the FMS editor's celebration of the sudden availability of time must be read. It is also in this context that workers use of time on the shop floor for anything other than company assigned work must be read. Every act of claiming/reclaiming time on the shopfloor for themselves is, whether intentionally or unintentionally, inherently infused with radical possibilities. Especially because, as the tobacco worker incident from above recalls and reiterates, keeping workers busy isn't necessarily related to productivity, but is a matter of control, since free time for a worker could be dangerous for the establishment and prevailing order.

Anything that threatens to puncture the prevailing order is dangerous and treated as such. Most threatening of all, perhaps, are displays of irreverence – which again, are more common than what narratives of working-class victimhood would have us believe. Irreverence and laughter loosen the control managements struggle hard to exert on the workforce. An illustrative example to conclude this point and discussion are the chargesheets given to workers at the Bajaj Chakan Plant in Pune, with whom the management had been locked in an extended industrial dispute in 2013:

> "You were laughing, singing and dancing on the line
>
> You were changing positions at will on the line
>
> You were deliberately stalling the line
>
> You don't listen to the management. This violates the agreement made with the union on 21 May 2010
>
> This is a violation of company rules. You have 72 hours to reply as to why strict action should not be taken against you"

-**FMS**, February 2014 issue

Drudgery, repetition, pain

Another prominent experience of modern work is that of its drudgery, repetition and pain, especially in light of the preceding discussion on the absence of free time, leisure, and in the absence of freedom to, like Marx's ideal workday, choose and change one's work based on pleasure, without being confined to any single occupation or being defined by a single occupation/ work role. Arguably, this mind-numbing nature is something experienced more by factory workers than hawkers, because of the nature of their work as mentioned in the section above. Some of that experience is evocatively captured by the poems written by Xu Lizhi, referred to in Chapter Three. One sees how it is the repetition that causes pain, and how the

repetition (in assembly line work) causes de-skilling and robs creative satisfaction. For instance, mentioned earlier in this chapter is the young garment factory worker speaking of how today most tailors working in the chain system in a garment factory do not have the satisfaction or the skill to make a full garment, because everyone is only stitching one particular part along the assembly line. This is in contrast to sampling tailors who are responsible for creating full pieces and tend to be the highest paid within garment factories.

Others argue that the assembly line has long escaped the factory, and become characteristic of modern digital and even brain-work related jobs. That is, even in jobs where one is using one's 'brain' more than limbs, such as fact-checkers hired for social media platforms, their work floors are structured like factory floors, and the repetitive, mind-numbing nature of the factory floor is replicated experientially in even these new kinds of factory floors.[194]

Fraysse (2014), drawing on Marx's notion of the ideal workday and what makes it ideal (i.e., variety, creativity, not being bound to one thing forever) notes that-

> "…if a change of work is a holiday, then what makes work an especially painful activity is its continuation through an over-extended period of time, the ensuing boredom, and the transformation of pain, which is an unavoidable part of life, into suffering, which is an avoidable part of life."

> -**Fraysse** (2014, 480)

'Relentlessness and endlessness are the two things that make hell hellish', he notes (Fraysse 2014, 480). It becomes the very opposite of that which is life-giving and life-affirming. Man's craving for variety and creativity are recognised by modern work spaces and he speaks of how human resources specialists allow 'cyberloafing' on the internet during the workday to lower

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[194]See Newton (2019).

stress and increase productivity (Fraysse 2014, 480). However, as Hardt and Negri (2004) have argued, what it does is it serves to further blur the distinction between work time and free time, contributing ultimately to reducing the duration and quality of leisure time that is available outside of work. No matter how one tries to dress it- 'leisure' at work is an oxymoron. As long as excessive hours and immersion in 'productive work' remains the basis of the modern economic paradigm, it is inevitable that varying amounts of pain and drudgery will be produced and experienced.

Ambition, desire, hope

"I started from where my father's dreams, aspirations ended."

"What did your father do?"

"He was a (tractor) driver."

-**Ram**[195]

"And, most importantly of all, I wanted to throw a spotlight on the generations, the millions and millions, for whom 'success', defined as anything other than the basic survival of themselves and their family, was a concept of which they were denied to the extent that they were chained, leg, wrist and neck, to an institutionally blessed mindset of zero expectation. To those in charge of those institutions, the working class is as it describes. A production line of workers, nothing more, nothing less. People? With character, hope, intelligence, ambition? Forget it. Get back in your box and shut up."

-**Christopher Eccleston** (2019, 316)

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[195]Not his real name.

On the face of it, Ram and Christopher Eccleston have nothing to do with each other: one is a young migrant worker in IMT Manesar from a village in neighbouring U.P. in his early twenties, the other is a successful and critically acclaimed actor in the United Kingdom. And yet they are connected by their working-class experiences and the universal desire for a better, a more hopeful life. Ram began recounting his life story to me with what I quote above: a desire to live a life that was 'more' than his father's, a life-long working-class wage earner as a driver, a desire for even dreams that were 'more' than the dream his father had for him- another working-class job, but better paid. How much better paid? Nothing that would be considered too audacious, too beyond the "*auqat*" (capacity/status) of someone of their class, a nice Rs.25,000-Rs.30,000 a month, which would be a significant jump from the father's earnings of Rs.10,000-Rs.12,000 a month. Father and son didn't have dreams that resonated at the same frequency. Nonetheless, neither of their dreams had any chance of coming to fruition in and around their village, that was clear. And so, the desire for a better life, a better income contributed to Ram migrating to the nearest major industrial hub, in Manesar, in the manner many such migrations occur- a fellow villager already working in Manesar became the point of contact, channel of entry and source of introduction into the new city. He got him a job in the factory he worked in, and thus began Ram's working life. The location of hope in the trajectory of his young life was forward, straight ahead, into the future.

Christopher Eccleston was born into a working-class home in the industrial town of Salford, Greater Manchester, UK, and came from a multi-generational working-class family. The memoir he published in 2019 fascinated me greatly. It isn't an obvious suspect for working class literature, but as one reads, it becomes clear that it is precisely that. The subject matter of his memoir isn't his professional work and fame. It is, rather, in his own words, a book in which he wanted to explore '…elements far more deep and elemental-the nature of father/son relationships, dementia, masculinity, mental health' Eccleston (2019, 315). It is a searing

account that demonstrates how structural factors of class society produced and continue to produce very personal and complex experiences of class, gender, sexuality and mental health. He does a post-mortem of the lived experiences of his parents, especially his father, a retired factory worker who had recently passed away, and a 'real-time' analysis of how that has impacted and continues to impact his lived experiences, into his fifties. He identifies very viscerally with his father and finds deep echoes of his father's personality, emotional make-up and personhood coursing through his own self and personhood, and speaks many times of feeling that he *is* his father, and living out the experiences of his father, only in a drastically different socio-economic time, and therefore with different consequences. The book is, amongst other things, an exposition on the death of hope in his father's life and for his father's generation and an ethnography of the production and process of realisation of hope in his own. In that sense, this is a narrative trajectory that moves in two opposite directions at once (following his father's life and his own), with the late 1960s being the 'zero point', the point of divergence (between his father's narrative and his own). The temporal location of this divergence is not incidental, and I will return to that in a bit.

In both narratives, Ram's and Eccleston's, fathers loom large. Unconsciously for Ram, and deliberately for a self-aware Eccleston. And the texture and shape of working-class hope are brought into the spotlight, up for scrutiny and subject to discussion. In the quoted extract above, from Eccleston's book, he illustrates how for his father's generation, hope was structurally capped; success was basic survival for oneself and one's family, and a weekly pint or two at the local pub or an occasional family outing at the movies, or equivalent. This is not dissimilar to Ram's father, who perhaps illustrates the internalisation of this kind of (structural) capping of hope in his ambitions for his son. 'People? With character, hope, intelligence, ambition? Forget it,' like Eccleston (2019, 316) says. Ram rebels against this ceiling, like Eccleston, who grew up seeing his father embodying diverse interests, including a love for words and reading

dictionaries, and a naturally enquiring mind that existed *despite* the scope of his (state-designed) schooling.[196]

> "Do you know how bees make honey?' he'd ask, and a thousand other questions like it. Life was an adventure. But that side of a person was never encouraged if they were working class. It was never going to be any use in a battle zone or heavy industry."
>
> -**Eccleston** (2019, 61)

His father, he says, wanted a 'life of the mind'. However, he adds, "Unlike me, it was never in his sway to find it" (Eccleston 2019, 61). Stripping down workers and working lives to their material needs is not merely the endeavour of capitalists and capitalist states, in their ruthless drive to meet the needs of industrialised economies. Even avowedly pro-working-class organisations and entities frequently end up mirroring this capitalist logic sometimes, choosing to foreground the need for material sustenance and reproduction over non-material desires and dreams that feed not the physical body, but emotional, psychological and spiritual selves, like I argue. As if human beings can so be sectioned and partitioned, like moving parts of unconnected machine! This-making the strategic decision about which part of a worker's self and needs to highlight, and when- is a political choice that workers movements and the left have to and must grapple with.

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[196]To serve the interests of industry and industrialised economy, in England, the school leaving age was twelve in Eccleston's grandparents' era, raised from ten in 1899 (Eccleston 2019, 236). His parents' generation left school at fourteen and entered the workforce. This age was raised to fifteen, according to Eccleston, from the year of his birth, in 1964. He says, "The message was clear-'You are only going to be given the most rudimentary education and emotionally you are going to be raised in an environment that makes you capable of hard, relentless work'" (Eccleston 2019, 236). One grew up believing, like he (Eccleston) did, that finer emotions and vulnerability were for the 'cerebral' classes.

Eccleston argues that this deliberate, structural suppression and shaping of young people from working class backgrounds into workers-to-be, had consequences.

> "I wasn't expecting Dad to walk through the door and be full of hugs. That wasn't the way. It was never going to be the way. I'd grown up surrounded by and embedded among the anger of the working classes, not just my father, but in general. Anger was not a rarity in lives like mine; it had a constant existence."

> -**Eccleston** (2019, 69)

This is anger in the personal space and sphere, in Eccleston's narrative, but one notes that this is also anger that can spill out into the larger public sphere. Structural conditions play an active role in stoking and producing anger that isn't inherently channelized into a political logic, anger that isn't neat and ordered. This can and does lead to periodic outbursts of rage and seeming chaos, such as what the UK witnessed during the 2011 riots.[197] Within the Left, then, there was a lack of consensus about how to view them. Armstrong (2012) points out that many on the Left sought '…to disown the riots; to dismiss them as apolitical or simply "consumerist looting", as the actions of a demoralised "underclass" or as counterposed to working class methods of struggle.' He counters such positions by arguing for the riot to be considered a legitimate form of working-class struggle, providing brief moments of liberation. However, he holds on to a distinction between riots that can be considered progressive and those that cannot-such as racist and reactionary riots. According to him, riots, like any other form of struggle, can be used by the right as well as the left in society. He notes that '…there is a growing layer of alienated and socially deprived working-class youth in the large cities of Europe and North America which feels it has no stake in the system and no political representation. This is fertile

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[197]See BBC (2011).

ground for further social explosions' (Armstrong 2012). Bhowmik (2012) also noted, drawing from historical examples such as what followed after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, how the failure of trade unions to truly represent workers, and oppose anti-worker state policies, leads sometimes to frustrated working classes gravitating towards right-wing movements-neo-fascist as well as religious ones.

The relationship between structural factors and workers as agents and participants of riots-especially of the 'non-progressive' kind, going by Armstrong's distinction-has been studied in the Indian context as well.[198] Chatterjee (2019) too briefly touches upon the manner in which those on the wrong side of the class divide can, in modern Indian society, in the present political economy of precarious jobs and tenuous livelihoods, produce devastating violence. Referring to the November 2019 rape and murder of a young veterinarian doctor from Hyderabad, and the consequent extra-judicial shooting of the four rape-accused by the police, Chatterjee suggests that the 'search for certainty and closure' by young migrant men in the city living with the daily pressures of precarious livelihoods and inadequate familial, social and cultural support, sometimes 'ends up in finding a weak and defenceless target…some of them seek out vulnerable women as objects of their violent fantasies…One act of male power overrides with deadly finality the utter powerlessness of their social condition' (Chatterjee 2019). I'd like to add here that this is not to be taken as a defence of or excuse for such violence; nor is this to be seen as part of that problematic social narrative which views all working-class individuals with suspicion and as potential criminals. This is also not to suggest that the privileged classes of society, including the middle classes, are not participants and agents of social violence

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[198] For some discussions see Swami (2019), Nandy (2002), Sethi (2002), Robinson and Upadhyay (2012). For a similar discussion touching upon the entire subcontinent, see also Bhutto (2021)- this is shared to buttress the point of the rage that arises from thwarted human aspirations and dreams in working class people, not to endorse the argument Bhutto makes for why this factory manager was brutally murdered. In view with the larger argument being made, that particular target was probably selected as a symbol of the oppressive work order and not just social anger.

(which Chatterjee's article also makes clear). It is merely recognition of the fact that one cannot ignore the truth that structural conditions produce complex forms of anger and violence within the working classes and in society.

Ecclestone emphasizes his point about the lived experiences of structurally smothered hope in working class lives further:

> "… through a system that not only strangled their dreams but knowingly made them feel foolish to have harboured any in the first place. Challenging the institutionally sanctioned smothering of working-class hope has been the driving force of my life. It is very clear to me that my mum and dad were handed a rudimentary education on purpose, kept in their place because they were intended for the factory and/or the cannon. And so, by extension, were me and my brothers."
>
> -**Eccleston** (2019, 193)

He refused such a future for himself:

> "More than anything, I was scared that if I didn't break out and do something different, it would make me like my dad. I would inherit his anger and bad-temperedness. I looked at him and thought, <u>I am not going to work nine to five in a factory because it will do to me what it did to you</u>."
>
> -**Eccleston** (2019, 87) (emphasis mine)

Very simply and succinctly he sums up his evaluation of the experience of a lifetime of factory-work in an industrialised economy: that the process of production of a factory worker did grave violence to the self. To a large extent, there is a universality to this evaluation that arguably applies to all (factory, but not just factory) workers, albeit with different degrees of intensity.

Note here the mention of the 9-5 working day in the factory, which was still the norm in his father's time, as well as the previously mentioned 'zero point', the temporal point of divergence of Eccleston's life trajectory from his father's, i.e., the late 1960s. These provide clues to the nature of the world of work that existed in his father's time, and the socio-economic conditions that existed in that period, right up till the Thatcher years, that made it possible for working-class youth like Eccleston to pursue hope. Although Eccleston does not go into detail on the socio-economic policies of the state that in his time offered him greater social mobility than his father's generation, he mentions benefitting from the Labour governments of the mid-1960s and early 1970s.

Eccleston, born in 1964, grew up in the years of the UK's post-war consensus (a period that spanned 1945-1979), a period marked by a mixed economy, Keynesianism, and the presence of a welfare state. It was a period that saw educational reforms kicking in which allowed greater mobility to working class children, with a significant expansion of state-funded higher education and culture and the arts. This included public subsidy for theatre, which allowed a whole different kind of theatre and playwrights to emerge, symbolised best, perhaps, by John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger,* a play best read as being *about* anger, a general, all-pervasive, not specifically directed at anything anger, expressing the post-war mood of the youth. This was a period of improved prosperity for the working classes. It was also a period of significant social change, marked by the counter-culture movements of the 1960s where the young, of which Eccleston then was a part, were suddenly challenging the mores and conventions of existing society. It was a period of great social churn that opened out imaginations. Eccleston talks about the impact, for instance, of David Bowie's music and androgynous persona (and glam rock in general) that left a deep impact on a generation's notions of sexualities and masculinities and how this fluidity was a drastic change from the way his father's generation

of working class men understood what 'proper' masculinity and men presented as.[199] Further, state funded schools, including that for the arts, allowed young boys like Eccleston to escape a life in the factories, and infiltrate the arts, allowing them to find and pursue a 'life of the mind',[200] that was structurally made impossible for his father.[201]

That Eccleston was able to pursue hope and break the generational chain of working-class life for something more is not to suggest that this mobility was easy, despite the reasonably favourable socio-economic policy environment of Labour in his youth. Despite the successes he achieved, breaching the domains of classical theatre to critical acclaim, for instance, Eccleston makes it quite clear that life as an actor from the working classes was difficult, especially for someone like him- loud and proud about his background, unwilling to erase the working class and his link to it from his artistic and professional pursuits (fiercely determined to do the opposite, in fact). The odds were stacked against the likes of him in the industry.

One notes with interest that these were not just material odds (generated by the film, TV and theatre industry) but also psychological and emotional ones, such as the scars left behind by growing up working class. The (very real) costs of hope, and fulfilment of potential, structurally denied to his father's generation manifests both, in his father, who had an undiagnosed nervous breakdown at work,[202] and in Eccleston himself, who has fought his way back from a breakdown, and has struggled with serious mental health conditions throughout life. Father and son suffer/ed from the mind, had breakdowns at the exact same age (fifty-two), but as he notes-

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[199]As he notes, however, this was not the only presentation of masculinity in vogue then. The musical movement represented by punk rock, on the other hand, as he notes, celebrated (not unlike Osborne's play one notes…) anger, an 'anybody-can-do-it attitude' (Eccleston 2019, 81) and more traditional masculinity.

[200]After his schooling, Eccleston trained at the prestigious, state-funded, Royal Central School of Speech and Drama in London.

[201] Eccleston notes, however, that the doors that opened for him in the 1980s, as a result of the Labour policies of the governments of his childhood, no longer existed: the possibility of mobility had shrunk again.

[202] In addition, his father, Ronnie Eccleston, lost his self and mind to Alzheimer's towards the end of his life.

"He was one of millions of (to those who know no better) faceless individuals who were never given any access to psychiatric help the like of which I received. Part of that is about eras, but part of it is also about capitalism. If a worker breaks down at the end of their life, why fix them? You wouldn't spend that time and money if it was a machine. You'd just get another….George Orwell didn't write Animal Farm for nothing. The working class are useful, then they are not. Binary. No grey areas. Politicians talk about the 'burden' of an ageing population. Presumably it was better when they died young from industrial diseases. Respect is what it boils down to. And the likes of my dad weren't shown any."

-**Eccleston** (2019, 151)

Eccleston's severe clinical suicidal depression and breakdown give him a lot of food for thought, creating space for reflection. "Breakdown", he notes, remains a much-stigmatized word, although it is actually a "very legitimate response to life in the early twenty first century" (Eccleston 2019, 149). We are not built to function to the rhythms of this 'non-stop world'. He reflects on how he ends up being grateful for the experience, emerging at the end of it as someone who felt more freedom, how it allowed him to become more conscious of his mental mechanisms and do a lot of inner work to process major issues in his life. However, as he notes-

 "I know also that my mum and dad weren't afforded the luxury of such awareness. They didn't have the opportunity to ponder quirks of personality in themselves or anyone else."

-**Eccleston** (2019, 311)

The structural tamping down of the scope of working class hopes and desires is what he set out to depart from. In this journey towards the realisation of his desire, the ambition for a life 'more' than his father's, his breakdown propels his narrative forward, rather than retarding or blocking it. It was a transformatory rupture.[203] It allowed him a release that his father did not have access to. It allows him to break the chain, and ultimately keep on towards the production of a life that is 'more' than his father's. The pursuit of hope, desire, ambition bore fruit, and continue to manifest in real ways in his life today.

For Ram, though, in 2016, living in a very different global (and national) moment with respect to how the economic, social and political is arranged, the hope he pursues is, arguably, far more illusory. Eccleston's trajectory is not available to him. At one point in our conversation, he hitches his personal narrative of mobility to the *chaiwalla* Modi who became Prime Minister- a narrative of possibility carefully crafted by the Modi PR machinery, and dangled as real, when the truth of it is far more suspect.

> "Have you heard this saying? '*Paisa toh sab kama lete hain, par karne ka tareeka hota hai…*' ('anybody can earn money, but not everybody knows the art of it…'). It isn't as if people are born as Tata/Birla/Ambani. *Kuch na kuch toh kiya hi hoga* ('they must have after all done something right'). Today if PM Modi has become PM Modi *toh chai bechke bana thha* ('he sold tea on the way to becoming PM')…*Main company par hi reh ke disc.*[204] *pe aa gaya* ('starting out at a company, I've reached a disc. now')."
>
> -**Ram**

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[203]Such ruptures, I argue, are potentially deeply valuable, for individuals and/or societies, for they enable a break with problematic status quo. As I suggest elsewhere, 2020 represented such a rupture at a global level. Another such rupture, more local, discussed to in Chapter One, was the 2012 Maruti workers riot in Manesar.

[204]Short form for discotheque. Ram began at a factory job, quit and consequently worked with a real estate company, which he also quit to work at a Gurgaon discotheque. These were advantageous and rapid job-hopping moves, for Ram, and he was proud of this progression.

> "Power *ka shawk sab ko hota hai*." ("Everybody has a desire for power")
>
> **-Ram**

I first met Ram in 2016 during my fieldwork at IMT Manesar, when he had just quit a factory job and had begun to work for a real estate agent. Several months later, I spoke with him again. Of all the conversations I had on the field, it was the one with him that made the strongest impression and has refused to vacate my mind. It was a strange conversation: poignant, naked with vulnerability, cinematic in the way he crafted his life story, and wild in the trajectory it took, swinging from descriptions of a life working at a factory in Manesar, then moving on to a real estate job in the area and then ultimately to working in a Gurgaon discotheque, 'sourcing' 'dance girls', as he put it, from Kolkata and the expat East European community in Delhi NCR. You heard many things in his words: he was alone, and lonely, frequently hurt, self-made, projection of a narrative of success, of having 'made it', of vertiginous social and financial mobility, a powerful undercurrent of ambition and big city dreams beyond merely 'livelihood'. Reading this you might think he was at least forty. In reality though, he would have been barely twenty-he cheerfully refused to disclose his age. I'm still not quite sure what to make of our entire conversation.

When he had come to Gurgaon, he had only come in search of work. Through some fellow villagers working in Gurgaon, he started working at a factory, as a helper on a CNC machine in an auto-parts company. The company employed upwards of 300 workers. Within four months, he was promoted to an operator.

> "I worked here till I lost interest and then I left. It took a lot of *mehnat* (i.e., hard work). There was the pressure of night shift, double shifts at times, production, meeting targets…"
>
> **-Ram**

He used to have to work one week of day shifts followed by a week of night shifts. That was strenuous, and soon his body became "*dheela*", and began to give up.

The impact and intensity of factory work was such-even for a young lad around twenty- that it pushed him to look for other kinds of work. So, he went to a real estate agent's office looking for an office-based job. An office job was the original dream, one he had harboured from the start. However, for a freshly arrived village boy, there had been no office jobs on offer. Until now.

In the beginning, he enjoyed the new job. He went from receiving wages at the factory to working solely on a commission/incentive basis in real estate (similar in beer bar/ discotheque, later). The real estate company was primarily aimed at factory workers: they approached those workers earning more than Rs.20,000 a month, with offers to buy Rs. 5 lakh plots on monthly EMIs of Rs.5000, with 30% down payment.

> "When a fellow enters real estate, there is scope for unlimited profit…I entered this field for the unlimited profit, to climb above the salary."
>
> -**Ram**

It sounded to me as if the work here was as intense as the factory work. Here too he spoke of working day and night, although the language he used to convey this was drastically different: it was filled with positive declarations. The day-night work here was welcome potential to climb above the wage level of the factory (colloquially called 'salary'). He enjoyed the SUV he was given to take clients to locations. The real estate job symbolised the entrepreneurial dream, whereas the factory was the killer of dreams.

> "I have done real estate work for very long, *ab pak chuka hoon*." ("I'm sick and tired of it now").
>
> -**Ram**

By the time I had spoken to him next, however, he had moved on. The **'very long'** he speaks of above referred to a duration of less than 8 months. The experience of time is, of course, subjective, but the equation of 'very long' with eight months cannot just be put down to his age, and understood as the impatience of and absence of an understanding of the long duration in young people. Ram's language is, in fact, very much reflective of the subjective experience of employment durations in the present world of (especially factory) work, echoed by others, especially young people in their early 20s, which I mention in the previous chapter.

"I said Sir, I don't like working under anyone…"

"…I work for myself." (**Ram**)

"But you're under contract, aren't you?" (i.e., at the beer bar/discotheque)

(**Myself**)

"Yes, a contract. There is just a relationship of 'senior-junior' between us,

that of a friendship."

-from the conversation with **Ram**

He was now working at what he called a discotheque/beer bar in Gurgaon, where the prestige and income was higher, as he spoke of it. He spoke of the new job in terms of having moved up in life, of having first moved beyond the factory wage system to the commission system in the real estate job under an employer, to a more autonomous role within the disc., as he spoke of it. He was courted by the owner, he said, who asked him to come in as a partner in the business. On probing further, it became clear that it wasn't exactly a partnership, and that he was still under a contract, but he chose to portray the relationship as a 'senior-junior' one rather than an employer-employee one. These little narrative decisions of his (many of which I don't refer to here) are, for me, charged with pathos and longing, his naked vulnerability coming through. Of a boy dreaming hard, desiring so deeply to fashion himself into an image that is

so far away from his reality. A fictionalised narrative of a becoming he wants to project-to others and maybe also to himself.

Ram's use of language provided an interesting insight into his self-fashioning. For instance, he did not see himself as working class, as *majdoor*, but as middle class. In the course of our conversation, he established that I think of myself as 'middle-class', and disagreed-

"…your father submits income tax?"

"Yes."

"So then how are you middle class?" *Laughs* "That's all upper class. *Aap log toh* high society *mein aa jate hain*." ("You people come under 'high society'")

-**Ram**

This was obviously not a statement on Marxist class for him, but perhaps no less valid as a social perspective on class. This was a comment on social stratifications, as he experienced it, with a cut-off point, as *he* saw it. According to him, people like him-who did not fall under the income tax bracket-, were middle class. Language, as mentioned earlier, is important. Perhaps thinking of himself as middle-class-though with none of the material and social benefits and cushioning of the middle classes- held space for his ambitions and aspirations more effectively than thinking of himself as working class, and being immediately confronted by the attendant reality of that.

This is not to suggest that he is lost in fantasy. He was very well acquainted with ground conditions, and material reality, because he was living it. He would likely know, better than many, just how far a person from the working classes can aspire to, having seen first-hand through his real estate job how difficult home ownership remains, as well as in his disc job, where the clientele would likely reveal which kinds of people can pay for such leisure and

entertainment. Remarkably self-reflexive, he was aware of the complexity involved in getting ahead, for people like him. Of being implicated in work that is morally in the grey area, but is *work*, nonetheles*s*.

> *"*Tell me one thing. A person who runs a beer bar, is he not selling *nasha* (addiction)? He is, isn't he? That is his *vyavsay.* His *rozi roti.* I have work at a beer bar*, nasha* is sold here also. People (may) come here to shed their stress, but they do *nasha* after all. *Daru mai(n) bhi deta hoon unhe…Humari* line *koi achhi nahi…hum hi ache nahi hote toh* client *kahaan se ache honge? Par <u>kaam </u>hai*." ("…we sell addiction. We ourselves are not good (since we deal in addiction), how can our clients be (good)? But it is <u>work.</u>")

> -**Ram**

And also (speaking about his personal life, and romantic liaisons that develop between his colleagues at the disc., which he dismissed as foolish and a waste of time)-

> *"...*in today's time, love can't give everything. *Duniya na bahut hi bura hai. Pyar se na roti nahi aati hai*."("The world, you know, is a cruel place. Love does not put food on your plate*)"*

> -**Ram**

Deftly dipping between the pragmatic and the poetic, he reflects the complex reality of working-class lives- where material sustenance and money remains one of the most important problems, but so do the longings of the heart, with no easy way to choose one over the other.

Ram's story, unlike Eccleston's, is just beginning. Eccleston was able to recognise the fears and limitations faced by his parents, ones that he inherited by virtue of his class location, but notes that, ultimately, he was able to do what he desired-to play Macbeth at the (prestigious)

Royal Shakespeare Company, to play a lead at the (also prestigious) Olivier Theatre. That he was able to do so despite his history and circumstances, because of the doors that were opened for him by Labour government policies at that time. Ram too presented himself as having made it already at a young age, of being poised on the verge of moving on to greater things. But, at least in 2016, he had to resort to a heavily fictionalised narrative at points, while speaking of the lived experiences of his ambitions. He spoke of now renting several flats, owning multiple vehicles, being able to donate large amounts to charity. In both their narratives one encounters similar desires for 'more', universal desires, but the outcomes are different, reflecting different political, economic and social climates and material conditions. These are desires inadequately captured both in the arts and in politics.

In view of the earlier discussion on the value of free time, and leisure, in the present economic paradigm, it is interesting to note the way in which Ram concluded our conversation. I had asked him what he now hoped for, what he now wanted to achieve, since he had, as he told it, met his dream of creating a life that exceeded his father's very imaginations for him.

> *"Abhi achha lagta hai aaram. Aaram se kaam karo". ("*I now like ease/leisure. I want to work with ease/leisure"*.)"* I have done a lot, nothing more now, just *aaram."*

> *"*Somethings are just [pause]…*har cheez paisa nahi hota hai."* ("money is not everything.")

And then he abruptly unclipped the voice recorder and said "interview *khatam"* ("interview over"). Politely, but firmly.

Aaram. The greatest ambition of all, so to speak.

Conclusion

This chapter illustrates how this threefold relationship with work emerges in messy ways in workers' resistance and political articulations. It also puts into context the interesting ways in which there is a constant attempt at counter-balancing the desires and ambitions of people (that arise from this threefold relationship with work) with attempts at pacification of discontent. In this concluding section, I briefly dwell on why the attempt to manage discontent is not effective and the kinds of concerns that workers' movements would ideally need to take into account.

Pacification of discontent frequently happens through minor interventions intended to appease *just enough* and to prevent further unrest by various forces-culture, state, management, and even trade unions sometimes. This can be seen as an attempt to keep the worker's eyes turned away from possible political futures that can undo the present system, by keeping them engaged/content with small concessions within the present system. But this act of counterbalancing is not always effective.[205] On the contrary, it is a potentially potent point of intervention/a pressure point for progressive workers political movements and activists. Since pay, conditions and survival needs are arguably qualitatively different from existential factors and needs, of hopes and desires-which are harder to 'solve' for managements- we have a scope and pressing need to examine and articulate the discontent of workers beyond those parameters.

Discontent, therefore, is more all-encompassing than just relating to material working conditions, though those can be immediate triggers for resistance and struggle, mentioned in Chapter Five (e.g., unpaid bonuses and delayed wages; evictions). How well does the state/employer/manager <u>understand</u> the nature of discontent? In this lacuna lies the potential for transformatory ruptures.

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[205] For instance, the significant concessions by the management of Maruti Suzuki in IMT Manesar in 2011, mentioned in Chapter Five, still failed to prevent the uprising of July 2012.

The ruling order tries to understand the worker so as to manage them- and funds copious amounts of research into it directly and indirectly-but a worker's self, like any self, cannot be well enough known. I, too, in my role as an institutionally-affiliated researcher am implicated in this drive for knowing and knowability, as mentioned in the postscript. My personal intentions in my desire to know might be 'innocent', but that becomes irrelevant so long as I'm still positioned within that system of motivated knowledge production, where my dissertation will ultimately contribute to a body of knowledge within the academe, even if it forever lies, unread, on a library shelf in my university, as mandated. I came alive to this realisation in one of my conversations with the FMS collective. They pointed out how the desire to know/understand is intrinsically twinned with the desire to control. What you do not know or understand, you cannot control/manage. It is fascinating to wonder along the lines of uncontrollability/unknowability as being/having the potential of being either volatile or wildly freeing, or both. The conversation drove home the point that research, of the academic kind, is used to understand how to control/manage society. Factory managements use this research to formulate their management strategy.

Posit this desire to control and manage the worker[206] with the reality of the 'unmanageable worker' who managements cannot discipline. For instance, allow me to repeat here snippets from a conversation with Pritam,[207] the young factory worker from Faridabad mentioned in Chapter Five (interview, May 2016). These are some of the things he has been infamous for:

- Always returning late from lunches (he used to go home to eat).

- Being convinced by a friend to skip work and go to the well-known and popular Surajkund mela where the friend's girlfriend apparently was to be.

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[206] This control isn't always done with the stick; there is genuine puzzlement on the part of the management and sometimes even good-hearted desires to 'help' a worker with their problems.
[207] Not his real name.

- Breaking expensive equipment repeatedly at a pharmaceuticals factory.

- Scandalising important visitors at a factory he was employed at by lounging around semi-naked at the factory's changing room area. The management had warned the workers in advance that the visitors were to come and told them to be on their best behaviour.

- Sleeping at work.

- Managing 'friends' who cover for him when he does all the above. He had supplied a young female colleague with chocolates, made friends with a 'dangerous guy' on the factory floor, etc.

For every story one reads of the cowed down factory worker, struggling under the conditions set by factory management, we are reminded that there are as many if not more such stories of young men and women who make up the workforce in the same factories.

Returning to the question of whether workers politics have any political heft and impact today (raised in Chapter One), globally, and in India, one feels that at a practical level, workers' movements and activists and thinkers need to engage with this. Do we know how to effectively make workers politics more impactful, especially as India twice re-elected a right-wing authoritarian government that has been further decimating workers' rights? This is a very real, and material concern for movements on the ground. This is a lack that movements discuss openly and internally, and had led to some unions developing an election strategy before the general elections of both 2014 and 2019. Clearly it did not work- raising the question of whether that is because governments no longer need or care for the working class vote, or because organised political movements are simply failing to understand their membership adequately? It points to a need for holistic engagement, better engagement, with the figure of the worker within capitalism, rather than piecemeal treatment of issues (minimum wage, working hours, social security benefits etc.)

The complexity of a worker's politics can be further driven home by the over-large presence of the BJP within NHF Delhi, in a movement that is otherwise progressive and pronouncedly left, in West Bengal and several other states. In Delhi, as mentioned, it was fascinating to observe how the BJP, as a mainstream political party, was 1) turning formal attention and dedicating senior personnel to organise and handle the informal sector, 2) the presence and creation of neighbourhood level BJP workers who were dignified with official posts and designations, and 3) who, it seemed to me, were provided with scope of recognition and political career growth within the party structure. Whether this potential was real or imagined does not matter- the party had successfully created the *impression* that the possibility was real.

This underscores, again, perhaps, the point that for any movement to be impactful and attractive, it would need to address these basic human needs and desires too. Altruism isn't enough; to imagine it should be enough for a worker to participate politically, is nothing more than fantasy.

It is important for progressive forces to recognise the right wing as a worthy opponent, not underestimate it, to see what it is doing 'well'-and learn from its often highly methodical ways of capturing the narrative and building its community.[208] Countering right-wing influence might be easier through methods that frequently appear in the FMS- conversations, honouring the individual, *talmel*. That such practices offer hope and contain great possibility is wonderfully illustrated by Sharma (2020) who writes of how conversations that then student activists Umar Khalid and Anirban Bhattacharya had with their jail guards had changed their initial hostile opinions of them into understanding.

I end this chapter with an anecdote from the older research on garment workers in Chennai in 2009. Speaking with yet another woman garment worker about leisure, free time, hobbies and

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[208]For a small glimpse of just how methodical they can be, see Meghnad and Thakur (2021).

hopes from the future, she had segued into talking about her children. Her twelve-year-old son fancied himself an engineer and was forever dismantling and playing with motors and electrical items. One of his legs had a weakness in the bone which could later manifest itself in ways that would make it impossible for him to do manual labour of any kind. She wanted to able to ensure that he had a safe future by investing in his education, but for that she needed her factory wages to increase. She and her daughter loved watching a reality show, a dance competition. Her daughter was a good dancer and earlier when she was in an English medium school, she used to perform regularly and win prizes. That school became too expensive for her and her husband to continue paying for and, despite the fact that her daughter was a very good student, she had to be shifted to a cheaper government school (with fewer opportunities). The little girl wanted to be a teacher, and had written all over the walls in their home, pretending they were blackboards. Her mother knew that the chances of that dream being realised were slim, as the teaching college nearby was too expensive for her to afford. She had felt that the government should come forward and help in such situations. "We don't have the means to support their dreams," she had said.

Dreams so uncontainable, pressing and expansive that they spilled out onto the very walls she lived within. Dreams that lie at the heart, perhaps, of political articulations and hope that in this present time is, as argued, more illusory than what workers of an earlier generation had access to, as discussed by Eccleston (2019), and Parry (1999b). Dreams that inform and fuel the fightback, because, the question isn't whether to fight or whether struggle is needed. Rather the question is how and in what form. As Ghosh had noted- *"Lagaataar sangharsh karenge toh baap manega!"*

Chapter Seven

Conclusion: Reflections on the Politics of Informal Workers

The Takeaway

This dissertation argues that there are three big shortcomings in the literature pertaining to informal workers politics: insufficient data due to lack of primary studies, a pro-union framing that exists by default within labour studies, and a limited understanding of an informal worker's agency. By choosing two contrasting kinds of informal work, I seek to both address the gaps in literature pertaining to the politics of two kinds of informal workers (hawkers and factory workers) as well as arrive at a broader understanding of informal workers' politics. My intervention is to suggest that while over-arching self-contained narratives of informal workers' politics might be challenging or impossible to arrive at, given the huge diversity that exists in work structures and conditions, what is nonetheless indicated is a need to understand anew what we recognise as politics and/or legitimate forms of struggle, and the goals and motivations of resistance. The latter, as I argue, draws from a three-fold relationship with work, which too needs to be emphasised.

Aligning with a critique of the default pro-union framing of labour studies, this dissertation argues that the final form that a collectivization process takes is, arguably, not important in itself. Rather, it needs to be evaluated on the basis of whether its membership believes that their needs are being adequately addressed in the short as well as the long term, and the impact that this creates on state and capital. The dissertation highlights some of the variations that exist in informal workers' movements, struggles and resistance-within trade unions and outside of it, at the level of the individual or the collective, organised or seemingly unorganised. There is also frequently a tension between trade union and non-trade union articulations of workers'

politics. It is argued that this is because of the transformations in the world of work and the almost universal informalisation of labour that has taken place across classes that frequently makes traditional ways of resistance meaningless. Empirical studies like Buckley's (2021) demonstrate that alternatives, such as wildcat strikes in the industrial sector in Vietnam, provide successful models of an alternative, provided we are able to take cognisance of it. Existing traditions of pro-union framing creates situations where alternative forms of struggle – especially violent ones – are disowned by trade unions and the mainstream left. Reflecting that viewpoint, as mentioned earlier, a CITU organiser I spoke with felt that public sympathy was essential for movements of workers to succeed, which is why the "extremist way" would never work (interview, April 2017).

The notion of 'violence' here is interesting, and I make a brief detour into expanding on its many dimensions that came up during fieldwork, not all of which are commonly acknowledged or understood.

Violence and work

There is an extraordinary amount of violence that is an ordinary, accepted part of work today, and I highlight it here in the context of the broader critique of contemporary work that this dissertation is undertaking. This violence is present in the working lives of both hawkers and factory workers, although workplace related violence tends to be more frequent and/or highlighted in industrial work. For instance-accidents. As mentioned in Chapter Five, 'accidents' are an everyday feature of factory work, and it is misleading to speak of them as accidents in that sense. Puncture wounds by needles are commonplace in garments factories. Workers on power presses-pneumatic or mechanical, open or closed die- receive grievous injuries or lose their lives all too often. Sometimes this is because of human error, but many times, I was told during conversations, it is because companies sometimes remove or reduce

safety features (such as automatic sensors that shut down the presses if it detects a body part in its way) in order to speed up work and increase or meet production targets. Some of these accidents also happen because companies avoid the costs associated with repair and maintenance of these presses and their safety features. A worker in an auto parts factory in Manesar, owned by a multinational company, reported more than twenty finger injuries a month. Their factory, which supplied parts to Maruti, had mechanical presses which had no safety sensors (personal conversation, December 2015). Reports like this were very common. One, in fact, saw several such injuries if one kept one's eyes trained on the passing limbs of workers on their way to work in these industrial areas.

The violence I speak of, however, is not just of amputated fingers and toes and shredded lungs; it is also about taking cognisance of the all-pervasive systemic nature of violence which consumers partake of and become party to. It is striking how the very material building blocks of our existence have violence inter-woven into them.

In many cases, the violence begins, in a way, right from the process of land acquisition to set up industry and the active or passive way it dislocates locals from their land and often makes migrant workers of them. This was less visible in Delhi NCR, but is more applicable perhaps to forested inner lands overlying mineral riches.

Then comes the easily accepted violence of production processes in factories and in the lives of hawkers. This is violence not only of work rhythms and the hardships of trade, violence not only of supervisors on workers, of managements on workforces, of policemen, entitled residents and other aggressors on hawkers, but also the casual, unknowing way that we as consumers literally consume war violence and severed fingers and arms and the blood of those who produce and circulate what is produced.

For instance, the metal that goes into the production of our domestic mixer-grinders and cars are frequently recovered from recycling plants where unused grenades and other explosives are dismantled. A worker in Faridabad who used to work in such a recycling yard and had lost three fingers in a rifle/gun cartridge explosion, spoke of how common it is to have such (global) war detritus explode, and for this to be officially recorded and reported as wall collapse (interview, July 2016). He spoke of a missile exploding at one recycling yard and killing a worker; it was officially blamed on a wall collapse due to heavy rains. When I asked him whether he knew where that missile waste had been sent from, he said, "*Videsh se ai thhi. Bahar se aayi thhi,*" ("it had come from abroad"), adding that it was hard to know which lot was from where. A lot of it apparently comes from Thailand, Nigeria, USA, Canada, etc. In fact, just before the cartridge explosion that took his fingers, he had been cleaning it and trying to read its markings to see if he could make out where it had come from. "*Padthe padthe phat gaya,*" he said ("It exploded while I was trying to examine it and read"). He ultimately left this line of work, i.e., jobs in metal recycling which involved salvaging all sorts of metals from different kinds of things, including gold from computer circuit boards. The stress was not worth it for him. "*Mere ko na ye kabaad* line *bahut…*line *jama nahin. Mitti, dhool*, tension, risk…*kab kahaan pe kya ho sakta hai, koi bharosa nahin*," he noted ("I didn't really take to the recycling line. Dirt and dust, tension, risk…there was no telling what would happen when"). He had moved on to working in an auto-parts company (in 12-hour night shifts), worked as a doctor in the evenings, and ran what is colloquially called a hotel (selling food and tea) with his father, a former factory worker. The work as a doctor was unlicensed and informally, of course, treating mainly coughs and colds, though earlier when there was a metal plating factory nearby, he would encounter a lot of tuberculosis cases which were a natural consequence of inhaling the fumes given out during the plating process. In addition to all this work, he also tended to the small amount of land his family had in their village, when he occasionally went home.

Further, the loss of body parts is so common in factories, that we can safely assume that every scooter, every car, every factory-made item – all of which now traverse long production/supply chains before assuming their finished form – has somebody's blood on it-and not just metaphorically speaking. In fact, 'piece rate' takes on a whole new meaning here when one thinks about how the Employee State Insurance Act, 1948 and the Employee's Compensation Act, 1923 calculate and price the compensation due to a worker for permanent or partial disability-so much for loss of one joint, so much for two joints, this much for one finger versus multiple fingers versus thumb etc.[209]

Industrial production-and we as consumers-are carnivorous in that sense. This consumption, falsely amplified by capitalism, drives contemporary manufacturing and industrialisation through cycles of creating desire and manufacturing the desired, the hollowness of which was starkly exposed by the Covid lockdown crises across the world. Masses at large were witness to how heavily capitalism rests on this hollowness, how fragile its roots and foundations, that a cessation/slowing of consumption for a few months was enough to bring it to its knees.

In hawking, too, body parts pay a price for work, especially for women who routinely develop Urinary Tract Infections and gynaecological issues because they frequently go whole days without using the toilet. This is because either there aren't enough public toilets around, or they are not safe enough to use. It is very common for women hawkers to avoid drinking and eating for long stretches of time because of this. I also met some women hawkers whose toes had been severed, who routinely met with accidents on the busy road near their site during municipality raids in Delhi. They would hurriedly pack their goods and run into traffic while fleeing. At a national NHF meeting stress was recognised as a cause of serious illness; the reference was to

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[209] For details, see Schedule I, Parts I and II of the Employee's Compensation Act, 1923.

the tension resulting from hawkers worrying about when raids would happen and about the Police, the MCD, and so on, which that takes a serious toll on health (Ranchi, November 2014).

Some of the other notions of violence that factory workers raised included the "*goonda-gardi*" ("thuggery") of companies violating statutory benefits and pay and the violence of human relations, between managements and workers. I was told of slaps from managers the sheer force of which drew blood; the routine use of yelling and aggressive threats against the sometimes continues background score of loud machinery operating. There are cases of workers too beating up management, and there are several cases of management personnel dying in such direct violent conflicts.

The most tragic case of all, amongst the conversations I had, was perhaps that of a thirteen-year-old boy who was the victim of triple-fold violence-that of the present system of work and inadequate provision of livelihood, that of machines and that of psychological violence meted out by his employer, all of which came together to result in the loss of two fingers in one hand. This little boy, unbeknownst to his parents who left early and returned late from their factory jobs, had secretly gone off to seek employment and began working in a workshop in Faridabad. He felt the need to leave school and supplement the family income because his youngest sibling, who was three, had medical costs that his family of two factory worker parents, a non-verbal grandmother, four younger brothers and one younger sister couldn't afford. Untrained, he got two fingers smashed in a power press. He was only on the power press that day because the owner had yelled at him to leave his packing work, which is what he had been employed to do, and help operate the power press since the regular operator was absent. Scared of the shouting, he had obeyed.

In view of this, the reticence of movement leaders to acknowledge violence or seek to distance themselves from it appears overcautious. There *is* no getting away from this all-pervasive

violence and perhaps more can be done to drive home the fact that the so-called apolitical citizens of the world are active participants in this system just by being consumers.

The need for diverse kinds of struggles

Returning to the issue of forms of collectivisation, I argue that the politics of the hawkers and factory workers both demonstrate the need to rethink how to evaluate the form a collectivisation process takes. The union/association form, at this moment, has more to offer to hawkers, whereas for factory workers, this is less true. Further, workers' institutions/organisations cannot be substituted for struggle itself, though there is scope for experimenting with and exploring the role of such organisations and institutions to adequately support struggle and take it forward. The NHF represents what is possible on that front, and the factory workers situation in Delhi NCR serves as a reminder of what happens when fidelity to a particular form comes to substitute attention to struggle. It is not the intention of this dissertation to argue that political focus and interventions around employment relations (for example, trade unions asking for legal recognitions of contract labour) no longer matter. Rather, it seeks to argue that this is not a pressure point that can offer leverage in a world where the overwhelming majority are no longer direct employees of any sort. This dissertation also holds that the question to ask in these circumstances is not, arguably, for more formalisation or more labour laws[210] since labour laws exist in violation, as Chapter Five shows. While progressive laws *can* be leveraged strategically by movements, as the hawkers' movement and the NHF's strategy around the law show, they cannot become a substitute for struggle or the end goal of workers' movements.

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[210] In any case, labour laws are being reformed to offer lesser – not more – protection under the new labour codes introduced by the present regime.

I posit that in general, a diversity of struggles is very necessary in order to not subsume or hegemonize some kinds of struggles under others. Our struggles and movements need to be hydra-headed to properly respond to the hydra-headed nature of threats upon the poor and vulnerable in today's political economic context.

Finally, the question of whether political movements should seek transformation or reform is a big and ever-relevant one. It informs politics. The outward embodiment of struggles and movements depends heavily on the goal-i.e., transformation or reform. However, as Nigam (2022) points out, this cannot become a reason for progressive political actors, activists and movements to refuse to engage with other movements and struggles on the ground, especially during potentially pivotal moments, if there isn't perfect alignment (with those actors) and agreement on goals. At most, one can remain vigilant about which kinds of politics and struggles aim to preserve a status quo versus those seeking to build pressure, create avenues and build momentum towards transformational change. Herein lies the messy process and the many tasks of 'consciousness building', of movements making small gains, and then losing some ground. It is obvious that there isn't any clear path to follow. Prioritising agility over dogma, studies of informal workers' politics must thus remain deeply attentive to what is happening on the ground, and draw from that rather than forming models based on 'shoulds'.

On Preventing the Return to Equilibrium: Discontent and the Pacification of Discontent

In light of the above, I would like to revisit the threefold nature of a worker's relationship with work here, address the role that trade unions play in the pacification of discontent in informal workers' politics, and speculate on what might happen if that discontent cannot be pacified.

This dissertation argues that a worker's politics simultaneously arises from experiences at the worksite, from the social experience of work and the relationship with work in the context of a

worker's selfhood. The politics that emerges is complex and often messy, defying neat narratives. It is sometimes articulated in terms of demands related to worksite issues, fighting for work that is 'good enough'. At other times, articulations gesture towards something larger, stemming from a rejection of the very nature of work as it exists. Sometimes an awareness of the latter affects political articulations of the first kind, with the demands for immediate worksite related issues becoming bigger and more amorphous.

For instance, take the issue of minimum wage and how much a worker thinks they deserve to be paid. In my earlier fieldwork research with women garment workers in Chennai (2009-10), I had asked some of the women what they felt they should be paid. One of them said at least between Rs.4500 to Rs. 5000. She then amended that figure, as she had not taken into account how much she had to spend monthly for expenses, and said that for basic survival one needed at least Rs. 5000 to Rs. 6000. Another worker at a Colour Plus factory began by recounting how she once made the mistake of going into a Colour Plus showroom, thinking that she would buy something. She was shocked to find trousers selling for Rs. 3000 (which was more than her monthly wage), and t-shirts for Rs.1500. She could not afford the very clothes she was making every day of her life, she noted, which she had not realised till then. Yet another woman began calculating her monthly expenses, which she said went up to Rs. 12,000. Her children spent twenty rupees each a day, the cost of vegetables varied between five to ten rupees daily… She was about to mention house rent when the discussion was interrupted by a woman distributing brochures for expensive electronics items like computers for Rs.40,000. Everybody had broken out into laughter at the irony of distributing such pamphlets in a working-class slum and the absurdity of them being able to afford something like this. They all seemed to be aware of the fact that they were tremendously underpaid, and that the brands they stitched clothes for sold single items for prices that exceeded their monthly wages.

However, they hesitated to think of amounts greater than a few thousand more (than what they were receiving) in terms of what they deserved. Most of these women were a part of a trade union.

In contrast to the above were some casual discussions that I sat in on with the FMS and its readers/first time readers, during rounds of distribution and post-distribution tea and chats. The Haryana government had recently increased minimum wage slabs and most of the workers' conversations revolved around implementation of this at their factories. Starting from how little the increase had been and how their employers were defaulting on even that, the conversation would occasionally touch upon how much the amount should actually be. Five thousand more? Ten thousand more? Why not forty thousand more? Or fifty-sixty-seventy thousand, given that the value of what they were daily producing for their employers ran into lakhs and crores? While the figure itself isn't important here, what is interesting is the radical nature of this questioning.

Unpacking the reasons for the contrast is beyond the scope of the discussion here, although it would clearly involve attention to questions of gender, time periods, nature of industry and so on. Nevertheless, the contrast helps illustrate the point I wish to make about how the limits of one's imagination – and which of the three aspects of relationship with work one is choosing to prioritise in building/schooling these political articulations – defines the limits being set on demands. On the matter of minimum wage, workers internalise how much they deserve. I suggest that if, for instance, leisure, pleasure, self-fulfilment become the centre from which a political articulation is made, then these modest amounts are changed to make bigger demands. Arguably, the historic anti-work current that arose following the 2020 pandemic, particularly in the western industrialised nations and China, is a reflection of this. As mentioned in Chapter

Three, one is seeing mass rejection of bad jobs and small wage increments over minimum wage. There are strong indications that Indian capitalists had feared this too. After the mass scale of workers going back home during the lockdowns of 2020 (on foot, and in extreme conditions), after being abandoned by the state and employers, there was fear they might not return. Internal newsletters circulating within an MSME industry body[211] spoke of 'sadness' at the privations being faced by workers, noted how 'we' need to take care of workers in this time. When the lockdowns lifted, some companies, having faced labour shortages for months, were so scared that migrant workers would not come back that they even flew their workforce back.[212]

The complex and threefold nature of workers' discontent is further illustrated through the 'demandless protests' I mention in Chapter Five and which Buckley (2021) discusses (mentioned in Chapter Three). The workers' riots that break out in industrial areas frequently leave no one for managements to negotiate with, no list of demands to accede to. This contrasts with traditional political action which asks specific things from managements and the state. Such riots also differ from those wildcat strikes where a specific issue – like non-payment of bonus/wages – becomes a trigger. I argue that these demandless protests embodied in the frequent rioting/explosions in factories are especially seeded with transformatory potential because they are arguably a rejection of the very system of work. It is an articulation of frustration and the end of patience with the very system. As is discussed in Chapter Six, this riotous form of protest and struggle can be appropriated by the right wing as well. This underscores the urgent importance of progressive actors paying attention to this form of protest as a legitimate expression of workers' politics in the contemporary period. In the absence of

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[211] Received in my email.
[212] See Singh and Mukherjee (2020).

that, we risk lingering in situations where the right wing and/or managements and the state successfully step in again and again to momentarily pacify this threefold discontent – managements and the state addressing worksite issues through small concessions, and the right-wing addressing desires and longing that arise out of the social and selfhood aspects. This, in turn, further feeds into the absence of political power exercised by labour at the national and global scales on matters of work.

One sees such attempts at pacification being made to address various kinds of political struggles. For example, circling back to the discussion in Chapter Three on urbanisation, there was a recent announcement of a planned garments hub in an area of Maoist struggle in Dantewada.[213] I argue that this is precisely such a move to appropriate the struggle in the area by providing employment- never mind that this employment-being dressed up as a gift to the impoverished tribal population, including women, of the area-is basically killing multiple birds with one stone-attempting to quell the local movement, support for the Maoists (whatever exists) and extract cheap labour all at the same time.

That said, what is more important to remember is that these attempts at pacification/counterbalancing of discontent, especially by managements and the state, are just that-constant ongoing attempts. They are not always effective, as some of the fieldwork discussions in Chapter Five emphasised. One also saw a recent example of such an attempt going awry, with the informalisation of the armed forces through the *Agnipath* Scheme announced on 14 June 2022, and the resulting protests.[214] The defence forces have an emotional

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[213]See Shivhare (2021).

[214] This scheme sought to change armed forces recruitment in India by introducing a system which would provide four-year employment terms to recruits, with twenty five percent of the recruits being retained in the regular (permanent) cadre for fifteen more years (the latter provides full benefits, which the new scheme does not). Vast numbers of youth across India rely on the armed forces for providing secure employment and social dignity. It is seen as a source of social and economic mobility for the most impoverished of the youth of the country, and many begin rigorously training for recruitment from their mid-adolescence itself. This new scheme took away that route, and it resulted in violent protests across the country for several weeks.

pull on the national psyche. The regime (including its social media army) tried to sell it as an opportunity for younger people. Public discussions on social media platforms had pro-government voices trying to diligently counter anger against the scheme by extolling the brilliant move that would allow the youth to build a 'corpus' of eleven lac rupees in four years. They pointed out how that would make for an excellent launching pad, and how the recruits would be entering the job market after that with the advantage of a military training over their peers, etc. In one such exchange on Facebook, one individual who was anti-scheme responded to a pro-regime opinion with a "dumbo not everyone want temporary job". Pithy and succinct. While the scheme did go ahead, the regime did not win the public relations battle on this one, and one can already speculate that this issue will again bubble up in the near future.

Highlighting this constantly ongoing attempts at pacification, a CITU organiser I spoke with mentioned that no management can keep workers subdued solely through '*danda*', i.e., the stick approach. They either use 'love' -by which I'm assuming he was referring to the concessions that are periodically extended to workers, especially after militant unrest that happens to scare managements-to keep control, or they exploit the permanent-temporary divide to weaken workers' unity (interview, April 2017). But how well does the state/employer/manager understand the nature of discontent? In this lacuna lies the potential for transformatory ruptures, as mentioned earlier, and is therefore an effective point of intervention and pressure point for progressive workers, political movements and activists. It is in situations where discontent cannot be managed that one sees demonstrations of the kind of power informal workers (still) have.

As agents of pacification (and therefore allies of capital and state), trade unions and the organised Left have not always had a stellar reputation. We know, for instance, how trade unions have supported war and military build-ups, including during the World Wars, choosing nationalism over global workers solidarity -and threatening those sections within the Left who

were anti-war and arguing that war was against the interest of workers everywhere. The murder of Rosa Luxemburg and Stalin's handing over of communists to Hitler are two prominent examples from history (De Jong 2021). Closer home, Chapter Three briefly discussed the betrayal of the successful worker-run cooperative in Sonali Tea Estate by West Bengal's Left Front Government. One of the surviving leaders of the cooperative, Simon Oroan, is quoted to have said "At the time, CPIM leaders would say that if workers become owners themselves, how will class struggle be sharpened? Actually, they did not want this plan to succeed as a successful cooperative would have inspired similar models across the Dooars" (Deb 2021). The Hawker Sangram Committee faced similar struggles with the Left Front Government. Fieldwork discussions in Chapter Five showed clear instances where trade unions mentioned and/or demonstrated how they did not wish to inconvenience factory managements and disturb production. They did this in various ways, such as by 'considerately' timing protest actions to Sundays, in locations thoughtfully away from factories. There were two such instances during my fieldwork period. The FMS referred to this phenomenon as "Sunday Sangharsh" with the editor of the FMS asking rhetorically with great impatience- "*Kar kya rahe ho*?" ("What *are* you doing?") (personal conversation, 2016). To him it was very clear that such protests were deliberately meaningless, meant to not disturb any status quo. Other anecdotal stories abounded of how union leaders would request workers to do 'makeup work' in the lead up to strike actions, to not inconvenience production. A senior AITUC organiser also mentioned that in many instances, company managements use the strategy of making agitators/leaders of militant struggles supervisors in the factory (interview, April 2017).

Such actions, I argue, are meant to calm down workers and give a sense of 'something being done'- and to extinguish the live ember of anger, which can quickly spread, as was seen in Manesar during the Maruti workers riots, and in other industrial areas.

In case of hawkers, although I do not entirely agree with Jain (2013)'s contention that the hawkers' policy (preceding the legislation of 2014) was a similar endeavour by the state to appease and control hawkers' growing demands (as discussed in Chapter Four), it is certainly true that several hawkers' unions, too, play roles as agents of pacification and appropriation, and even exploitation. In Delhi, as mentioned in Chapter Four, most hawkers spoke of unions as being *dalals* (agents). The danger of unions within the hawkers' movement going down the same way as factory workers unions have done, very much exists.

Limitations and Possible Future Research

The limitations and shortcomings of this research are many, beginning with the asymmetry of the two cases as pointed out in Chapter Two and extending to the shifts in approaching the research, as external events changed, mentioned in Chapter One. The latter in particular meant that the theoretical framing of the material remains less rigorous than it could be, had I engaged with certain literatures from the very beginning (examples of such literatures not engaged with are pointed out in Chapters Three and Six). Another shortcoming is that there were many possible approaches to studying the questions I raise in this dissertation and my case studies, and for the longest time, I remained unsure how to choose between them. For instance, to take just two examples, one could have approached the analysis of fieldwork material solely by focussing on trade unions and their organisational aspects, or by framing it solely in terms of agency and resistance. One could have also chosen to read it entirely within the framework of politics of the urban poor. Choosing one approach and/or framework, rather than the mixed approach ultimately opted for, would likely have made for a more coherent and tight framing of this research.

The range of fieldwork opted for (NHF hawkers in Delhi and Kolkata, and factory workers in Delhi NCR) proved to be another limitation because, given the constraints of time, the depth and range of issues entered into remained narrower than it could have been. Lines of query into aspects of gender, caste, religion, and regional identities were not pursued, which would have been useful, particularly for better understanding the threefold relationship with work. In hindsight, mapping migration amongst hawkers and factory workers too would have enriched this study. Additionally, this study would have gained through greater clarity on the various agents of eviction-the state/private interests/neighbourhood rivalries- and the manner in which the NHF responds to these various agents. This could not be pursued, though hints were visible of differences in approach. Greater clarity would also have been welcome on the differentiations between various kinds of informal factory workers and a closer reading of correlations with how they prefer to act politically and in their interest in unionisation. While I note that the main cleavage still remains between permanent workers and all kinds of informal and temporary workers, it would have been useful to have more insight on the latter. Some workers engaged with this differentiation during fieldwork conversations, but I did not pursue this question uniformly in all field interactions.

Going forward, I see several possibilities of refining and expanding this research. While pursuing the lines of query missed out in this project (mentioned above), it would make sense to extend the study of hawkers' politics by incorporating non-unionised hawkers, especially now that the 2014 Act has been in place for almost nine years. This would be particularly relevant in areas where powerful unions are present since it would allow one to see how unionisation in the post-Act regime impacts the overall good of all hawkers.

Another useful line of research to follow up would be to find a way to test out the speculative argument made here regarding the ways in which right-wing forces and political movements have often managed to take into account and address the social and selfhood aspects of a

worker's relationship with work. One way to do so might be to return to the same fieldwork sites and focus on those with background and/or linkages with the RSS/BJP and other right-wing political parties or movements. Such a focus would also perhaps allow one to comparatively contrast organisational dynamics of the Right with the Left.

The Tree of Life

by Sayori Ghoshal

The village was tucked away on an island, between the open sea and a forest. Sometimes, when dawn broke, the villagers would be seen returning from the forest and going about their daily chores.

Learning of the legend of the tree in that faraway village, a young ethnographer braved the treacherous sea and reached the island. The villagers welcomed him. Walking around with his audio recorder, he saw an old woman on a porch, knitting in the winter sun. He asked if he could talk to her and tape their conversation. She smiled and nodded compliantly. He sat down and switched the recorder on. After a few warm-up questions, he posed the one burning in his heart: "Is the tree of life real? Is it here in the village?" She saw in him the image of several others who had come in search of the tree, who had come to use it, to take it away, to profit out of it. They had wanted to own the tree and the knowledge of it. She sighed and looked at him with fleeting sympathy, "The villagers will take you to it if you want". The ethnographer's joy knew no bounds. He was elated. Caught up in dreams of the fame and power this knowledge would bring, he failed to wonder why he was so easily the first to have found it.

At nightfall, the ethnographer walked into the forest with a group of villagers. When they stopped at a spot, he knew which was the tree of life. It was the thickest, the tallest among the rest. It rose so high that you could imagine it reached the heavens. And perhaps from there, the magic of life flowed into it. If you embraced it, the legend ran, you would become immortal like it. Like a rationalist, he interpreted this to mean that perhaps in taking the bark or the leaves gave people increased immunity and self-healing powers that let them live incredibly long lives. Either way, this knowledge and this tree were priceless.

The villagers formed a circle around the tree and asked him to stand embracing it. They began moving along the circle, chanting a prayer. He embraced the thick, dark trunk as much as his hands could go around it. He saw them break into a dance as their melodious prayer reached a crescendo. He noticed the dark sap oozing out of the trunk and thought how it could easily be imagined as blood.

When dawn broke, the villagers returned to the village and went about their daily chores. Deep in the forest, the tree of life was still standing tall. You might think nothing had changed. Or you might think its thick trunk had become slightly thicker, its sap bloodier. If you put your ears close to it, you might think you heard a faint scream from within. And if you looked down, you might think you saw a recorder tangled in the roots of the tree.

Figure 5: 'The Tree of Life'- flash fiction by Sayori Ghoshal

Postscript

Reflections and Closing Thoughts

Like many ethnographers, I have complicated feelings about my chosen methodology. I did not set out to become an ethnographer, nor did I professionally train as one within the formal bounds of a traditional discipline (sociology/anthropology). Indeed, I have no discipline and am very much, in terms of training, a composition of different influences and traditions- I trained as a student of literature for my undergraduate degree, went into an inter-disciplinary Master's on Globalisation and Labour, trained and worked in the space of policy and legislative and parliamentary research for a year, and returned to an inter-disciplinary training in the social sciences for my MPhil and the PhD.

Along the way, I organically fell into ethnography, as my initial forays into fieldwork during my Master's, and ways of 'knowing' soon began to resemble/acquire the ethnographic impulse. It was, for the most part, the only way I knew how to 'know'. I am, thus, not a 'proper' ethnographer, by which I mean I did not systemise my ethnographic approach, observations and analysis the way I imagine 'real' ethnographers do- i.e., within loosely defined boxes that have historically evolved into accepted standard practice (e.g., kinship, language, religion, politics, economic systems). Rather, I distilled rough categories from my notes, for the most part, during periods of reflection off the field. This particularly applies to the fieldwork with factory workers in Delhi NCR. The information collected, thus, was perhaps more haphazard than what a formally trained ethnographer might have done, but I still categorise it as ethnography for the immersive impulse that was at the heart of the process.

As one learns early in research methodology training, ethnography is not simply fieldwork. There is an element of time and depth of involvement that sets apart fieldwork from ethnography, even as clear-cut definitional distinctions between the two remain challenging to pin down. It is easy to tie oneself into a few tough knots while trying to conceptually separate the two, though the rather broad adage that 'all ethnography is fieldwork, though not all fieldwork is ethnography' remains a surprisingly helpful filter to apply.

I have been 'doing' ethnography since about 2009, but properly fell into it March, 2012, during my MPhil. At that time, it was not actually ethnography because the academic aspect was missing: I only wanted to know how I could, in my own small way and in any capacity, be of use to the HSC in that moment of hawker evictions in Kolkata. A few months down the line, however, when my original plan of writing my MPhil dissertation on the Occupy movements fell apart because my ideas refused to coalesce into a viable project, I accepted the suggestion of my supervisor to pursue a topic that I was more viscerally interested and invested in, such as the hawker evictions in the city from earlier in the year. I thus ended up making that engagement-with hawker evictions and hawker politics in the city- the subject of my MPhil research and dissertation, as mentioned in Chapter One. Since then, my engagement has been both academic and personal. I continue to be invested in that subject, in the people and their movement, and have worked on things with them that have nothing to do with the PhD.

I straddled this simultaneous positioning as a researcher and as someone involved in a slightly more activist capacity[215] almost for the entire duration of my engagement with the HSC and NHF. There is a natural complication that arises with such a positionality, in that my identity became enmeshed with organisational identity early on, as mentioned in Chapter Two. I was

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[215] For instance, I proposed and put together two mobile phone photo and videography workshops with their membership with the intention of helping grow their self-documentation and self-narrativizing as hawkers in the city, especially at the time of catastrophic events like evictions; coordinated a photo-exhibition of an eviction at the site of the eviction, amongst other activities.

seen as someone who the leadership had welcomed and approved of. As I go on to mention, I made my peace with this because even though this wasn't a cold-blooded strategic move, it was what allowed me to carry out my fieldwork the way I was able to. As countless researchers have found, the precarity of hawking is such that most hawkers will decline to speak to unknown, unvouched for researchers. I was able to have the access and conversations that I did because I went through their union.

For the factory workers fieldwork, this enmeshment was absent. I had indeed begun by intending to seek out and follow the membership of an independent national trade union that I had interned and volunteered with over the years (and therefore had a personal relationship with), but when that route closed owing to the relationship that I found existing between temporary workers and unions in the Delhi NCR, my entry point and anchor in the field became the Faridabad Majdoor Samachar collective (elaborated upon in Chapter Two). The lack of enmeshment was aided by the fact that the FMS was not an organisation, and had no conventionally activist or organisational agenda, except for a broad 'consciousness building' if one might put it that way (this too is elaborated upon in Chapter Two). There I was present exclusively and explicitly as a researcher, and was accepted as such, although I did help distribute copies of their monthly newspaper at industrial areas in Gurgaon, Manesar, Faridabad and Okhla (which ultimately became my fieldwork sites). I thoroughly enjoyed and took pleasure in this experience of distribution and the conversations that sprang up around them, and though I knew that my experiences and conversations at the distribution sites would eventually go towards my research, that was not the factor that led me to it. At that stage, in 2015, I was still clueless about how to frame and understand my second case study, i.e., informal factory workers' politics, and I wasn't sure how to design and proceed with fieldwork given that no single union seemed to have a decisive presence in Delhi NCR, nor did there appear to be any strong union comprising of temporary workers. I had had very interesting and

stimulating conversations with the FMS collective; indeed, as noted, our initial conversations had upended my basic understanding of the role unions were playing in the lives of temporary workers, and wanting to pursue that, I simply followed them wherever I could, whilst also seeking out other routes of engagement (making contact with unions, walking up to workers on the way to a shift and requesting appointments for conversations and interviews, seeking out a few industry body leaders and factory management interviews etc.)

My ethnographic approach, especially with the stance I took with my engagement with the HSC and NHF, was, for me, a question of doing justice to my research, but more importantly-about ethics. I was and am loathe to think of myself as a typical academic leach-and ethnographers, especially, come close to inhabiting this image as we spend months, even years, studying a (usually less well-off/marginalised) community only to go back, write a dissertation, get paid as a researcher and live a life that is far removed from that community's.

At an institutional level, there wasn't much I could do to neutralise my embeddedness in the heavily skewed power structures and dynamics of professional knowledge production. My institutional location makes disinterested knowledge gathering a structural impossibility. Just by virtue of being affiliated to my institution, I was a part of a particular power dynamic that Jain (2013) unpacks so meticulously in her research on street vendors, when she talks about the historic role that think tanks and research bodies, and their funders, have played globally and in India. She makes important points about a) the (not accidentally) vast number of research institutes that exist globally, that qualify as 'think tanks', b) very interestingly, and tellingly that 'The term think tank was a military jargon for a private room where invasion plans and strategies were discussed during World War II', indicating the undisguised 'original' intention of such motivated knowledge production systems (Jain 2013, 64), c) how think tanks essentially compete in 'the marketplace of ideas' (thus seemingly bringing together the

impulses of the military and capital) (ibid.), how d) 'A small group of private philanthropists established research institutes to fill the gaps that traditional universities focusing solely on teaching could not address,' (thus adding to the mix, the additional impulse of-frequently corporate-philanthropy) (ibid., 65), e) that studies produced by these institutes often put pressure on the government to act to redress issues pointed out, and how, f) in the case of India, '…the British established the Societies Registration Act (SRA) in 1860 under which NGOs could function as a legal entity. Even today all modern think tanks in India are registered under this act…(ibid). This raises interesting questions (not addressed in this research) on the implications of workers' unions being registered under this particular act, as is the case with a majority of hawker unions, or of trade unions having organizational side-arms, or sister organisations, registered under the Societies Act (which I encountered, and which seems to be a very common phenomenon in India.)

In India, she goes on to note '…a notable feature of Indian think tanks was that they were involved in both research and training… organizations, in fact, worked as proxy universities at the time when institutions of modern higher education were limited…' (Jain 2013, 66). She adds that following independence, the Indian government '…started opening research institutions within different government and state departments that could provide the government with basic quantitative and qualitative information', including the Indian Council of Social Science Research which was set up in 1968 (ibid., 67). Further, as she notes:

> 'In the United States, many NGOs and think tanks trace their funding back to the Ford Foundation. Historically, funders like the Ford Foundation have been known to be called upon by the CIA to wage cold war on cultural fronts in many countries. Anti-left intellectuals were specifically recruited to dispel the communist threat. In India, Nehru solicited the support of the Ford

Foundation to co-opt communist led agrarian struggle through community development projects. Since the mid1980s in India, the international funding for NGOs has increased 20 times and since then the registered NGOs have also increased by 250 percent..."

- **Jain** (2013, 91)

This lays bare my embeddedness within the 'think tank' regime, given that my home institution of the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta is an institution under the ICSSR, and underscores how my research and presence are unlikely to be benign and harmless from this location.[216] This also explains, in a very material way, why every regime attempts to install its 'own people', i.e., mouthpieces and ideological agents, within these institutions and think tanks.

At a personal level,[217] however, I have tried hard to be vigilant about ethical imperatives, especially with regard to my lives on and off the field. I was firm that I did not want to separate my personas on and off the field. My presence on the field would *not* be a performance of clothing, mannerisms and fake or opportunistic fellowship. To an extent that came naturally. The clothes I wore, the lifestyle I led did not differ so much on and off the field,[218] at least to what degree I was consciously aware of. However, I did become aware that irrespective of what I sincerely hoped to be and to convey with my being on and off the field, what ultimately

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[216] I acknowledge, however, that disruptions to the order are possible within structures, and that problematic structures do not foreclose the possibility of resistance.

[217] I should also point out that the fact that there is a separation- of my professional location and personal location- was not evident to me until almost mid-way into the PhD. It took me time- and conversations with the editor of FMS, as mentioned earlier- to realise why and how I was embedded in an academic market, and the political economy of institutional knowledge production, and how my *intentions* were irrelevant.

[218] This did, however, begin to change in the latter part of the PhD, when my consumption levels increased as my savings from the fellowship I received grew. There is something terribly problematic and contradictory about resorting to frequently writing up parts of this research in coffee shops. And yet, the other existential exigencies of the long, long PhD life and solitary work it entails often meant that those coffee shop days were sometimes the only means of motivation and making my way through yet another motivational/intellectual logjam.

would be perceived and received would be a combination of many factors out of my control. One cannot, however, erase multiple axes of privilege, privilege that I embodied. As another ethnographer notes-

> 'When you are an upper-caste researcher in India, few spaces are out of bounds.'

And,

> 'How does one account for the startling fact that I "moved up" professionally while my interlocutors suffered material losses – if not lost their lives – during the pandemic?'

-**Annavarapu** (2021)

The extreme ethical anxiety about my ethnographic presence began to settle a bit mid-way into the PhD, as I came alive to the fact that I was not always-already in the position of the exploiter. All privilege was not all mine at all times. On occasion I was vulnerable because of, for instance, my gender. I stopped being determined to blur the boundaries between the professional and personal because that (i.e., the blurring) has its costs.[219] When one gets significantly involved in terms of time and energy, occasionally some people get over-familiar and even inappropriate, as I found. Some would try to 'own' me or my welfare on the field and I observed how I came to be occasionally deployed by my interlocuters in ways advantageous to them, in small power games. There were instances when some people were clearly being 'nice' to me because they knew their leader 'valued' me and therefore by being nice to me they

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[219] I would not, for instance, respond to all Facebook friend requests, preferably avoid Whatsapp interactions, respond to communications within 'work-day' hours only, and avoid fieldwork situations where I would have to socialize at the end of a work day. Basically, especially for the social aspects, if I wouldn't do something in my personal life, I wouldn't any longer feel pressured to accommodate that same thing in my life as a researcher.

were playing a personal game of their own (against their peers?). In hindsight, these occasions, hopefully evened the scales a tiny bit.

This decision to draw a firmer line between the personal and the professional- I am aware of the irony of this: drawing this line during fieldwork, but arguing for a blurring of it during the writing! -also helped me get some much-needed distance and perspective. Constant ethnographic contact had begun to produce a kind of 'over-exposure'. The tenth-twentieth-thirtieth protest rally one attends suddenly begins to look just like each and every preceding one and one feels like one has reached a stalemate in terms of learning more, understanding more. Nothing new emerges. However, as my one of my professors', and later, co-Supervisor, pointed out, it was perhaps unfair on my part to expect something new every time. Because, as she pointed out, I was trying to map the everyday details (which don't change that fast) *and* the events in the life of this organisation and their movement (which had been changing very fast)- i.e., mapping gradual differences and the bigger ones simultaneously. I realised that misplaced mechanical solidarity was no good, nor was this over-exposure doing my research any good, and that I had to change my strategy. Instead of trying to be present for every rally and protest event they organised, out of solidarity, I needed to step back for a while to think different thoughts and be more selective in my participation and presence.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

How effective was I, really, in my endeavour to not commit the offences of the stereotypical white, male, colonial anthropologist? The path to hell is paved with good intentions, they say. I definitely noticed a certain 'deterioration', if I may, in myself between the MPhil and the PhD. I started out by being very clear about who was doing who the favour-and knew very clearly that my time would always, always be subservient to that of my interlocuters. Thus, even when I was on occasion stood up multiple times by some hawker leaders, I knew it was

their right to do so. However, by the time my PhD rolled around, I no longer was as mentally patient. I feared and fear that a decade or so later, should I continue doing ethnography, I will deteriorate further. Quite akin to the western (albeit female) anthropologist I briefly assisted as a translator, who expressed delight on a dull day on the field when a corporation van rolled around to confiscate hawkers' goods, thereby creating an 'event' that would provide something to study.

The cannibalistic instinct of the subaltern, biting back, portrayed so insightfully and beautifully by Sayori Ghoshal in the preface to this chapter, is thus intensely satisfying.[220] Ultimately, perhaps, ethnography and the ethnographer can only be tolerated so long as they both are eventually extinguished as a mode of doing research. No matter what, ethnography will always have an unequal power dynamic as long as one studies the 'other', as long as one 'punches down' rather than 'punches up'.

I did make some conscious efforts to try to address this. My way of 'punching up', like some ethnographers, was through the gradual recognition of and inclusion of my own self as an object of query. I became a part of my field very intensively, as my very self became a part of my observations and queries. Amongst other things- the ways in which my mental health and conscious and sub-conscious thought patterns were interacting with my ability to step out onto the field, into the library, to write. I also became more and more aware of the marketplace that was professional academia. For instance, in the initial years, calls for proposals and conferences and workshops had appeared special, and I felt 'chosen' and my work validated when a proposal of mine was accepted somewhere. I thought they were endeavours designed entirely for scholarly purposes, marked by fantasies of some sort of a 'pure' desire for genuine

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[220] Although this is probably an intellectual satisfaction, for as I saw, actual instances of the biting back on the field were not a comfortable experience. Which is indeed the whole point!

intellectual engagement and to take our understanding forward through discussions of ongoing research, etc., of topics chosen because they were a pressing concern and issue, not because they'd be likely to be funded. A very naïve notion indeed, but perhaps I am not the only one to be under this illusion in the early years. After realising there are Facebook pages that aggregate calls for proposals-and seeing that multiple such calls came every day, making me realise the workaday nature of conferences, as opposed to them being special events- and having an experience where I saw how a workshop on a vitally important social and political issue was once put together not because it was important, but because there was money left over in a financial budget which had to be used. If it was not, it would be treated as not needed and docked from the institution's next annual grant by funders. I began to become aware of 'hot topics' and trends that were likely to draw more funding for conferences and workshops, the concept of 'saleable' research and the way grants were often disbursed and papers chosen based on that logic, as well as the pressure of toeing the 'party-line' within disciplines-a certain almost priestly obeisance paid to the general consensus on how certain subjects could and should be studied. I also became more aware of the way academia functions, with its own elite clubs and networks that consciously and unconsciously exclude the outsiders. All these realisations actively shaped my ongoing understanding of what exactly I was doing during the PhD, and the way I understood my research.

I was unsure of how, and if at all, I would be able to include this in my narrative- for it *was* a part of my narrative- because the 'I' within academic narratives has long been a much-disputed subject. In contemporary times it is less about whether or not to let the 'I' intrude into one's writing- though there still exists a mainstream valorising of neutral-sounding knowledge production which pretends as if the 'I' played no role in the act of information/knowledge gathering, processing and output- but rather, how much. For after all, as one of my supervisors pointed out, it doesn't really even out the scales-I might be putting myself into the page and

subjecting myself to the gaze of the reader and evaluator, just like the narratives of my other (field) interlocuters, but my field interlocuters remain unable to return the gaze upon me in any way within this research document. They can't write me back on the same document, within my chosen methodology.

On this issue, how much is too much? What is the line between self-reflexivity and self-indulgence?

A phrase that strikes terror in my heart is 'navel-gazing'. It is one of the worst accusations that can be made against a scholarly or creative work. 'Arm-pit cinema'-I heard that phrase applied to a form of film-making, (and later, analogously, to intellectual-academic production) when I was a (far-too) impressionable undergraduate student, forming my first notions of good and bad ways of thinking and knowledge-production. It was spoken of with disdain by the kind of scholars I valued and sought to be validated by back then. The self must be disguised, subdued or excised from the entire creative process, or at least, from what one finally placed before a readership, or an audience. One must remove oneself from the text, lest one becomes, or is deemed, too self-indulgent and self-obsessed. Excessive[221] contemplation of the self was self-indulgent, and thus mortifying for most reasonably conscientious people (amongst who I do count myself). These terms are meant to invoke shame, and I obliged by feeling shamed.

Interestingly, in Yoga, to 'gaze' at one's navel is an incredibly powerful thing to do, both for hatha yoga (the physical asanas) and raja yoga (roughly referring to meditative practices). They strengthen you. As a practitioner, I 'gaze' at my navel to physically and energetically strengthen my physical and energetic core. One can contemplate on one's navel (chakra) as an aid to meditation. A well-functioning navel chakra, according to a form of energy healing I

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[221] The question, of course, is, who defines what is 'excessive'? What epistemological tradition and history is each such definition setter coming from?

trained in and practice (Pranic Healing), aids in optimal drawing in, distribution and assimilation of *prana* (life energy) in the body. If one's navel chakra is underperforming, one may tend to feel, amongst other malaise, (physically) tired and low, and it will have a domino effect on the rest of the chakras of the body, affecting physical and mental health. The *manipura* chakra, which conventional systems conflate with the navel, is the seat and source of personal power, self-esteem, strength. It is, in fact, a very important chakra.

My writing and confidence in my scholarship and ability to be a researcher was and is acutely affected by this dichotomy. The disdain and shame and terror-lest I be a navel-gazing scholar-became the inner voice in my academic infancy, constantly disciplining, censoring and editing me when it leaked out on occasion anyway. Because on the other hand (with respect to the leaking), I have a tremendous capacity for and predilection towards 'navel gazing', towards dwelling on the self and its mediation of the outer world. I was/am acutely aware of it (this mediation) in me, and I was/am aware of it in others, devouring memoirs and personal accounts of ordinary folk, of artists, writers, scholars. As a practitioner of raja yoga, and Pranic Healing, I interpreted everything through and functioned in the framework of yoga. My way of being was apparently in conflict with how I thought I was supposed to be thinking. It was leading to severe cognitive dissonance. That shame-laden overpowering inner voice (telling me that reflecting on my self and subjectivity in the process of knowledge assimilation and production was self-indulgent and bad scholarship) was crippling- in my ability to think and bring my individuality and voice to my scholarship. In taking ownership of my scholarship. It was alienating me from my work, and having a domino effect on my mental health. Because it had real repercussions on my ability to proceed with the PhD work and on the likelihood of my completing it-as much as factors of supervision breakdowns/financial crises/mental health breakdowns do for others (which are legitimately recognized factors impacting degree

completion)-the personal was professional, I saw. I was silencing my own self, adversely affecting my research-and I thought this was how it had to be.

Towards the end of the dissertation, however, in 2020 and 2021, I encountered two instances which challenged this notion, and introduced me to ways in which I personally could approach a resolution, and ways in which others were approaching a resolution to similar conundrums. I saw that the conundrum itself had its origins in the ways our epistemological frameworks have evolved. Both encounters took place outside of traditional spaces of academic and intellectual exchange- one, on a personal social media account and then over email with a peer who is a scholar of yoga, and another with a writer whose newspaper columns, essays and social media posts I'd been following since 2017.

The first involved an exchange following a post I'd shared on a personal social media account on my thoughts on 'navel-gazing', to which they'd responded by noting how that was not surprising, and elaborated further by responding to an email I sent. They noted how the development of this negative notion of navel-gazing as a way of producing knowledge-had a context within the Protestant work ethics of capitalism, where the act of navel gazing was the very opposite of 'capitalist scientific materialism' and thus 'a rejection of everything the post-enlightenment west held sacred', and had linkages to colonialism (and ways in which it devalued certain 'native' knowledge systems) and was not innocent of those histories. They note in the email[222] how-

> "…That's right about the time that industrial work cultures are being reproduced in the colonies and in particular there is a lot of writing about India and Indians as being lazy, infantile in that they are unable to sufficiently distinguish the subjective realm from objective material matter (hence the

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[222] Permission was granted by the author to share this excerpt from the email.

belief in magic to produce real world effects, a charge levied against all native peoples). This supposed infantile inability to distinguish the subjective from the objective was seen as a justification for the paternal colonial conquest by the British…. While at the same time Indian religion and philosophy was reduced to Vedanta and thus was seen as nihilistic or life denying as compared to the life affirming nature of protestant capitalism."

-Email exchange, **Kaustubh Das**

The second instance was first, my encounters with writer and art critic Rosalyn D'Mello's personal style of writing, and then her engagement with auto-theory. In D'Mello's (2021) words, auto-theory was '…an under-studied form of feminist praxis steeped in generating theory from lived experience that had been evolving over several decades'. She notes its non-white origins to '…BIPOC feminists like Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Kamala Das, etc.' and some noteworthy recent works such as that by Fournier (2021). Meditating on fermentation,[223] and on other artists' meditations on fermentation, D'Mello (2021) brings in the essay 'Guts' by Morrigan (2017) quoting her-

'Guts are a metaphor for knowing. Guts are a place of processing. Guts are wrapped around themselves down in the belly of the body... Guts exist at the level of language and they also have a materiality all their own. Guts are an ecosystem filled with beings which are not me, yet dwell within me'.

-**Morrigan** (2017) cited in D'Mello (2021)

D'Mello notes how another artist, Alanna Lynch,-

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[223] The 'Mother' in the title of D'Mello's (2021) piece refers to the 'mother culture' that is necessary to fermentation as much as the notion, biological and cultural, of 'mother' that births and nurtures.

'…plays with some of these possibilities of what constitutes 'gut feeling'... felt sensation beyond conscious knowing, while simultaneously hinting at the historical devaluation of affect as a manifestation of hysteria; or how phallogocentric ideology delegitimised so much female intuition…'.

- **D'Mello** (2021)

Returning to the trope of fermentation, (and, in the context of this discussion, to the possibilities of a resolution to my personal conundrum lying within feminist thought/praxis) D'Mello (2021) wonders if '…the origins of phallogocentric thought lie within the 'seminal' (literally of or relating to semen), could feminist thought be construed within queer temporalities and imagined as a continuum of symbiotic cultures, conversations, and citations, a manifestation of backslop, the remnants from a previously successful fermentation used as a starter for every subsequent one.' Highlighting beautifully the very concrete continuity and enmeshment of the physical and emotional, of the biological and the intangible/ephemeral/intuitional, D'Mello's essay draws on multiple plays on the gut-which, literally, also lies directly behind the navel-, i.e., emotions, intuition, knowing and experiencing, held together by the fascinating materiality and metaphor of fermentation. The 'historical devaluation of affect' that she mentions is of particular interest to me in the context of this discussion, one that the emerging methodology and praxis of auto-theory seeks to address. For, as Zwartjes (2019) notes-

'Autotheory is work that engages in thinking about the self, the body, and the particularities and peculiarities of one's lived experiences, as processed through or juxtaposed against theory—or as the basis for theoretical thinking. It strips the pretension of neutrality, of objectivity, away from the theorizing voice. Often discursive, it offers us a thought-provoking, multivalent kind of

hybridity, one unafraid to mix theory with creativity and lyricism, and with the graphic details of one's very specific physical experience.'

And,

'Among the things autotheory offers us that are "new"—or are of particular resonance at this moment in time—are its quick movement back and forth between different modalities of thinking and examining the world; the way it creates a sense of parallel, rather than of hierarchy, between different ways of knowing, thinking, and analyzing; and lastly, its innovative formal and structural contributions to the creative writing field as it navigates these multiple modalities.'

- **Zwartjes** *(2019)*

These interventions, thus, allow me to offer a somewhat more substantial defence of some of my own choices in the writing of this dissertation (including the inclusion of this postscript), than simply as something that I've knit together, albeit with conviction, from my experiences and broad practices and ways of being (outside of academia). They allow me a citational universe[224] and history, allowing this discussion and stance to, hopefully, be more than simply personal, extremely subjective, opinion.

These discussions thus allow one to perceive the personal as a means of arriving at authentic knowledge. To perceive the personal as a way of mediating experiences, material and immaterial, external and internal, that nonetheless produces grounded knowledge. It allows one to investigate the personal and the consequent linking of it to the 'professional', to imbue with authenticity whatever knowledge is produced. Knowledge tinged with a truth value that is, in the first instance, acutely subjective, but in the last instance subject to multiple linkages with

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[224] For more discussions on auto-theory, see Wiegman (2020), amongst others.

other people's acutely subjective truths, thus producing collaborative, visceral forms of knowledge that are simultaneously new, and born(e) of old- like the metaphor *and* materiality of fermentation that D'Mello, and the artists she studies, mull on. 'How does newness come into the world? How is it born? Of what fusions, translations, conjoinings is it made?...' asks Rushdie in the Satanic Verses. Perhaps this is how and this is what.

To be truly interested in the new, and if we are to be mindful of not introducing painful contradictions between our outward, knowledge producing, professional selves and our inner selves, being and lived realities, perhaps we all need to navel-gaze a lot more-to internalize in solitude, become aware of the rhythms and movements in our selves and bodies and to stare hard and uncompromisingly at its interactions with what lies outside.[225]

For this dissertation, though not just for the dissertation, to be able to write, I needed to navel-gaze. To right my heart, I needed to navel gaze. In the face of loss, during when ill health dominates the heart, I find I literally lose my ability to write. I find that I, personally, cannot muscle (or caffeinate) my way back from such a state, irrespective of timelines and deadlines. Not brute force of the will, but surrender, returns me. Immersing myself in the failure to immerse myself, if one might so put it. The process of that return becoming a productive, learning in itself, one of the learnings being that it was not by bypassing, but by navel-gazing, that a return was at all made possible, for me. Ultimately, it was by navel gazing-in all the ways and fullest sense in which that phrase has been discussed in this chapter so far- that I was able to finish writing this dissertation.

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[225] We see only too many such contradictions in the worlds of academia, activism, art. Of stalwarts within, espousing cutting-edge theory, ideas and politics, many of which they violate, with impunity and without acknowledgement, in their own personal lives. One can't help but feel strongly that such theory, ideas and politics are, in fact, then not as cutting-edge or transformational as they might appear in view of how easily they appear to be violated by their progenitors and their (secular/academic) evangelists.

Unfortunately, with respect to both these above-mentioned trails that opened up, which I could and would have pursued in order to improve my ethnographic approach and writing, and which would have provided possibilities for a more rigorous methodological engagement to resolve the contradiction I faced than I was ultimately able to do, I came upon them at the fag end of my PhD years. This did not leave me with enough time to properly engage with them. I look forward to exploring them further, as something to be considered for a personally meaningful, radical restructuring of how one may approach research, though not just research, following the conclusion of this PhD.

Annavarapu (2021), in a reflective, post-dissertation write-up, wonders-

> 'Should I put myself on the page? Risk yet another form of vulnerability? Worse, would anyone care? Am I being an ungrateful ethnographer?'

> -**Annavarapu** (2021)

She adds-

> 'All I do realise in retrospect is that the messiness of ethnography requires us to make decisions – sometimes carefully calibrated, sometimes abrupt – that cause discomfort, pain, guilt and linger in our bodies for years to come. And, yet, this story never made it to my dissertation. There is no whiff of my discomfort, of my anguish, or of my guilt. There is no whiff of PR's politics.'

And,

> 'My feminist politics have taught me to critique the machismo model of ethnography. No to "cowboy" ethnography. A bigger no to putting myself at risk. A big yes to writing through the body. I say this exhaustedly, of course,

as I think of all the affective surfeit I have edited out of so many of my writings. From a "near-accident" that filled me with numbness and pure horror to a dry sociological text that few people will ever read.'

-**Annavarapu** (2021)

Within this dissertation, thus, I resolve my personal sense of the contradiction, and the question of 'how much is too much', and the line between self-reflexivity and self-indulgence by writing myself into those bits of the narrative where I felt not doing so would be dishonest or misleading, choosing to err on the side of excess rather than moderation. There are bits I leave in- for instance, by talking about how my own experiences of the lockdowns in 2020 led to how I understood work, leisure and free time, and how that came to significantly change the way I was looking at my research questions, by centring that at the heart of informal workers' politics, rather than the more limited and prosaic concerns of social and economic justice that I had begun with.

Then there are bits I leave out, for the future, after I have more time to digest the implications of auto-theory and the ways it shapes my work. Such as, for instance, the many gendered encounters I had during the fieldwork, especially when they overlapped with the domain of social relations. For instance, there were times when I received overtures seemingly tinged with what was beyond the strictly professional, though I was less adept at gauging the specifics. Sometimes I interpreted it correctly, and sometimes I wasn't fully sure, so it remained ambiguous. On some occasions when I could sense there was a non-platonic quality to the attention being turned on me, I was taken by surprise at how respectfully and courteously it was offered, even though it was unwelcome to me, and how safe I felt in gently resurrecting the dynamic I preferred. This was, frankly, transformative to encounter. I was struck by how very different these experiences were from the frequently aggressive instances of

announcement of intent and pursuit that women are, unfortunately, so familiar with within our class, caste and social bubbles. At the same time, I also wondered if that courteous respect was afforded to me more because of the relative power dynamic, a lot of which was skewed in my favour because of the multiple axes of privilege I inhabited. (I am most certainly not trying to suggest that this is the experience of all women in these situations.) It was transformative at the level of the self- simply for how much more trust I ended up developing towards society-at-large-and how it changed my notions of what kind of public places were safe spaces for women. I began to note the quality of sociality in different public and private spaces more intensively, reinforcing conclusions a younger self had drawn, commonly acknowledged (i.e. that streets full of people and hawkers will always be more welcoming than those denuded of them, but policed with private money) and forming new ones.[226] Without any exaggeration, and even as someone who has grown up in Delhi, it was my experiences as a woman on the field, that expanded my trust in the city-both cities, and by extension, all cities- and drastically expanded the comfort I had in being mobile, at hours I would not have earlier considered, and in loitering in its public spaces. Again, while this was my experience, I am aware that this is not everyone's. All these experiences could have, equally, been distressing and violent, for those who came from positions less privileged than me. Indeed, the distressing deterioration of the political climate within India in the past few years makes me additionally aware of how outright dangerous the situation could now be for others like me, especially if they belong to marginalised/minority communities.

I also should note, perhaps, that my experiences were not always uniformly uncomplicated. For I did have some very anxious moments, questioning the sanity of, during fieldwork, trusting

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[226] For just one example-that large crowds, which I've always experienced with a degree of fear, don't always feel threatening-my first such experience of that being around the thousands of people on their way to work in the factory areas of Delhi NCR that I visited.

strangers enough to get into cars, onto bikes (on the way to fieldwork appointments and locations), conducting interviews in unfamiliar neighbourhoods, on isolated rooftop offices in late evenings with two male strangers (one of who I later found had a somewhat dodgy Facebook friends list), etc. I didn't *feel* unsafe- I trusted my intuition though my brain occasionally rebelled, for it was aware of the general safety-or lack thereof-of women in Delhi, and to an extent Kolkata. A few small battles were fought at home, too, at what was seen by my   family   as   unnecessary   risk-taking.

Certain other situations I was comfortable refusing-such as an invitation to stay overnight in Manesar along with some individuals of the FMS collective. This was their routine practice prior to the Manesar distributions in order to reach the location in time for the morning shift workers. I have a feeling that refusal might have been taken as my disinclination to 'slum it' in workers' quarters, thus offending or hurting sentiments, whereas the real reason was my concern of making myself vulnerable in a situation where I didn't really know the (male) collective members. My 'gut' trusted them, but in this case I preferred to play safe.

Another example of what I leave out includes examples of the social relations I formed-and did not form- with people I met during fieldwork. Of trying to figure out whether the right and respectful thing to do would be to continue those relationships after the end of fieldwork, with periodic thoughtful greetings, for instance, if so how, or if it was ethically okay to not do so. This was not because I was willing to discard these relationships after my ends were met, but because I'm simply incapable of such modes of social interactions in all domains of my life. Or of the decisions I made regarding Facebook and Whatsapp interactions, and why, and how, on occasion, I used Facebook profiles to 'scope out' and get a sense of the political and personal selves of people I was due to meet, to prepare me for interactions with them, and to decide how

much distance to maintain in those awkward overlapping spaces between the professional and the personal.

"Crrrritic!"[227]

Like pretty much everyone who starts a PhD, I had recurring moments of wondering what I wanted from the dissertation, why I was doing it, should I even finish it, etc. These were existential questions that visited me frequently from the mid-point of the PhD onwards. I knew there was more I wanted from my journey than just a completed dissertation and degree. I did not intend or foresee an academic career; the PhD had been a way for me to know what I really wanted to know. These questions pressed upon me more urgently after a) the discovery of the mundane marketplace nature of academia, my compromised location within it (wondering if the only acceptable and ethical 'out' was to *not* complete the dissertation), and b) after also, inevitably, becoming better acquainted with the non-altruistic, occasionally seamy underbelly of a lot of activism and labour politics (like everything else in the world). How was one to navigate this?

I struggled to make forward motion for several years, partly because of what has already been discussed, and partly because of how I'd ended up understanding what critique means, and what its function is. It was in my undergraduate degree in literature that I first encountered a deeply stimulating and enriching intellectual and political world-but it was there, too, where I had my first proper encounter with post-Enlightenment traditions of knowledge making. Very western-thought centric, very 'rational'. It showed my cohort how to critique, without showing us how to build. It gave me the skills-and encouraged me- to critique everything and

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[227] From Samuel Beckett's play, *Waiting for Godot.*

subconsciously I began to equate intellectual rigour and worthiness with the ability to sharply, mercilessly critique. To tear down, to observe the world around me like an edgy critic, all sharp angles and hard planes. This tendency is frequently encountered amongst political scholars, commentators and activists as well. Again, this was at odds with how I generally preferred to function, and even politically, such an attitude is of no practical value in the world. We work with what we have, and we seek to do more, and better.

In a previous research, the MPhil dissertation that preceded this dissertation, I explicitly mentioned with regard to what I was studying, i.e., the HSC, that I, in effect, came to praise (while holding on to rigour of analysis), not to rip apart. This desire came to be shaped even more sharply by the catastrophic chain of events unleashed by the pandemic in 2020 and the farmers' movement of 2020-2021 that culminated in a historic mobilisation in Delhi. These transformatory events highlighted, yet again, the messy nature of labour organisations, activists, and politics. Under these (age-old) circumstances, what were one's options of meaningfully 'doing'?

Critique appeared to me to be the lazier, easier option, unless it was productively coupled with, and used only in service of construction, of creation. I do not mean we must never critique, and only provide 'solutions' (a motto the corporate world is very fond of). We do need to be alert to the tendency to refuse stocktaking and reflection within progressive politics. That said, I was more interested in knowing how to build-the much harder question. I was in search of worthy examples of what this meant, models that provided worthy examples to draw from-and this is what I looked for during this research, with my interlocutors both on and off the field. In the chapters that precede this, I hope I am able to reflect that, in a small way.

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