

Fieldwork Report: Lives and Struggles of Migrant workers in Okhla Industrial Area: Delhi

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Abstract: This fieldwork report attempts to reflect on the lives and struggles of male migrant workers in Okhla Industrial Area, Delhi. Focusing on a metal artwork polish factory employing approximately fifty workers this report documents their attitudes, cosmologies, everyday speech, constraints and relationships.

Introduction

The following notes attempt to reflect on the lives and struggles of male migrant workers in Okhla Industrial Area, Delhi, where I have been conducting dissertation research over the past three years. My research has focused on an American-owned metal artware polish factory employing approximately 50 workers, all male migrants from the states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Jharkhand. The majority of these workers are on the muster rolls of the company, and receive statutory minimum wages (Rs.2,700-3,300/month) as well as ESI and EPF benefits. Metal polish work is extremely dirty and hazardous, and many workers suffer from illnesses such as tuberculosis, and incur injuries at the machines to the hands, legs, and face. Workers are not provided with proper masks or uniforms (which develop gaping tears and holes due to the nature of work), a dignified place to eat or bathe (both done out on the open road), nor are they paid legal double overtime. Suspicions also exist as to whether EPF deductions are deposited with the state, as no EPF receipts have yet been received, and whether ESI deductions from overtime are being paid to the ESI office, as accidents incurred during overtime have been falsely reported as having occurred during normal working hours.

Over the past year, I have witnessed several episodic struggles by workers` for wage increments, bonus restoration, provision of two samosas

during overtime hours, and an official transfer letter in the event of being shifted to another factory. Most of these struggles have taken the form of refusals - refusing to take wage payments and reduced bonuses, to do overtime without double samosa, to go to a new unit without a transfer letter. One witnessed in the course of these struggles an initial escalation of unrest around a given issue; ongoing formal and informal discussions, meetings and talks, at and outside of work; the building up of autonomous *taalmel* energies (coordinative, cooperative relations) amongst workers, for the most part without the role of leaders or leader-like workers; and the eventual breakdown of this *taalmel* due to selective betrayals and the loss of morale as workers resumed compliance with management. Approximately six months ago, workers decided to engage the support of a militant CPM-L union active in the area (Indian Federation of Trade Unions), though I would argue, primarily for instrumental (and not ideological) reasons – the felt need for a leader, for the purposes of ongoing advice, and for future protection in the event of a proposed illegal transfer of workers to a new unit.

The combination of 1) the autonomousness and leaderlessness of workers' ongoing oppositional activities, 2) the new presence of an outside leader and organisation (IFTU), and 3) a set of action-reaction sequences in which workers responded to management's oppressive initiatives with tool downs, the refusal of overtime, and occasionally abusive speech (*gali-galauj*), led to increased management anxiety about workers' growing strength and *taalmel* energy. Of particular concern to management were workers' ongoing (and mostly leaderless) regular Sunday park meetings, which management even attempted to gatecrash on occasion. Management's growing unease and anxiety, we believe, led to the following events which transpired over six weeks this summer.

Notes on a micro-struggle

On August 3, workers arrived at the morning shift (6 am) to find not one but four security guards at the factory gate, along with a posted notice of termination of four workers. These workers were a strange mix of a very vocal and oppositional worker (Varma), a second extremely articulate and savvy worker with leader-like ambitions but who was also believed to secretly collaborate with management (Rajender), a third who was oppositional in production style but otherwise quiet if not docile (Achevar), and a fourth who had a long and well-known history of chamcha-like activities since the start of the company three and a half years ago (Bhagvati). Workers were thus highly confused as to the meaning of this 'attack' by management, but due to the presence of Varma and Achevar amongst the four, who were known to be oppositional at heart, the workers on both shifts (after consultation with the union leader by phone) reacted with an immediate tool down. The next day, workers re-started work, but worked half-heartedly,

such that almost no pieces passed on the day, and this 'slowdown' activity continued for the next five days. Meanwhile, the four workers made a formal complaint to the regional labour office. The four dismissed workers maintained a presence at the factory gate, sitting and playing cards, and meeting with workers during tea and lunch breaks.

On August 9, management responded to the problematic situation inside by putting up a notice requiring that all workers sign that they would 'abide by management norms and regulations'. Perceiving this as a potential tool which management would use against workers should they resist in any way in the future, workers refused to sign the notice, and the next day, all workers were denied entry. A new complaint was made in the labour office as to the illegal lockout of all workers. At this stage, workers were highly disoriented, shuttling between IFTU rallies (on issues such as farmers' suicides and the EPF rate decrease), the labour office, and the factory gate, wondering how long this process would last. Labour inspectors took their time in attending to the case, and given their delays as well as corrupt reputation, the union leader brought the matter to the direct attention of the Deputy Labour Commissioner (DLC). Workers, meanwhile, were independently beginning to consider the option of signing the company notice and going back on duty, with the intention of struggling inside (through various forms of resistance, vocally and at their machines) to get the four dismissed workers reinstated. But the visible efforts of the DLC to contact and bring management into the conciliation process gave workers some hope that they might be taken back on duty without having to sign the notice, and so workers continued to refuse to sign and awaited their next date.

By the next labour office date, August 17, however, another notice had been put up on the gate suspending twelve workers (which included the names of the initial four dismissed workers). The DLC made further calls to the manager, and further assurances were given that he would appear at the next date. Workers became more tense at this stage and began to express doubts amongst themselves as to the power of the DLC to bring the management into the labour office. Workers went through the motions of slogan-shouting at the factory gate (as advised by the union leader) and showed signs of fatigue at the IFTU rallies they were being asked to participate in during the week.

On August 24, as workers gathered in the office of the ALC, they found to their shock that management had come to the labour office on the previous afternoon and had arranged the 'compromise' of five workers, who had withdrawn their complaint and taken their full and final dues (*hisaab*) from the company. The shock of this revelation was multifold. First, the compromise letter had been drafted and signed by the Labour Officer, whose post is below that of the Assistant Labour Commissioner (ALC) and

DLC, and who had agreed to act as 'witness' to this negotiation, the evening before the official hearing date, though without informing the union leader. By drafting this document for the five workers and the manager (who was yet to appear for any official labour conciliation date), the Labour Officer was providing official endorsement to management's efforts to deal with the workers' complaint by dealing out final *hisaab* to workers rather than reinstating them. The second cause of disturbance was the fact that while Bhagvati, who had been a long-time chamcha, was among the list of five *hisaab*-takers, also on this list were the names of two workers who were thought to be among the most vocal, oppositional, and reliably of the group (Krishna and Sivam). This caused extreme disorientation, confusion, and loss of morale, while management again failed to show and a new date was given.

Developments now accelerated rapidly, with several workers coming under the influence of Bhagvati's very energetic and management-sponsored efforts to break down other workers into taking *hisaab*. He would appear in workers' rooms at the crack of dawn to explain to them the merits of taking *hisaab* and dropping the complaint. By August 27, the next date, only three days later, eleven more workers had broken away and came to the labour office seeking to withdraw their complaint. Rumours circulated that management was promising workers that if they took *hisaab*, they might be considered for fresh employment in the same unit or in a proposed, new unit elsewhere in Okhla. Some workers that day claimed they were taking *hisaab* not out of these assurances but out of various personal compulsions (*majboori*), such as the inability or unwillingness to fight a long case in the courts, the piling up of debts, illness in the family, as well as what they perceived to be a general herd-like trend that was unfolding in which they did not wish to be left standing alone.

Despite the valiant efforts of the union leader to publicly shame the Labour Officer for his somewhat underhanded intervention in favour of management, workers who took *hisaab* over the next two weeks reported the Labour Officer's presence at the company's head office or in other locations whenever such *hisaabs* were made to workers. Estimates were made that Rs.500 to Rs.1,000 per worker had been given to this Officer as commission for the official witnessing of these *hisaabs*, based on the amounts workers observed were withheld from their *hisaab* packet after signing for a larger amount (e.g. workers signed for Rs.23,000 but Rs.500 was removed in front of them). Although the letters drafted by the Labour Officer on these latter occasions never surfaced in the labour office file, many believe that he was acting with the tacit cognizance of the ALC and DLC. The process of attrition of the remaining group continued until a total of 28 workers had taken *hisaab* and only 17 workers were left, with their resolve and conviction wearing down by the day.

During these days and weeks, one witnessed a very macabre theatre of workers' ugly and worst selves, which seemed to engage incessantly in vacillating, self-interest guided calculations about where their true advantage (*fayeda*) lay – in the collaborative grovelling for the “secondary gains”-quacrumbs from the management's table, in which they would get sure money now, that too in excess of the legal minimum severance payments, as well as an end to and exit from the tensions of this struggle and the company; or whether their interest lay in fighting the case for the restoration of their jobs. In the former strategy, it was not enough for a worker to quietly approach management for final *hisaab*; workers would try to take down others with them, perhaps to save face but possibly to also arrange a small commission for delivering heads to management.

As for those who continued to fight the case, they too exhibited a dubious mixture of motives: 1) the *fayeda* workers anticipated in the event of winning the case, either in terms of re-securing one's permanent job (which is extremely rare in the present employment scenario) or in terms of a larger final settlement in which one would be entitled to back wages for the entire period of the case, 2) the egoistic and vengeful motive of wanting to make the company bow down (*jhukna*) rather than bow down oneself, fuelled by sentiments of anger, stubbornness, and personalised ill-will towards management (*krodh, zidd, josh-jazbaat, ahamkaar*), and 3) the trace of a non-exclusively-self-interest guided animus against the ongoing injustices (*adharm*) perpetrated by the company, which had to be resisted here and in every factory, regardless of *fayeda-nuksaan* calculations.

In an effort to resist the spectatorship mentality and the ongoing grim calculations of advantage, as well as to boost workers' inner strength and self-confidence (*manoba*), the remaining group began drawing up posters detailing the events of the past month, describing the sorts of shenanigans witnessed in the labour office, reporting the various assurances and threats that had been made by the managers to workers, and describing the activities of chamcha workers such as Bhagvati (qua 'Kalyugi bhai') to break down fellow workers. These posters were put up near factory gates in Okhla Industrial Area, in workers' residential areas, and at the labour office. Although we did not always have clear answers to the occasional questions from spectator-like workers as to 'isse kya hoga?' (what will come of this?), there was a visible boost in *manoba* as workers busied themselves in this oppositional activity and recovered some of the strength and feeling of autonomous *taalmel* energy, which had become obscured in the course of the confounding clash with hidden, mysterious powers (high managerial decision-making behind closed doors, dependence on the union leader due to a lack of knowledge of how laws and courts work, behind-the-scenes dealings between management and the Labour Officer, etc.) and as a result of witnessing so many worker betrayals and desertions.

The struggle then took on a surprising turn. On September 13, the manager showed up for the labour office date for the first time (though the date had actually been changed to the 16th), and made overtures to the remaining workers to withdraw from the union and withdraw their complaint from the labour office, though promising little in return except that he would 'try' to resolve the situation favourably (though he continued to exclude certain 'problem' workers from such consideration). On the evening before the 16th, in anticipation we believe of the arrival of the American owner into Delhi on a visit, the manager went door to door to workers' homes, looking for remaining workers who were fighting the case, and landed up at the home of a central, most trusted, and respected worker who was regarded by many as a leader of the group. I also happened by coincidence to be present in his *jhuggi* at this time, and participated in the discussion which ensued, which culminated in the manager offering this worker and any other similarly-minded worker his job back in exchange for withdrawing the legal proceedings immediately.

We conferred with the larger group at the labour office the next day, and despite the manager's many convoluted schemes and efforts to avoid appearing at the labour office to secure this compromise in writing, he did eventually appear and signed a compromise letter in the presence of workers, the union leader, and an additional Labour Officer, taking back all 17 remaining workers without any conditionality. Workers were elated though somewhat bewildered by this turn of events. Now too, workers cannot say that they truly understand why they were taken back, given how much the company had seemed opposed to their presence and existence within the company. Nor do they understand why so many workers had decided to desert the group and take *hisaab* – out of greed (*lalac*), compulsion (*majboori*), panic (*gabrahat*)?

Obstacles and aids to the formation of potent and dignified struggles

The spectacle mentality

One disturbing tendency I encountered during this struggle and throughout my research is the troubling way in which workers come to adopt a standpoint of spectatorship towards their own lives. While not wishing to downplay the role of powerful agencies (such as managements, labour officers) in taking decisions, often behind closed doors, which shape workers' situations in drastic ways, workers also contribute to their own sense of powerlessness by looking upon the drama unfolding around them as a '*tamasha*' occurring at some remove from their agentive powers. This dangerous, self-disempowering attitude manifests itself in the refrains of '*dekho kya hota hai*' (let's see what happens...) as endpoints in workers' conversations and discussions about a given situation, and more

disturbingly, in the status quo-affirming mantra of '*jo ho raha hai, accha ho raha hai, jo hoga, accha hoga*' (what is going on is good (and by implication, for the good), what will happen will be good). This latter statement is ironically repeated precisely in the worst of circumstances, when it appears as if all that is occurring is indeed against the good.

While there will always be forces from above to attempt to discipline, diminish, and control workers' autonomous energies, workers themselves, by hosting the spectacle mentality, devalue their own importance and capacity to affect their own situation, while exaggerating the importance of those with more *visible* power (managements, labour officials, union leaders). In so doing, workers forget that it was their own autonomous *taalmel*, resistance, and agitational energies which precipitated the crisis in the first place. The result is that one sits back and lets others do the work of struggle (e.g. going to the labour office, union office, etc.) while one waits and watches for advantage. Such a posture more often than not leads to vulnerability to and potential manipulation by the visible power centres (managements, leaders), and ultimately, to regret and guilt (*pactaava*) if the outcome turns against workers.

Instead of '*dekho kya hota hai*' (see what happens), one would like to hear, as Sher Singh, the editor of *Faridabad Mazdoor Samachar*, advisedly says, '*dekho kya behtar kar sakte ho*' (see what you can do better). This injunction, I would add, is completely consistent and resonant with proletarian cosmologies of *karm*, which advocate not the passive surrender to circumstances or fate (*kismet*), but an ongoing wrestling with and struggling against one's determinative situation to commit good and right acts (*acche karm*).

The overly calculative mentality

Another obstacle to the formation of potent, dignified struggles is the disturbing tendency of workers to engage in ongoing, extremely complicated calculations as to where, with whom, and with what strategy one's self-interest lies. I have found that workers very rarely take a final decision to struggle along a certain trajectory. Quite the contrary, workers are constantly evaluating, re-evaluating, checking and conferring with each other as to whether what they are doing is sound and likely to produce good effects.

In spirit, this kind of experimental approach, ongoing analysis, and re-evaluation are very worthy activities, and act as crucial checks on projects from above and within workers' groups to mobilise workers into mindless rank-and-file foot soldiers, obedient to and dependent on others' commands. Such activity also serves to remind us of the profound mental capacities of ordinary persons to analyse and examine the myriad details, considerations, and contingencies (including long chains of 'what-if' scenarios) that

characterise a conflict-in-process in the context of multiple and complicated uncertainties.

But problems arise when this kind of ongoing calculation revolves dominantly around the criteria of the maximisation of self-interest (whether individual or enlightened collective interest). In such a situation, a struggle can reduce to a contest between competing groups seeking only to achieve their various narrowly-defined self-interests (*apna svarth siddh karna*). If one wishes to see the character of a struggle rise above this sort of clashing of billiard balls, there needs to be at least a *partial renunciation* of this calculating activity in favour of a more non-instrumental comportment towards struggle and conflict as endemic to life in oppressive and exploitative societies. In one worker's words, this is the orientation of '*adharm ke khilaaf*' (opposition to wickedness and wrong), which focuses on the struggle as such, and not only on advantage and interest (whether short or long term). Where this strain was visible, it added a distinctive new element to the struggle, offering higher, more dignified possibilities than those offered by the calculative mentality: the hope of better *izzat* relations rather than mere monetary advantage or job security. The non-instrumental orientation offered a recasting of what one was doing within the larger context of a struggle against the bad, the wrong, and the wicked, which can never be a wrong endeavour regardless of its strategic worthiness. It also expressed a tendency towards patience, allowing liberation from immediate, short-term and often panicky calculations as to how to extricate oneself quickly and favourably from this murky situation (e.g. by taking *hisaab*), because one could see that in the context of the factory, the battle would never really be over. There arguably could not be peace, *shanti*, *tassali* between managements and workers in this or any other factory, only more or less tension, strategem, *kutniti*.

The recognition of radical uncertainty

What sorts of things might help to facilitate, motivate, or inspire the partial renunciation of the overly calculative mentality?

One liberative phenomenon which may help encourage such a renunciation is the realisation of the nature of uncertainty prevalent in workers' lives, which can help to humble the calculative mentality. This includes the various forms of *vertical* uncertainty (alluded to above, which help to produce postures of spectatorship) regarding what goes on in decision-making power centres above, behind closed doors, '*management ki andar ki baat*', which one never really gets to learn about except 1) as refracted and distorted through myriad rumours circulated by management itself, supervisors, security guards, drivers, and workers themselves, and 2) as manifested through policies for all to see, after the fact of decisions, such as notices dismissing or suspending workers, notices demanding compliance with discipline, and so on.

As an aside, I would remark that where the decision-making centres above are state agencies, movements such as the Right to Information can potentially play a vital role in helping to reduce the vertical uncertainties involved. It is less clear what sorts of laws or acts could be resorted to by private sector workers to gain better access to the sorts of secret managerial talks and policy moves which impact so gravely on their lives.

Perhaps more important than the vertical uncertainties workers confront, however, are the profound uncertainties amongst workers themselves as to the doubts, fears, convictions, and intentions that are in the minds and hearts of one's co-resistors and co-struggles. What others in one's close proximity are thinking and feeling and what they might do is often highly uncertain and non-transparent, as well as constantly subject to change (especially allegiances). In the course of this short struggle, several shocking surprises were visited upon workers, for example, when two workers considered to be amongst the most defiant and reliable were among the first five to take *hisaab* behind the group's back (on August 23), and when another worker, Varma, seen as one of the most central and strong (as well as least instrumental) of the remaining group, late in the agitation, disappeared the night before a very important labour office conciliation date (September 16), having fled on cycle to a relative's house in Ghaziabad in the maelstrom of something approximating a mental-emotional breakdown.

What may help to liberate workers from the calculative obsession is the recognition of the radical nature of at least some of these vertical and horizontal uncertainties. By 'radical', I mean to draw on the important insight of the economist Frank Knight (and elaborated in the writings of Stephen A. Marglin and Sanjay G. Reddy) on the distinction between 'risk' and 'radical uncertainty'. Certain kinds of uncertainty which are amenable to measurement and prediction can be brought under the rubric of 'risk' calculation, while 'radical uncertainty' defies measurability and predictability. Radical uncertainty pervades large domains of human lives, and in accepting this (and its attendant anxieties and fears) we also gain a measure of psychological freedom, in that we are partially freed from ultimately misplaced risk-type calculative gymnastics. There is only so much one can know or anticipate about the actions of others above and at one's side in such radically indeterminate situations.

The *karm*-shaping effect of one's micro-*samaaj* (micro-society)

Another potential aid in effecting the partial renunciation of self-interested over-calculation is the nature of one's micro-society, circle, *sangat*. Is one's circle sustained primarily by bonds of mutual *svarth*, *fayeda*, advantage (e.g. a *chor ka samaaj*)? Is it a *sangat* which steers one into dangerous, anti-social behavior (*samaaj-drohi*) including harm to oneself? Or is it a circle where

one feels and gives each other respect (*izzat*), where one's 'value' matters, and is always at stake? Is it a micro-society that acts as a check on your *karm*, which helps to keep you in line, that is, which partially deters you from engaging in self-interest-dominated, *izzat*-compromising actions? As one worker expressed it, "This is really why I can't cave in [leave the struggle and take *hisaab*] – if I do, I won't be able to show my face in society (*samaaj mem muh dikhaane laayak nahim rahumga*)".

It is said by workers that '*jaisa sangat, vaisa karm*' and '*jaisa karm, vaisa sangat*': one's micro-society shapes one's *karm* (actions), and one's *karm* determines the sort of micro-society one attracts. If that is the case (and this insight resonates with the theories of the great 'context-respecting' social thinkers, from Marx to Unger), what we need are more *izzat*-governed and infused micro-societies, if we are to witness struggles of a different, more dignified character, which can begin to question a wider expanse of *adharm* in its many manifestations (and not only seek objectives of narrow personal gain), as well as become attuned to a more nebulous, longer term perspective, which sees struggle and conflict as inherent to life within the oppressively hierarchical macro-societies we inhabit.

The indeterminacy of autonomous *taalmel* trajectories

If we are to take up this longer term, always-struggling-in-the-present perspective, we also begin to see a loosening of the crushing effects of two phenomena: 1) panic, or the impatient desire to see quick solutions to complex conflicts, much like one expects instant relief from a doctor's *goli*, despite one's potentially long pre-history of wrong actions which have brought on the illness (especially one's partial collaborating with one's oppressors), and 2) the tremendous loss of morale and confidence resulting from past betrayals and failures of group resistance.

In my research, I have found that the trajectory of autonomous struggle is often not linear, but an excruciating and unpredictable (radically uncertain) ebb and flow, with episodic escalations, peaks, and crashes. Crashes occur for a variety of reasons, such as vertical pressures from above, horizontal betrayals, herd-like behaviour in following these negative examples, and eventually the generalised loss of faith and esteem in each other. A crash is followed by a period in which people collaborate to new degrees with oppression and amplify *jalan* (destructive envy), *grina* (contempt), and abusive aggression towards each other and oneself.

But in a factory setting, where a company always seeks more and more profit, discipline, and control, pressures on workers build such that people once again see the worth (if only initially out of *svarth* considerations) of coming together. In this regrouping and reconstructive stage, reparative apologies are made to one another for past betrayals, provisional pardons

are given, and the struggle starts afresh. As resistance efforts escalate, one feels a sense of ascent, a growing remoteness of the last, confidence-shattering crash, and an illusory sense that such crashes will not and cannot happen again. While it is probably dangerous to think along these lines (as it makes the next crash more damaging psychologically), what is true is that the strength and character of people's *taalmel* energies (while remaining difficult to anticipate and predict) *can* evolve in a space over time. In the factory I have studied, they have acquired a certain accumulative magnitude over time, in that despite the fact of cyclic escalations and crashes, the peaks (as well as the nadirs) have increased in amplitude over time. I attribute this to a certain recovery, transfer, and gathering together of some of the past, defeated and humiliated *taalmel* energies of a former struggle into a present struggle, in an unstated and subterranean manner. The repressed anguish and anger of apparently forgotten past defeats come alive in a new way in a new struggle.

Conclusion

If indeed the trajectories of workers' autonomous *taalmel* energies are indeterminate and up for grabs, then there really can be no truly passive spectatorship: things do not happen simply on their own, but always as a result of our actions and non-actions (our failures to do certain things). If the spectacle mentality is self-deceiving, neither can the overly calculative mentality guide us properly or dignifiedly in a radically uncertain world of endemic conflict. It is probably wiser and nobler to seek out and invest ourselves in micro-societies which can help steer and support us in respect-worthy (*izzat*-abiding) actions, and to orient ourselves towards conflict and struggle as permanent facets of our lives, with their tortuous ebbs and flows, escalations and destructive crashes. It is in the context of crises and conflicts, as I have witnessed amongst metal workers in Okhla Industrial Area, that one's character in the eyes of one's *samaaj* is put at risk. As we thus seek to reshape our character in more respect-worthy ways, we should also aim to respect the character of our micro-struggles in the image of the non-hierarchical, *izzat*-governed macro-societies we may envision in the indeterminate and therefore possibilities of rich future.

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