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Mechanisms of Surplus Appropriation in the Informal Sector: A Case Study of Tribal Migrants in Ahmedabad's Construction Industry

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Mechanisms of Surplus Appropriation in the Informal Sector: A Case Study of Tribal Migrants in Ahmedabad's Construction Industry

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Abstract

This paper is based on fieldwork I had undertaken regarding tribal migrant workers in the construction sector, in Ahmedabad in May-July 2018, coordinated by Aajevika Bureau(AB). I had undertaken this fieldwork to assess the work of AB and advise them about strategies to collectivize migrant labour groups. While interacting with a particular social group (Bhil tribals from South West Rajasthan) who work in the construction sector, I struggled to capture the specificity of their experience through the concept of informal labour. This paper is an attempt to characterize the specificity of their social experience, while also, reframing the concept of informal labour. I use the concept of labour process (Michael Burawoy: Manufacturing Consent) to argue that there is not a binary or one-dimensional power relationship between informal labour and owner/state/capital, but instead, the process of surplus appropriation occurs at multiple nodes through different agents. In this paper, I have identified multiple modes of surplus extraction which are embedded as institutions or social norms in the labour process. Further, I argue that there is a close link between the status of tribal workers as marginalized within society, and their status as displaced and marginalized in their living areas and workplace. This difference translates into identity based discrimination faced in the city, as well as, structural exclusion from the governance apparatus faced as migrants. Therefore, tribal migrant workers do not earn enough to subsist and are highly dependent on early child birth, non-remunerated services of their family and the social security net provided by their village community. This paper concludes that primitive accumulation, fragmenting land ownership and indebtedness creates a supply of tribal migrants, who have no other recourse to employment and are forced to work in the deplorable conditions found in the construction sector. Tribal migrant workers in the informal sector are an important population to target for social policies, because they are more vulnerable than other social identities. This paper hopes to contribute to the framing of interventions and policies that civil society organizations and state authorities can implement to improve the terms of employment and working conditions of informal labour.

1. Introduction

This paper is based on a fieldwork study of tribal migrant workers in the construction sector in Ahmedabad. This fieldwork was coordinated by Aajeevika Bureau (henceforth AB), an organisation that works to “ensure secure and dignified lives of community’s dependent on migration and labour.” I had been invited by AB to assess the functioning of their collectivization efforts with migrant labour and provide feedback. This provided a window for me to both observe the working lives of migrant labour up close, but also interact with AB staff who had worked with these groups for many years. The fieldwork was not conventional in terms of methodology or magnitude; it did provide a unique opportunity to understand multiple perspectives of actors/agents involved with migrant informal labour.

My aim in this paper is to conceptualize a frame to understand how tribal migrant labour experience and deal with the deplorable working and living conditions found in the construction industry. Why do they continue to work in this industry in the face of continuous danger, exploitation, and harassment and how do they negotiate this daily distress? While this provides the content and foreground of this paper, I will also interrogate through these questions the category of informal labour and argue that it requires reframing to understand the specificity of the experience of tribal migrant labour.

Informality as a concept is framed as the binary opposite of formal employment or as a deficit over the conditions of work of formal labour. This deficit is found both in the labour’s working conditions e.g. low wages, irregular work hours, no security, insurance or benefits, no recourse to law, as well as in the production process e.g. labour intensive technology, little investment in the production process, etc. Such a binary view of the informal sector reduces the labourer as being a functional appendage to big-firm capitalism and doomed to forever either survive or be defeated. They are framed as being helpless against the discrimination and exploitation faced by forces of capital and the state. As a corollary, the only potential improvements in the wage labour relation is to recommend conditions found in the formal sector (regular contracts, rights achieved through state intervention). Such a framework misses out on important low cost and realistic interventions that can be made in the informal sector. Moreover, it homogenizes the experience for informal labour and fails to discern the differences in informal labour’s ability to engage and negotiate their work relationship through their social identity.

In this paper, I will re-frame the concept of informal labour, to counter the uni-dimensional way in which it is defined, by using the more nuanced concept of informal labour process. The reason for this change is to demonstrate that there is no binary between hegemonic capital and powerless labour; What needs

to be contested is power as a one-dimensional object, held by one side and enforced on the other side. The labour process brings forth the idea that power is present in multiple points in the labour process. The concept of labour process provides a framework to study the process of appropriation of surplus: the points and agents through which this appropriation takes place is in constant flux. The points through which this appropriation is achieved is not necessarily hierarchical (more appropriation higher up the chain of production) or controlled by any agent. There are modes of surplus extraction within the labour process that adapt to the external conditions of the production process and the nature of the social embeddedness of the worker. Hence, the experience of informal labour will differ in different industries, depending on the nature of competition in that industry and the socio-political context of the region and identities involved. The frame of labour process will identify the different points (relations in production, relations of production, and personal life) of appropriation of surplus and will also argue that these provide micro nodes of negotiation/resistance to the workers.

This paper is divided into the following sections: section one describes the socio-economic conditions of tribal construction workers in Ahmedabad and their living and working conditions; section two applies the frame of labour process to analyse the different modes of surplus extraction which are experienced by tribal construction workers; section three provides some concluding comments.

2. Tribal Construction Workers

2.1 Social Characteristics

This paper will focus on AB's major intervention work in Ahmedabad with tribal migrants, who are employed as daily wage labour in the construction industry. They are short-distance migrants traveling from tribal belts in South West Rajasthan. I have made multiple visits to different sites of migrant settlement, *nakas*¹, and construction sites in Ahmedabad during the field study. However, one specific migrant camp next to a sewage water treatment plant provided the main basis of my observation.² This site has more than a thousand migrant Adivasi workers living in their temporary settlements made from recycled plastic, wood, rope, and junk items. They are living on encroached land and do not have basic amenities like electricity, running water, toilets, etc. They are forced to stay illegally, as the state does not

1 *Naka* literally refers to street corner. These are locations in the city, which function as daily labor markets. Contractors come to these sites and bargain with gangs of labour to hire them for the day/short project.

2 This area was also part of the study by Breman (2016), chapter 6, pp 168.

recognize them or provide any public services which are guaranteed to locals. Their main possessions are the ones that can be carried with ease such as a mat for sleeping, basic cooking utensils, vessels for storing, and toiletries. Given the consistent threat of both financial distress and physical eviction, family units own very few possessions which are packed daily and carried in person. This is done as they face the threat of eviction and confiscation of possession by the municipal corporation at any time. They use fires to manage cooking and lighting at night, for this, they collect stray wood from the surrounding area. They have to travel to local public toilets as there are no toilets and bathing facilities nearby. They get water from a nearby factory which is provided twice a day, and they have to stand in line for an hour or more to get access to this.

Their living conditions are connected to the fact that they have no visibility in the policy framework or rights guaranteed by state authorities. Studies have shown that about 6 lakh migrant workers from tribal areas come to work in Ahmedabad, yet state authorities and local politicians do not provide any services or assistance that are provided to residents (Their own country: pp1). The politics of migrant labour are well documented (Bremner 2016 pp 12). They are perceived as outsiders as they have no connection with the local population; having no rights as the state actors and politicians gain no political cache from this population. These conditions circumscribe the lives of migrant labour as being completely dependent on their employer's whims, and their ability to survive and negotiate the forces of city life bounded within interactions with state actors, merchant, shop keepers, local citizens, policemen, contractors, and competing group of migrant labour.

The migrant workers in the site studied here consist of Meena or Bhil Tribals from districts of southern Rajasthan like Udaipur, Dungarpur, Banswara, Rajasmand, etc (Their own country: pp 11). The magnitude of labourers migrating from this area to join the construction industry is high. These labourers are defined as short term distress migrants. They are framed as distress migrants as they are not coming to the city out of aspiration for better jobs or higher pay, but are forced to come under extreme debt incurred and the threat of loss of land and livelihood.

Tribal identities are strongly connected to their land and community. This is particularly true because, tribals fall outside the Hindu caste system, and have historically been highly dependent on natural and forest resources. The tribal society is an independent society that has its own sets of rules, norms, and customs. Social status is defined by tribal customs, and land ownership is an important marker of meaning in their life. Their customs and culture are not based on the reproduction of the Hindu caste systems but based on different modalities. To leave their community and land is perceived as a failure by

tribal norms and only undertaken when there is no other option. The main reasons for tribals to migrate are due to the steady process of primitive accumulation³ on forest resources on which they have depended on historically, and the fragmentation of their owned land over multiple generations.

Since colonial times common forest resources have been deforested to create commercial agricultural land; however, this process has been expedited after liberalization and this land has been extended for mining and quarrying or construction of manufacturing units. This dispossession of common land has been conducted by state authorities, on behalf of manufacturing units and commercial farmers with political clout or capital. Further, as the population of tribals has increased, their land has got fragmented and divided, forcing them to overwork the fields and affect its fertility and productivity.

Lastly, tribals get heavily immersed in debt usually through the *chandla* mechanism, and are forced to migrate for work to pay back their *chandla* debt. Amongst tribal populations, like the Bhils events associated with transitions in an individual's lives or transitions of agricultural life, are very important (ref: Baumgartner 2004, pp 101). These include births, deaths, and marriages - in which bride prices are quite common, as well as important festivals such as Holi and Diwali. A family's status in a community is dependent on how much they spend on these occasions. It is hard to have the cash required for these expensive events and credit from formal institutions is non-existent; these communities have evolved a system of social contribution towards a family's expenditure based on reciprocity called *chandla*. The contribution of *chandla* depends on the family's closeness to and status in the community. The *chandla* contribution keeps increasing over time: to account for the time gap or deferring consumption. There is a social expectation, that each family will pay a 30-50% higher contribution to what they received. If a family is unable to pay *chandla* then they will lose status in the community. Over time the *chandla* amounts have become so large that families have no surplus income to invest productively and have to take loans to make *chandla* payments. Many families talked about how richer members of the community make large *chandla* contributions and then siphon off money from other families by giving credit (at high interest) to other families to pay back *chandla*. Since this system is so engraved in the social customs of tribal life, families are forced to migrate to earn income if they are unable to pay *chandla*.

³ Primitive accumulation is a Marxian concept, which refers to the process through which labor is stripped of their ownership of means of production and forced to become wage labor. In the above case, primitive accumulation refers to the process through which the state has appropriated land, which was historically used by tribal labor.

2.2 Working conditions

Social identities play an important role in networks of recruitment and kinds of work available to a migrant worker. A substantial proportion of workers from the tribal belt in Southern/Southeastern Rajasthan travel to Ahmedabad and work in the construction sector (Their own country: Fig 2: pp 24). When I asked my interviewees about this phenomenon, there were multiple reasons provided: belief in gaining higher wages in the construction industry, more jobs available in Ahmedabad, closer distance to their homes (5-6 hours), and community knowledge about areas where they can squat. Knowledge of an area and contacts with contractors are built by early migrators from the community, and this knowledge is passed on to others. In the next section, I will discuss how social identity also restricts jobs available to a particular community, as well as how caste networks restrict mobility within the workplace.

The majority of workers, according to AB staff, were manual and unskilled workers in the construction sector. Their main work ranged from cleaning, digging, loading, carrying, or assisting in the laying of bricks. Some workers moved up to jobs of the bricklayer or overseeing the mixers or loading vehicles. There were almost no cases of workers who did skilled work such as masonry, wiring, plumbing, laying tiles, and interior work. Migrants from different regions and higher castes monopolized skilled jobs. There was also a clear gender division with women being delegated to cleaning and boiler maintenance tasks; these jobs were the most undignified and requiring the most physical efforts. Such hierarchization of work according to social status (defined by caste) is common in informal labour (Barbara Harriss White 2002, pp 176 - 200).

The tribal labourers prefer daily wage work, as they do not like being tied down for longer periods. In some ways informal daily, wage suits these needs as they can travel back and forth, as they wish, or when their financial needs are fulfilled, or to visit functions/festivals in their village - which they give significant importance to. Secondly, they gain their work through *nakas*. These are daily wage markets spread out across the city. Contractors come to these sites and bargain with gangs of labour to hire them for the day/short project. The advantages of the *naka* are that cash is paid daily, plus the employer will provide for transport and in some cases for tea. Moreover, this allows the workers to individually assess the terms of work and pay. If a worker does not like the terms of work, then they will not go back with the same contractor on the next day. The flip side is the lack of stability in work availability. Bargaining in the *naka* is highly contingent on the demand available on the day. Moreover, if a worker is old, not in good physical condition, or has accumulated a bad reputation, then it can be difficult to get a job every day. The migrant workers have very little bargaining power in the workplace itself.

The working conditions in construction sites are unclean, unsafe, and usually, sites have no toilets. It is unsafe for women workers (who frequently face sexual harassment) and has no space/anganwadi to keep children. The recruitment chain is quite complicated in the workplace. There is a chain of communication from the builder, engineer, supervisor, recruiter, and sub-contractor. Since the worker only has contact with the contractor who recruits them, they have no way of approaching anyone else for assistance for delayed payment, harassment, and health issues. Moreover, since staff from multiple regions and castes work in the construction site, they are unable to communicate with other labour gangs. Within, the workplace it is quite clear that tribal workers look different, behave differently; and are involved in relatively more menial work.

In the next section, I will discuss the concept of labour process, apply it to informal migrant tribal labour's experience, and analyse the multiple modes of surplus appropriation that they are embedded within.

3. The labour process

The labour process plays a vital role in the overall accumulation cycle⁴. It is through the labour process that capital appropriates surplus from labour. Michael Burawoy (1982), in his influential book *Manufacturing Consent*, focuses on this crucial phase of the accumulation cycle and defines the labour process as one of appropriation and obscuration of surplus from labour. Burawoy (1982, p. 15) theorizes the labour process as having a practical aspect and a relational aspect. "In its practical aspect, the labour process is a set of activities that transform raw material into useful objects or fractions of useful objects with the assistance of instruments of production." This involves the expenditure of labour and the translation of capacity to work into actual work. This aspect is also referred to as the **relations in production**.

The fundamental relation between owner and worker inscribed in the wage relationship is referred to as **relations of production**. These aspects are not easily separable in real life, but such a division provides analytical value, as one can study different aspects of the labour process separately, and concurrently isolate different modes of surplus appropriation. Further, it de-privileges the neo-classical emphasis on conditions of supply and demand and focuses on the process of creating value and appropriating labour

⁴ The accumulation cycle refers to Marx conceptualization of the capital production process as one where money is transformed into commodities which is then sold to realize capital. It is popularly referred to as the M-C-M' cycle.

power. This takes into account not only the physical act of labour, but also technology, the nature of the labour hierarchy, relations within the workplace, and the labourer's life outside of the workplace. The application of the concept of labour process is to divert the conceptualization of labour as an input in the production process and instead make it the central component of understanding the production process.

I will articulate a conceptualization of exploitative informal wage labour process (De 2017), based on Burawoy's theorization, which refers to a labour process that does not provide labour with resources to reproduce themselves. This conceptualization is described in detail in the next sub-section, drawing on the work of Breman (2016) and Lerche (2017). According to Marx, all wage labor is exploitative: exploitation refers to the process of appropriation of surplus from labor. The labor process defined in this section, however, refers to labor processes in which labor is not guaranteed a subsistence mode of earning required for meeting basic needs. In this section, I will describe the conditions of existence for such labor processes, the mechanisms through which surplus is appropriated from labour, and the means through which tribal migrant workers survive. I will argue that different social identities face different degrees of discrimination and negotiate this labor process in a different manner. Tribal migrant workers face structural exclusion and identity-based discrimination which makes them one of the most vulnerable groups of workers.

3.1 Conditions of existence

Exploitative Informal wage labour refers to all labour processes, which have an owner who hires wage labour under extremely precarious terms. These processes use coercive methods to decrease worker control over the pace and rhythm of work, and their bargaining power in determining wages. These processes are usually characterized by informal contracts and breach of labor laws: longer working hours, poor working conditions, social isolation, and inadequate access to basic amenities.

These labour processes are usually employed in firms that produce commodities in a highly competitive market: individual commodities are not easily differentiable, like garments, cloths, basic services, and low skilled processes in construction. This includes production processes that are part of a larger chain of production also referred to as sub-contracting work. Since these firms have little power to influence the price of goods, their ability to make a profit hinges on maximizing the effort of the labour involved. These firms increase profits by increasing the absolute surplus value appropriation: lengthening the workday, decreasing wages, and increasing the effort of labour.

These processes are characterized by a despotic control by owners over labourers' pace and rhythm of work, working conditions, and living conditions. Owners of highly competitive firms such as textile mills, that I have interviewed, have claimed that cheap labor is a prerequisite for this production process to be profitable, as these firms compete in highly competitive input markets and own similar technology. Moreover, these are industries with very low barriers – capital and technical know-how - to enter the market. The production processes in these firms must adapt to the requirements of the market. During high demand periods, the production process will have to function for most parts of the day, while when demand is low the production process might have to be completely halted. Since producers have no control over the pace and rhythm of work, labour has to be coerced to work according to the requirements of the production process. Moreover, depending on market requirements, workers might get retrenched or receive delayed wages. The employers pass on the firm's risks to the worker. Worker's facing high economic distress and having no other mode of procuring work are forced to work on such terms. Furthermore, there are no mechanisms for mobility or increased bargaining power available to the labourer; there is no potential for socio-economic improvement of this group without external intervention. The case of migrant labour becomes acutely difficult, because the local government has little incentive to improve their condition, and their home government does not have the information or policy mechanisms available to improve their conditions. Since there is neither incentive nor ability for the improvement of the socio-economic condition in this group, these conditions persist. It is important to understand the multiple modes of surplus appropriation and mechanisms through which this labour process is reproduced to design policies or intervene in their lives.

3.2 Modes of Surplus Extraction

The Marxist conception of the workplace is founded on the fundamental antagonistic relation between owners of capital and labour in distributing surplus. The concept of labour process provides an analytical division of the entire process of extraction and obscuration of surplus labour. Such an analytical division can provide more nuance into the multiple social relations through which surplus is extracted from labour, which is otherwise obscured due to focus on the wage relation. I will use a concept used by Basole and Basu (pp 71) referred to as mode of surplus extraction which they define as “the specific ways in which unpaid labour is extracted from the producers and appropriated by the dominant classes”. In their paper, they have identified four institutional ways in which surplus is extracted from the informal sector in India namely Piece Wages, unequal exchange, Labour Bondage, and Gender and Caste. Surplus

extraction in tribal migrant labour has also been analysed in Jain and Sharma (2018) I will extend this concept to identify modes of surplus extraction faced by tribal migrant labour in the construction sector.

Component of the Labor Process	Modes of Surplus/income Extraction
Relations of Production	Daily wages, Hiring through a <i>naka</i> system, Lower status in the social hierarchy, Lack of mobility in the workplace.
Relations in Production	Heirarchization of the labour force - through skills and social identity, Employing a divided and highly replaceable workforce.
Reproduction of Labour	Price discrimination, Extra charge/rent to gain access to public services.

3.2.1 Relations of Production

The defining set of relations in class society is between those who produce surplus value (labour) and those who siphon this surplus (capital). These relations determine the distribution and consumption of the product of labour. Marxist literature theorises that relations of production are always antagonistic and the distribution of surplus-value in the production process is determined by the bargaining power between owners of capital and workers. This antagonistic relation is represented in bargaining over wage rates. The modes of surplus extraction in relation of production contribute to decreasing the bargaining power of labour in determining the wage. The bargaining power of a worker is influenced by, their ability to differentiate themselves in the labor market, bargain as a group, or hold out for a higher wage. In this section, I will analyse the mechanisms which reduce the ability of tribal migrants to bargain for higher wages such as social status in the caste hierarchy, lack of savings, lack of group bargaining power the lack of rights or representation in the city.

Tribal migrant work in the construction sector is characterized by piece-rate wages or daily wage depending on the nature of labour being performed. The singular advantage of instituting piece work wages to the number of loads carried or the number of bricks unloaded is that it links remuneration to work effort and provides motivation for workers to work harder. Some forms of labour such as cleaning, maintaining the boiler, digging, etc. which does not have a tangible output are paid daily time wages. Since the contract is renewed every day, this ensures maximum effort from a worker in a day, as there is

no guarantee of being re-hired the next day. Moreover, owners can make workers work overtime without paying at a higher rate. The daily wage (both piece and time) ensures the owner does not have to bear the burden of ill health or deteriorating physical ability of the worker. They can hire workers who are physically more capable.

Hiring through the *naca* benefits the contractors tremendously, especially if they are regulars and have a good understanding of the social profile of workers. Contractors who have good relations will hire workers without much negotiation as they have knowledge of healthy and highly motivated workers. One can observe in the *naca* that the younger, more physically able workers (16-25) will get hired first. Couples take longer to get jobs and will have to wait for a while especially since they insist on working on the same job site. Workers who have not got a job will be willing to lower their wage demand as the morning progresses, as the prospect of not getting work increases. Similarly, older workers (30+ age) or workers without good health will have to wait for a job and agree to a lower wage. Since these workers are dependent on their survival on daily wages they will have to accept the lower wage. Many contractors take advantage of this fact. Migrant tribal workers, however, react to the daily wage market in unusual, and what may be considered irrational, ways. This will be discussed in the last section on resistance.

Another aspect of the relations of production is the process of mobility within the labour force. Ideally, as a labourer learns from work experience, they should be able to upgrade their skills and move into better positions in the factory or work site. Skilling and increasing the productivity of workers will allow them to bargain for better wages. This is the natural process through which formalization occurs: as firms invest in their employees, as their value to the firm increases. The mobility up the labour hierarchy also acts as a natural motivator for the labourer.

In the labour processes' studied here, there are major barriers to a labourer moving up the labour hierarchy. The primary barrier is social identity; manual and semi-skilled workers are from marginal identities and are rarely promoted to the supervisory role. Moreover, since these workers have no opportunity to learn new skills or get a better educational degree, they cannot increase their bargaining power. The skilled jobs in the construction site such as masonry, tile cutting, electrical work, interior work, etc, are done by labourers from specific regions and communities. These groups of labourers have no interaction with the tribal migrant workers in the construction space, as they are socially excluded even in the workplace. There exists a clear hierarchy between different kinds of jobs, and skilled workers perceive a sense of pride in their work even if the pay rate may not be very different. Moreover, these

communities pass on their skills to their children who work through the same networks established by them. So the son of a Rajasthani OBC tile worker will assist his father for a few years learning the trade, after which he will take over the job. The caste system is used to reproduce this skill-based division of labour. This division is reproduced through caste norms of purity and social boundaries such as marriage, segregated living, interacting in religious events.

AB staff consistently found that the most physically demanding work (carrying, digging, loading), and the most unclean work (cleaning, working with the boiler), etc, were given to workers from the lowest social status in society. Since tribals are perceived as having the lowest status in the Hindu caste hierarchy, it was easy for employers to provide the most degrading jobs to them for minimum pay. Moreover, in certain cases, a worker and his wife will be hired together and paid one and a half times the minimum wage, as women are not paid minimum wage. Women do not work independently in construction sites, as there is a significant threat of sexual violence; couples will agree to the lower combined wage as long as both get work in the same workplace.

Daily wages, hiring through a naka system, lower status in the social hierarchy, and lack of gaining mobility in the workplace are different modes of surplus extraction which function through the fundamental wage relation/relation in production and contribute to keeping the bargaining power of migrant workers down.

3.2.2 Relations in production

This refers to the organization of the production process and the technical division of labour. Relations in production develop in order to maximize surplus appropriation within the labour process. This is done by controlling the pace of the workday, and the amount of effort that workers put in the workplace. Modes of surplus extraction within the relations in production consist of increasing the intensity of worker, shortening breaks between different tasks, and alienating labour groups from building a collective consciousness. Harry Braverman (1998) has analysed how within the factory system, physical infrastructure, and management systems were created to control the pace of work while alienating the labourer. They can be differentiated from the more traditional family/ artisan based labour processes, where all the tasks are performed by the same group of labour.

The manufacturing sector is characterized by the division of labour between conception, supervision, and execution. Separation and specialization of function are one of the modes, through which the

degree of control of the owners over the labouring population is increased. The hierarchical labour structure allows for both control over and incentive for labour to strive to move up the pyramid. Moreover, the majority of workers at the bottom of the labour force can be easily replaced, while more skilled or supervisory labour are provided formal terms of employment as their skills are highly valued.

In the construction sector, this division can be found between mental or conceptualizing labor such as engineers and architects, supervisory labour, skilled labour such as carpenter, mason, electrician, and plumber, and manual labour. The set of activities can range from digging the foundation, engineering work, creating the design and blueprint, brick making and laying, creating the electrical and water networks, building the interior of the building, etc. Power and control flow downwards in this hierarchy. The construction sites I have studied are run by large oligopolistic construction companies; few large firms with finance and capital compete for these construction projects which in this case are large residential housing projects in Ahmedabad. The main function of the construction company is to procure the land and gain various permissions from the bureaucracy to make a building and provide the capital for the project. Further, they provide the architect, engineers, and technical teams who are involved in the construction process.

The majority of the labour force which provides the manual, semi-skilled labour for the construction site is hired through chains of supervisors and foremen. At the top of the chain are supervisors who take on different aspects of the construction process and oversee the whole process of hiring, managing, and executing that part of the process. Each head supervisor will in turn have a handful of foremen/thekeedar/contractors, who will be in charge of smaller parts of the whole process. The supervisor will be the channel through which communication and finance pass from the higher to the lower levels, making them quite powerful in certain parts of the labour process. However, these supervisors are not owners of capital and do not directly benefit from the appropriation of surplus that they are involved in. This division of labour in multiple hierarchies provides a mode of control and surplus appropriation for the owners of capital. Each worker gang works independently and cannot influence the overall process. If a particular group is either inefficient in its work or bargains for a higher wage then they can be fired without affecting the whole process. Moreover, it reduces the possibility of collective worker bargaining in the production process.

Each foreman and group of labourers (usually 10-20) can be thought of as a firm working under highly competitive conditions. The worker's gangs are easily replaceable if there is a fall in output or if the gang is not willing to work to the requirements of the owner, which could sometimes be two shifts in a day for

seven days a week. Moreover, contractors are also easily replaceable hence they are always looking for ways of pushing workers to work harder, supervise and ensure very few breaks, and monitor movements to ensure maximization of effort.

The construction sites that I had visited had employed a complex hierarchy of contractors and supervisors to manage the labour pool. I found that each portion of the production process employed labour gangs from a different ethnicity. Most workers/*thekedaars* in the site knew little about the jobs and roles conducted by other workers/ gangs. There was no feeling of camaraderie amongst workers as they spoke in different languages/ were from different regions. Moreover, nobody was sure about who were the main managers/owners of the site. Such dispersion in labour roles in the site ensured that there is no collective consciousness amongst workers in the workplace. Even if a group of workers had a payment issue or faced harassment, they didn't know who to approach as they didn't understand the chain of command. Even if the workers stopped work and went on strike, it hardly affected the rest of the workplace and they could be replaced easily. The disparate and mobile nature of the workplace ensured that there was very little collective consciousness amongst workers.

The supervisory and engineers (conceptualizing labour) had formal jobs with benefits. The working conditions of the unskilled workers were manual and labour intensive work with little scope for improvement in skills, such as cleaning, loading, clearing, digging, and taking care of the boiler. These workers would constitute half of the workers at the construction site. The lack of labor-saving or automation technology in these tasks is a function of the highly competitive nature of these industries. Each contractor is too small to invest in new technology, better equipment, better working condition. Instead, each contractor uses very similar labor-intensive technology⁵ and accepts the market price for these contracts. In order to maximize output, given the cost of inputs and technology, is through intensifying and controlling the work done under them. Individual jobs are broken down into a cycle of easily repeatable actions, which make it a simple activity to learn, but extremely dreary to repeat over and over. Moreover, this ensures that an unskilled worker can learn the job in a short time and any dissident worker can easily be replaced. The pace and rhythm of work can be changed according to the demands of the construction site. The early parts of construction are usually done from the October-April season, where migrant labour is more easily available and the labour supply is high. Short term migrants return home for the agricultural harvest season. In peak season, production can be carried out

⁵ One highly articulate owner I talked to commented about how the technology used today is not any different from the one used in Manchester mills in the early 19th century.

all day, while in the off season the workplace can be completely shut down if required as the only variable to control is labour effort.

The hierarchization of the labour force, through skills and social identity is a mode of surplus extraction embedded in the relations in production. The pace and intensity of work is enforced through the divided and highly replaceable work force. Moreover, the collective consciousness that gets built in labour due to working together and individual processes requiring synchronization or through large work gangs was avoided. This aspect of the labour process allows maximum appropriation of surplus.

3.2.3 Way of life/ reproduction of labour power

While empirically this section describes the workers sphere of living, analytically it provides us a category to understand how workers reproduce their labour power. This aspect explains the standard of living of a worker and their quality of life. In this section I will argue, that tribal migrant workers do not receive enough income to maintain subsistence standard of living: due to, a class of merchants who appropriate income from their wages through price discrimination. This mechanism function because of the structural exclusion faced by workers as migrants in the city, and discrimination faced due their tribal identities. Subsistence can be defined in terms of income, nutritional requirements or basic needs – which account for a culture specific definition of basic needs. In this paper I will expand the notion of subsistence as a static measure, to the more dynamic Marxian concept of reproduction of labour. Reproduction of social labour power involves more than just its physical reconstitution. It also includes the renewal of the working class from generation to generation. This includes expenditure for the maintenance and education of children, maintenance after retirement and insurance against sickness. The nature of work makes the lives of tribal migrants extremely precarious and unpredictable: they have extremely irregular working hours and a constantly changing pattern and rhythm of work. In peak seasons they may have to work for more than sixteen hours a day, while in the off season these labourers' may remain unemployed for months at a time, moreover, depending on the nature of the production process informal labour has to stay extremely mobile and be willing to migrate at any moment for the possibility of a job. Tribal migrants are particularly vulnerable because of the precariousness of their daily living situation, which is dependent on the health of the main earner, their savings, networks and status in the village economy. In the next paragraph, I will analyze the living conditions and expenditures of these workers during their residence in the city and identify mechanisms

through which surplus is further appropriated from the worker's by merchant classes/state authorities. Since, this appropriation is happening outside the work place, it is often overlooked; this labor process frames informal labour not just as an unequal relationship between capital and worker, but embedded within social structures of exclusion and discrimination.

Tribal migrant workers, usually, live in shared, temporary, single room accommodations on rent or made by accumulating junk and basic building material. These accommodations have little access to basic amenities like water, sanitation and electricity. The labourers cannot afford to invest in any consumer durables, and most of their income is spent on food, wine and paying the interest on debts taken. There is little income left to invest in children, essentially relegating the family to live in such conditions of squalor for generations. The temporariness of their way of living is symptomatic of the temporary place they have in the work place and city. Gender norms in the community such as age of marriage, age of having children, role of women in the household etc, are shaped by the precariousness of their livelihood, and lack of insurance and support in the work place. The vulnerability in their earning, which are highly dependent on their physical ability, has incentivized them to marry early and have children early. Workers physically manage the work intensity till the age of 35 - if they haven't succumbed to disease, chronic illness or accident earlier. For the family to survive the children must reach working age (usually 14-16 years) by the time the head of the household cannot work. Tribal migrants marry by 16 and have children by 18. The oldest son of these family reach working age by the time the father reaches the stage of physical decline.

These migrants are not aspiring to live in the city and become socially mobile, as they perceive their village as their permanent residence. The barriers for social mobility in the city are so rigid, that these workers do not invest in their way of living. This is particularly exacerbated by their lack of education and exposure to metropolitan citizens, leading to a lack of awareness of basic rights, or knowledge about minimum wages and working conditions. Also, living illegally in different parts of the city make them highly vulnerable to be evicted and cheated. They are regularly harassed by locals in the area and there have been reports of stealing, assault and sexual harassment by local youths. These are a result of discrimination faced as tribal's: who stand out in their appearance and behavior in the city. Such discrimination is faced by backwards communities working in the city, however, it is exacerbated for tribal's who do not have any connections or network of others from their community who have successfully migrated to the city.

The state government does not acknowledge their existence and the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation does not attempt to provide services to assist these populations. Moreover, they do not receive several public benefits, which are provided by the state at their source such as subsidized ration, subsidized health check-up and treatment, free schooling, and access to the Anganwadi for young children and lactating mothers. They are perpetually prepared to move or leave at the shortest notice. The tribal populations usually carry their belongings and money with them at all times. The municipal corporation can come anytime and confiscate their residence as they squat in different parts of the city. This is a result of structural exclusion faced by distress migrants.

The lack of knowledge about rights and savings, and the exclusion and discrimination faced by tribal migrants, makes them susceptible to appropriation of income from their wages, by several agents in the city through price discrimination or modes of unequal exchange. Their daily wages are spent getting rations for cooking from vendors, who come to their area of residence. Since the workers are at work for 10-12 hours, including travelling back by foot to home, they have little time to look for other places to shop. These vendors/shopkeepers sell them small amounts of ration eg. 250 grams of rice, dal, few vegetables, chillies, herbs etc. The labourers are dependent on these vendors as they do not have the income to afford the normal packages (min 100 -500 gm). The diet of male labourers is supplemented with cheap alcohol, bidis and tea from a couple of tea shops located near their residence. Moreover, there is a whole smorgasbord of vendors vying to sell goods ranging from snacks and junk food, basic goods (plastic goods, toiletries, storage vessels etc), uploading music and videos to phone, phone repair etc. Since, the workers are limited in their interaction with other city folks, they end up purchasing from these vendors. These vendors sell at a slightly higher price than MRP and appropriate income from the earning of these workers. Additionally, these workers pay multiple agents for services which should be free or subsidized by the state such as water, toilets, electricity, banking, public transport and ticketing, fixed price ration shops. They are forced to use public toilets for five rupees per use, as they have no toilet facilities. They get their phone charged from vendors for five rupees per charge. They also use local agents to transfer money to their homes, purchase bus tickets etc. They visit local doctors (quacks/ unregulated) for health issues. There is always the threat of taking short term loans or purchase goods on loan and then having to pay back at an exorbitant rate. The higher price can be understood as a form of price discrimination, the conditions of this price discrimination is contingent on forms of exclusion and discrimination faced by the worker

In cases, where the worker's health gets very bad and is unable to work or the living situation gets distressing, then a worker returns to their village and hopes to get help from relatives or others in the community. The worker's status in the village acts as a security net in these times, as they can be bailed out by relatives. This is also why the *chandla* payments and village customs are important for these workers, even at the cost of impoverishing and indebting oneself. The worker faces insecurity and alienation in their personal lives, leading to an inability to improve their condition of living through savings. This further contributes to their lack of networks in the city. They are dependent on vendors, merchants, money lenders, and locals who appropriate income from their low wages. This ensures that these workers are barely able to manage their day to day lives, unable to build a stronger base in the city or improve their living conditions, and are forced to return to their native place, when they cannot survive or have earned enough to pay back debts. This leads to no improvement in their bargaining or living conditions. Therefore, tribal migrant workers do not earn enough to subsist and are highly dependent on early child birth, non-remunerated services of their family and the social security net provided by their village community. Such exploitative conditions are a result of identity based discrimination faced in the city, as well as, structural exclusion from the governance apparatus faced as migrants.

4. Conclusion

This paper analyses the social experience of tribal migrants working in the construction sector in Ahmedabad through the frame of informal labour processes. Such a framing of informality allows analyses of the social and regional specificity of informal labour and captures exploitation as occurring through multiple points. This paper demonstrates that:

Firstly, there is a close link between the status of tribal workers as marginalized within society, and their status as displaced and marginalized in their living areas and workplace. The status in society is reproduced in the workplace due to their different looks, habits, cultural norms, limited mobility, and lack of networking in the workplace determined by social identity. Their identity excludes them from participating in the city, as they face discrimination and harassment from locals -who perceive them as having a lower status. Further, they face structural exclusion from the governance apparatus due to their status as migrants. The municipal corporation or state government do not recognize the existence or the need to provide basic rights and amenities to migrant workers. Moreover, local political organization do not interact with this group as they provide no political cache. Social identity determines the nature of

exclusion and discrimination faced by a tribal migrant worker. They are one of the most vulnerable social identities as they face exclusion as migrants and discrimination as tribal.

Secondly, this paper has identified modes of surplus extraction which are embedded as institutions or social norms in the labour process. This paper identifies the following modes: daily wages, hiring through a *naka* system, lower status in the social hierarchy, lack of mobility in the workplace, hierarchization of the labour force - through skills and social identity, employing a divided and highly replaceable workforce, price discrimination, and paying an extra charge/rent to gain access to public services. These modes of surplus extraction can change its form according to the regional and technical specificity of a labour process.

Thirdly, there is no mechanism of reproduction provided to migrant labour in these labour processes. Informal labour processes are daily struggles for survival, wages, and contingent on the power dynamics between multiple groups. These struggles are not organized but happen at an individual level at different points of surplus appropriation. The conditions of existence for such labour processes are framed by state policy, the nature of competition in the market, and social relations. Changing the condition of the existence of such an economic relation will translate into better bargaining power for wages and working condition for migrant labour.

Fourthly, this paper has discussed how primitive accumulation, fragmenting land ownership and indebtedness creates a supply of tribal migrants, who have no other recourse to employment and are forced to work in the deplorable conditions found in the construction sector. It can be argued, through Marxist theory, that processes of primitive accumulation and concomitant loss of access to land and resources, and the appropriation of income by middle classes of vendors, retailers, and service providers, create a surplus population of highly distressed migrant labour, to subsidize the expenditure of the manufacturing sector in India. I plan to explore this dynamic in more detail in a future paper.

This paper demonstrates both the urgency and complexity required to intervene in the working lives of tribal migrant labour. Policy intervention for migrant labour in the construction sector will benefit from, focusing on the conditions of existence of highly exploitative informal wage labour processes. For example, better laws and rights will not necessarily transfer in better conditions of work for tribal migrants, as there are few parties interested in delivering these rights. A more nuanced solution may be providing incentives for contractors and grass-root based social organisations to ensure the rights of these workers. Delivery of better social infrastructure such as health, education, housing is difficult for

such a mobile population, instead private agents who engage with this population should be regulated and provided incentives to deliver services in a better manner. Thirdly, a pan-Indian organization registering, accounting, and educating migrant labour or their rights is necessary for executing a policy, as it requires coordination across both destination and source states. Given, the magnitude of migrant labour and their invisible contribution to the growth of the Indian economy, a separate national body coordinating and regulating informal migrant labour would be required to improve the conditions of migrant labour in more than just a piecemeal way.

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