'Ways of Seeing'—Policy paradigms and unfree labour in India

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Abstract

This article traces the trajectory of different initiatives to address unfree labour and their impact on workers' capacity to aspire to and exercise their rights in India. We attempt to understand the dimensions and effects of different 'ways of seeing' precarity and exploitation within the larger context of economic policies, social structures such as caste-based discrimination, gender-based violence, and state indifference. In a caste and gender-unequal society such as India, with deep regional disparities, we examine how different lenses have impacted on development-led historical processes of informalisation and flexibilisation of work. We do this by contrasting two different 'models' in the country, one in the north in a rural setting and the other in the west in an urban context. Context is important, but the organisations and activists involved in our two case studies saw their role and that of workers differently, operating according to distinct goals and working practices. Our research demonstrates that 'ways of seeing' matter, as they lead to disparate results in terms of workers' capacity to mobilise and claim their rights.

Keywords: 'ways of seeing', slavery, unfree labour, bonded labour, workers' collective efforts

Anti-slavery and Development

Forced labour, human trafficking, and modern slavery have all come to be classified as problems of and for development thanks to the introduction of target 8.7 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDG) in

2015.[1] This shift has not done away with the dominant position of criminal law, which prioritises the rescue and rehabilitation of 'victims' or 'slaves',[2] but instead adds an additional level of economic development into the larger equation as a fundamental 'root cause' or 'push factor'. This shift has in turn reinforced larger patterns of geographical fetishisation,[3] with the division of the world in North-South, East-West, or Developed-Developing, that has characterised this dominant approach, of which India is its preferred referential example. Although terminology is highly contested in this policy field, and concepts tend to be used interchangeably and simultaneously to label different practices, there is a tendency to use 'slavery' as an umbrella term, encompassing forced labour, bonded labour, human trafficking, and other slavery-like practices.

In India, terminology that defines policy paradigms reflects local historical contestations and movements, such as bonded or forced labour,[4] or local-global struggles, such as human trafficking, which has focused on female migration and sex work exceptionalism.[5] Over the last couple of decades, policy interventions focused on anti-trafficking in efforts to improve India's standing in the United States Department's *Trafficking in Persons Report*.[6] This emphasis on trafficking has tended to overshadow and exclude local histories of struggle around bonded and other forms of forced labour, as evidenced in the draft *Trafficking Bill,* 2018.[7] In this article, we explore how, in a context where workers' conditions are being driven to the ground in the pursuit of economic growth, the lenses through which we frame these experiences matter. We find it is critical to consider the processes through which *change* for these workers is imagined when addressing unfree labour in India. We do this by focusing on the trajectories of two initiatives which aimed to address workers' conditions: one that sees workers as 'victims' of 'slavery', and the other that sees *citizens* in conditions of precarity and exploitation. Our research indicates distinct results

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1   S McGrath and S Watson 'Anti-slavery as Development: A global politics of rescue', *Geoforum*, vol. 93, 2018, pp. 22–31, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2018.04.013.

2   P Kotiswaran 'Trafficking: A development approach', *Current Legal Problems*, vol. 72, issue 1, 2019, pp. 375–416, https://doi.org/10.1093/clp/cuz012.

3   McGrath and Watson, p. 27.

4   K K Prasad, 'Debate: Use of the term "bonded labour" is a must in the context of India', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 5, 2015, pp. 162–167, https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201215513.

5   P Kotiswaran, 'What Is Wrong With India's Trafficking Bill 2018: An Introduction', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Special Feature Rethinking Trafficking Bill 2018, 2018, https://www.epw.in/engage/article/what-wrong-indias-approach-2018-0.

6   R Kapur, 'India' in Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women, *Collateral Damage: The impact of anti-trafficking measures on human rights around the world*, GAATW, Bangkok, 2007, pp. 114-141.

7   Kotiswaran, 2018; Prasad.

for the workers involved. Particularly, the workers operating under the latter framing were more inclined and able to exercise their rights collectively despite the ongoing deterioration of their working conditions.

A Pilot Research Project

In 2018, we gained funds from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) through their Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) scheme to conduct a collaborative research project between the Advanced Centre for Women's Studies at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) in Mumbai, India, and the Wilberforce Institute at the University of Hull in the United Kingdom. The project started as an attempt to understand the trajectories of different initiatives where workers' collective efforts and voices had been prioritised within the context of efforts to address bonded labour, forced labour, human trafficking, or other forms of exploitative and precarious work. It is also important to note, however, that our data reflects the pilot nature of the project and the restricted time and resources we had.

Overall, we had more information about initiatives in the west and south of the country, given our location in Mumbai, than in the north.[8] We conducted four different field site visits, one in the north and three in the west, and spoke to representatives of unions, NGOs, activists, and workers across sectors and regions. We recorded twenty interviews, held numerous informal conversations, kept fieldnotes, and transcribed an event where we brought together workers, activists, organisations, and academics. Sectors included in the project were brick-making, mining, construction, sex work, domestic and other service work, agricultural work, waste management, porterage, and garment production. On some occasions, we were able to speak and interview workers without the presence of those leading the interventions; in others, we were able to compare and contrast organisations' official narratives with what we were seeing during our field visits, or to talk with multiple people occupying different positions within the organisations. For the purposes of this article, we focus on two case studies, one in the north in a semi-rural context, and another in the west in an urban context. This helps us to link 'ways of seeing' these practices with the consequences for workers. Before we move to these case studies, let us first introduce our 'ways of seeing' framework.

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[8]   We use North-South as broad regional references and to ensure the anonymity of some of our participants (some others waived that anonymity, as seen below).

'Ways of Seeing'

Policy theories acknowledge that policymaking is complex, messy and unpredictable.[9] Decisions as to what social issues are to be prioritised are often the result of negotiations, contestations, and compromises among a multitude of actors, including governments, multinational institutions, businesses, non-governmental and other civil society organisations, faith-based, advocacy, and campaigning groups, community groups, experts and particular individuals. Not all these actors understand and frame social problems the same way, but over time, a 'way of seeing', or policy paradigm, emerges as dominant. Here we follow the work of James Scott to refer to the authoritative cognitive lenses through which a particular social problem is seen.[10] A 'way of seeing' then indicates how the nature of the problem is understood and allows linking a diagnosis of its root causes with generic prescriptive policy solutions and interventions.[11] 'Ways of seeing' are necessarily schematic and partial, centring on a slice of the totality of the social order.[12] These 'ways of seeing' then function to simplify a complex and fluid social reality, relying on measurement techniques and the seductive appeal of quantification to further legitimise this position.[13] As Scott highlights, these dominant cognitive models are also invested in modernist ideologies centred on progress and development, and aspire to be universally applicable across contexts.[14]

'Slavery' comes with a set of multifocal lenses, allowing people to perceive it differently depending on who they are and where they are located. 'Slavery' in India is typically conceived as a pre-capitalist relation of labour, illustrated in attachment relationships between landlords and agricultural labourers in rural contexts. It is therefore strongly associated with traditional, backward, and pre-modern cultural formations, which are exemplified in the caste system.[15]

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9   P Cairney, 'How Can Policy Theory Have an Impact on Policymaking? The role of theory-led academic-practitioner discussions', *Teaching Public Administration*, vol. 33, issue 1, 2015, pp. 22-39, https://doi.org/10.1177/0144739414532284.

10   J C Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1998.

11   A Broome and L Seabrooke, 'Seeing like an International Organisation', *New Political Economy*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2012, pp. 1-16, https://doi.org/10.1080/13563467.2011.569019.

12   Scott, p. 6.

13   S E Merry, *The Seductions of Quantification: Measuring human rights, gender violence, and sex trafficking*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2016.

14   Scott, p. 3.

15   J Phuley, *Slavery (Gulamgiri)*, translated from Marathi by Maya Pandit, Critical Quest, New Delhi, 2008 [1873].

Note here how culture is deployed as the explanation to the persistence of 'slavery', a sign of India's perennial backwardness and under-development. Framed in terms of the advancement of modernity, culture becomes the enemy, an impediment—'a voice from the past that inhibits societies from functioning in the modern world'[16]—and a history that must be transcended.[17] This tunnel vision has a tendency to then bring all facts observed into line with this fundamental premise.[18]

This form of 'slavery', also referred to as serfdom, was re-classified as debt-bondage in 1843, when slavery was abolished in British India.[19] Many have devoted attention to understanding the historical process through which attachment between landlords and agricultural labourers across rural India changed. Scholars have looked at, inter alia, the origin and nature of bondage, whether and why it disappeared, the role of economic and socio-cultural processes in this transformation, and the subsequent emergence of an army of footloose labour[20] dependant on circular migration but not yet delinked from the rural setting.[21] Prakash traces how in southern Bihar in the north of India, patron-client relationships between *kamias* [agricultural labourers] and *maliks* [landlords] were constructed in colonial records as an unfree, debt-based labour relation, in opposition to free labour exchanges under market conditions.[22] Seeing bondage in India reflected a historicity that emphasised progress, and it served to reinforce an imagined classical India, and not the changing realities resulting from shifts in the political economy of the region due to colonialism. This is not to say that there was no hereditary attachment, that the caste-system was not implicated, or that *kamias* and *maliks* had equal power and status.

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16 V Rao and M Walton (eds.), *Culture and Public Action*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2004.

17 Scott, p. 95.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 90.

19 G Prakash, *Bonded Histories: Genealogies of labor servitude in colonial India*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990; I Chatterjee, *Gender, Slavery and Law in Colonial India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1999.

20 J Breman, *Footloose Labour: Working in India's informal economy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996.

21 J Breman, *Patronage and Exploitation: Changing agrarian relations in South Gujarat, India*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1974; Breman, 1996; J Breman, *At Work in the Informal Economy of India: A perspective from the bottom up*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2013.

22 Prakash, 1990.

Post-independence India was shaped by mounting pressure from activists working with marginalised communities in conditions of bondage, culminating in the Indian state enacting the *Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act* of 1976. This legislation would subsequently become infamous for its poor implementation and an overbearing bureaucratic process, continuing a pattern of legal reforms which struggle to be realised in practice (the abolition of forced labour was also mandated by the Constitution of India in 1950). Consistent work by activists, including via the judicial system in the 1980s, have given further clarity to its terms and application.[23] Thanks to these efforts, Indian law against forced labour now includes provisions such as the right to a minimum wage,[24] the role of the state in guaranteeing labour rights,[25] bonded labourers' rehabilitation,[26] the existence of an advance as an indicator of bonded labour,[27] and instructions to labour inspectors to assess workers' health and safety protection and ensure children under fourteen are not in work but in education.[28] The presence of such elements is often used as evidence that workers are subject to bonded labour conditions.

Jan Breman, in his early study of the *hali* system in South Gujarat, carefully delineates how depatronisation occurred in this region, where numbers of attached agricultural labourers diminished progressively as the number of daily wage labourers increased.[29] This was the result of shifts in the selection of crops, acceleration of capitalist modes of production and commercialisation, job prospects in nearby urban industrialising centres, imbalances in demographic patterns and aspirations between caste unequal groups, and the centralisation of bureaucratic and governing institutions. And yet, as he emphasises, the conditions of these daily wage labourers, now dependent on circular migration and *mukkadams* [contractors] to mediate in finding work, were not any less bleak. [30] This process of depatronisation has taken place at different levels and speeds across regions in India.[31]

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[23] M Dasgupta, 'Public Interest Litigation for Labour: How the Indian Supreme Court protects the rights of India's most disadvantaged workers,' *Contemporary South Asia*, vol. 16, issue 2, 2008, pp. 159-170, https://doi.org/10.1080/09584930701733498.

[24] *PUDR vs. Union of India*, 1982 AIR 1473, 1983 SCR (1) 456.

[25] *Peoples' Union for Democratic Rights vs. Union of India*, 1983 1 SCC 525.

[26] *Neerja Chaudhary vs. State of Madhya Pradesh*, AIR 1984 S.C. 1099.

[27] *Bandhua Mukti Morcha vs. Union of India and Others*, 1984 SCC (3) 161.

[28] *Bandhua Mukti Morcha vs. Union of India*, 1997 10 SCC 549.

[29] Breman, 1974.

[30] Breman, 2013.

[31] J Lerche, 'Politics of the Poor: Agricultural labourers and political transformations in Uttar Pradesh', *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol. 26, issue 2-3, 1999, pp. 182-241, https://doi.org/10.1080/03066159908438707.

Conditions of work in India have been deteriorating over the last few decades. Labour flexibilisation and informalisation processes have been at the core of the growth model adopted since liberalisation policies were introduced in 1991. Proponents of this development approach consider labour standards and decent working conditions as luxuries to be pursued only after a threshold of development has been achieved.[32] This concentration on development through informalisation and flexibilisation has precluded vast sections of people of decent employment and a dignified life. Hence the need to understand how these intersections affect the trajectories of interventions to address forms of unfree labour across locales. Women's position in work, despite their participation in the labour market via paid work, is still mediated via caste and gender, often as an extension of their social reproduction tasks. Within cities, women at the bottom-most of the caste and class hierarchy straddle different markets for labour, such as dancing, cleaning, and care-work, often by-passing or at times using skills to escape the permutations of caste-based unpaid labour. This contention over caste-based occupation still remains a raging debate within the women's movement in India.[33]

These conditions are likely only to get worse in the future thanks to recent legislative changes. As part of its agenda to make India the world's third-largest economy by 2030, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government, re-elected in 2019, is pursuing an aggressive labour reform programme that will redraw all country labour legislation into four Labour Codes. This includes a Code on Wages, passed in August 2019, which leaves wages to the discretion of state governments—it includes no definition of a minimum wage. This effectively pushes many daily wage and migrant workers into bonded labour conditions.[34]

We explore some of these dynamics via our two case studies, exploring the relevance of 'ways of seeing' unfree labour in two different localities with very different social and cultural dynamics. We hope this exercise can offer a first step to understanding some of the implications of how 'ways of seeing' produce not only different outcomes but also engender different subjects.

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[32] S Bhattacharya, *Informal Sector Dynamics and its Role in the Capital Accumulation Process: The contrasting cases of India and South Africa*, 2007, n/p, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/237386313.

[33] M Gopal, 'Caste, Sexuality and Labour: The troubled connection', *Current Sociology*, vol. 60, issue 2, 2012, pp. 222–238, https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392111429223.

[34] R Mehrotra and N Jayaram, 'India's New Wage Code Will Push Migrant Labourers Deeper Into Poverty', *Scroll*, 19 September 2019, https://scroll.in/article/937596/indias-new-wage-code-will-push-migrant-labourers-deeper-into-poverty.

Stone Quarries in North India: Seeing 'slavery'

One of our field visits was to Laxmangarh,[35] a town in a northern Indian district. An Adivasi[36] group migrated centuries ago to this region to escape feudal lords from neighbouring districts in an adjacent state. They are now categorised as a Scheduled Caste.[37] Soon after their first migration, these groups entered into bonded labour relations, farming non-irrigated land in rocky terrains. During the 1970s and 1980s, political activists raised concerns about the plight of families living in bonded labour in Laxmangarh. Over the years, there were a series of collective outbursts, such as protest rallies, but with little long-term benefits for the workers. Locally, a number of activists as well as non-governmental and community-based organisations (NGOs) took on the plight of these workers in the 1990s and, over the course of three decades, developed a model to address bonded labour. They refer to their existing approach as a third generation NGO approach,[38] characterised not by focusing on the amelioration of visible needs (first generation), or on questioning root causes of identified problems (second generation), but on external environmental factors and agents. However, as the description that follows indicates, interventions in practice have not really allowed these groups to resist these external socio-economic and environmental factors and certainly have not been able to transform 'boundary actors'.[39]

At the beginning of the movement, social activists' pressure on government officials in the region led to the establishment of a District Level Bonded Labour Vigilance Committee, which finally recognised bonded labour in the area.[40] A community-based organisation and activists with support from international donors started to operate in the region. They adopted self-help group structures

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[35] This is a pseudonym for the region where we conducted our field visits. This is in line with what we suggested in our ethics forms to all our interviewees and participants.

[36] Adivasi is an emic collective term used for the Scheduled Tribes of India, which is the official name recognised by the Constitution of India.

[37] This is an officially designated name given in India to the lowest castes, in the past considered 'untouchable' and for which some groups prefer the term 'Dalit'.

[38] D C Korten, 'Third Generation NGO Strategies: A key to people-centered development', *World Development*, vol. 15, Supplement 1, 1987, pp. 145-159, https://doi.org/10.1016/0305-750X(87)90153-7.

[39] *Ibid.*

[40] District Level Bonded Labour Vigilance Committees in States, formed under the *Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act* of 1976, are responsible for enforcing it and advising the district magistrate to ensure that the bonded labour law is properly implemented; providing for the economic and social rehabilitation of freed bonded labourers; coordinating the functions of rural banks and cooperative societies to help ensure freed bonded labourers have access to credit; monitoring 'the number of offences of which cognizance ought to be taken under the act' and defending freed bonded labourers against attempts to recover the bonded debt.

with a participatory management approach to organise these bonded labourers. This, in turn, enabled a number of these self-help groups to apply together for a mining lease, which was granted for a quarry of nine acres of land in 1999. In time, self-help groups for men and women were established, with different goals and responsibilities along gender lines. Between 1999 and 2001, a total of seven leases were granted to these groups.

In the early 2000s, the community-based organisation with the assistance of an international non-governmental organisation would assess the presence of indicators of bonded labour, such as amounts and lengths of loans and advances, freedom of mobility, the nature of relationships with labour contractors, and, to a lesser extent, the incidence of sexual harassment and violence. However, they would also use the language of 'slaves' and enslavement to categorise the experiences of those in bondage, prioritising their identification as bonded labourers to guarantee their access to rehabilitation funds and other state welfare schemes. Contractors and their families were identified as the culprits orchestrating systems of bondage, assisted by corrupt officials (mostly local police officers) who would often turn a blind eye to these workers' experiences of violence and exploitation. Workers affiliated with these self-help groups' leases saw their incomes increase threefold and this encouraged other groups to come together in the hope of applying for further mining leases. At this time, the community-based organisation mobilising bonded labourers seemed understaffed and under-resourced, and faced challenges in monitoring the situation on the ground. Bonded mining labourers were under surveillance from contractors through which their work was arranged, complicating staff visits.

Within a two-year period, malpractice emerged in five of the seven mining lease sites, culminating in their operations stopping altogether. Self-help groups needed a level of technological competence to be able to deal with transactions along the supply chain, including contractors, transporters, loaders, and buyers, and workers lacked that capacity. Furthermore, self-help groups did not operate well internally, and leaders made rushed decisions without consultation or informing other members. Contractors took advantage of these internal conflicts which ultimately exploded in a violent event. This first batch of mining leases slowly disintegrated. With the lessons learnt from this first trial, two more mining leases were granted in the mid-2000s to a number of surviving self-help groups, but these were now managed through a local and newly established supporting NGO. The earlier community-based organisation had also been accused of mishandling finances.

By the time we visited the villages in July 2019, shifts in the economic structure of mining were undermining previously viable ways of life and the self-help group model again. The government is now granting mining leases only to big private contractors that use heavy machinery in the open mines, and hence employ less labour. The government also allowed two big power plants to be

established in the area. Around 10,000 local inhabitants were displaced as a result. The inability to find work had pushed young men in these villages to migrate out of the region into Delhi, Mumbai, and Pune. Women, children, and older men stayed, and some men continue to mine illegally, earning a pittance. Others engage in agricultural work whenever available, for which they receive very little money. They have a hand-to-mouth subsistence, and in the villages we visited, we saw children who were incredibly malnourished and small for their age, school attendance was patchy, and entire villages had no access to water or electricity. Electricity had been instead diverted into open mining or power plant sites, sometimes adjacent to these villages. Girls were married off when reaching puberty as a protective measure, given the outmigration of most men and the loitering of lorry drivers at the nearby mining sites. Conditions at the time of our visit seemed quite despondent.

This case underscored the inability of this slavery 'way of seeing' to address shifts in wider structural factors. The deterioration in the conditions of work due to economic growth models that benefit big capital and mineral extraction over labour and environmental sustainability revealed that past interventions had not empowered workers locally. Thousands of people were invisibly and silently displaced from their villages and internal migration became the only potential source of livelihood. This is further supported by other research in India.[41] This case study also supports the development literature that identifies the limitations of self-help groups. Some claim they are a route to the partial neoliberalisation of civil society, addressing poverty through low-cost methods that effectively do not challenge the existing distribution of power and resources between the powerful and the exploited labouring poor.[42]

We also saw no strong articulation of a collective identity, Adivasi or otherwise, and how this could be deployed to make demands from the state as citizens or from big mining companies as workers. There were signs that they were trying to distance themselves from their Adivasi identity. In the villages, a culture of debt through advances persists, where these groups are borrowing money from other families (who are also sometimes smaller contractors in the quarries) to attend to immediate family crises. NGO staff labelled these contractors 'Muslim', something quite significant in the socio-political context of the region. And yet, the families lending money were not visibly better-off and often lived in nearby villages. During our field visits, we heard little discussion as to how the conditions of work experienced by migrant Adivasis in Laxmangarh fall within the larger political economy of the building and construction industry

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[41]   Breman, 1996; Breman, 2013; Lerche, 1999.

[42]   J Pattenden, 'A Neoliberalisation of Civil Society? Self-help groups and the labouring class poor in rural South India', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol. 37, no. 3, 2010, pp. 485-512, https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2010.494372.

in India, something that was articulated initially by the community-based organisation and activists at the time of obtaining the first set of leases. In 2019, the leading NGO staff were focused on providing psychosocial support. One of the schemes, for example, was aimed at female adolescents not yet migrating. This seemed to us to provide little benefit to the women, especially in terms of addressing gender inequalities such as early marriages and poor school attendance. This type of support was modelled on therapeutic interventions and did not intend to mobilise these young women for social reform. NGO staff were also averse to workers' unions, given the history of trade unions in India and their very close association with major political parties.

The operation of these programmes reflected the co-constituted nature of caste-class-gender based relations. In this case, an Adivasi group has remained at the bottom of the social and economic hierarchy, even when migrating outside of their places of origin. During our field visits, workers and NGO staff seemed to have taken roles and dispositions as service users and service providers, respectively. We saw evidence of past activities in some of these villages that centred on raising awareness of national legislation, such as the 1976 *Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act*, and economic activities which aimed to provide alternative sources of livelihood away from mining. These activities appeared to reach a relatively small number of people. This 'slavery' lens struggled to capture the wider social and economic structural dynamics in the region and did not seem to allow for a collective long-term strategy to lift the position of these workers and that of their families.

Mobilising Informalised Labour: Seeing citizens

As we saw in our previous case study, economic growth fuelled by natural resource extraction is displacing and pushing many groups in the north of India to migrate to cities like Pune, the second largest city in the western state of Maharashtra. Outmigration from villages into big urban centres also offers migrants the possibility of escaping caste-based obligations and bonded labour relations. Many of these inter-state migrants end up working in the informal and unorganised sector, as they search for work that does not tie them to labour contractors. As some of them would say: 'who wants to be in the shackle of that *mukkadam* [contractor]?'[43]

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[43]   These case studies are based on interviews that the researchers had with activists of KKPKP (Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat) between April and July 2019 as part of the pilot study as well as field observations.

With this case study, we trace the history of unionisation of mostly female Dalit waste-pickers in Pune. Many of the first cohort of women workers involved in setting up the Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat (KKPKP), a trade union of self-employed waste collectors, had arrived in the city after the 1972 Maharashtra drought,[44] principally from the Marathwada region. These women were in highly precarious living and working arrangements, discriminated against as out-castes engaged in 'dirty work', harassed, and easy targets for accusations of theft. Many gravitated towards settling in unrecognised slums and then engaged in waste-picking as their source of living. In 1990, a group of social activists and researchers attached to the Shreemati Nathibai Damodar Thackersey Women's University (SNDT) in Pune, through their adult education centres, began to work with children who were segregating scrap and recyclable material, enrolling them into education classes. Soon their mothers sought their support to organise themselves in managing their waste collection efforts. While women earned a livelihood through their recycling efforts, the city municipal body began to encourage private enterprise who suddenly evinced an interest in providing garbage collection services.

Through their nascent organising efforts that resembled feminist environmental activists of the Chipko Andolan in the Himalayas in the 1970s, these women waste collectors in the 1990s organised their 'Bin Chipko Andolan', adopting Chipko Andolan's nonviolent direct actions, holding onto garbage containers and the waste that had recyclable potential. This was their source of livelihood as informalised workers, which would have been appropriated by private agents interested in capitalist profits had they not resisted. In 1993, they registered as a trade union for self-employed people in the waste management sector.[45]

KKPKP might sometimes use the word 'slavery' strategically to describe their exploitative caste-based working conditions, but their organising is centred on rendering these workers visible and providing them with a dignified way of life. Without the traditional employer-employee relationship, these workers demanded recognition as workers—complete with identity cards specific to those in the informal economy—directly from local authorities. This is a strategy that has been adopted by organised contract and self-employed workers across a number of informalised sectors in India to obtain visibility and improve working conditions.[46]

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[44] S Brahme, 'Drought in Maharashtra', *Social Scientist*, vol. 1, no. 12, 1973, pp. 47-54, https://doi.org/10.2307/3516345.

[45] See fn 43.

[46] R Agarwala, *Informal Labor, Formal Politics, and Dignified Discontent in India*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2013; R Agarwala, 'Redefining Exploitation: Self-employed workers' movements in India's garments and trash collection industries', *International Labor and Working-Class History*, vol. 89, 2016, pp. 107-130, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547915000344.

In this case, the combination of research and organising and the collaboration between feminist social scientists and the workers themselves was very productive in these initial days. Feminist scholars' research allowed workers to understand the political economy of waste picking and to map the distribution and recycling chains of this informal sector.[47] Post-liberalisation, there is pressure to privatise solid waste management, but research allowed these waste pickers to articulate a different vision. Being able to understand how waste is collected, where it goes and why, and what happens to it facilitated the presentation of such an alternative. The workers' cooperative SwaCh (**S**olid **Wa**ste **C**ollection and **H**andling) gave workers a stake in the enterprise through a participatory form of democracy, and a solution to outright privatisation.[48] The trade union also helped them get a share of the waste management trade while also improving their conditions of work.[49] As one of our interviewees explained, 'it is necessary we keep track of the way the sector is structured and the way it is changing, otherwise you might make demands in the air and that's the end of it, so your struggle can just die over there'. As issues affecting trade union members would be identified, agitations, rallies, and other activities would be organised to ensure members remained engaged in the process. Although KKPKP is an independent union, they have built a network of alliances with other informal workers' unions to which they go for advice and support whenever needed.

In Pune, there has been a shift in the gender and caste division of workers in waste picking as the work became more formalised. One the one hand, men and Other Backward Classes[50] are now entering these jobs as they are less socially stigmatised and pay better, and, on the other, women bring their husbands and sons in when they find no jobs elsewhere. Union leaders have had to actively campaign against these practices and ensure women remain in charge of their earnings. Newer waves of inter- and intra-state migration in Pune also create anxiety among established union members and these can translate into barriers for union entry. As with other informal sector unions, maintaining membership, hierarchies within the union, struggles over leadership, and the sustainability of the process in the face of private encroachment into solid waste management are some of the threats they currently face.

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[47] See fn 43.

[48] Critics have identified this move as partial privatisation, too, and a first step to the union losing ground to private capital.

[49] See fn 43; P Chikarmane, 'Public Space, Public Waste, and the Right to the City', *NEW SOLUTIONS: A Journal of Environmental and Occupational Health Policy*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2016, pp. 289-300, https://doi.org/10.1177/1048291116652689.

[50] Other Backward Classes is a collective term used by the Government of India to classify castes which are educationally or socially disadvantaged, but that are not Dalits, who are often at the bottom of the social and economic hierarchy.

In the case of waste pickers in Pune, we have seen how attempts to escape neo-bondage relations in villages and a lack of viable employment and livelihoods have resulted in migration and a search for work outside of contract-based arrangements. Women who found themselves at the bottom of the local social hierarchy struggled to secure decent work and avoid exploitation, harassment, and violence. Women workers in the waste economy, especially those at the bottom of the hierarchy of solid waste management within Pune and facing stigmatisation for engaging in 'dirty work', organised both into a trade union to bargain with the state and as a workers' cooperative to have a stake in the waste economy. What struck us in this instance is how these women's aspirations had broadened over the years. They had developed a collective voice and challenged the stigma associated with their work. Their collective efforts had altered their situation in a highly competitive value chain. Anti-caste movements have a different perspective to the one employed by KKPKP. They seek abolition of all polluting labour and abjure the participation of members of the Dalit community within these polluting labours; yet KKPKP activists demanded basic rights for those who are still located within it, even as they seek a space within the formal economy of modern solid waste management administration.

'Ways of Seeing', Possibilities and Hope

As scholars-activists of labour in India have indicated, India's progressive labour legislation, including against bonded labour, slavery, and forced labour, has had a long history and was the product of the same movements that struggled for independence.[51] Increased labour actions and militancy led first the colonial government and then the Indian National Congress[52] to try and defuse its strength. Legislation introduced shortly after independence, for example, reduced the scope of direct collective bargaining by trade unions and firmly established the state as a paternalist regulator.[53] Despite this, the organised

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[51] S Bhattacharya, 'Vicissitudes of the Relationship between State, Labour and Capital: An appraisal of neoliberal labour market reforms in India and beyond', *Labour, Capital and Society*, vol. 40, no. 1/2, 2007, pp. 106-133; V Chibber, *Locked in Place: State-building and late industrialization in India*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2003; V Chibber, 'From Class Compromise to Class Accommodation: Labor's incorporation into the Indian political economy', in R Ray and M F Katzenstein (eds.), *Social Movements and Poverty in India: Poverty, power, and politics*, Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham, 2005, pp. 32-61.

[52] This was the first party to form the central government after independence in India. Jawaharlal Nehru became its first prime minister.

[53] Chibber, 2005, p. 37; Bhattacharya, 2007, pp. 118-119.

labour movement succeeded in advancing its interests, using a combination of pressure and compromise,[54] which, paradoxically, also led to 'a loss of revolutionary consciousness'.[55] Agarwala claims that informal workers' unions are newly re-directing their attention to the state. [56] This indicates that the state is now in charge of bearing the costs of structural adjustments.[57] What is interesting, as in the case of KKPKP above, is how informal trade union members are making visible the crucial role and power of informal workers in the liberalisation project of the government in their attempts to improve their working conditions. They are doing this using an intersectional lens, positioning waste-pickers as women, migrants, low caste and involved in reproductive work, as citizens with rights-claims with non-exclusionary identities.[58]

Our first case study traced the trajectory of interventions which aligned with an approach that sees 'slavery', with an emphasis on identifying 'slaves' and offering support through low-cost measures in line with neoliberal approaches. In Laxmangarh, we saw very little sign of either a collective identity, ascriptive or otherwise, or the possibility to imagine a different way to respond to the catastrophic impact of the neoliberal development model. Indeed, there was no 'revolutionary consciousness', and this showed in the disposition of the workers we spoke to. By contrast, our second case study emphasised rendering workers visible and engaged in collectivising efforts. In Pune, the KKPKP as well as in other sites where informal workers were organising in trade unions or collectives (as in the case of porters and sex workers), we saw workers positioning themselves as part of collectives. They were confident to articulate how they could make claims and assert their rights as citizens as a collective. Despite these important differences, the cases also shared some key features. In both examples the organisations involved operated hierarchically, despite their aspirations to be more horizontal and collaborative, and contestations over decision-making among workers and staff within and beyond the organisation emerged. Furthermore, in both cases initial material improvements for workers proved difficult to sustain over time.

Despite differences in terms of sectors and regions, our case studies also indicate the relevance of the intervention of an external agent or agents to the onset of workers' mobilisation. The approaches that these external agents followed and their ideological basis were critical in how these collectivising

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[54]   Bhattacharya, 2007, p. 126.

[55]   *Ibid.*, p. 113.

[56]   Agarwala, 2013.

[57]   Bhattacharya, 2007, pp. 112-113.

[58]   Agarwala, 2013, p. 24.

efforts evolved over time, as other scholars have shown as well.[59] Sometimes this was orchestrated, following media spotlighting dire conditions and abusive practices. Most of these efforts begin by trying to render visible the invisibility of these workers, by obtaining identity cards, the first step towards accessing a range of welfare and social services.[60] Appadurai warned us that reducing our very right to life, liberty, dignity, and well-being to a documented status as statizens can also be the first step towards exclusion, expulsion, and even extermination.[61] Breman had issued this warning, too. [62]

We know that more in-depth research would have allowed us to better trace the relationships between workers and outside actors, to delineate points of contestation and compromise, and internal and external threats to the sustainability of these efforts. However, our pilot research indicates that 'ways of seeing' matter. These had distinct results for workers, as they led to different dispositions and strategies in challenging and re-imagining workers' positions. What we saw is that different 'ways of seeing' produced very different subjects, the distinctive factor between them being the workers' voice.

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[59] A G Nilsen, *Adivasis and the State: Subalternity and citizenship in India's Bhil heartland*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2018.

[60] Agarwala, 2013.

[61] A Appadurai, 'Goodbye Citizenship, Hello "Statizenship"', *The Wire*, 4 September 2019, https://thewire.in/rights/goodbye-citizenship-hello-statizenship.

[62] Breman, 2013.

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