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Caste-Gender Intersections in Contemporary India

Between *Khet* (Field) and Factory, *Gaanv* (Village) and *Sheher* (City): Caste, Gender and the (Re)shaping of Migrant Identities in Urban India

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Between *Khet* (Field) and Factory, *Gaanv* (Village) and *Sheher* (City): Caste, Gender and the (Re)shaping of Migrant Identities in Urban India

Eesha Kunduri

Introduction

- 1 Studies of labor in colonial India have grappled with the question of caste as a pertinent (if not central) one in understanding the shaping of industrial work, modes and modalities of workers' recruitment, mobilization and organization, and the development of urban neighborhoods (Morris 1960; Chandavarkar 1994). While acknowledging the persistence of caste, Morris (1960) argues that it did not play a significant role in the industrialization process, and stresses the possible emergence of class over caste. Chandavarkar (1994), on the other hand, highlights the shortcomings of a continuity/change binary, arguing instead that "caste relationships ... were repeatedly reformulated in numerous ways" (p. 219). His analysis, which foregrounds the intertwined nature of workers' rural and urban ties, and that of the workplace and the neighborhood, sheds light on the multi-layered nature of caste amongst the working classes in colonial Bombay (present day Mumbai).
- 2 Recent scholarship has reflected on these historical concerns by engaging with questions of modernity and change (Parry 2003; De Neve 2003; Strümpell 2008). Parry (2003:247) observes how articulations of the village as "backward," "conservative" and "a waiting room" by Bhojpuri migrants to the steel town of Bhilai feed into the post-independence, Nehruvian vision of industrial modernity. In a similar vein, Strümpell (2008) speaks of a "spatial limitation of caste" (p. 378) among workers of a public-sector power project in Orissa. He argues that while caste takes prominence in relation to workers' rural ties, it is consciously subverted and "negated" on the shop-floor, epitomizing the ideal of

industrial modernity. Both Parry (2003) and Strümpell (2008), however, also note that this narrative does not hold true in case of those at the bottom of the labor and caste hierarchy.

- 3 In the context of contemporary neo-liberal transformations, Carswell and De Neve (2014) offer a remarkably insightful account of two villages near the garment producing region of Tiruppur in Tamil Nadu. In one village, they find that Dalits' access to industrial employment away from the village and the avenues presented by a modern, urban life ("nagarikam") weakens traditional ties of dependence on the dominant castes, namely the *Gounders*. In another village, on the other hand, where the *Gounders* have set up power loom work within the village itself, bonds of dependence are reproduced within the manufacturing landscape of the village, marked among other things, by relations of debt bondage. "Industrial transformations certainly do not lead to any linear removal of caste identities and inequalities; rather, they engender highly varied changes in the relevance and meaning of caste in both urban and rural life," argue the authors (Carswell and De Neve 2014:127).
- 4 Much like its nature then, the caste question has persisted in studies of industrial labor from colonial to neo-liberal times, albeit in varying degrees, and has been seen from different angles. Promises of development, urbanization and modernization in the contemporary period render this question as relevant today as in the early days of industrialization. What does the contemporary industrial employment landscape in Indian cities mean for caste and caste relations? Is caste less or more relevant than before, or is it acquiring a different form and character? Can we stop only at caste as a point of enquiry? We know from the work of Fernandes (1997), for instance, that class politics is intrinsically shaped by the intersections of gender and community. Any understanding of caste in industrial work would be incomplete without taking into account gender differentials. Analyzing these experiences through a gender-analytical lens sheds deeper insight into the distinct ways in which the shop-floor is experienced by male and female workers. Therefore, I further ask: In what ways does caste intersect with gender? What are the axes of segmentation and difference, and what are the grounds for similarity, particularly if we take into account the intersections of caste and gender?
- 5 In an attempt to engage with some of these questions, I turn to insights gathered from fieldwork in the cities of Delhi and Ludhiana—fieldwork conducted as part of two separate research projects between mid-2012 and early 2015.¹ The scope of the research projects was broader than what has been taken up in this paper: the linkage between agriculture and industry in one, and the relationship between migration, industrial work and worker identities in another. During the course of fieldwork, however, I was struck by how caste emerged in interactions with workers, even as interview questions were not necessarily oriented to capture it. The caste dimension was not divorced from gender, and there were significant differences *between and among* male and female workers' articulations of caste. Drawing on my fieldwork, I explore in this paper what inter-state migrant workers articulate about identities, work, and urban/rural spaces. Principally, I seek to tease out intersections of caste and gender within the overlapping contexts of migration, industrial work and urban neighborhoods.

Data and methodology

- 6 My analysis follows an intersectional approach, wherein the multiplicity of migrant workers' identities, and the interconnections and/or contradictions between them are analyzed. The intersectional approach, which has its roots in critical race theory (Crenshaw 1989, 1991) provides us with a conceptual and methodological tool to unpack and comprehend the multi-layered reality of Indian society (see Banerjee and Ghosh 2018, this volume). Following Davis's (2008) appraisal of intersectionality, I deploy it as a tool to foreground the multi-dimensionality and complexity of the migrant experience, which is critically shaped by caste and gender, among other identity markers. The overlapping themes and cross-cutting identity negotiations that emerge in the narratives are analyzed to shed light on how individuals experience and make sense of macro processes and phenomena.
- 7 The paper examines narratives of migration among industrial workers in two cities. Firstly, I look at workers' decisions to migrate and the reasons they offer in their accounts. Secondly, I analyze their perceptions of work in the city, and of the city and/or specific urban localities. The intersectional approach deployed enables me to understand how migrant identities are constituted, and the clear as well as subtle forms in which caste and gender emerge in the narratives. I situate my analysis in the context of a broader sample survey of migrant industrial workers—among 469 workers in Ludhiana and 317 workers in Delhi. The broad patterns that can be teased out from the qualitative components of the two sample surveys are then grounded with regard to specific worker narratives and field observations. About 70 case histories of migrant workers in each of the case cities inform the analysis. Before I proceed, a note on the two cities and their industrial profiles is in order.

Research context: Delhi and Ludhiana

- 8 Both Delhi and Ludhiana are cities where industrialization has been linked to the growth of small-scale industries, but their industrial trajectories differ significantly. Delhi, referred to as the National Capital Territory of Delhi in official parlance, is marked by pockets of industrial activity across 28 planned industrial estates, covering a total area of 46.47 sq. km (GNCTD 2010). Garment and footwear manufacturers command the largest share of the city's industrial profile, followed by electrical machinery production and repair services (*ibid.*). In addition, there are four planned factory complexes which fall under the ambit of planned industrialization, and 22 industrial areas "notified for regularization" as per the Master Plan for Delhi (MPD) 2021. The latter are identified as "erstwhile residential areas, where the non-conforming manufacturing and commercial activities proliferated unchecked" (GNCTD 2010:12). The question of non-conforming industries (non-conforming in relation to the Master Plan for Delhi) has been central to debates over industrial development in the city in recent years. Following a 1996 Supreme Court order (*M.C. Mehta v. Union Of India & Ors* 1996) which directed the closure and subsequent relocation of "hazardous and noxious industries," "large and heavy industries," and non-conforming industries to peripheral estates in the city, several thousands of workers were rendered unemployed as industrial units shut down (Negi 2010; Heller and Mukhopadhyay 2015). Even as industries in Delhi have relied on a

migratory workforce, primarily from the neighboring states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, in the policy discourse in recent years, migrants have come to be seen as creating a strain on the city's resources and infrastructure (GNCTD 2010), and have been pushed out to peripheral locations over subsequent waves of eviction drives. Much of this has been subsumed under the vision to transform Delhi into a "world-class city."²

- 9 Ludhiana, on the other hand, is an industrial city. Hailed as a hub for manufacturing in the state of Punjab in North India, the story of Ludhiana is one of a successful industrial cluster driven by the growth of small and medium enterprises (Tewari 1996). The origins of industry in Ludhiana have been dated to colonial times, with hosiery or knitwear being the earliest industry to take shape (Pathak 1970). Over the years, Ludhiana has come to be known for the production of woolen knitwear, T-shirts, bicycles and bicycle components, sewing machines, auto-parts and basic metallurgical goods (Tewari 1996). According to the Census of India 2011, Ludhiana is the largest city in Punjab, both in terms of surface area (159.37 sq. km) and population (1,613,878) (Banerjee 2014). In the recent past, Ludhiana's industrial base has attracted the attention of the cluster development programs of the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) and the city was ranked No. 1 in terms of "ease of doing business" by the World Bank in 2013 and in 2009.
- 10 Despite the differences between the two cities, what enables me to bring the insights from the two cities together is the commonality of its industrial workforce. In Ludhiana, our sample survey found that over 95 % of the sample workers hail from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, each accounting for about 47 % of the total workers surveyed (see Pais and Usami 2014). In Delhi, migrant workers from Uttar Pradesh accounted for close to half of the sample, while the share of those from Bihar was about 38 %. A miniscule proportion of the sample in both cities was comprised of workers from Nepal.³
- 11 Workers surveyed in Ludhiana were principally concentrated in work in the garments, hosiery and textiles sector, followed by the manufacture of auto parts, as well as bicycles and bicycle parts. Other sources of employment were the iron and steel industry (forging work), and the manufacture of machines and machine parts (see Pais and Usami 2014:32). In Delhi, we covered workers in two kinds of industrial estates, which are about three decades apart in their existence and in some sense, capture different time dimensions of Delhi's industrial profile. The first one of these, the Wazirpur industrial area in North-West Delhi, emerged around the 1960s, and is an agglomeration of steel utensil manufacturing units. The other, the Patparganj industrial estate in East Delhi, was one among the sites of industrial relocation in the 1990s and 2000s, and consists of a mix of light manufacturing units engaging in the production of garments, auto-parts, tobacco products, incense material, paper products, food products, and those involved in operations like packing, packaging, and printing, and vehicle service centers.
- 12 To further elucidate the context for the discussion in this paper, the caste composition of the migrant workforce is worth highlighting. The predominant share of workers in both the cities is comprised of "Other Backward Classes" (OBCs),⁴ followed by those from the upper castes. Only a miniscule proportion of workers are Scheduled Castes (SCs), several of whom are concentrated as sweepers across the industries and the cities. This is at once reminiscent of what Breman (1999) surmised about caste segregation in informal industrial work:

... social origins frequently determine the type of work carried out. The informal sector is not homogenous but can be broken down into various layers. Without

doubt, access to work is connected to caste membership. This applies also to the better-skilled and better-paid tasks in informal industrial work. In recruitment to such work, intermediate and “Other Backward Castes” seem to be strongly represented. In contrast, workers who perform the most humble and miserable forms of informal sector work are mostly recruited from the lowest ranks and are often from tribal and Dalit communities. (Breman 1999:414)

- 13 In both cities, the workforce is predominantly male. Women workers are fewer and typically concentrated in lower-end tasks such as removal of excess thread from clothes, packing and packaging, as helpers to machine operators, and as home-based workers. In the residential spaces of Ludhiana, we came across fewer home-based workers compared to Delhi. Generally, there are concentrations of OBC women in factory work, SC women in factory cleaning, and upper-caste women in home-based work. In Ludhiana, workers usually reside near the factories, with few exceptions. The predominant form of industrial housing in Ludhiana is a *beda* (also referred to as *vehra*). These are typically tenement housing units spread over pockets of worker colonies, which are up to three or four floors high and accommodate workers in single-room living spaces with shared toilet facilities. Very often, larger buildings have a common courtyard in the center, somewhat reminiscent of the *chawls* in Mumbai. There are an estimated number of 850 *vehras* in the city (Banerjee 2014). The other forms of housing are slums (*bastis*) and Economically Weaker Section (EWS) housing (Banerjee 2014).
- 14 Housing for industrial workers in Delhi is marked by tenements in urban villages and in unauthorized colonies. Similar to the *bedas*, these are one-room rental accommodations with shared bath and toilet facilities, but they are spread over a much smaller space and located in areas with diverse income and occupational profiles, unlike the concentrated pockets of industrial workers in Ludhiana. Other studies have found similar forms of rental housing for migrants in the National Capital Region (Naik 2015). Workers were also found to be residing in *bastis*, what are administratively known as *jhuggi-jhopri* clusters in Delhi.⁵
- 15 In Ludhiana, all major worker colonies were covered during fieldwork in the industrial area. These were spread across the industrial area and envisaged all three housing typologies as mentioned above. In Delhi, fieldwork was conducted in urban villages, unauthorized colonies and *bastis* near the Patparganj and Wazirpur industrial area. In spite of the different forms of industrial organization both within and between the two cities, the narratives of workers have striking similarities, calling for a joint appraisal—which I attempt in this paper—while speaking to broader debates on industrial work and cities.

Caste and gender in the migration landscape: examining narratives

- 16 Notwithstanding that economic distress, poverty and lack of income from agriculture are factors that continue to drive migration to cities, I observe, like De Haan (1997), that migration decisions are entangled in a complex web of reasons that are more often than not rooted in specific socio-cultural contexts. In this section, I focus specifically on the sociological dimensions of migration decisions, wherein I explore caste and gender identities as a subtext.

- 17 Let me begin by considering the narratives of male industrial migrants. Among the various reasons that emerge in the accounts, the striking resonance of individualism is hard to overlook. It is brought to the fore when male workers state that they desired to work outside of the confines of the village and outside of agriculture, or when they remark that they aspired to “see” the city and experience city life, but most prominently when they articulate their hope(s) to break away from village-level norms of caste. Consider for instance Aman’s case. Hailing from a Sonar⁶ family in a village in the Rohtas district of Bihar, Aman⁷ who is in his early thirties, came to Ludhiana in the early 2000s with his paternal uncle (*chacha*). At the time we interviewed him in the summer of 2012, he was working as a welding operator at a factory manufacturing cycle parts. Back in their native village, his father ran a small business as a jeweler, which eventually ran out of steam as he grew older, since neither Aman nor his brother wished to take it up. Realizing that opportunities in the village were linked to his caste, and to notions of status and dignity—implying therefore that he could either continue to work as a jeweler or not—Aman decided to move out to fend for himself and for his family. After having tried his luck in Delhi for about fifteen days, he came to Ludhiana, where his uncle helped him find a job as a helper in one of the factories. He learned on the job and eventually graduated to working as a machine operator, working for about 11–12 hours a day on a piece-rated basis. Even as he visits his village annually and sends money each month to his family back there, like many others, he places emphasis on Ludhiana as a place that allows him to earn a livelihood.
- 18 Early on, Fox (1967) observed in a study of a market town in Uttar Pradesh “that the persistence of a caste in its traditional occupation means the continuance of a particular caste’s members in it, not its monopoly over the specific activity: many Sonar caste individuals are ornament makers, but there are also many other people fabricating ornaments who are not Sonar” (p. 307). It seems that Aman feels the weight of this “persistence”—traditionally assigned to him by his lineage—but is determined to not conform to it. In the same vein, however, he perceives the village as lacking in opportunities for the occupational mobility he desires, and thus, looks to migration as a way out of his situation. Carswell and De Neve (2014) similarly find that caste was a significant factor for the migration of young males to Tiruppur from a village in Tamil Nadu where caste relations were particularly tense.
- 19 Located about 300 odd kilometers from Ludhiana, in the industrial area of Wazirpur in North-West Delhi, Nandan and Ajay share similar aspirations:
- We never had any financial problems back home [in village]. We have a substantial plantation to feed the entire family. But the problem is I belong to a low caste, and when upper caste people look down on us, it angers me. That is why I came here [to Delhi]. Here at least there is respect no matter what work I do. No one here asks me about my caste, they only talk about my work. (Nandan, 24 years, Wazirpur industrial area)⁸
- There are opportunities to do better work here [in Delhi] ... the money is less, but the work is fine. I cannot do good work back in the village ... Good work means work above that designated to my caste. I cannot even open my own shop in the village. (Ajay, 26 years, Wazirpur industrial area)⁹
- 20 While such desires and aspirations cannot be de-linked from the economic reasons that drive migration, they serve to remind us that migration decisions are as much shaped by one’s social origins as they are by economic position. This is seen to be the case not just for low caste workers but also for upper caste workers, many of whom opine that

becoming an industrial worker is intrinsically linked to their notions of what constitutes “dignified work” (“*izzat ka kaam*”), as they cannot undertake work that is “menial” (“*chhota-kaam*”) back in the village, however ambiguously defined both may be.

- 21 Not surprisingly though, Aman, Nandan and Ajay are all male workers, which begs the question of women workers and their migration decisions. Most male workers interviewed in the two cities did not migrate with their families the very first time they moved to the city. Often, mothers and wives of migrating workers stayed behind in the village. Women who travelled to the city did so after their husbands had spent some time there, a few years or more. While caste is strongly represented in the decision to migrate in male workers’ narratives as also in work narratives, for women caste is represented in terms of their work opportunities in the city, but not in migration decisions per se. It is well known by now that women’s mobility in India is linked to marriage and the movement of the family, and this is even criticized as a shortcoming of the way macro-data represents women’s migration (Mazumdar, Neetha, and Agnihotri 2013). In 2007–08, according to the statistics of the National Sample Survey (NSS), about 91 % of rural female migrants and 61 % of urban female migrants cited marriage as the reason for migration. For male migrants, on the other hand, employment-related reasons constituted the prime drivers of migration; nearly 27 % of rural male migrants and 56 % of urban male migrants reported migrating for employment related reasons, in sharp contrast to less than 1 % of rural female migrants and about 3 % of urban female migrants (NSSO 2010:32). In consonance with macro-data trends, in both Delhi and Ludhiana, the accounts of migrant women underscore this relationality—women typically report accompanying their husbands and/or families to the city—in the latter case, migration is led by male household members like fathers or brothers. (Sharma and Kunduri 2016). As Sunitha, a home-based worker in the Wazirpur industrial area narrated, “[I came to Delhi thinking] that he [husband] would have a helping hand, and that I could make him *roti* (bread), as there was no one to feed him here [in the city].” Even as recent studies have highlighted the role of independent motivations in women’s migration, which take into account/livelihood opportunities at the destination places (CWDS 2012, Kaur 2006), in both Ludhiana and Delhi, this is not seen to be the case. This suggests that the caste-determined frame of social mobility through migration is not the same for women and for men. For women, the ability to challenge caste through migration is only attained once they have moved to the city, but not necessarily at the point of making the very decision to migrate.
- 22 Broadly then, it can be seen that while for men, migration and the subsequent work opportunities it entails present a form of mobility, especially in relation to caste; for women, the process of migration often reinforces traditional stereotypes pertaining to gender and caste, especially with regard to what kind of work women take up in the city. This first struck me in Ludhiana when a young male worker, upon being asked about his mother’s occupation replied curtly, “Women of our household don’t work. It is the low castes who send their women to work.” I thought about this observation throughout the fieldwork process, and wondered if the caste dimension had anything to do with the difficulty of finding women factory workers, and the commonly encountered opinion —“Oh! What work will the woman (*janani*) of the household do?” The restrictions on upper-caste women’s mobility outside the home on account of reasons of family honor (*izzat*) have been well documented, particularly in the North Indian context (see Chen [1995] 2001; Chakravarti 2003). The need to conform to the expectations linked to a

higher caste status was particularly striking in the accounts of home-based women workers (industrial outworkers) in Delhi. Most of the home-based workers we interacted with in Delhi were upper caste, and spoke of home-based work as a preferred option over work in factories. This was because it allowed them to preserve notions of honor as expected of their caste status, while supporting themselves and their families through their earnings, however meager they might be. In the same vein however, nearly all of them unanimously referred to the city as relatively liberating when contrasted with the restrictions on their mobility back in the village (Sharma and Kunduri 2016). As Kamalesh, a home-based worker in an urban village in East Delhi reported: “Women of our community do not step out of the home. They say that it is tradition (*parampara*). We belong to the Rajput caste—my husband emphasizes that women from our caste (*jaat*) and community (*biradri*) do not go outside [the home] for work.”¹⁰ It is fairly evident from accounts like that of Kamalesh’s that women migrants have to negotiate between the social constructions of their gender and caste identities, and the interplay between these often determines the decision to work and subsequently, what kind of work to undertake. I argue, therefore, that the intersections of caste and gender shape migration decisions, and that migration is not independent of these identities. Rather, these are reconstituted and reshaped in the urban space. I discuss this below.

Caste, work identity and the urban space: between modernity and tradition

- 23 Prima facie, the narratives of Nandan and Ajay in the preceding section suggest how work in Delhi provides an opportunity to break away from work traditionally ascribed by caste inheritance. On a deeper note, however, the accounts reveal how the meaning of work is recast within the steel factories of Wazirpur for the migrants, who find the relative anonymity offered by the city with respect to their caste identities welcoming and liberating. These narratives are situated within a larger context of work in the steel factories, which itself involves exposure to soot and dust, as can be visibly observed in the blackish-grayish marks on the clothes of most workers in the vicinity. In such a context, how the very meaning of what is “good” and “honorable” work gets redefined in the accounts of the workers becomes interesting to look at; it is not only relational to work back in the village, but also framed within a wider context of the promises of modern, industrial life, however precarious the latter may be. Workers emphasize the preference for the shade of the factory over working in agriculture by arguing that, “In the fields (*khet*), one has to toil in the sun (*dhoop*).” A woman worker, who works in the packing department of an incense manufacturing factory in Patparganj articulated this in powerful words:

In village, since we do not have our own fields, we are wandering around always in the sun [from field to field]. If in the village people work hard to earn their grain, here in the cities, likewise we work hard to earn money [cash] ... There, you work through the day in sun. Here, you work in shade. In village you get everything fresh but after a lot of physical effort. (Lakshmi, 38 years, factory worker, Patparganj industrial estate)¹¹

- 24 Interestingly, this comparison between the field and the factory is something that is articulated by workers across the board, irrespective of the industry they are employed in. In other words, the nature of industrial work does not seem to determine whether one finds factory employment attractive or not—knitting machine operators in Ludhiana

state this as emphatically as the steel workers of Wazirpur and the women employed in packing and packaging work in Patparganj. This comparison is repeatedly invoked in the accounts of younger informants, who have had access to some level of education. In a similar vein, Carswell and De Neve (2014:116) note that young Dalits who have access to garment jobs in Tiruppur are reluctant to undertake agriculture work, and look down on it as a “second-best option.” It further merits mention here that the conditions of employment of these migrant workers are informal, marked by what Damodaran (2016:175) identifies as regular employment, “the only mark of being regular is that they are in continuous employment with the same unit for long periods of time,” without having access to the benefits associated with long-term employment. On average, male workers earn between 6,000 and 8,000 rupees a month, which can reach up to 10,000 rupees if overtime work is undertaken on a more or less daily basis. On the other hand, women earn between 4,000 and 5,000 rupees a month on average.

- 25 The narratives remind us of the need to go beyond the workplace and understand the larger urban context wherein work is located, for meaning and identity derived from work appears to be spatially embedded. The specific references to the city in contrast to the village serve to highlight the spatiality in relational terms, something I take up subsequently. The articulation of the factory as a site where identities as “modern” workers (see De Neve 2003; Parry 2003) are forged is further exemplified by the way workers express disdain for other forms of wage employment in the city. Workers speak about the respect and prestige that factory work commands, both in the city and back in their villages, unlike occupations like rickshaw pulling and paid domestic work. As Dipesh, a factory worker in Wazirpur (who is also upper caste) commented, “[cycle] rickshaw pulling is degrading to one’s honor (*izzat*). One is always tensed about being seen by acquaintances.”¹²
- 26 As part of our research in Delhi, work/life history interviews conducted with women engaged in work as cleaners in factories bring out a strong disregard for paid domestic work, with several informants having previously worked as domestic workers. We have explained this in terms of the differing social relations that typify the two worksites—domestic work as work that takes place in the private space of households, as compared to work in a conventional workplace like a factory. Although the nature of work remains informal in both these sites, the latter is preferred over the former on account of relatively well-defined tasks, unlike domestic work where employers are constantly seen as assigning more work (Sharma and Kunduri 2015). It could be further suggested that the shop-floor is constructed by workers as symbolic of a modern workspace, with a clear demarcation of tasks.
- 27 In foregrounding a work identity as factory workers, there are underlying references to caste that are brought out by deploying a trope of modernity versus tradition, and by positioning it in relation to work like rickshaw pulling and domestic work. We know from the work of Ray and Qayum (2010) that servitude in contemporary India is deeply linked to notions of caste: to that of dignity and stigma, purity and pollution. The above accounts are also in consonance with literature that shows how identities are defined, articulated and constructed relationally, and to Lamont’s notion of “boundary work,” that is “constructing a sense of self-worth by interpreting differences between themselves and others” (Pande 2009:157). I suggest, therefore, that such symbolic articulations of mobility and the expectations from what is deemed modern, industrial employment¹³ relative to agricultural work in the village, and to other forms of wage

employment in the city, are essentially tropes through which workers negotiate the precarity that marks their everyday lives. In terms of pay and benefits, factory work may be as degraded as any other form of informal wage work—the informants in my study are part of the vast pool of India's unorganized (informal) workforce, which was estimated to comprise about 92 % of the workforce as a whole, as of 2004–05 (NCEUS 2007). It may be suggested, therefore, that this economic downside and indignity is negotiated by dignifying the workspace and the nature of the work involved by invoking comparisons with other forms of wage work which come with a historical baggage of caste and servitude. In doing so, the factory is presented as a site where work identity takes precedence over caste identity. This is often expressed in terms of the machines being operated, the skills required and subsequently, a heightened sense of self.

- 28 This is not to make any claim, however, about the significance or non-significance of caste in urban India or in cities like Delhi and Ludhiana. Recent studies, using Census of India data for 2001 and 2011, have documented the prevalence of high levels of residential segregation by caste in Indian cities (at the ward level), driving home the point that caste may not disappear in our cities today (Sidhwani 2015; Vithyathil and Singh 2012). Following Carswell and De Neve (2014), I suggest therefore that industrial migrants' experiences of and expectations from work in contemporary, neo-liberal Indian cities do not lead to a straightforward dismissal or affirmation of their caste identities and rural affinities. Instead, the meaning and significance of caste is reshaped by the process of migration. If in one vein, the city offers respite and anonymity from one's caste identity, in the very same vein, the process of migration into specific kinds of industrial work (or home-based work/industrial outwork as in the case of upper-caste women) recasts this identity either by attempting a break from the stigma of caste for some, or by attempting to live up to questions of prestige, status or honor expected by caste origins for others. I suggest that caste does not fade away into the background at all; it subtly provides context and new meaning(s) to migration. What then is a matter of interest is its relevance (or lack thereof) in everyday spaces like urban neighborhoods, and whether and how it intersects with migrant identities, and how gender shapes these experiences. It is to these that I turn next.

Regional identities, caste and the urban neighborhood: new forms of solidarity?

The key issue is that of Punjabis and the Biharis/UP-wallahs. When there are no Punjabis in our colony, what is there to be worried about? (Rajiv, male factory worker, Rajiv Gandhi colony, Ludhiana industrial area)

- 29 In December 2009, two prime areas in Ludhiana—Dhandari and Jugiana—were affected by a violent clash between locals and migrants, reportedly leading to a few protests by migrants which brought industrial work to a standstill (Khanna 2010). While it was not possible for the research to delve into the origins and cause of this tension, we sought to capture in a miniscule way whether this past incident has had any implications for migrant workers' perceptions and their relationship to the city. Contrary to images of alienation and exclusion of migrants, a substantial proportion of the workers stated during the interviews that they were more or less unaffected by the Dhandari and Jugiana incidents, and generally felt safe both at their workplaces and at their living places. Workers attributed this to the nature of the colonies where they reside which are

typically, as described earlier, pockets of tenement housing densely populated by industrial migrants. The caste and regional composition of these residential localities were found to be quite heterogeneous. Clustering was observed when it came to the case of the factory sweepers, but among shop-floor workers the composition was fairly heterogeneous—both at the level of the shop-floor and beyond. The general picture that emerged was one of co-habitation among industrial migrants from diverse backgrounds in a tenement. Workers repeatedly emphasized the sense of safety and security that working and living together with other migrants provides, as the above quote from Rajiv exemplifies.

30 Even though Delhi is a different context than Ludhiana, the question of the city to workers' lives assumes significance against the backdrop of anxieties and fears regarding migrants, as seen in the history of eviction and resettlement in the city. Interestingly, except for a few accounts, most workers did not express feelings of vulnerability or of being driven out of their residences in the city, but instead expressed very similar sentiments about clustering. Only in some tenements did residents report clustering by regional and community backgrounds. As one woman worker put it: “[the neighborhood] feels just like our village. All the people living nearby are from our village. They are all from Bihar, and speak our native language.”¹⁴ In a relatively diverse settlement, another opined, “If I am from another state, then it is not the case that my neighbor or co-worker is from Delhi—they have also migrated from elsewhere... Neither do we say anything to anyone nor does anyone say anything to us.”¹⁵ Furthermore, in Delhi one is also struck by the resurgence of the idea that “Delhi is a city of migrants.” This quote also seems to find some empirical validation; as per the Census of India 2011, about 46 % of the population in Delhi is comprised of migrants.

31 Such sentiments and expressions of an overall identity as “migrants” can be seen to further shape the identities of migrant workers, which give rise to particular forms of neighborhood relations. Consider for instance what Anuj, another male worker in Rajiv Gandhi Colony (a slum area very close to forging units) has to say about his locality:

Particularly, I can speak for this colony—people residing here are either from Bihar, UP [Uttar Pradesh] or Jharkhand. One would not even know who is from UP and who is from Bihar; one would not even know who is your own (*apna*) and who is not (*paraya*). We treat each other with respect—one wouldn't find this back in the villages (*dehaat*), as there are caste practices (*jaati-vaad*) there. Here, in the colony if someone dies, we come together unlike the village. We migrants (*pardesi*) consider each other as brothers.¹⁶

Kamalesh, a woman worker in Delhi's Wazirpur industrial area states:

Here in Delhi, no one says anything with regard to caste, it is there in the village, but not here. We earn, eat and pay attention to our work. I am a Koli and I am not ashamed about it. We are all working here [in Delhi] out of compulsion—it does not matter where we come from or what caste we belong to.¹⁷

32 What we see in the accounts of Anuj and Kamalesh, therefore, is workers subverting one form of identity (caste) and upholding the other (regional) to forge a shared identity as migrant workers. Discursively, this shared sense is invoked through references to the neighborhood where everyone is a migrant, and by constructing a work identity foregrounded in the city. Quotidian practices, however, as one could expect, are different for men and women. In Delhi, our research finds that the settlement is a site for socialization—for leisure, chatter, banter, “watching TV”—and in the case of home-based workers, for camaraderie through work. In our fieldwork, we commonly observed women

working together in groups in the common courtyard of tenements or outside on cots. Women see the ability to partake in acts of socialization in the city as particularly empowering, in relation to strict controls placed on movement back in the village (Sharma and Kunduri 2016). In Ludhiana, on the other hand, I was repeatedly struck by the absence of women in the lanes and by-lanes of the worker colonies I visited, unlike in Delhi. We did find a fair number of home-based workers undertaking embroidery work, often in disparate pockets, but the limitations of the data do not allow me to make deep claims about women's relationship to the neighborhood. For male workers, however, socialization was seen in three significant ways in Ludhiana: a) on off-days in the industrial estates, when workers could be seen hanging outside tenements, chatting and often, drinking heavily (I had to navigate such situations carefully as a female researcher), b) hanging outside tenements during late evenings, and c) on festivities where merry-making is observable (I had the opportunity to observe *Shivratri*¹⁸ celebrations in Ludhiana in March 2013). In Delhi, the nature of the settlements is far more mixed—tenements in urban villages coexist with large bungalows and the tenements are inhabited by a diverse set of informal workers and not only industrial workers. Possibly due to this, one doesn't find similar kinds of congregation in the neighborhood as in Ludhiana. However, male workers were seen to congregate for a siesta or lunch breaks in parks in the industrial estate—in Wazirpur for instance, one such space, namely Raja Park was frequented by our research team. At the time of our fieldwork in June 2014, Raja Park was also a site for strikes and agitation by workers engaged in the hot-rolling steel units, who were organized under “*Garam Rolla Mazdoor Ekta Samiti* (Unity committee of hot-rolling unit workers),” demanding wage hikes and other statutory benefits. Interestingly, however, one finds only male workers at Raja Park, and the only place in the entire Wazirpur area where the research team could spot women workers together, albeit for very short moments of time, was near the common toilet facility, when women walked in small groups towards the facility, as the factories have no toilet provision.

- 33 These quotidian practices and discursive expressions provide insights for understanding how migrants reshape social identities and forge new ones (De Haan 2000). Broadly then, I suggest that the intersections of caste and regional identity play out significantly in shaping the ways in which workers relate to the city, and find a sense of connectedness and appreciation for it. While the anonymity of one's caste identity becomes a significant marker of difference from their rural contexts, strong regional identity as workers from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh often binds them together. Across interviews in both cities, this was seen to be expressed in statements like, “UP (Uttar Pradesh) and Bihar are running the factories [of Delhi/Ludhiana].” On the one hand, therefore, caste identity is articulated as subservient to an industrial work identity, and work itself articulated relationally (to other kinds of work and to the rural), which has undertones of caste considerations (association of certain kinds of work with servitude). On the other hand, regional identities are seen as more crucial than caste which shape workers' relationships with each other at workplaces and in neighborhoods. Broadly then, caste identities are expressed as subservient to identities as workers and as migrants, which highlights the multi-layered ways in which caste is experienced and challenged. Intersectionality, then, is “not only a tool for understanding difference, but also a way to illuminate less obvious similarities” (Cole 2008:3).

- 34 This foregrounding of migrant identities, I suggest, signals the need to rethink the basis for understanding potential worker solidarities. Chandavarkar (1994) has expounded on the criticality of the neighborhood for shaping workers' politics and political actions in Bombay's textile industry. Recent scholarship, in light of the growing informal and dispersed nature of work, has highlighted that the locus of organizing is shifting from the shop-floor to the neighborhood (Agarwala 2013, Tewari 2010). Is there a need to re-imagine and reshape the relationship of urban neighborhoods to labor politics, and more importantly, strengthen its potential for change in the industrial landscape of contemporary cities?
- 35 Having said that, I do not deny the possibilities of internal differentiation and fault lines among the migrant workforce. Perhaps, the starkest marker of this is the segregation of factory sweepers along caste lines, and their concentration in specific neighborhoods. Neither does the embrace of difference and the articulation of "cosmopolitan" sensibilities, to borrow from Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan (2003) necessarily imply "progressive political agendas" (p. 362). In one interaction, for instance, a migrant woman from West Bengal distanced herself from other migrants from UP and Bihar, arguing that they do not keep their homes clean. In another, we witnessed constant tension and banter between a low caste home-based worker and her upper caste neighbor. Notwithstanding this, the two women were always working together as sub-contractors for other women in the locality. Significant as they may be, it is perhaps important to look beyond these fault lines to uncover the potential for wider coalitions. In her work among construction and *bidi* workers in three Indian states, Agarwala (2013) writes about "the political identity of the 'informal worker'" (p. 59). While this could co-exist alongside others like caste, she argues that it constitutes a critical one to push for demands from the state and to obtain welfare benefits for workers. Can the identity of a migrant industrial worker then be (re)constructed as a political one? What forms of politics could this identity potentially embrace? What claims to dignity could it raise, considering the enabling nature of the urban that is articulated in the accounts?

Conclusion

- 36 This paper has argued that migration to urban, industrial employment—from how it is envisioned to how work in the urban context is seen—is significantly shaped by the intersections of caste and gender. From a theoretical and methodological standpoint, the intersectional lens adopted in this paper helps us understand negotiations and/or articulations of the many identities that characterize the life-worlds of industrial migrants—identities as rural-urban migrants, as city dwellers, as hailing from upper/intermediate/low caste origins, as male/female workers, as factory/home-based workers, as UP and Bihari migrants, and so on. While these negotiations and/or articulations themselves are multi-layered, two aspects strikingly stand out. One, the narratives bear symbolic references to modern, industrial workspaces, and two, they emphasize the relative loosening of entrenched caste/gender norms in the city spaces vis-à-vis their villages. In understanding and exploring these intersections, the paper seeks to contribute to an old yet deeply relevant subject of inquiry—that of the role of caste in industrial and urban landscapes. Drawing on a combination of narratives, survey data and field observations, I highlight in this paper the variegated and fluid nature of caste—one

that adapts and takes on particular meanings in a complex landscape spanning the rural, the urban, the factory and the field.

- 37 It is important, however, not to stop only at the mere recognition and/or problematization of these intersections. The narratives are marked by a prioritization of certain identities over others in *particular* contexts—the workplace and the urban neighborhood. Identities as workers and as migrants gain precedence over caste, although this is experienced differentially by male and female workers. I argue that these *prioritizations* foreground migrants’ agency to own/disown and conform to/challenge caste. The subservience to caste, on the one hand, and the subtle forms in which it emerges, on the other, respectively present opportunities and challenges for labor politics. Significantly then, the urban landscape, despite its emergent inequalities, often becomes the very means through which migrant workers negotiate their expectations from development processes and trajectories. This offers insights for understanding contemporary urban and industrial labor politics, and for rethinking them. This paper raises some questions in that direction.

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NOTES

1. The first project aimed to understand the linkage(s) between agriculture and industry in India, wherein I worked with Jesim Pais (presently Director, Society for Social and Economic Research, New Delhi) during May–June 2012 for my Masters' internship and subsequently dissertation at the School of Development Studies, Ambedkar University Delhi (AUD). I thank him for all his support as the project director. Sumangala Damodaran at AUD supervised my internship and dissertation, and I continued to work on issues of industrial work and migration with her from January 2013 onwards as part of a larger research project at the school, which constituted the second research engagement that informs this paper. I thank her for being a wonderful and supportive guide. I thank my co-researchers (in particular Sonal Sharma and Swati Krishnan) in both projects for companionship and camaraderie through varying periods of fieldwork. Their research contributions, which have been cited at various points in this paper, have been crucial to shaping the present arguments. I thank participants at the conference on caste-gender intersections at the Institute of Development Studies, Kolkata (February 2016) for their helpful questions and comments, and especially the organizers Supurna Banerjee and Nandini Ghosh for their feedback on several drafts. Subsequent versions of the paper were presented at seminars at Ambedkar University, Delhi (April 2017), the Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi (June 2017) and the University of Johannesburg (November 2017). I thank participants at these seminars for valuable questions and comments, and Ayan Meer, Banashree Banerjee, D Shyam Babu, Partha Mukhopadhyay, Ingrid Palmay and Pragna Rugunanan for helpful discussions. Thanks are also due to Shamindra Nath Roy for help with NSS and Census data. The usual disclaimers apply.

2. The vision of creating world-class cities has had to do with transforming cities such that they are amenable to large-scale capital investments in the realms of infrastructure, finance, etc. (Batra 2008). More than anything else, it has been guided by aesthetic norms such as that of a "slum-free" city (Ghertner 2015). Negi (2010) has succinctly described this as "an ideological imperative within which certain spaces and inhabitants come to be viewed as superfluous at best, and 'encroachers' at worst" (p. 180).

3. As per a bilateral treaty signed in 1950 (Treaty of Peace and Friendship) between India and Nepal, nationals of both countries can move freely between the two countries, and are to be

accorded “national treatment” and “same privileges” (Articles 6 and 7) in matters of residence, employment, property, commerce and trade, etc. See Bhattra (2007) and Samuels et. al. (2011) for field insights on Nepali migrant workers in India.

4. In the context of the knitwear industry in Tiruppur (Tamil Nadu), Neetha (2002) finds the presence of a large share of OBCs, and attributes this to the possibility of a relatively higher social status accorded to work in the textile industry.

5. Urban villages, unauthorized colonies and *jhuggi-jhopri* clusters are among the eight types of settlement categories in Delhi. For a detailed discussion, see CPR (2015) and Bhan (2013).

6. Sonar (also spelt as Sunar) are known to be a caste of goldsmiths. In both Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, they are listed as an “Other Backward Class” (OBC).

7. Interviewed by the author in June 2012 (with Shikha Kher).

8. Interviewed by Arpit Gaiind in June 2013.

9. Interviewed by Arpit Gaiind in June 2013.

10. Interviewed by the author (with Sonal Sharma) in September 2013.

11. Interviewed by the author (with Sonal Sharma) in June 2013.

12. Interviewed by Antara Rai Chowdhury and Nikita Khanna in July 2014.

13. As De Neve (2003) observes, there has been a close relationship between studies on modernity and issues of mobility, with the “prospects of mobility” often characterizing what modernity means in contemporary times. I borrow from De Neve’s understanding of modernity: “Modernity-however defined-increasingly reveals itself as a contradictory and ambiguous process of change that holds as many promises as riddles to be solved” (p. 252).

14. Interviewed by the author (with Nikita Khanna) in April 2015

15. Interviewed by Anushka Rose in June 2013

16. Interviewed by the author in March 2013.

17. Interviewed by Anushka Rose in June 2013.

18. A festival in honor of the Hindu god, Lord Shiva.

ABSTRACTS

This paper examines the intersections of caste and gender in the context of migration, industrial work and urban spaces. Drawing upon fieldwork in two cities in North India—Delhi and Ludhiana, it explores what inter-state migrant workers articulate about identities, work, and urban/rural spaces. Migration narratives display a strong undertone of negotiating with traditional village-level hierarchies of caste and gender. In several accounts, while *prima facie*, the process of migration is strongly represented as a means of breaking away from traditional hierarchies, the intersections of caste and gender underlie the narratives, and these traditional identities often provide context and meaning(s) to how the migration process is envisaged. Migrating for industrial work—from how it is envisioned to how work in the urban context is seen—is not independent of these identities; rather they are reinforced and reconstituted in varied ways. The accounts are also marked by prioritization of *particular* identities over another in specific contexts—such as the workplace and the urban neighborhood—which I argue, offers valuable insights for understanding workers’ agency and politics.

INDEX

Keywords: caste, gender, migration, industrial work, urban neighborhoods, modernity, intersectionality

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