August 2023 - Working Paper 03

Migrants, Mobility and Employment in Mumbai's Informal Manufacturing Sector

Debangana Baruah

Maansi Parpiani

Work Fair and Free

aajeevika bureau

CMID

August 2023 - Working Paper 03

Migrants, Mobility and Employment in Mumbai's Informal Manufacturing Sector

Debangana Baruah
Doctoral Candidate
School of Development Studies
Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai

Maansi Parpiani
Postdoctoral Researcher
Global Health Section
University of Copenhagen

Work Fair and Free
Aajeevika Bureau
Centre for Migration and Inclusive Development

Work Fair and Free is a knowledge institution driven by a commitment to advance the agenda of an equitable and dignified world of work for India's laboring communities. We carry out grounded and rigorous research, insightful policy work and innovative teaching and training, all supported and informed by impactful practice in urban industrial centres as well as rural migration pockets. Work Fair and Free has been conceived and incubated by **Aajeevika Bureau**, a pioneering workers' rights organization with a long presence in the western Indian labour migration corridors.

The Centre for Migration and Inclusive Development is an independent non-profit that advocates for and promotes social inclusion of migrants in India. Established in 2016, CMID's priorities include designing, piloting and implementing programmes for mainstreaming as well as improving the quality of life of migrants. CMID's work also includes technical support in the formulation, refinement and implementation of strategies, policies and programmes that promote inclusive and sustainable development, working with diverse state and non-state actors.

The **Working Paper Series** disseminates our ongoing research to stimulate discussion and exchange ideas on contemporary migration and labour issues. The series aims to inform evidence-based policies and interventions in the world of work.

For enquiries and feedback, please write to: contactus@workfairandfree.org

Image courtesy: Debangana Baruah and Bhakti Vardam (Back Cover)
Design: Bijoy | bejoie05@gmail.com

Migrants, Mobility and Employment in Mumbai's Informal Manufacturing Sector

Abstract

The introduction of neoliberal reforms in India over the last few decades have led to high informalisation and fragmentation of the manufacturing sector. The sector is dominated by rural migrants who labour on low wages in a setup that is outside of state regulation, without access to skilling initiatives or social protection. In this paper, we offer an ethnographic examination of a cluster of informal manufacturing enterprises in Mumbai, where migrant workers operate across contentious occupational hierarchies. We focus on the position of the 'helper', the equivalent of an apprentice in the informal sector. Owing to the lack of any vertical mobility, helpers often find themselves stagnating and move horizontally from one unit to another to garner a diversity of basic skills across industries. Additionally, with a further reduction in jobs post the Covid-19 lockdown measures and resultant economic shocks, even skilled workers have taken up helper jobs in a case of downward mobility. Though meant to be an entry-level position, we suggest that the helper job has rapidly become the fulcrum of ongoing post pandemic transformations of informal Indian manufacturing. The work of a 'helper' has become more of a survival job rather than a stepping stone, i.e., one where a worker can learn skills to rise up within a specialised industry. Together, the stagnancy within the job of helpers and the downward mobility of more experienced workers to the position of helpers showcases the dire condition of the sector and of employment in India today.

Keywords: migration; apprenticeship; manufacturing; India; Mumbai

Acknowledgements

This working paper is an outcome of a study carried out through a research fellowship jointly curated by Aajeevika Bureau, Udaipur and Centre for Migration and Inclusive Development (CMID), Kochi. The authors would like to thank Divya Varma, Dr. Tara Nair, Dr. Geeta Thatra and Ananya Iyer for their review and editorial support.

CONTENTS

Welding machines inside a gaala or karkhana

Introduction

The Government of India has repeatedly emphasized the importance of the manufacturing sector for the Indian economy. Recent studies, however, indicate a range of problems in the structure of Indian manufacturing, especially in the recruitment of workers. A large majority of the sector is constituted of small, informal workshops that do not have access to credit to become larger enterprises or improve on their hiring practices (Raj and Sen, 2020). Hiring of short-term contractual workers is widespread (Mehrotra & Parida, 2019; Economic Survey of India, 2017), and is accompanied by persistently low wages (Barnes, 2018; Cross, 2014; Mezzadri, 2016). This work force is growing as the lack of rural opportunities for work and the desire to migrate push several young men to the cities' manufacturing sector every year. Young men are likely to migrate as early as the age of 15-16 years, with migration to the city becoming a passage to adulthood and manhood in several rural communities (Chambers, 2019). The structural challenges of the sector have been further exacerbated by the economic shocks posed by the coronavirus pandemic and the lockdowns that were imposed to curtail its spread.

This study discusses some important questions: what role do young workers play in small manufacturing workshops? How do the sector's structural issues shape their work experiences? What are the possibilities of socio-economic mobility for these young men in the city? We address these questions through research conducted in the immediate aftermath of the strictest lockdowns in a cluster of small manufacturing enterprises in suburban Mumbai. In this paper, we present findings from this study, focussing on young male migrant workers in Mumbai who first come to work as trainees or apprentices. We explore the advantages and limits of the concept and figure of the 'apprentice' in Indian manufacturing and push for a broader reconfiguration of the concept in light of the structural impacts of the pandemic on the manufacturing sector.

Literature on apprenticeship has discussed its complex nature in detail. It is a deeply embodied, cultural process of knowledge sharing in communities, particularly where traditional occupations are passed down from one generation to the next (Ingold, 2002; Wacquant, 2005; Mehta, 1997). In the Indian context, becoming an apprentice has provided the gateway to enter the workplace and grasp its everyday routines, body burdens and pleasures (Chambers, 2019; Cross, 2014; Prentice, 2008;

Shakya, 2018). Scholars have discussed that the relationship between the *ustaad* (teacher) and the helper (apprentice) is steeped in technologies of control and reproduction of social order (Simpson, 2006). This is done by keeping skills within caste and kinship groups and have young trainees work for a low wage (Basole, 2016).

In our research, we also found that apprenticeship is a mode of learning and acquiring skills from senior workers. However, it was also revealed by the apprentices (colloquially called helpers in India) that there are more severe economic consequences of being an apprentice beyond low wages. In this paper, we seek to expand the existing scholarship on apprenticeship by foregrounding the structural impacts of the pandemic on the changing role of the helper in the Indian manufacturing sector. Growing informalisation of Indian manufacturing has led to competition for work among the rural youth in urban manufacturing clusters like the one we have studied in Mumbai. Already before the pandemic, helpers reported that they were stuck in that role for decades: moving from one enterprise to another, trying to grasp the basics of a range of machine and production functions. They saw this as a way of preparing themselves for an uncertain job market where they may have to operate any kind of machine and make any kind of commodity. In the context of the pandemic, a lack of market demand has led many skilled workers to voluntarily demote themselves and to take up entry-level jobs as helpers. We show how the notion of apprenticeship has been reformulated from being centred around someone who learns a specialised skill "on-the-job" training without given any real training to becoming a job performed for survival.

Methodology

The fieldwork was conducted between September and December 2021 at Chavan Nagar (name changed to guard against identification of the neighbourhood), situated in a suburb in east Mumbai. Both primary and secondary data collection was carried out as part of the study. The lead author carried out in-depth interviews, case studies and recorded oral histories of three helpers, three operators and three supervisors, in order to characterise migrants' work at the manufacturing units. Hailing almost exclusively from the Balarampur and Siddharth Nagar districts of eastern Uttar Pradesh (UP), these workers are mostly male. They work and live in garment, metal and plastic production units in an industrial neighbourhood in suburban Mumbai. Migration to this region can be traced back to at least three decades. The site, which was the focus of this study, was accessed with the support of the staff at the Worker Facilitation Center run by Aajeevika Bureau in the area, which has been operational since 2015.

The paper is divided into four sections. After a brief discussion of the concept of apprenticeship in Indian manufacturing, we lay out the migration history of young migrants working at Chavan Nagar. In the third section, we show how the occupational structure at the manufacturing unit affects the lives of helpers. We discuss the spatial arrangements of the neighbourhood along with the tasks of the different groups of workers and their challenges. The following section shows how the competition between skilled and unskilled workers plays out in the context of informality and lack of formal skill training. In a brief conclusion, we discuss the trend of reverse mobility in the aftermath of the pandemic.

A helper in a steel production unit

Apprenticeship and Indian manufacturing

Existing scholarship has already well-established the precarious work conditions of small manufacturing firms across Indian cities. Young workers arrive at these firms, colloquially called *gaalas* or *karkhanas* where a relative or acquaintance may already be working. They start work without any formal legal contract. Wages, working hours, safety precautions as well as work responsibilities are all verbally discussed and subject to constant negotiation. The new workers are expected to learn on-the-job from experienced workers such as machine operators (hereon, operators). These young apprentices are colloquially known as helpers. They receive wages from the unit's supervisor or owner (*maalik/seth*). Younger workers are often preferred for work that is labour-intensive and rough on the body. They often sleep inside the premises or in a sleeping area provided adjacent to or in a loft above the unit. Thus, they become intricately woven into a web of dependencies on a range of actors for their survival in the city.

As other studies have also found, helpers rarely face lack of employment opportunities in the Indian manufacturing sector (Barnes, 2018). Given that being a helper requires low entry-level skills, we find that workers frequently change jobs to maximise on the opportunity to acquire skills. Workers may go back to their villages for up to two years without losing the possibility of returning to some kind of helper job in the city. Mezzadri and Majumder (2020) characterise this feature of the contemporary manufacturing labour market as a 'revolving door' between industrial and reproductive realms of work through which workers, especially women workers, go back and forth between different kinds of work. This kind of flexibility is made possible because of the deep and long-standing links between the village and the city.

Prentice (2012), in the context of garment workers in Trinidad, states in her work that 'learning to sew means learning to be a flexible economic actor.' Inherent to apprenticeship is a lesson on survival in the contemporary market. Workers in manufacturing units fashion themselves as 'flexible specialists,' moving from one contractor or enterprise to another (Basole, 2016; De Neve, 2014; Mezzadri, 2016). They carefully negotiate these fragile relationships with senior workers who may not only guide and train them, but also provide opportunities for work when they set up their own enterprises. Good relationships with senior workers, especially sharing a common bond of socio-cultural belonging may also be useful for younger workers as the former might be more oriented to the city and may provide help in times of crisis.

At the same time, helpers don't always want to stay in long apprenticeships, trying to learn a range of skills quickly. Chambers (2019) examines this contentious relationship between *ustaads* (teacher)

and *shagirds* (student) in the wood crafts industry of Uttar Pradesh where the changing political economy of woodwork has reduced the duration of apprenticeship. Senior workers bemoan this as a 'modern' feature of the market where workers have little loyalty to those who train them and as a characteristic that is specific to a generation of disinterested young workers who rapidly move from one trade to the other. In the following section, we discuss how these fragile relations of seniority and apprenticeship were laid out in the industrial cluster in Mumbai, and its consequences for the mobility of helpers.

Migration from Uttar Pradesh to Mumbai's Chavan Nagar

In India, each labour migration corridor is distinct in terms of its demography, culture and economy (Kundu & Sarangi, 2007). The supply of labour from eastern states, especially like eastern UP, Bihar, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and West Bengal to metro cities, is not a new phenomenon (Kundu & Gupta, 1996). Migration from UP can be traced back to the late 1960s and 1970s, when the Green Revolution led to a spike in the demand for agricultural labour in Punjab and Haryana (Bremen, 1985). A large majority of these movements have been either circular or seasonal. Recent trends in out-migration from UP point towards the emergence of new corridors which extend to the southern states as well. While highly productive agricultural areas were primary destinations in the past, the trend of migration has shifted enormously over the years with more migrant workers choosing to migrate from rural to urban locations and working in better paying non-farm occupations in industrialised areas (Balisacan & Ducanes, 2005). The magnitude of migrant labour has increased across the country, with industrialised states like Maharashtra, Gujarat and Delhi seeing a particularly high influx.

Mumbai is a financial hub offering diverse jobs in the informal sector. Over the years, the city has seen a transition from being a textile mill town to a 'world-class megapolis'. This has simultaneously brought forth changes in the trends and patterns of migration and employment in the city. The closure of textile mills pushed a large segment of the labour force into unemployment and small-scale informal employment (Bhowmik & More, 2001). This period also witnessed a remarkable shift in the magnitude and trend of migration into the city, especially from UP (Singh, 2007). Small-scale units that engage in manufacturing, metal segregation and recycling emerged as the major employers for migrant workers from the eastern parts of UP (Mehrotra & Parpiani, 2022). For instance, many localities in Mumbai are hubs of small-scale entrepreneurialism, ranging from manufacturing to garbage recycling units (McFarlane, 2012).

Chavan Nagar is one such neighbourhood with a long history of inter-generational migration from eastern UP. At least 5,000 units are spread over a distance of 1.5 kms in this industrial cluster. Units in Chavan Nagar process a range of scrap material, stainless-steel, metal parts, spare parts of machines, garments, glass/plastic bottles and chemical products. Most of the units are adjacent to each other with each being approximately 20*20 square metres in size. On an average, 10 to 12 workers live and work in such crammed spaces under extremely precarious conditions. Inside the gala, there is a wooden loft where helpers rest after labour-intensive work. The living condition in the manufacturing unit has been precarious. Previously, two fires had broken out in the neighbourhood leading to the death of 12 workers (Parpiani, 2020). In metal and steel units in Chavan Nagar, operators work on machines located in one corner of the unit. Helpers are usually kept away from the machine and machine operators. Their tasks are mostly manual and conducted with hand-held devices. These involve buffing and glazing the final products.

Sharp objects lie around where blazing of steel takes place

Apart from helpers and operators, production units also consist of more senior workers like those who have specialised skills of welding or managerial responsibilities like supervisors. The role of supervisors is to assign tasks to the helpers. Supervisors also keep track of time along with the number of pieces or tasks that have been completed by operators and helpers. In addition to monitoring work, they also make receipts *(challans)* after delivering good from third party vendors. Welders are considered the most experienced. According to one worker, welding is a process of metal fabrication that requires almost ten years of experience. He said, *"Once you know welding, it means you have done a Ph.D. in designing and assembling steel."* At the lowest rung of the structure are the helpers who are entry-level workers and usually assist operators while also observing and learning different techniques and skills. In our paper, we focus primarily on the relationship between and the mobility of operators and helpers. We do not focus on more senior positions and the dynamics in those occupational roles.

Operators earn between Rs 10,000-15,000 per month. Helpers earn Rs. 6,000-10,000 per month. Due to this low remuneration, helpers rarely have any savings. Moreover, this salary is not paid out at the end of every month. Instead at the end of every week, they are paid Rs. 1,000 to cover for their immediate expenses *(kharchi)*. The balance amount of Rs. 2,000 is settled at the end of every month. Umar[1], who works as a helper said, *"We put in the same amount of time and labour to finish a product, but we are not treated as equals."* While some helpers keep their money with them for emergencies, others like Umar say that *"I have no other option but to transfer the remaining salary to my parents, so that they can buy ration-paani [groceries] with it."* According to helpers, they work for 12 hours a day and should be paid at least Rs. 10,000 at the starting of their job. Umar emphasises that since the salary is extremely low, helpers are forced to switch employers in search of even a marginal increment.

Operator's Skill (Hunar) and Helper's Precarity

In contrast to helpers, operators have better negotiating power. However, their superiority is fragile, and they are faced with the perpetual threat of being replaced by a helper who has gained enough knowledge to take their position. To maintain their position as skilled workers, they deliberately make

1 Pseudonyms are used throughout the paper.

a distinction between their work and that of the helpers. They differentiate between heavy work *(bharee kaam)* and thin work *(patla kaam)*. The former is seen to require intelligence *(dimaag hona)*, competence, skill and time. The latter is viewed as less skilled work and helpers are often restricted to these tasks to keep them away from acquiring skills.

In other cases, helpers may also be kept away from machine work because of the physical risks associated with such work. Some operators emphasise that the tacit knowledge relating to safety requires time to learn and grasp, and hence, they may deliberately not allow helpers to operate certain machines. Take, for instance, the case of Abdul, who has been an operator for many years at the unit in Chavan Nagar. Abdul took a decade to become an operator. He is able to operate several kinds of machines with high speed and low accident or error rates. He credits the operator, who he learnt under, with having skilled him in the minute details of metal fabrication work. One day he was called upon by a helper in his unit. The helper was having trouble operating a machine that he had recently been assigned to. Abdul asked the helper to switch off the machine while he was manually removing some metal scrap stuck inside it. The helper, however, was not paying attention and Abdul lost a finger due to the former's inattentiveness. He said, *"Helpers are often in a hurry, they want to learn the work immediately"*. During the process of mentoring, operators may encounter accidents due to the helpers' lack of refinement in learning production work. This eventually creates tension between them and the helpers. Helpers may be in a hurry to finish their work as their wage is based on piece-rates. In other cases, they may be in a hurry to demonstrate that they have learnt to work on machines by themselves and consequently, move up from their position.

Helpers need to also put in 'extra' time and effort to learn fast, to quickly earn more with their improved skills and competence. However, they believe that occupational mobility is only possible through change of factories/units. Helpers aim to acquire basic knowledge across a range of functions and shift horizontally between different production units. In other words, instead of deepening their knowledge in one kind of production unit, they acquire apprenticeship experience at different units – doing metal polishing in one unit, cutting of used metal pipes in another etc. This allows them to move around with more flexibility while ensuring that they get some form of basic employment. In cases where they may be deepening their knowledge, it is rarely due to someone teaching or training them elaborately. Instead, they observe on their own from a distance, being streetwise and grasping the details. Prentice (2012) calls this process 'thieving a chance' in her ethnography among Trinidad workers who observe skilled seamstresses secretly and try out similar skills by themselves later. Similarly, Maher (1987) writing on Italian seamstresses, terms this as 'stealing with the eye'.

A young helper narrated the challenges and consequences of the excessive work pressure and exploitation faced by him every day in a stainless-steel production unit. He aspires to be an operator as soon as possible but the scope is limited as he is restricted to his position. According to him, operators do not offer any on-the-job training to helpers. Helpers are assigned to one machine but are never allowed to take over tasks from operators. This is primarily due to the changing nature of production competition within the unit vis-a-vis market competition. In a labour-intensive industry, the efficient use of resources by supervisors can influence the workforce. Operators tend to monopolise production work as they have better social relations with supervisors. As a result, conflicts are very common. A helper working in a stainless steel manufacturing unit in Chavan Nagar said, *"Sometimes they (operators) interfere in our work"*. When they make mistakes, instead of being taught to rectify them, helpers are punished by being given repetitive tasks or being confined to mundane work like manually fixing, polishing and glazing steel. On the one hand, they are assigned to do the laborious work, but on the other hand, they are expected to be perfect. According to Umar, "one needs adequate training to become perfect at welding". He said, *"even if we have intelligence (dimaag), we are not utilising it. We should be given opportunities, and not just be expected to watch and learn from them"*. When helpers wish to do a task individually, they have to bargain and negotiate with their operators. It may also be noted that when helpers perform tasks alone, their salary would increase

Inside a steel fabrication unit

based on their performance. In reality, according to helpers, nobody trains anyone at the *gaalas.* For instance, Umar said that the operator will never teach them anything and they do not want to move out of their positions. He said that while it is an opportunity for them if they take up a new task, the whole structure is very rigid. He says, *"The operator does not move from his position nor does the welder, then how will we move forward?".* According to the helpers, the only way to move ahead is to leave and join another factory. Switching factories may help them in becoming operators soon, while it may take them several more years to become welders or supervisors.

Umar discussed how the workers are divided into groups. After working for 12 hours, helpers and operators have their own smaller groups with whom they sit and eat food. Helpers also experience precarity in different forms, i.e., not only at their work but also when accessing housing and health care services. Umar narrated that he is prone to breathlessness due to consuming the bad air of the unit day and night. Sleeping on the work site has caused physical harm to him in addition to having affected his well-being. He said, *"I get very worn out after working 12 hours a day, we also sleep in that same environment. Now we cannot afford to live on rent, but we have friends who have rooms here. I go to my friend's apartment for a day or two, just to rest. Taking a short break from the gaala helps my body to recover."* Further he added, *"Supervisors or welders can take time off by going back to their villages and return to the same job; but if we go home for a longer period, we might lose our jobs. Somebody will replace us, and it is easier to find replacements."*

Taking time off by leaving the unit is one form of temporarily escaping its harsh environment. Yet, it is also not a durable solution. When helpers are absent from their work, it is often assumed by the supervisor that they have moved to a new enterprise or have gone back to their village. Helpers are not paid for the days that they do not show up to work. They are also not allowed to take leaves for long stretches of time. In some cases, helpers prefer to take advances from their employers during festive seasons, which subsequently gets deducted from their salary, to finance their holiday period.

Downward Mobility during Post Pandemic Times: Operators Becoming Helpers

Umesh, who was an erstwhile operator, explained the unanticipated consequences of the government's pandemic responses. Hailing from UP, he and his family returned to Mumbai after the lockdowns to search for new job prospects. He said that after losing his job for more than 6 months, many operators like him were left with few options at manufacturing. They not only lost their livelihood, shelter and jobs, but also their positions as operators. Although he had worked in the gaala for more than a decade, his employer could not sustain him or provide him with any safety net during the lockdown.

Before the pandemic, Umesh used to manage and run multiple machines, often switching from one machine to another. His work was hectic as he was responsible for supervising other helpers. He also used to design and work on power press machines. As an operator, he had the specialised knowledge to use more complicated and automated computer numerical control (CNC) machines. However, after the pandemic, Umesh had to take up the position of a helper as there was only entry-level work available at that time. Moreover, the pandemic had severely hit small-scale units because of which jobs were only available in large-scale enterprises.

We argue that the downward mobility was a case of *'majboori'* (compulsion) during the pandemic. To survive this crisis, Umesh decided to join as a helper at a large-scale manufacturing unit that manufactures nuts and bolts. Manufacturing units at Chavan Nagar, which are small to moderate enterprises, were shut down for a long duration. The large-scale enterprises were open to offer low-paid jobs. Umesh spoke of how he had to start everything from scratch in terms of having to begin at a lower-skill level job. He is assigned to work on one machine now and hence, his wage is also lower than before. It will take him another decade to get promoted to an operator's role and to climb the wage ladder in the new industry. At the large-scale enterprise, he has been assured that he will receive his salary based on the number of working hours. However, he emphasises that he gets half his previous salary. Therefore, operators like Umesh bore the brunt of the pandemic and have been subjected to financial precarity.

According to him, the work is less taxing and stressful than his earlier jobs. As an operator, he barely had time for himself. He was constantly in charge of managing and operating multiple machines every year. At the current enterprise, he has to work on 'coupling', an activity that entails fixing the nut and bolt together. Sometimes, he has to tighten the bolt. He does this manually and the work is not very laborious. Later, these bolted joints are taken for assembling steel wardrobes/almirahs, automobiles etc. According to him, it is easier to work here as he gets time to rest. He said, *"I get paid less but I also have time to rest"*.

From his narrative, we observe that Umesh's current work is less stressful for him as his position is lower in the occupational hierarchy. In this context, we understand that although Umesh had taken the helper's position out of compulsion, he is also fully aware of the helper's role in the unit and its possible advantages and disadvantages. Umesh's case illustrates some of the reasons that shape both demand and supply of helpers. On the one hand, the market has few opportunities for mobility for operators who are experienced workers. On the other, entry-level jobs as helpers continue to grow. From the perspective of the operators, while this situation entails a downward mobility, it does ensure basic survival, some amount of freedom and continued survival wages. The helpers are the ones who lose out in such market changes: their pathways to become operators are not only restricted but their jobs as helpers are also increasingly more competitive.

A welding machine with automated computer numerical control (CNC)

Conclusion

In this paper, we have discussed the transformation of Indian informal manufacturing industry after the pandemic. By illustrating the case of two workers employed as helpers, we have shown how the job has become a survivalist job. It no longer has in-built notions of training and learning. There are few occupational mobility options for helpers. Instead, we see that even more experienced workers such as machine operators are now sliding down in hierarchy to become helpers.

Through the narratives of Umar and Umesh, we have endeavoured to foreground the role, position and work of a helper in Indian manufacturing. By contextualising their narratives in a discussion of the informalisation of the manufacturing sector, we have sought to underscore the structural limitations to their work. Given that the large majority of such work is in the informal sector, occupational hierarchies are opaque, training is non-existent, and competition is fierce. Umar's case shows the everyday frustrations of working within these structural delimitations. These frustrations extend beyond that of work hours and wages. Even their eating and living arrangements within these enterprises are shaped by the competitive and survivalist nature of these enterprises.

If a worker tries to transition to the formal sector, like in the case of Umesh, the only possible job is that of a helper. While this entails substantial loss of wages, it does involve some relief from the everyday work pressures that he faced earlier as a machine operator. This encompasses foremost the risk of injury, supervising and training helpers on-the-job and meeting production targets set by supervisors or owners of the enterprise. As the brief narrative by Abdul shows the risk of injury tends to be high for the operator who is forced to juggle these multiple roles.

Together, the narratives from the workers suggest a complex employment system that is fragile, competitive and precarious. For both helpers and operators, work is characterised by low wages, immense work pressure and lack of social security or any safety net. These conditions seem to have been worsened after the pandemic and the lockdowns. We have sought to discuss these transformations through the particular "precarisation" of the helper. In view of these transformations, the role of the 'helper' has become more of a survival job than one where a worker can learn skills to rise up within a specialised industry. More research is needed to better understand these on-going transformations. Our study has been an initial step in bringing forth workers' perspectives on these changes after the pandemic.

References

Barber, P. G., & Lem, W. (2018). Migration, temporality, and capitalism: Entangled mobilities across Global Spaces (1st ed.). Springer International Publishing.

Basole, A. (2015). Informality and flexible specialization: Apprenticeships and knowledge spillovers in an Indian silk weaving cluster. Development and Change, 47(1), 157–187.

Balisacan, A. M. & Ducanes, G.M. (2005). Inequality in Asia: A synthesis of recent research on the levels, trends, effects and determinants of inequality in its different dimensions. The Inter-Regional Inequality Facility. Overseas Development Institute.

Barnes, T. (2018). Making cars in the new India: Industry, precarity and informality. Cambridge University Press.

Bhattacharya, R., Sanyal, K. K., & Bhattacharya, S. (2013). Dualism in the informal economy: Exploring the Indian informal manufacturing sector. In S. Banerjee & A. Chakrabarti (Eds.), Development and sustainability: India in a global perspective (pp. 339–662). Springer.

Bhowmik, S. K. (2000). A Raw deal? Seminar, 491 Street Vendors - A Symposium on reconciling people's livelihood and urban governance.

Bhowmik, S. K., & More, N. (2001). Coping with urban poverty: Ex-textile mill workers in central Mumbai. Economic and Political Weekly, 36(52), 4822–4827.

Census of India. (2011). Migration tables. Office of the Registrar General of India, New Delhi.

Chambers, T. (2020). Networks, labour and migration among Indian Muslim artisans. UCL Press.

Chari, S. (2004). Provincializing capital: The work of an agrarian past in south Indian industry. Comparative Studies in Society and History. 46(4), 760–85.

Cross, J. (2012). Technological intimacy: re-engaging with gender and technology in the global factory. Ethnography, 13(2), 119–43.

Cross, J. (2014). Dream zones: Anticipating capitalism and development in India. Pluto Press.

De Neve, G. (2012). Fordism, flexible specialization and CSR: How Indian garment workers critique neoliberal labour regimes. Ethnography, 15(2), 184–207.

Economic Survey of India. (2017). Ministry of Finance, New Delhi.

Gallo, E., & Scrinzi, F. (2019). Migrant masculinities in-between private and public spaces of reproductive labour: Asian porters in Rome. Gender, Place & Culture, 26(11), 1632–1653.

Goyal, Y., & Heine, K. (2021). Why do informal markets remain informal: The role of tacit knowledge in an Indian footwear cluster. Journal of Evolutionary Economics, 31(2), 639–659.

Kundu, A. & Sarangi, N. (2007). Migration, employment status and poverty: An analysis across urban centres. Economic and Political Weekly, 42(4), 299-306.

Kundu, A., & Gupta, S. (1996). Migration, urbanisation and regional inequality. Economic and Political Weekly, 31(52), 3391–3398.

Mehrotra, Santosh, and Jajati K Parida. 2019. India's Employment Crisis: Rising Education Levels and Falling Non-Agricultural Job Growth. Centre for Sustainable Employment Working Paper 2019–04. Bangalore: Azim Premji University.

Mehta, D. (1997). Work, ritual, biography: A muslim community in north India. Oxford University Press.

McFarlane, C. (2012). The entrepreneurial slum: Civil society, mobility and the co-production of urban development. Urban Studies. 49(13), 2795–2816.

Mehrotra, R., & Parpiani, M. (2020). In Mumbai's small manufacturing neighbourhoods, broken supply chains, rent burdens hamper recovery. Scroll.in. 25 July 2020. https://scroll.in/article/968471/in-mumbais-small-manufacturing-neighbourhoods-broken-supply-chains-rent-burdens-hamper-recovery.

Mehrotra, S. (2020). Make in India: The components of a manufacturing strategy for India. The Indian Journal of Labour Economics. 63(1), 161–76.

Mehrotra, S., & Jajati K P. (2019). India's employment crisis: rising education levels and falling non-agricultural job growth. Centre for Sustainable Employment Working Paper 04. Azim Premji University.

Mezzadri, A. (2016). The sweatshop regime: labouring bodies, exploitation, and garments made in India. Cambridge University Press.

Mezzadri, A., & Majumder, S. (2020). Towards a feminist political economy of time: labour circulation, social reproduction & the 'afterlife' of cheap labour. Review of International Political Economy. 29(6), 1804-1826.

Nielsen, M. (2012). Roadside inventions: Making time and money work at a road construction site in Mozambique. Mobilities, 7(4), 467–80.

Pande, A. (2017). Mobile Masculinities: Migrant Bangladeshi Men in South Africa. Gender & Society, 31(3), 383–406.

Parpiani, M. (2020). Fighting Fires: Migrant Workers in Mumbai. Economic and Political Weekly. 55(14), 13-15.

Mehrotra, R. & Parpiani, M. (2022). Living with precariousness: survival in Mumbai's small manufacturing enterprises. In S. Patel, D. Parthasarathy, & G. Jose (Eds.), Mumbai / Bombay: Majoritarian Neoliberalism, Informality, Resistance, and Wellbeing (1st ed.), pp. 67–83. Routledge India.

Prentice, R. (2008). Knowledge, skill, and the inculcation of the anthropologist: Reflections on learning to sew in the field. Anthropology of Work Review, 29(3), 54–61.

Prentice, R. (2012). 'No One Ever Showed Me Nothing': Skill and Self-Making among Trinidadian Garment Workers. Anthropology & Education Quarterly, 43(4), 400–414.

Raj, S. N. R., & Sen, K. (2019). What do we know about firms in the informal manufacturing sector in India? In K.R. S. Sundar (Ed.), Globalization, Labour Market Institutions, Processes and Policies in India. pp. 47–86. Springer.

Raj, S. N. R., & Sen, K. (2020). The 'Missing middle 'problem in Indian manufacturing. Economic and Political Weekly. 15(16), 51-60.

Shakya, M. (2018). Death of an industry: The cultural politics of garment manufacturing during the Maoist revolution in Nepal (1st ed.). Cambridge University Press.

Simpson, E. (2006). Apprenticeship in Western India. Journal of Royal Anthropological Institute, 12(1), 151-171.

Singh, D.P. (2007). Migration in Mumbai: Trends in fifty years. Demography India, 36(2), 315-327

Wacquant, L. (2005). Carnal connections: On embodiment, apprenticeship, and membership. Qualitative Sociology, 28(4), 445-474.

Work Fair and Free is a knowledge institution driven by a commitment to advance worker-centric knowledge and action so that informal labour migration can become more secure and dignified. Conceived and nurtured by Aajeevika Bureau, a pioneering labour rights organisation in India, we aim to bring together grounded and rigorous research, insightful policy work, and innovative teaching and training, all supported and informed by impactful practice in urban industrial centres and rural migration clusters.

workfairandfree.org

@workfairandfree

@Work Fair and Free

@workfairandfree

@WorkFairandFree