

Beyond Survival: Refusal of Risky Work in Informal Manufacturing Workshops in Mumbai

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Abstract

In this essay, we argue that workers consider their suitability to work using a set of shared codes of acceptance or refusal of work, though as per survivalist readings of informal work, they are often compelled to accept risky work. Our arguments draw from long-term fieldwork in informal metal and rubber manufacturing workshops in Mumbai. When workers sustain finger crush injuries, some decide to go back to risky work (good employer, less risky than other jobs, tacit knowledge of managing risk) or refuse risky work (threat of repeated injury and amputation, access to savings or other jobs, bad relations with employer). We reframe survival in informality as extending beyond the present (income and work today) to considerations of preventing amputation to retain the body's long-term ability to work.

Keywords: injury, refusal, survival, work, Mumbai, manufacturing

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CONTENTS

Introduction	6
Informalisation in Mumbai: Context, Field Site and Methods	9
Production Pressures, Setting Machines and Returning to Dangerous Work	11
Technical Solutions for Social Problems	15
Return or Refusal? Shared Codes of Suitability	16
References	18



Inside a workshop

Introduction

Workers routinely refuse work across the world to protest against the growing informality and precariousness of work (Dawson, 2022; Fouksman, 2020; McGill, 2022; Sargent, 2020). Refusal of work may also take the form of rejection of the rigid disciplines of formal waged work in favour of the flexibility of casual or informal work (Millar, 2014). Recent readings of informality as a relational phenomenon have increasingly emphasized this dual nature of informal work that compels workers to accept flexible work arrangements without regulation but with some degree of freedom in how they carve out their survival (Lee et al., 2020). Taking workplace risk and injury as our entry point into the world of informal work, we seek to further explore the relational calculations through which workers may decide to stay or leave informal work after injury.

According to the existing literature on occupational safety in informal work, occupational risks are more or less unavoidable because tenure is uncertain and the need to work for survival force workers to undertake risky work (Afolabi, de Beer & Haafkens, 2021; Chan et al., 2014). This implies that work is the risk - to refuse risk is to refuse work and thereby ensure survival. Here risky work is framed largely as survivalist with little to no freedom for workers to refuse such work. With limited exceptions¹, few have examined when and why workers may walk away and what they may opt to do next.

In this essay, we consider these questions, particularly in contexts of post-injury decision-making. We contend that workers evaluate risks in terms of their bodily capacity and desire to extend the longevity of work, which determine when, why or how they both accept and refuse work. In other words, survival is constructed not only as income and work today but also as ensured work and ability to work in the long run. The latter plays a large role in both why workers may go back to risky work (good employer, less risky than other jobs, tacit knowledge of managing risk) as well as refuse risky work (threat of repeated injury, access to savings or other jobs, bad relations with employer). Embodied considerations of suitability to the work, and physical ability to take risks at that moment and with that particular kind of work or employer, are equally important.

¹ For instance, one ethnography discusses workers' assertions of themselves as "masters of our will" who could walk away from risky work at any time (Saraf, 2020:123).



Working with buffing machine

Taking the case of the risky work of moulding and cutting metals and rubber in small, unregulated workshops in Mumbai (the capital of the regional state of Maharashtra), we suggest that reading informality through workplace injury may help us go beyond the survivalist emphasis in risky work. Our analysis builds on Laura Bear's concept of a 'sense of workmanship' (Bear, 2014) which underscores workers' relationship to work. Seen through the lens of workmanship, it is not only the case that workers deny formal rules to survive in informal economies but instead that they make the rules and codes through which work can be undertaken within the limits of capitalism. This sense becomes particularly evident at points of rupture, like in a workplace accident, that reveals the limits of workers' codes and coping mechanisms in precarious work conditions (ibid). Bear argues that for accidents to make sense in informal contexts, they tend to be incorporated within the broad knowledge-making exercises, into teaching moments to be passed onto future generations of workers.² This imperative to continued learning takes embodied forms. Maura Finkelstein in the context of garment factory work writes of the preference to keep working, despite the muscular pains that it entails, over that of loss of work and its associated risks of atrophied bodies (Finkelstein, 2019). Here the imperative is ensuring longevity of the body's ability to work.³

Injuries, wounds, amputations or risk of amputation restrict this desire for the continued longevity of work life. Thus, adding to Laura Bear's work, we argue that not only accidents, but injury can be even more revealing moments of workers' action in the face of the demands of capitalism. Even though bodies develop differential vulnerabilities and abilities to absorb, heal and endure wounds (Das, 2015; Solomon, 2022), these over time also coalesce to inform collective modes of living and working with injury. As machines are often old and second-hand without any regular maintenance, these collective modes focus on how workers understand, approach, build the ability for and do repair work (Anwar, 2020; Bedi, 2020; Saraf, 2020; Sargent et al., 2021; Strebel et al., 2019; Sur, 2020). Repair work frames their decisions to accept, stay in or refuse risky work. In other words,

2 Bear writes of the case of the river pilots who drive container ships along the dangerous Hoogly river in the east Indian state of Bengal. Here, accidents are not rare and pilots use accidents 'either to generate new individual skills that can be passed on to other pilots or to form new technical solutions that make pilots safer and bring them into closer relation with the river' (2014: 82).

3 To not work is to expose the body to the shock of new rhythms and the threat of sluggishness. This kind of insistence on continued working and learning, we argue is not always survivalist, i.e. born out of the need to work but rooted in embodied experiences of the body made by workmanship. In this vein, some workers may try to combat the body burdens of production pressures by feigning illness or trying to slow down assembly lines to care for tired bodies (Ong, 2010; Ruwanpura, 2017, 2019).



Powerpress in a workshop



Drill machine

the ability and necessity of cleaning, setting, repairing and facilitating rest and maintenance for machines lie at the centre of the work of operating a machine. Workers were likely to get injured due to lack of repair or during machine repair. As a result, they routinely look out for indications like sensory codes to detect malfunctioning and care for their machines (Bedi, 2022; Sargent et al., 2021).⁴

We approach this closely intertwined relationship between work and repair through the ongoing theoretical debates on social reproduction theory. Production and reproduction are no longer seen as two separate spheres of activity, but interlocked processes that make work and life possible. Reproductive work generates value, particularly for those working under agrarian decline, migration and split families where care work is central to sustaining trans-local lives (Gidwani & Ramamurthy, 2018; O'Laughlin, 2021).⁵ The value generated by repair is crucial to workers' decisions to return to or refuse risky work where they may have been injured. In this framing, we draw from Kathi Weeks' seminal work on refusal of work but move away from her focus on a rejection of productivism (Weeks, 2011: 81). In other words, it is not that workers' refusal of risky work in Mumbai is squarely a rejection of their right to 'not work' but is their assertion and claim to work (cf Dawson, 2022; Fouksman, 2020). Their refusal is not a rejection of work but signals a desire to 'stop' work to evaluate its risks to the long-term abilities of the body to work. They present collective, political action and the potential of 'germs of change, however humble' (Gidwani & Ramamurthy, 2018:1003).

4 We were repeatedly told in the field that a machine usually announces its breakdown in advance. A loose screw will let out a squeal or low levels of oil will be indicated through a sudden sluggishness in the workings of the machine. Workers with *samajh*, i.e. experienced, knowledgeable and alert workers, can prevent mishaps from happening if they listen to the machine and refuse work until repairs can be undertaken either by themselves or other experts.

5 Some have underscored this even further: '...only interpretations of social reproduction as value-producing capture the features of contemporary informalised labour relations' (Mezzadri, 2021: 1186).

The essay is divided into four sections. The first section provides a background to the main characteristics of informal production work in Mumbai and an overview of the industrial suburb where this study is based. Section two shows how production pressures accompanied by the frequent need to fix machines frame the world of everyday work and danger. We also discuss the differential abilities to refuse work through the case of young apprentices who may accept the job without being fully exposed to codes of suitability and non-suitability. In section three, we recount the ways in which injury comes to be understood, narrated and remembered, with some workers returning to work on similar machines that caused their injury and others who refused to go back to such jobs again. In the conclusion, we present the political possibilities of these invocations and end the essay with a call for more studies examining the inter-linkages between injury, refusal and workers' politics.

Informalisation in Mumbai: Context, Field Site and Methods

In India, the share of manufacturing to the GDP has remained stagnant at around 16% since 1991, and employment in manufacturing has failed to increase from 12% of the total workforce (Mehrotra, 2020). This stagnancy to widespread informalisation of this sector is attributed to the deregulation of manufacturing by the structural reforms of the early 1990s (ibid). It is mainly characterized by sub-contracting regimes and a reduction in the size of firms undertaking manufacturing work. Micro (6-9 workers) and small firms (10-49 workers), a large proportion of whom are unregistered and unable to access any schemes for credit, remain uncompetitive and unable to grow into middle-size firms (Mehrotra, 2020) or provide for new employment generation (Mehrotra & Parida, 2019).⁶ Though in 2014, the Government of India (GOI) announced the 'Make in India' campaign as a way to revive manufacturing work, the policy has been deemed to have failed because of its reliance on foreign capital and demand, which led to uncertainty in the domestic industry (Babu, 2020). Lack of investments in infrastructure, particularly water and electricity, has also played a role in the failure of manufacturing to grow (Mehrotra & Parida, 2019).⁷

This macro story has played out in Mumbai in complex ways. Scholars have noted how post the closure of textile mills and other big industries from the 1980s, industrial work which had already started to dwindle after independence (Chandavarkar, 2009)⁸ became increasingly tied to the politics of real estate in the city (D'Monte, 2005). From the 2000s, when mill owners sold factories in return for highly speculative gains, opportunities for income sourcing in the city dramatically changed. Land was in demand by multi-national corporations eager to enter India as it liberalised and the city of Mumbai, until then its commercial and trade capital, started to metamorphose into the country's financial capital. At the macro level, Indian policy started to move from supporting agriculture to the services sector lending tax subsidies to the new industries of IT, software and banking. The Indian government envisioned the economy to leap from being agriculture-dominated directly into a services-oriented future. This transition was far from smooth as it was unable to absorb the millions of agrarian households. In Mumbai, many continued to work in the last twilight era of factory work

6 Even within formal manufacturing enterprises, one can see increasing informalisation of the workforce, wherein workers are hired without a formal contract, in both public and private sectors. See, Mehrotra & Parida (2019) and Government of India (2017) for an account of the accentuating precariousness within manufacturing work.

7 Similarly at the regional level, in 2014, the government of Maharashtra passed a new industrial policy focusing on bringing about ease of doing business reforms and attracting new industries to the state. The government of Maharashtra held the Make in Maharashtra and Magnetic Maharashtra summits, which led to the signing of a total of 6718 new Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) between the government and private industry (Vyas, 2019). However, reports suggest that in 2019, most of these projects had not even gotten past the land acquisition stage and had failed to be converted into viable projects (ibid).

8 Even at the height of industrial work, mill workers retained links with the village and depended on a combination of agrarian and industrial incomes (Chandavarkar, 2009).



Working with drill machine

(Finkelstein, 2019) while others who were rendered unemployed turned to self-employment or low-wage manual or security work (Mhaskar, 2018). Yet others never even entered industrial work and continued to garner a livelihood through small home-based industries like recycling and artisanal production operating out of informal settlements (Boo, 2014; Nijman, 2010; Saglio-Yatzimirsky, 2013).

The income distress was particularly noteworthy in regions that had few non-agrarian options for employment and income sourcing, leading to migration to urban centres like Mumbai where the promise of jobs continued to be clustered in. This was the case in the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, particularly its eastern districts which have become intrinsically tied to Mumbai for employment and survival since the 1990s (Mehrotra & Parpiani, 2022). Migrants from eastern Uttar Pradesh started small *karkhanas* (workshops) in former industrial compounds in the 1990s. Since then a steady stream of migrants from subsequent generations continue to come and seek work under the patrons of the same kin, village or region.

Our fieldwork is rooted in such an urban industrial field site: a rubber and metal manufacturing cluster in suburban Mumbai with hundreds of small *karkhanas* lined together in former industrial compounds. Manufacturing is fragmented along different stand-alone, second-hand, old machines and sometimes even across different workshops, all providing a specialized function in the production process. Metal blocks (known colloquially as 'jobs') may be cut in one workshop, moulded, and shaped into specific shapes, sizes and configurations in another and polished in yet another. Most workers retain connections to villages in eastern Uttar Pradesh. Some second or third-generation migrants and living with families in Mumbai. Others who are single men, recent arrivals or circular migrants come here for eight to ten months every year.

A range of products is recycled, produced and packaged in this neighbourhood. For instance, jeans are stitched, dyed, and washed in massive boilers in different workshops by specialized workers under separate businesses.⁹ Some supply for global brands but mostly they flood local Indian markets. Due to rising competition, small margins and poor infrastructural facilities, owners of these *karkhanas* – many of whom are also from Uttar Pradesh – are not able to improve work conditions

⁹ In this paper, we don't focus on garment production that has already been examined deeply by other scholars, albeit in different locations (De Neve, 2014; Mezzadri, 2016). We foreground the less examined manufacturing of metal and rubber products which are among the workshops with frequent machine injuries due to their use of the power press machine.

(ibid). Migrants work for long hours, often on old, second-hand machines that give away under production pressures. Wages are calculated under piece rates, further exacerbating the pressures to produce more and faster. In these workshops, similar to other industries involving machine and repair work, skills are learnt through practice and embodied observation. Tools and training is passed down from *ustaaads* (teachers) who were *karigars* (craftsmen or artisans) to those relatively new or inexperienced in the work known as helpers (cf Anwar, 2020). These relationships in both the potentials and limitations they pose are crucial to understanding danger and injury at work.

The study that this essay is based on was initiated in November 2019 by a labour rights non-profit with an office located within the industrial cluster in suburban Mumbai. The first author was part of the study from its inception and the initial research team consisted of seven members. Seven pilot interviews and a group discussion were conducted with a range of workers – metal fabricators, waste recyclers, head loaders and construction workers. After a review of initial findings, we decided to focus on fabrication work, because of the use of the power press machine, that seemed to cause most of the crush injuries. The study received ethical clearance from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) in March 2020. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the study was delayed. Over April-May 2022, a new team – of three existing and two new members – conducted interviews, non-participant observation and group discussions on the issue of machine safety. Author 2 was part of this second phase of data collection. The essay was written down by the first author with crucial inputs from all the members of the research teams in phases 1 and 2. The detailed experiences of three workers with crush injuries form the core of our argument and showcase the intimate pathways through which workers endure injury and arrive at an understanding of what work suits them more than others. In two of the cases presented here, the non-profit was involved in negotiating the payment of a compensation amount by the workers' respective employers. We draw from experiences of the negotiation process, that the second author was closely involved in. The third case was an older injury, though having occurred in the same industrial cluster before the setting up of the non-profit.

Production Pressures, Setting Machines and Returning to Dangerous Work

A worker that we pseudo named Ali (aged 39) narrates his work at a metal fabrication unit almost twenty years ago. We interviewed him in the NGO office as his current employer did not approve of the NGO and reprimanded Ali for associating with it. When he was 21 or 22, he got injured. Unlike the majority of those interviewed for this study, Ali was born in Mumbai, his father having already migrated to Mumbai from Uttar Pradesh several years ago. He liked working for his then-employer, a kind Gujarati man, who always emphasized that Ali maintained safety at work and did not worry about production targets. He worked there for six years and it was in this workshop that Ali learnt to cut and shape metal sheets under an *ustaad* (teacher) who also always emphasized the risks involved in metal cutting. As Ali explains 'the power press machine operates in a way that it would never stop mid-way, i.e. once you have pressed the pedal thereby having given it the command to execute the press, it lifts only after giving the *fatka* (press) no matter what object or human has come in its way'. It is made to press, shape and cut metal exactly as per the workers' specifications.

These are however not mechanical specifications and need to be manually set inside the machine by moving around parts so that the desired shape can be rendered onto the metal sheet or block that lay at the base of the machine.¹⁰ This made the process of 'setting' the machine crucial. Six



Lathe machine

years after working with the Gujarati seth (boss/employer) and an experienced ustad who had since then left the workshop, Ali became a karigar. This meant not only that he could operate the power press, which he most definitely could. More importantly, he could 'set' it, to acquire the trickiest of bends, shapes and cuts to the metal. During this time, he was getting along with another worker quite well. 'Humari bahut jamne lagi thi', Ali said, as he taught him the work. One day the employer decided to separate them.¹¹ Ali was sent to a second workshop of the employer, close to the first. Ali was all alone here with two junior workers and three machines to supervise. 'I was getting really overwhelmed if one machine gets jammed, it takes up to half a day to correct it sometimes, and here I had to look after three'.

One day he had already finished producing his quota for the day on his power press machine when he was called upon by one of the other two workers. This worker's power press was creating bends at an angle out of the metal area. Ali went over to take a look and could see that some shavings of metal were stuck in the machine which was probably creating the error in the press. He would have to manually put his fingers inside the machine, to remove the shavings and then place the press appropriately so that it made the mark at the right angle as required by the order. He started to make the adjustments, and each time he made one, he asked the junior worker to press the peddle so that he could assess the accuracy of the setting on a dummy object. While doing so, Ali said, 'I could see that the other worker's foot was loosely resting on the peddle and I asked him to take it off. I told him to put his foot on it only when I said to do so. But he didn't listen to me and said that he was careful'.

The next thing Ali knew was that the press came down suddenly and there was a sound. His right hand was still partly in the machine when the other worker's foot must have accidentally pressed.

11 We would not be able to discern the reasons for the employer separating the pair, and existing literature points to at least two explanations – one, to avoid any kind of anti-employer solidarity from fostering between them (Kofit, 2016), and two, to simply discourage socialization between workers (Knox & Harvey, 2011).

When the press came back up, his hand was completely white and then blood started to ooze out - 'I just started slapping the worker with my bloodied hand and his face was covered in blood'. He took his index finger that lay on the press machine and put it in his pocket, hoping that they could join it back. Someone summoned the employer. Ali was screaming in pain by this point. The employer asked him not to scream and took him to a hospital in a three-wheel autorickshaw.¹² It was hours before the doctor arrived. Later he was taken to the surgery room and woke up after several hours. He had forgotten about the finger in his pocket. Meanwhile, a co-worker informed his mother who came to the hospital. The doctor told her that she could ask for compensation from the employer. The employer had paid for all the hospital expenses. His mother said that it was enough for her that the employer cared for her son and showed *insaniyat* (humanity). A month's salary was also paid during which Ali recovered from the injury.

According to Bear, accidents 'potentially reveal to us and to our informants the limits of attempts to suture together incommensurable temporal rhythms and workplace demands' (Bear, 2014: 74). Take for instance, when author 1 asked Ali, if he thought that the injury had been caused by the new working arrangement, where he had the burden of supervising three machines, he said no. But he went on to add that production pressure is an important aspect. He said at the time he was producing 600-800 kgs of *maal* (product) from his machine alone along with setting the other machines. But production pressure alone did not cause the accident in his opinion. He went on to give more context to address why production pressures cannot be considered in isolation. After the incident, the employer moved to Vasai (on the outskirts of Mumbai) but Ali refused to go with him as his family lived in this neighbourhood. He worked in a similar workshop for another two years before he joined an iron smelting unit where big iron dyes were made in Mumbai's eastern suburbs. While working there, he started getting breathing problems from spending 36 hours inside the *bhatti* (furnace). He coughed constantly and his spit became completely black. 'I stopped taking tea breaks after one particular incident when I forgot that the fire was burning and went to have tea. Thankfully another worker noticed and shut it in time'. He left that job after two years and returned to metal fabrication work. In relative terms, the latter despite its production pressures was safer than the working furnace where both his health and life were in constant danger. With the former, he was skilled in setting the machine and felt confident that he could manage the dangers much better than in the furnace where there was no way to escape the smoke.

Ali's recollection of his injury and his post-injury decisions may be juxtaposed with another less-skilled, or less-experienced worker. Rehan (aged 33) had worked as an apprentice in metal fabrication for eight years and his work included moving materials, emptying or filling trollies with finished goods, and applying wax to metal which allows for better moulding or cutting. Unlike Ali's slowly accumulated skill, Rehan had not operated a power press machine or any other machine before except a sewing machine which he used to work on at home before getting into metal fabrication.¹³ In the workshop where he got injured, they made metal containers for a range of products like oil cans, guitar cases, and cookie boxes. Rehan did not have any direct interaction or rapport with his employer and reported to two other 'senior' workers who acted as pseudo-managers. One day, one of them, Bhim, asked him to operate a power press machine to mould metal for the cover of a guitar case. Rehan refused knowing that the machine had a problem, and the press would just fall randomly without its peddle having pushed. Bhim had also lost fingers, even though he was the setter for the workshop and had all the knowledge required much like Ali. Yet Bhim threatened him that if he did not operate the machine, he would have to leave the job. Rehan's initial refusal here

12 We were often told and also observed that the streets between karkhanas were too narrow for an ambulance to even enter.

13 He stopped sewing clothes as his former wife did not like the sound of a sewing machine at home all day, forcing him to look for work outside.



Boring machine

was met with the threat of losing work. Rehan said 'I got scared and said yes. The first day went okay and the second day around 3 pm just before I was switching off the machine for the tea break, the press fell on my right hand'. He managed to pull it out but lost the thumb.

This juxtaposition between the injuries encountered by Ali and Rehan reveals the different ways in which karigars (skilled) and helpers (apprentice/unskilled) workers differently encounter risk. Apprentices did not have the ability to get properly skilled and may be forced to do risky work. Ali said after his injury he has become particularly keen on training younger workers properly. In a power press, sometimes in a machine that is not currently functioning, the nut can come loose, and the panel can fall with the slightest of touches. He has made it his habit to constantly check the nut bolts and use a spanner to tighten them. 'I go around telling others to do the same. They sometimes don't pay attention, but I have made it my habit to constantly remind everyone that they must keep in mind their safety as well as those around them'.

At the same time, according to many in the field, skilled workers were more likely to get injured as they may have more faith in their ability to circumvent challenges and be more risk-taking than unskilled workers. As Nausheen Anwar notes in her study, ustaad artisans reported to her that 'maintenance and repair work is like an ocean... Even the biggest ustaad who claims he is special, even he can drown if his brain gets stuck somewhere (Anwar, 2020: 9). In a nutshell, in either case, the skill was not perfect insurance against injury. If skill could not completely save workers from injury, what could they do to protect themselves? Two options were mentioned in our interview that we turn to in the next section. Quitting the job altogether or negotiating with employers - either to get machines repaired or demand the installation of sensors that detected the presence of a limb and stopped automatically.

Technical Solutions for Social Problems

While interviewing Rehan, his mom and another worker Ashish who also experienced an injury were also present. We were all sitting in the first-storied living space of the local grocer who had allowed us to use the space that had air conditioning for the interview on the hot May day. Ashish aged 30 explained that the machine could fall like this due to a hydraulic leakage. He had been injured due to a malfunction of a rubber power press machine. The workshop he worked in made rubber droppers, used largely in pharmaceutical products for children. His parents had worked for several decades in the workshop where he got injured.¹⁴ He used to work for the same employer who had a similar workshop in Adgaon, on the outskirts of Mumbai.

At the time of the injury, he had come to suburban Mumbai to take his parent's place in the Mumbai workshop as they had gone to Uttar Pradesh for a month. Describing the day he got injured, he said, 'The work was urgent. The sensor was not working; it had been taken for repair. I was shifted here from there [Adgaon] and I even asked if the machine was working fine before starting work. The employer said that it was'. He showed us a long scar along his left wrist where the press fell, right after he was able to withdraw his hand to save his fingers.¹⁵ Ashish said that thankfully they were able to stitch up the wound and he did not need amputation. 'I was in the hospital for three days. After my return, the sensor has been installed back again'. His mother operates that machine now, and Ashish thought that the risk was reduced now.

Both Rehan and Ashish lent support to the need for sensors on machines that could prevent crush injuries. However, Ashish was quick to note that it is not that a sensor is a panacea against machine injuries. Ashish said, 'Just like we work for so many hours and then sleep for eight hours...the machine also needs rest'. Employers do not send machines for repair as it leads to a stoppage in work. They prefer that some machine operator or setter can just fix it in the workshop itself for the time being so that production work continues. Rehan's mom wondered why the machines were not serviced - the same way we service everything from cars to gas stoves - even when they show signs of slowing down. Ashish said that his employer sends the machine for a thorough check once in 6-12 months if they raise any issues with it. 'We say that we will not sit on the machine till it is looked at...I have just opened up an entire machine and sent its parts for repairs as we could see that it was slowly bending downwards'.

Ashish had better negotiating power with his employer as his entire family had worked there and the employer did not want to risk losing them as over the years they had developed the specialized embodied skills in cutting rubber. It was not easy to find replacement or new workers for rubber fabrication when compared to metal fabrication. When the rubber was melted, a strong odor spread throughout the workshop which had very little ventilation. Someone who was not accustomed to this odour would barely be able to stand in the workshop for longer than a few minutes.¹⁶

Rehan did not have this negotiating power of being specialized in a certain kind of work or handling of material. His work as an apprentice was easy to find a replacement for. Thus even though he and others had informed supervisors about the machine malfunction, no repair was undertaken or sensors installed. He said that new workers who have never worked a specific machine, like himself or those who were new at the workshop and did not know the patterns of behaviour of certain machines were continually at risk. Before and after Rehan's injury, there had been several who had been injured on that machine. That is why it was not allowed to take phone calls while operating

14 About 12 years ago his father had lost two fingers on another machine in the Mumbai workshop rolling rubber into thin sheets when his hand got stuck in the roller. The employer had paid for the medical expenses and given Rs 25,000 in compensation.

15 Author 1 said that it was lucky that it didn't get his finger but Rehan's mother who was present said that Ashish's injury was worse as it was along his wrist and could have cost him his entire hand.

16 The notion of aadat (habit or routine) was often evoked in the context of certain specific occupational hazards. Those working with metal works often showed us their hands saying that they had become hardened and become immune to small cuts and burns.

the machine in the workshop, he said. Like in factory work, these are technical solutions for what is a deeply social problem (Mezzadri, 2016; Ruwanpura, 2013), and sometimes people's socially acquired ways may even contradict the technological instructions. For instance, social codes may emerge in the form of practising carefulness and relational responsibility for keeping each other safe through socialization, sharing tips and camaraderie during work, even as technical solutions restrict talking, socializing or drinking (Knox & Harvey, 2011).

This rule while instituted in Rehan's workshop due to the frequency of injuries was not able to stop the accidents from occurring. 'While my treatment was ongoing, another apprentice was similarly forced to operate another machine. I heard that his palm got perforated with a hole in the middle; the employer gave him 25,000 rupees and sent him home'. Rehan refused the same amount offered to him 'I told the employer that in my case, it is my right thumb and it would be impossible to find new work. I have a family to look after. To set up a small shop of my own too, I need more money than 20,000-25,000 rupees, and so I decided to file a case at the NGO.' After the incident, Rehan went back to work for the same employer as he was afraid that no one else would give him a job. However, he quit after he heard that the employer was thinking of shifting operations outside the city. The press machine had already been moved elsewhere – possibly to the new workshop on the outskirts of Mumbai – to avoid any inspection from the non-profit or police. Because he had approached the NGO for compensation, the employer refused to pay him the wages for the days he had worked post-injury, accusing him of having deliberately stuck his hand in the machine. This was the last straw for Rehan and he quit the job.

Return or Refusal? Shared Codes of Suitability

How do we make sense of Ali and Ashish's return and Rehan's refusal to return to fabrication work? Ali quit fabrication work and returned to it after having tried what he experienced to be more dangerous work. Ashish also returned to work but with the condition that the employer installs sensors and routinely sends machines for thorough repair. For Rehan, this job was no longer safe and he was waiting to receive compensation to start a small retail shop.

Many workers noted the multiplicity of factors that went into consideration of staying or leaving and changing that decision. During a meeting on safe working practices and risks of fire organized by the NGO in 2019, a worker said almost in exasperation at the end of an hour-long group discussion, 'Just like when we operate a machine, we need more than electricity, we need earthing, the main board etc, we can't look at any singular thing alone, we need to look at many factors – work, wages, employer, housing, safety. We have to consider all things'. Talking in general terms, workers would often tell us that they were not always in a position to refuse risky work, but during the course of the conversation point out specific instances where they did refuse work, machines and employers. Most had iterative work histories – moving between different positions, machines and industries altogether. They may have worked as an apprentice in one kind of industry and an artisan in another. They may have been self-employed for several periods between waged jobs for the same or different employers.

Risk is embedded in the assemblage of wage risks and work risks. Refusal of work often occurs when the wages or work are also deemed inappropriate. Wages may have been consistently delayed by the said employer. Or the worker could say that he was not getting along with the way an employer operated or behaved with him. Likewise, the worker may feel that the work is not suitable for him – too arduous, repetitive, and boring – that is different from his expectation. In workers' words, 'mujhe jamaa nahin' – the work, employer or enterprise did not suit a worker. Injury or the threat of injury, located in this sense of suitability is thus an ongoing, relative evaluation of what each worker thinks

he can or cannot do in terms of ability – technical knowledge, practice, experience and risk-taking. In this, our analysis differs from survivalist explanations of why workers do risky work. In other words, we do not believe that these decisions only stem from the refrain of 'I have to do this work' and instead locate them in broader considerations of 'Am I currently suited to do this work in relation to the wages, work arrangements and risks it entails?'

Though refusals and returns may appear highly individualized decisions, they also do represent collective modes and codes of behaviour particularly post-accident or post-injury. Encountering danger at an everyday level leads to the emergence of collective self-identification as virtuous and valuable to society (Anwar, 2020; Gidwani, 2015), good workers (Mannov, forthcoming) or failures of government intervention (Chatterjee, 2019; Mehrotra & Parpiani, 2022).¹⁷ Here dangerous work or dangerous machines become 'the centre-piece, a motif around which individuals experiment with unpacking different techniques of living, livelihoods, and building human relations' (Sen, 2022:129). It is not the machine or the work that is in itself dangerous, but the relations and conditions of work that make them so.

In this essay, we have used the metal and rubber moulding power-press machine as a motif of danger to delve further into workers' movements and actions around it. We have foregrounded the moment after injury and how survival and freedom may get interlaced with each other. This standpoint allows us to move away from seeing informality as an interplay of decisions of having to work (survival) or not wanting to do risky work (freedom). How injured bodies make sense of both having to and not wanting to work post-injury amidst the perpetual threat of new injuries or other kinds of harm is revealed when workers retell stories of injury. How they touch, listen, report, talk, discuss, and rest are actions as important as how they work or operate the machine as such. Given the differences in exposure, experience and endurance, workers are differently positioned in encountering, sustaining or healing from injuries which impacts where and when they may refuse work. Seen this way, the existing terms of 'skill', 'expertise', 'knowledge' or 'talent' often used in labour market analysis of entry and exit do not fully capture how workers move around the infrastructures and economies of work. Instead, workers' way of establishing their suitability vis-à-vis the work emerges as the primary and common way in which work is sustained, performed and refused.

¹⁷ In other words, for some 'the need to remedy the injustice or unfairness, was rooted in the pride they took in their ability to reconstitute the broken-down' (Anwar, 2020:11). Contradictorily, others may root themselves in the state's discourses of them as failures or toxic to the city as the only way to get more or better access to basic entitlements for ensuring continuity of health, livelihood and residence in the city (Chatterjee, 2019).

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