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# An Exploration of Collective Meaning-Making among Migrant Workers

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## An Exploration of Collective Meaning-Making among Migrant Workers

### Abstract

I engaged with workers in India who have migrated from rural districts in the southern state of Karnataka to work in the mess of an academic institute located in a western state of India. These workers faced significant challenges and vulnerabilities due to being part of the unorganised sector. The primary question for my inquiry was to understand how migrant workers negotiated these vulnerabilities and whether they could succeed in processes of informal collectivisation based on shared bonds of language and ethnicity. I interviewed six migrant workers to understand their experiences and difficulties they face. I analysed the data by building themes within and across the interview data. One of the findings of my study is that the collective identity of migrant workers who are involved in preparation of South Indian food items emerged through various symbolic acts in their living and work spaces.

### Keywords

Migrant Workers, Language Struggles, Interpretive Study

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## An Exploration of Collective Meaning-Making among Migrant Workers

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*I engaged with workers in India who have migrated from rural districts in the southern state of Karnataka to work in the mess of an academic institute located in a western state of India. These workers faced significant challenges and vulnerabilities due to being part of the unorganised sector. The primary question for my inquiry was to understand how migrant workers negotiated these vulnerabilities and whether they could succeed in processes of informal collectivisation based on shared bonds of language and ethnicity. I interviewed six migrant workers to understand their experiences and difficulties they face. I analysed the data by building themes within and across the interview data. One of the findings of my study is that the collective identity of migrant workers who are involved in preparation of South Indian food items emerged through various symbolic acts in their living and work spaces. Keywords: Migrant Workers, Language Struggles, Interpretive Study*

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People migrate in order to improve their economic well-being and escape from poverty (Kundu & Sarangi, 2007). In this study, I seek to understand how migrant workers negotiate the vulnerabilities they face. In India, social security is not available for a large number of workers; they are not eligible for provident funds, injury benefits, access to education and housing, or health and old age care. The absence of social security means that workers are forced to look after themselves and migrate to look for employment in the unorganised sector in cities in the hope of obtaining higher wages.

This unorganized sector refers to establishments which are not covered under labour laws applicable to factories and other establishments. Typically, the unorganised sector encompasses those establishments which employ less than 10 workers and is growing at an incredible pace, whereas employment opportunities in the organized sector have reduced drastically (RoyChowdhury, 2002). Employees in the unorganised sector do not have job security, wage revision, and other benefits. Workers in the unorganised sector lack both the legal entitlement to fair wages and other benefits and consequently, they are extremely disempowered (RoyChowdhury, 2005). Adding to their woes is the long and unregulated hours of work. The unorganised sector, especially the food sector, is mostly dominated by migrants.

While the state enacted legislation for the social security of unorganised or informal workers in 2008, it has been criticised by civil society and organizations representing collectives of workers. The legislation does not regulate conditions of employment and wages for informal workers, thus life and disability insurance, health and maternity benefits, and old age care are not expected to reach a majority of the informal workers.

Though the government has many welfare schemes, they are hardly sufficient to meet the many needs of the marginalised sections of Indian society. The dilution of government's anti-poverty initiatives after liberalisation, privatisation, and globalisation (Soederberg, 2001) increased migration to urban areas where workers accepted jobs with low security, abysmal wages, and very poor working conditions. Since the migrants have lower literacy rates and come from impoverished socio-economic backgrounds, they are considered to be more vulnerable in society (Vijay, 2005). Being in a new place without any social support adds to

their problems and their geographical distance and cultural diversity create barriers in organizing as a collective (Sengupta, Kannan, Srivastava, Malhotra, & Papola, 2007). Migrants are people in transit who come to work in a place and go back home or to some other new place later. Migrants keep shifting from one place to another, and this needs to be kept in mind by the government when designing a comprehensive scheme of welfare for migrant workers. However, Fall (1998) does not subscribe to the view of temporary migration. Rather, he states that migrants visit their native place only occasionally for participating in family ceremonies. Migrants prefer a permanent urban residence, but travel back to their roots to take care of family obligations. In this context I was interested in studying how migrant workers may help each other during their difficulties and try to overcome their vulnerabilities. I was interested in studying whether informal processes of collectivisation were a feasible strategy that migrant workers could adopt to improve their well-being. Informal processes of collectivisation may often be viable for migrant workers on the basis of shared identity and experiences of work and livelihood (Rai & Selvaraj, in press). Migrant workers face issues of injustice and marginalisation due to ethnicity, language, and other factors (Sengupta et al., 2007).

In the organised sector, workers have developed collective mechanisms to fight against the arbitrary powers of the employer including a collective body to exert some influence on wage negotiations and fight against injustices meted out by the managerial class. Hence, workers join unions to demonstrate their strength against the powerful capitalist class. The unions have their presence not only in organizations but also as separate wings in political parties. Collective action, such as strikes, helps unions to attain the desired demands and generate an evolving spirit of solidarity among employees in the organised sector (Apostolidis, 2005). Since the early 1980s, the dominance of the service sector reduced many stable job opportunities in the area of manufacturing. In addition, union membership started dwindling due to tough anti-union legislation by the government (Azad, 2005), union corruption (Buhlungu & Bezuidenhout, 2008), increasing individualisation, and new forms of work arrangements. This also raised questions about the efficacy of solidarity and collectivism among workers (D'Art & Turner, 2002). It is not only a decline in union membership, but also shrinkage of the organized sector which has resulted in erosion of bargaining power of the union. In order to reach out to marginalised workers, unions are trying to organize the employees in the informal sector (RoyChowdhury, 2005). The opinion of workers in the unorganised sector about unions also becomes critical. Their notions of the struggle against injustice and the utility of unions in such a struggle will have implications for the future of unions. It is possible that even in the absence of unions, other mechanisms of collectivisation may emerge (McLoughlin & Gourlay, 1992).

To examine these injustices and possibility for collectivisation, I posed the following research questions:

- a) how do migrant workers in the food sector work for and secure their well-being in the absence of trade unions,
- b) what are the resources that migrant workers use to improve their lives, and
- c) how do migrant workers engage with each other to obtain benefits from the employer?

## **Method**

I was familiar with the language of Kannada (the language spoken in Karnataka, Southern Indian State) as I had lived in Bangalore (now Bengaluru, the capital of Karnataka), for 8 years and thus also understood the socio-cultural context informing the migration of

workers. With this affinity and knowledge of the context, I investigated the work conditions and lives of migrant workers from Karnataka who were now living in a city in the western part of India. Prasad (2002) argued that “all social phenomena arise from human externalization or objectification of inner feelings and experiences” (p. 15). Hence, I engaged with migrant workers using an interpretive methodological lens (Yanow & Shewartz, 2006; Yanow, 2000) to understand their vulnerabilities and efforts to overcome them.

## **My Framework**

By adopting interpretive methods I wanted to pursue the tasks of “empathetic grasping, reconstructing and re-experiencing” (Prasad, 2002, p. 15) in terms of the vulnerabilities of migrant workers. Therefore it was important for me to study the complexities of the everyday life of migrant workers in order to understand their experiences better (Ybema, Yanow, Vels, & Kamsteeg, 2009). Following Ybema et al. (2009), I obtained new insights about these complexities while recording my field observations. Appreciating these complexities I tried to avoid suppressing the voice of the researched by attempting to ensure that my own privileged representational and theoretical space did not drown the experiences of migrant workers (Down & Hughes, 2009). To accomplish this, I adopted the four interpretive moments described by Yanow (2006) to improve the reflexivity of my study. The four interpretive moments also served as guides for engaging relationally with participants, as such relational engagement is crucial for accessing stories from participants (Caine & Estefan, 2011). Interpretive methods involve locating an individual’s experiences over time in the contexts in which these experiences occurred (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Interpretive methods involve several informal conversations in which the researcher shares a sense of time, space, and mutual anxieties with participants (Huber, Clandinin, & Huber, 2006).

In the first interpretive moment I used observation and interview techniques to learn how the migrants moved as a group and attempted to strengthen and maintain their well-being. Specifically, I spent long periods of time in the dwelling places of migrant workers to observe their living conditions. I actively tried to lower the barriers between those I was studying and me by connecting with the experiences of workers (McCurdy & Uldam, 2013). In interviews with migrant workers, I asked them about their current living and working conditions and how they related with their fellow colleagues. I understood the interview process as an interplay between subjectivities, identities, and emotions (Lippke & Tanggaard, 2014). Then I interpreted my observations and information from the interviews and tried to draw meaning from them. In these interpretations I followed Prasad (2002) in understanding “interpretation as a dialogue between the text and interpreter and interpretation as non-author-intention” (p. 16). Since the text cannot be considered to be independent of the subjectivity of the interpreter (Prasad, 2002) my interpretations of the interviews reflected my subjective positions on several issues pertaining to rights at work and the need for collectivisation. For instance, I believe that trade unions are necessary for securing the rights of workers. However, I was careful to ensure that my beliefs did not suppress the voices of participants and I did not end up imposing my views on trade unions on them.

In the second interpretive moment I compared my data with published work in the literature. This was important to defuse the subject-object dichotomy (Gadamer, 1975) by situating the observation and interview texts as adding to and problematising existing knowledge. For instance existing knowledge about migrant workers constitutes them as vulnerable subjects (Wang & Tian, 2014). I used the interview data to problematise concepts in the existing literature and to access contextual knowledge.

In the third interpretive moment I analysed the data and wrote about my findings. This was necessary to build the themes that were the findings of my study I followed Habermas (1990) to analyse the data from the perspective of critiquing the ideologies that advanced inequality for workers. Particularly, I was interested in critiquing the employer's role in creating vulnerabilities for migrant workers and the efforts of workers to overcome them.

The fourth interpretive moment occurred when I discussed my interpretations with peers and refocused the analysis. By engaging with peers who have experiences working on issues of industrial relations and job insecurity, as well as working with vulnerable workers, I could situate my work within our body of critical knowledge related to these themes. My work could be seen in relation to the scholarly work of my peers who have contributed to the advancement of critical understandings of worker's conditions and their struggles.

### **Reflexivity**

Reflexivity involves rethinking research identities and relationships and is important to appreciate the politics behind the construction of knowledge (Marcus, 1998; Upadhy, 2008). In my study the migrant workers often perceived me as a person sensitive to their concerns on account of the free flowing conversations that I held with them in Kannada.

At one level I could empathise with the experiences of migrant workers as I had also migrated several times in my life for education and livelihood. While my hometown is in the industrial city of Coimbatore in Tamil Nadu, I migrated to Bangalore, Capital of Karnataka, which is now famous as the silicon valley of India in search of a job. It was during my 8 years stay in Bangalore, as a part of my circumstance of employment that I began to learn Kannada. Now I am able to speak the language fluently.

The quest for obtaining a doctoral diploma brought me to Ahmedabad and once again I became a migrant. I was in contact with the migrant workers in a canteen which I used to visit regularly to eat south Indian food. Due to my conversations with the migrant workers being in Kannada, they used to pay a little more attention in giving me parcels of South Indian food items when I needed them. In terms of reflexivity my initial interaction with the migrant workers in the canteen was one of a customer with service providers. However our informal conversations transcended the transactional relationship between customers and workers providing food services in an urban setting.

### **Recruitment of Participants**

To recruit participants for the study I followed the process of prior informed consent. Peers had reviewed the ethical processes involved in the study, and a primary concern was that the workers should not come to any harm due to the study. These peers included faculty members and doctoral scholars in the academic institute where I was pursuing my doctoral studies. My research is situated in the same ethical context as outlined by Noronha and D'Cruz (2006): "While the organizations involved in the research did not require IRB approval as this is not a customary practice in India, the researchers ensured the inclusion of ethical guidelines such as informed consent, voluntary participation, and confidentiality in order to protect the rights and interests of participants" (p. 5). Gaining consent and trust of the informant is very important in the research strategy (Fujii, 2008).

I introduced the research objective to the workers including possible outlets for dissemination and articulation of research findings. I approached each worker in the canteen individually and requested his consent to participate in the study. I informed each worker that the study would involve a few conversations which I would record and I outlined some of the

questions pertaining to their life history and work that would be part of these conversations. All six workers agreed to participate in the research process.

## **Data Collection**

I employed interviews, observations, and writing field notes as the central data collection methods for accessing the migrant workers' local knowledge.

### **Observation and field notes**

Built spaces are story tellers and part of the story being told, and enable human meaning-making processes (Yanow, 1998). Hence I visited the residential space of the migrants to observe the space and settings. I also visited their work place. I observed the living and working spaces of workers by spending long periods of time and maintaining field notes of my visits.

I focused on observing the places where the workers slept in the night and the places where they worked during the day. For instance, I spent some time in the room where they slept in the night and noticed how they had arranged the room and what they had kept in the room such as photographs, portraits, and other material belongings. I also spent time in their work spaces noting their working conditions and the nature of their work. For example, while observing their working spaces, I got a sense of the high temperature in the working environment and the variation in the pace of their work during different times. An illustration of my observations and field notes describing the living space of workers follows:

A room has been provided to the migrant workers from Karnataka where they can keep their personal belongings and where some of them can sleep. There are seven workers from Karnataka in the mess. Since they work in different shifts they can take rest at different points of time in the day. At a time two workers can sleep in the room, but usually three workers sleep there. There are cardboard sheets lying on the floor over which thin bed sheets have been spread. All the migrant workers live out of their suitcases. They have no cupboards or almirahs (cabinets) where they can keep their belongings. There are many pictures which adorn the room. They include that of a sports car, sports bikes, a cheetah, children, and posters of Kannada film hero Upendra.

### **Interviews**

My conversational interviews with workers covered details regarding their life history, the difficulties they encounter in their present work place, awareness about unions, and their relationship with other migrants from Karnataka. Leicester (1999) and Oakley (1981) suggest that interviewing subjects from a familiar context enables the accessing of rich knowledge. Qualitative data is meaningful in light of contextual appreciation of the experiences of respondents. In interpretive methodologies it must be stressed that the "people and events which constitute the raw materials for . . . analysis are not encountered in isolation but rather in specific contexts" (Emmison & Smith, 2000, p. 5). When engagement has taken place between the researcher and subjects earlier, it facilitates an epistemological basis for understanding the subjectivity of the respondents in deeper way (Stanley & Wise, 1993).

The main question that I asked of everyone was "What are the issues or difficulties faced at the workplace?" Some of the other follow-up conversational questions were as

follows: Why did you drop out of school at a young age? What are the most important events in your life? What are the difficulties that you faced in your childhood and youth? When did you begin to understand the social and economic problems faced by your family? What was your first employment and how much did you earn? Have you heard about trade unions? Who helped you to get employment in Ahmedabad? What are the hours of work? What are the benefits provided by your present employer?

Responses to these questions were recorded using a voice recorder with the consent of the participants. I have used pseudonyms for all the respondents. I conducted all the interviews in Kannada and wrote the transcripts in English. Since I could interact with the workers in Kannada, establishing rapport with them was easier. Each of the interviews was approximately 45 minutes long. However, there were many instances of informal interactions which were not recorded. Field notes were maintained of these interactions. Whenever I could not record my interactions with participants, I wrote down a summary of these interactions, reconstructing them as much as I could from my memory. Usually I wrote these field notes of my informal conversations with workers on the same day of the conversation. These informal conversations were about our families, reflections on the immediate day, films and other aspects of our everyday lives, and helped in building further rapport with workers and accessing experiential knowledge of their life and work.

### **Analysis**

I first read each transcript to understand the different meanings expressed in it by making notes on the margin and highlighting the key phrases used by participants. I read the transcripts repeatedly to understand the implicit nuances that I may have missed in a single reading (Miles & Huberman, 1984) and reflected on the patterns that were emerging from the notes I had made on the margins.

I then generated themes as outlined by van Manen (1998) by indicating important issues in the lived experiences of participants. I followed Palmer (1969) in noting that analysis using interpretive methodologies is not merely a logical process but an intuitive process involving temporal and historical characteristics. Following Prasad (2002), I engaged in the part/whole dialectics of interpretation by traversing between individual experiences of migrant workers and reflecting on how they were shared across the narratives of all the workers. Next while analysing the data, I rearranged the transcripts to group together experiences of migrant workers such as reasons for migration, current difficulties, family, and efforts being made to overcome vulnerabilities. I brought together particular quotes from different respondents and thus tried to arrange all my interview data thematically. The interview data of participants has been used to describe the experiences of migrant workers. The interview data brings to light their experiences and gives us rich insights into the reasons for collectivising. The interview data retain the uniqueness of each individual's life and provide us with the basis of similarities and differences in the experiences of migrants.

Next, I also wrote long notes on my own reflexive positions, some of which I have shared in this article to allow for what Gadamer (1975) called the historicity of understanding. By the historicity of understanding, I wanted to understand how my own life history was different from the life history of migrant workers and how this influenced my analysis of the data. According to Gadamer (1975) our prejudices constitute the historical reality of our being and therefore my own historical reality followed from multiple prejudices that I held such as that of a Ph.D. scholar in a management institute, former administrative officer in a research and development establishment and a migrant. Further, according to Gadamer (1975), prejudices should not be seen as hindrances but as productive activities



which enable understanding by defining the hermeneutic horizon which contains both the limits and potentialities of interpretation.

I generated the themes of solidarity, language, economic deprivation, and struggles during case by case analysis of data. For instance, I generated the theme of economic deprivation while coding the data pertaining to the reasons that had forced the workers to migrate for their livelihood. I generated different codes such as family distress, loans, inadequate income; these described data pertaining to the experiences of workers before migration and were joined to generate the theme of economic deprivation I read each transcript to understand why each of my participants had migrated and contrasted their experiences with my own in order to obtain a reflexive sense of the data. I noted the salient issues that had driven each of my participants to migrate. On comparing codes pertaining to these issues, I was able to discern that poverty, distress, and loans, all of which constituted economic deprivation had led to the migration of each of my participants.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness/Credibility**

According to Shehata (2006), “reflexivity means being self-conscious about the fieldwork and the role of ethnographer in the production of knowledge; it is a reflexivity not about writing and textuality, but about fieldwork as method and the ethnographer as ‘positioned subject’” (p. 246). This indicates that reflexivity is an important part of qualitative research and the researcher needs to reflect on how he/she contributes to the production of knowledge. In my study I addressed issues of trustworthiness and credibility by providing an account of reflexivity in terms of how participants perceived me. First, I brought together those parts of the interview data in which participants were asking me questions about my life and work. Next I wrote notes about the common questions that participants were asking me and my responses to these questions. These notes helped me to understand my identity that was being constructed by the participants. Next I compared my own experiences with participants’ experiences pertaining to different issues such as family, access to financial resources, education, and livelihood. This helped me in understanding the different choices and meanings underlying them. My descriptions of reflexivity also help in identifying my leanings as a researcher in generating themes from the data provided by participants.

### **Findings**

Now I discuss the findings of my study in terms of observations and field notes, the narratives of workers and themes emerging from their experiences. I generated the themes of economic deprivation, solidarity, language, and struggles by analysing the data.

#### **Economic Deprivation**

Due to poverty many are forced to drop out of school and search for some means of livelihood to sustain their family. Lack of education often arises out of a long history of family poverty based in insecure work with extremely low incomes. One of the migrant workers in my study indicated the context of economic deprivation due to which he migrated.

I am from a small village in Hassan district in Karnataka. My parents are daily wage earners. I studied in a Kannada medium school. The financial problems at home distracted me from studies and I could only study till the 5<sup>th</sup> standard [Grade V]. After discontinuing my studies, I joined a small hotel near my

native place. My initial salary was Rs.900/- per month. I learnt cooking non-vegetarian food in that hotel. After working there for 5 years, I joined a very big restaurant in Bangalore. I learnt to cook vegetarian food which made me a complete cook. My salary was Rs.2500/- per month. Since I had many friends and used to roam with them, I could not save much. I work in the night shift from 6PM to 4 AM. Since I have been provided free accommodation and food, I am able to save more than Rs.2500/- per month.

The need to save money is an important pressure on migrant workers. Sandeep also describes the financial distress, which led to his migration.

My father's salary of Rs.5000/- was not sufficient to run the family. We are staying in a rented house in our native place. The financial problems forced me to discontinue my studies and look out for a job. I joined as a helper in a canteen near my native place and received a wage of one hundred rupees per day. Since I had to stay outside, I rented a room and stayed with my friends. Sometimes I ate outside too. This increased my expenditure and I could not save much. Since I could not save much and working as a helper did not make me learn any new thing, I decided to work with my brother who was working in a reputed institute in Ahmedabad. After joining there, my brother taught me to cook and within a year I could cook all the South Indian dishes on my own. I work from 8AM to 6 PM. . During weekends, I work as a server in a university canteen and earn Rs.80/- per day.

As Sandeep's narrative indicates migrant workers often shift cities while shifting their jobs in the hope of increased incomes. However the reality of precarious employment, which can suddenly leave them without a job, is always part of their consciousness. Amit's experiences of migration are described below:

I am from a small village in Karnataka. I studied till 10<sup>th</sup> standard in a Kannada medium school in my native place. I failed in English in the 10<sup>th</sup> standard Board Exam. I decided to work since my father's income was not enough for a decent living. We were living in a rented house in our native place. Rent, electricity bill and other medical expenses reduced our food budget and some days we had to go hungry. The other option was to take a loan. The loan amount increased every month and the interest payment made our condition worsen. So I decided to work. Initially I worked in a factory in Bangalore, where I got a very nominal amount as salary. I could have continued to work in Bangalore in spite of the low salary but the skyrocketing room rent and increased cost of living left nothing as savings. I came to Ahmedabad 4 ½ years ago and worked in several famous restaurants and joined an academic institute. They are paying me Rs.3500/- per month. When I came here I initially did not know Hindi. So, I struggled a lot here.

Migration is driven by conditions of extreme economic deprivation where hunger and lack of access to food security are dominant realities. Krishnan's narrative describes similar experiences:

My father is an agriculturist. We had more than 10 acres of land. Everything went on well 'till my elder sister's wedding. We took a lot of loan for her

marriage and conducted the marriage in a grand manner. My sister gave birth to a baby girl. Three years after marriage, while she was cooking, her clothes caught fire and she got burnt. She was admitted in a hospital with more than 60% burns. We took loan again to save her life. We spent a lot towards her medical expenses. In spite of the best efforts of the doctors, she did not survive. Before her death she asked my mother to take care of her daughter. We sold some of our agricultural land. Still we ended up with a loan of more than three lakh rupees. This was the time I decided that I would discontinue my studies and join my brother at Ahmedabad to solve the problem of debt that our family was facing.

Krishnan's experience indicates the vulnerability of agrarian households as economic shocks related to the family or other contexts can easily push the household to poverty. Guru's narrative indicates how migrants are forced to nurture an intense culture of savings:

I have a daughter and a son. My daughter has completed her B.Sc (Bachelor of Science) degree. My son is not intelligent and he is working here in Ahmedabad in parties. My daughter got married last year. I took a loan of Rs. 100000/- for my daughter's wedding with interest at the rate of Rs.10/- for every hundred rupees per month. To clear the loan I sold tender coconut in the streets of Bangalore. I used to earn Rs.400/- per day by selling 100 tender coconuts daily. I cleared the loan fully. Due to my increasing age, I could not continue in that profession, which was a very difficult one. During wedding, I could not pay the dowry fully to the bridegroom's family. I still have to pay them Rs.20,000. I decided to work for some time and pay them the balance Rs.20,000/- later. Since my relatives are working here, I came to Ahmedabad, leaving my wife in my native place. My job is to cut vegetables and I work from 7 AM to 5 PM with a 2 hour break in between from 1 to 3 PM. I came here 4 months back and I will work here for another 6-8 months and go back to my native place and take care of agriculture.

A context of patriarchal inequalities also informs Guru's narratives as it is very difficult for marginal workers to pay exorbitant amounts of dowry. The migrant worker chooses occupations based on the intensity of the labour involved and the amount of income needed to overcome the current crisis that she may be facing. Manish's experience indicates some of these tensions:

I left my home when my father beat me for not studying when I was in the first standard. I worked in a tea shop in a railway station in Mumbai. I worked there for 3 years and I got a payment of Rs.1000/- every year. I worked as a construction worker for a year and earned well. Since I could not have food on time, it affected my health and I had to quit the job. I joined a big restaurant in Bangalore. I worked there for two years. But I could not save much due to the increased expenses. I came to Ahmedabad a year ago. I do not spend much here and send my savings to my parents. Delayed payments create a lot of problems for us.

In order to prove themselves as a valuable subject, migrant workers like Manish are willing to be a part of intense labour regimes. It is only when these regimes begin to affect their health that they start exploring other opportunities.

## **Solidarity**

Often migrant workers cooperate with each other to overcome cultural handicaps and barriers of language. They also provide information about available jobs to friends and members of the community. Rajeev describes some of these experiences of solidarity.

One of my relatives working as a cook in a reputed educational institution brought me here and got me a job in the institute. Since I knew neither Hindi (official language of India) nor Gujarati (language spoken in Gujarat, Western India state), I found it extremely difficult. I learnt Hindi within 2 months from my colleagues in my work place and now I am getting a salary of Rs.3000/- per month. I know working in the night shift affects my health, but I am powerless to ask for a change. Unless we form a trade union we may not be able to fight for things like this.

Thus Rajeev describes how his friends helped him to learn a new language and thereby enhanced his survival skills. Rajeev recognized that unless workers formally collectivise and engage in collective bargaining they will continue to be exploited in the form of night shifts and adverse consequences for their health. Sandeep describes the importance of friendship and solidarity in his life. He expresses an emotional bonding with his coworkers and refuses to substitute this with economic interest.

I work as a part time server in another university canteen in Ahmedabad during the weekends. The owner of the canteen has asked me to come there everyday and he has said that he would pay me Rs.1500/month if I work from 7 pm to 11 pm everyday. But I refused since some of my friends have asked me to take care of their work for sometime in the place where I am currently working. I cannot turn down the request of my friends.

On being asked about how solidarity was useful for the migrant workers, Amit said that this could be used for forming a trade union.

One of our friends is working in three places. We make all the preparations ready for him, so that he can come and prepare dosas straight away. I have seen unions in movies but I have not seen or heard of unions in real life. So I don't know whether unions may help in solving our problems. But if we remain together in future as well, we may be able to fight for our rights.

Help rendered by migrant workers to each other is an expression of their humanity. This can become the basis for forming a trade union in the future when more organizational information about trade unions and a social democratic consciousness is accessible to them. Krishnan discusses the importance of solidarity and how friends need to help each other in the following words:

When Kiran, a colleague of mine, went to his native place he facilitated my joining here, thinking that he would do some business in our native place. It did not work out, so he came back. When he came back I thought I should not disturb him so I left the job and went to another college. The management asked me to continue here. But for me my friendship is more important to me than my job. He has worked in this place for a long time. Though I may

change my job and the owners for whom I work, my friendship with Kiran would remain forever. It would have been difficult for Kiran to continue here if I had stayed back. I have seen unions in movies. If people are interested, I am ready to take lead in forming a union and fight for their cause.

Krishnan's narrative indicates how even in the midst of economic vulnerabilities, migrant workers refuse to behave in dehumanized instrumental terms. As Guru indicates solidarity expressed by migrant workers towards each other is vitally important for their survival.

I am 55 years old. I do not know Hindi, so most of the time I am interacting with people from Karnataka. When I want to communicate to others, Kiran acts as my translator. It's Kiran who has brought us all here. He is only 24 years old. He takes good care of us. Whenever we have any grievance Kiran communicates it to the management. If we are not well, he takes us to the doctor. He collects Rs.100/- from everyone and purchases oil, paste, and other daily use items. We share and use those items. When a person has a financial problem, Kiran takes the initiative of pooling the resource and sends money to the family, which is adjusted in our subsequent month's salary. All of us listen to Kiran because he is helpful. We believed that Kiran has everyone's good at heart.

When migrant workers express solidarity with each other they are also enabling leadership skills to develop and facilitate the emergence of an organic leadership. Leaders such as Kiran can play an important role in collectivising migrant workers as all workers trust Kiran. Manish describes how solidarity emerges by the togetherness produced by doing everyday activities jointly.

On Saturdays we try to go to the Hanuman (Hindu deity) temple together. I work in the night shift. If I do not have any work, I come out and chat with my friends. If there is any order, my name is called out loudly. Then I go and finish my work. Kiran brought me here. I left the job in between and left to my native place. Kiran convinced me and brought me back here. Kiran spoke to the management and fixed my salary at Rs.3000/-.

## **Language**

Since all the workers could speak Kannada fluently this became the basis for shared bonds between them. Rajeev shared his experiences about some of these bonds.

I like spending time chatting with my Kannada friends. Whenever we find time, we chat. They help me during my hours of crisis. Whenever my family is in need of money, they pool all their salaries and send it to my home. I pay them back using my subsequent month's salary. People form their own groups based on the place they have come from. I speak very less with people from other states. If there is a need, definitely I speak to them.

As Rajeev points out ties of language help workers to financially reach out to each other. Thus they are able to pool their resources and act as an informal insurance against shocks. This helps in reducing the vulnerability of migrant workers which is high on account

of low wages and very little job security. Sandeep describes how language is an important criterion for remaining connected to an employer.

The management has plans to transfer me to one of their canteens in a design school. If transferred, I would be the only Kannadiga working there. I want to be with my Karnataka friends. If the management insists, I will quit the job and look out for a better job in a restaurant in Ahmedabad.

Common bonds of language help in engaging with this alienation better by ensuring that workers can draw support from each other during difficult times. Amit describes how culture is reproduced for migrant workers through shared bonds of language:

On some Fridays, we all go out to see Hindi or Kannada movies. When a Kannada movie is released, we do not miss the movie. We usually go to a popular multiplex, which is nearby to see Kannada films. Earlier nine of my friends from Karnataka were working here. Now we are only six. Since already three of our friends have left and some of them are planning to leave, we intend to take a room outside the institute. This will allow us to sustain our bonding with each other.

Watching a film together helps workers to revisit some aspects of Kannada culture and thus provides an opportunity to share their experiences with each other. At the same time, it is important for migrant workers to learn the local language, and Krishnan accounts for difficulties that arise in this regard.

Initially I joined a restaurant as a helper for one year. I did not know Hindi or Gujarati, which made my survival very difficult. I used to cry for days together when I was beaten by my supervisor.

Migrant workers are often exploited and bullied due to their lack of familiarity with the local language. Learning the local language can be advantageous for migrant workers and Guru describes how language can be used as a strategic resource to obtain some benefits from the employer.

We Kannadigas have food together. I was in Mumbai (capital of Maharashtra, western Indian state) and worked for a year. The manager was from Karnataka. He used to help me in my interactions with others. Only the six of us, who are from Karnataka are staying in the mess. Everyone else has moved out. Since Kiran has been working here for 8 years, he has a lot of credibility. That is why we have been allowed to stay. People from other states have been provided accommodation outside.

Kiran is able to persuade the employer to allow all the migrant workers from Karnataka to stay in the mess. Thus the workers are able to obtain some benefits based on their shared language, as Kiran is able to persuade the employer to provide them accommodation in the vicinity of their workplace. For the employer, the migrant workers were important as they have the expertise of preparing the South Indian food, which is liked by the patrons.

## Struggles

Since the migrant workers are employed in the unorganised sector, they are deprived of protection of almost all labour laws in India. Rajeev describes the struggles of migrant workers pertaining to delayed wages and the absence of benefits.

The salary is disbursed after 20<sup>th</sup> most of the time. The new management has promised that they would try to pay before the 12<sup>th</sup> of every month. We have spoken to the supervisor a few times regarding the delay. We do not get bonus or medical facilities here. Even when we are injured while cooking in the work place we have to spend on our own. I am saving money to start my own business.

Sandeep describes the struggle to send remittances back home and how the delay in payment of wages adds to this struggle.

My brother and I earn Rs.6500/- per month and send around Rs.5000/- to our parents. The delay in disbursement of salary pains us a lot. The new management has promised that they would look into the matter. My first priority is to construct a house and purchase some agricultural land for my family. There is no employee insurance or provident fund facility here.

The primary struggle of workers like Sandeep is to search for avenues through which they could obtain higher incomes. Migrant workers eventually want to author secured futures and livelihoods for themselves. Amit describes struggles on account of the distress that he faced:

Five years ago, my father was not well and was admitted in a private hospital. We did not have any cash in hand to spend for him. So we had to borrow from my uncle. We had to repay the amount (now around Rs.16000/-) to transfer our ancestral property in my father's name. I am saving money to construct a small house in our native place. We do not have any medical facilities here. Management sometimes meets the initial expense if we are injured while cooking. After that we have to take care of ourselves. The management must take some steps to pay us the salary on time otherwise we would be in a difficult situation. 'Till last year there were nearly 150 employees along with us. Then the management informed us that they are incurring losses and terminated the services of nearly 60-70 people. So sometimes we live with a fear that we might also be sent out in the near future. Sometimes it is very tiring to work. It is very difficult to prepare dosas in the summer season due to the extreme heat.

Amit describes the absence of workplace rights, as the employer is willing to bear the responsibility for workplace injuries. Delay in salary creates many difficulties for migrant workers. Krishnan describes his experiences in the following words:

Now I am working in two places. From 4 AM to 11:30 AM, I am working in a college and take rest at home till 5 PM. After that I work in a restaurant from 6 PM to 12 AM. Totally I earn around Rs. 9500/-. I have to pay a chit amount of Rs.4000/- by the 15<sup>th</sup> of every month. The chit fund helps me to save. Due to

delays in payment of salary, I have to borrow from my friends every month to pay the due for chit fund (saving scheme). If there is an injury in the workplace the management takes care of the expenses for the first day. After that we have to spend for any further treatment.

Before joining a restaurant, I was working in private parties. Then I worked in the restaurant for 3 years and learnt to cook very well. One of my relatives, who was working there transformed me into a perfect cook. My salary also increased accordingly. Still I could not contribute much to the family in repaying loans. I decided to continue to work in parties, where I would get Rs.300-500 per day but I had to work till 3-4 AM. It was not a regular job, but I was lucky to regularly get jobs in parties. This was the period when I played a major role in reducing the debt of my family.

Krishnan is paid extremely low wages and therefore he has to work with multiple employers in order to earn a reasonable income. Manish points out the lack of social security benefits for migrant workers.

There are no medical facilities, employee insurance or provident fund. Since I do not have any educational qualification, I do not know anything about unions. I do not know how we will obtain medical facilities and insurance.

Migrant workers like Manish are deprived of health insurance and provident fund. Consequently they do not obtain benefits of public investments and have to spend for their health related needs on their own. They are deprived of access to public subsidies with respect to health and related needs of life.

### **Limitations**

In order to ensure that my views about trade unions were not imposed on participants, I did not attempt to intervene by collectivising migrant workers who participated in my study. This lack of intervention on my part can be seen as a limitation. For instance I could have adopted an action research design where I engaged with workers even while I tried to form a trade union and help in collectivising them. While conducting this study as a doctoral scholar I have come to conclude that the quality of research in terms of its political credibility improves if the researcher consciously involves himself or herself in trying to improve the material wellbeing of vulnerable workers through collective efforts. The difficulties of a practical attempt at collectivising workers would have significantly enriched the contributions of this study. I do not believe that the objective of qualitative research is to yield generalisable findings. On the other hand, qualitative inquiries are useful for generating contextual knowledges and mobilising specific actions in local settings based on these knowledges. However, while I do not provide generalisable findings in my study, I add to a vast body of literature about informal economy workers and their vulnerabilities. From this theoretical perspective I contend that there are several implications of my study, primary among which is the unacceptability of the apathy of employers and the Indian state towards informal economy workers. Society, state, and employers need to provide a wide gamut of social security benefits pertaining to pension, health insurance, unemployment allowances, housing, and education. Another implication of my study is a call for trade unions to be more sensitive towards the condition of unorganised sector workers in India and play a greater role in collectivising them.



## Discussion

Participants in my study experience job insecurity and exploitation and are forced to work for extremely long hours for abysmal wages and do not have access to health care, and are extremely vulnerable. In the phase of such vulnerabilities workers render support and solidarity to each other so that they can cope with the difficult conditions of work and life. In this section, I discuss the solidarity rendered by workers to each other to indicate that workers do not passively accept vulnerability but engage with their work and life in the spirit of trying to improve their well-being. Further workers realise that by remaining together and rendering support to each other they can negotiate their vulnerabilities more effectively.

Solidarity can be defined as the emergence of “a community of interest, feelings and action” (D’Art & Turner, 2002). Solidarity can also be considered as a frame of shared values and rules that keeps everyone together. The shared values and rules are available as cultural codes for everyone in the public space (Rosati, 2003). Solidarity means not standing by equals alone but also fighting for the rights of the weaker members in an organization or society. Guru who is 55 years old does not know Hindi. Whenever he wants to communicate with other employees, Kiran acts as his translator. Kiran is expressing solidarity by reaching out to Guru, who is in a more vulnerable position. Kiran is enabling other workers to find their anchors in the new workplace setting. In some instances, he even negotiates a better wage for them and enables them to continue working. Thus, though Manish wants to leave the place, Kiran holds him back by getting him a better wage. In return, Kiran is also helped by others. Once when Kiran had gone away for some time, Krishnan became established as a cook. Yet when Kiran came back, Krishnan was willing to leave his job for him. Krishnan was more interested in preserving his friendship than his job. Solidarity within the experience of migration leads to the formation of informal collectives. These collectives provide a sense of support to the workers (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2000). The migration pattern sometimes changes the ethnic and racial landscape of many urban areas wherein the ethnic and racial minorities are coming together to form communities (Shah, 2008), which helps them in expressing ethnic solidarity with each other.

Solidarity arising out of mutual help leads to the formation of collectives and such solidarity is not just a compassionate lending of hand and conceiving everyone as equals (Agustin, 2007). Solidarity leads to the formation of resource pooling, which helps workers to negotiate their everyday existence to fulfill their daily needs. Such fulfillment of daily needs sustains their living and renders them the assurance that the nature of their lives would not be ruptured to a great extent. They contribute Rs. 100/- every month for purchase of items like soap, oil, and creams. These items are treated as common resources and all the migrant workers use them. The pooling of resources helps to give a sense of concrete meaning to collective existence (Subasic, Reynolds, & Turner, 2008).

Solidarity renders a sense of coherent identity and meaning to the workers. In times of difficulty and distress, the workers support each other by rendering collective financial help. Collective action is possible when employees share an identity and have a sense of solidarity, in which cultural identity plays a major role (Acosta, 2008; Martinez, 2008). Whenever an employee has a financial problem, all the employees pool their salaries and send money to the distressed family of the employee. The employee repays the amount from his monthly salary later. The element of trust built up among workers allows them a sense of community. Solidarity also helps to demand their rights to dignity and a liveable wage (Azad, 2005). Thus, they are able to repeatedly ask management to avoid the delays in paying them salaries, and stop the practice of paying them after 20 days of the month are over. Reluctant solidarity also helps the vulnerable employees in their hours of distress and helps to build small bonds in spite of tension among the employees (Bahre, 2007) and such solidarity can also trickle

down to other vulnerable employees (Pattenden, 2005). In the end, the togetherness of employees can bring them many benefits. Thus, the workers from Karnataka are allowed to stay in the mess itself, while other workers are asked to find accommodation outside.

The solidarity of workers is also evidenced through the bonds that they form with each other in their living spaces. Interestingly, a cat often walks into the room where the workers sleep and the migrant workers claim that it sleeps with them in the night. The migrant workers have also achieved this bonding with the cat in a collective and social way. Perhaps, by expanding human affections in an extemporaneous way to a serendipitous cat which is an outsider to human society, migrant workers attempt to seek for themselves a legitimate space in societies in which they themselves are serendipitous outsiders.

Also, the migrant workers had put up several portraits and images of gods in their room. The workers brought almost all the images and posters from Karnataka. These images were kept on a shelf above the ground. The suitcases of the workers were also kept on a desk. In that sense material and divine sanctity converged as both the suitcases and the gods and goddesses existed on a vantage point above the floor. A shared sense of devotion to gods was another way of expressing solidarity towards each other.

Language can form the basis of solidarity between migrant workers as they can help each other to come to terms with cultural difficulties that they face (Francisco, 2014). Language plays a vital role in enabling trade unions to connect with migrant workers and help in mitigating their exploitation (Mustchin, 2012). In the absence of trade union support as well, migrant workers in my study helped each other to acquire the necessary language skills.

The common language of Kannada allows the workers the opportunity to consolidate the memory of their historical journey of migration. Post-migration there are transitions in identity in the new work place and language plays an important role in making sense of these changes (Barkhuizen & de Klerk, 2006; Rahman, 2002). The identity of migrant workers from Karnataka has been changed from Kannadiga to Madarasi in their current social context. In North and West India, all South Indians are referred as Madarasis (since the earlier Madras province consisted of present day Tamil Nadu, Andhra, Karnataka and Kerala). Thus language also represents group identity.

Awareness of the struggles of others forms a basis of shared identity (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). The common theme of debt emerging from the crisis in the family allows the workers to stick together. Loans seem to be the main reason behind the migration of workers (Bonner, 2004) in almost all cases. Some of the migrants borrowed loan at a very high interest i.e Rs.10/- per month for every Rs.100/- borrowed, which works out to 120% per annum. Loans with high interest make family members lose hope so that those who were young lost interest in studies and are forced to migrate. These struggles help them to understand that they inhabit a similar nature of existence. This helps them to stick together and render a sense of genuine and free flowing solidarity to each other. The sharing of struggles with each other leads to the emergence of the possibility of hope. Hope leads to emancipation, which is about freeing people who are weakened by existing inequalities, so that they become strong (Braithwaite, 2004) and recover a sense of agency. Even without formal trade unions, collectivisation occurs through the rendering of solidarity to each other's struggles.

My study contributes to an earlier body of work which points out that informal mechanisms of mobilizing and protecting migrant workers emerge when trade unions fail to represent these workers effectively (Xu, 2013). This leads to migrant workers trying to bridge representation gaps by looking for effective and legitimate ways to combat their marginalisation (Xu, 2013). Migrant workers in my study experienced marginalisation on account of delays in payments, absence of social security and lack of workplace rights to

enforce compensation for workplace injuries. In many ways migrant workers subsidise the economic growth of national economies by providing employers with a source for cheap labour who are willing to work for extremely long hours of time (Howell, 2009). Migrants workers in my study as well were working for extremely long hours and in order to earn higher incomes were also working for multiple employers.

I hope to have pointed out how collectivisation can occur through workers expressing solidarity with each other in order to overcome their shared sense of economic deprivation (Vijay, 2005). Such solidarity can become the basis of a shared language of protest and resistance which seeks to alter the status-quo which has produced injustice. One of the aspect through which workers express solidarity with each other is through community networks of support and extending help to each other in times of distress, which helps them in overcoming unequal power relations (Subasic et al., 2008). Community networks of solidarity are also strengthened through common bonds of language (Rahman, 2002). Alliances between workers are likely to become strong when they are able to forge deep-rooted community ties with each other. Thus while anger and antagonistic expressions of protests are necessary, for comprehensive social movement to emerge, positive community reservoirs of support are equally necessary. Through a culture of sharing and giving freely a sustainable collective can emerge and migrant workers can recognize the need to provide support towards each other's struggles (Pithouse, 2008). It is a movement towards such a sustainable collective that I hope to have contributed to.

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