

The London School of Economics and Political Science

Gendered economies of extraction:  
Seeking permanence amidst the rubble of Bengaluru's construction industry

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A Thesis submitted to the Department of Anthropology of the London School of  
Economics and Political Science for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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## ABSTRACT

Bengaluru, the capital of Karnataka state in southern India, has undergone rapid transformation in recent decades, from ‘Pensioner’s paradise’ to ‘The city of the future’. At present, its kinetic landscape reflects the competing aspirations of an array of global investors, entrepreneurs, local politicians and would-be real estate moguls. But what of those who lay the foundations for this possibility? By focusing on the lives and labour of women and their families working in construction, this thesis sheds light on a frequently overlooked demographic of co-contributors to Bengaluru’s growth.

Attending to the precarity experienced by interlocutors, this thesis situates women’s endeavours to establish familial forms of permanence through an ethic of pragmatism. Illustrating how such projects are strived towards, it examines the cultivation of pragmatism to navigate various aspects of the city, and beyond. By acknowledging the resources long-term resident communities may acquire in the city, this thesis also examines the contrasting liminality experienced by migrant workers, who have scant access to these. In doing so, it attends to the ways in which urban precarity is shaped and harnessed by real estate developers seeking to maximise profit and devolve the financial risks of industry speculation. Illuminating how hegemonic masculinity informs these actions and subsequently, who is able to speculate, this thesis attends to the gendered relations that belie economies of extraction. Making visible employer strategies to maintain flexible labour, it also explores workers’ efforts to counter precarity via the state and their own forms of collective organisation.

Utilising ethnographic data collected during fieldwork between October 2014-May 2016 and August 2016-February 2017, this thesis provides a nuanced perspective of the gendered relations of production and social reproduction; and the political life that unfolds between them. Attending to the intersectionality of precarious labour conditions, it contributes to the overlapping fields of the anthropology of work, gender, and economics.

*For my late father Bob, and for the builders of Bengaluru.*

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## NOTE ON STYLE AND NAMES

The city of Bengaluru was formerly known as Bangalore. While many informants still refer to it as such (which I have faithfully included in their narratives), following its name change from this colonial-era Anglicised form, I refer to it as Bengaluru. Although the establishment of Bengaluru's new Kannada name is not without controversy, I prefer to use the present local language form of this name which is also its historic pre-colonial appellation.

Kannada and Hindi words are presented as transliterations. I alter some primary personal, organizational, and locational names to protect the anonymity of my interlocutors.

## LIST OF INTERLOCUTORS AND ORGANISATIONS

### **Karnataka Building and Other Construction Workers' Welfare Board**

A tripartite welfare board established in Bengaluru in 2006 following the 1996 Building and Other Construction Workers' Act.

Featured staff members

Dr Sriramakrishnan  
Former Deputy Board Director

Jaya  
Board Sub-Deputy Director

Seema  
Assistant Labour Commissioner and Assistant Secretary

### **Migrant workers and their families**

Praveen's site

Hemavathi's family

Basappa  
From Adoni, Andhra Pradesh. Hemavathi's husband and a construction worker

Hemavathi  
From Adoni, Hemavathi works in construction and is expecting her third child

Rangamma  
Daughter of Hemavathi and Basappa, living with her parents and younger brother in a small shed next to Praveen's site

Shiva  
Hemavathi and Basappa's youngest child

Lingamma's family

Lingamma  
From Adoni, Andhra Pradesh. Construction worker and mother of three children

Eramma  
Eldest daughter of Lingamma

Narsamma  
Youngest daughter of Lingamma

Suraj  
From Adoni, a cement worker and husband to Lingamm

## The Thimmaiah Campus

David

The *maistri* in charge of the workers (below) from Raichur

Devamma

From Raichur, Northern Karnataka. Shubha's grandmother, Devamma watches the children when her daughters and granddaughters go off to work

Radhamma

A construction worker from Raichur in her thirties. Radhamma came to the city with her husband, a *maistri*, her brother and her sister in law

Shubha

Construction worker in her early twenties and cousin of Shivu

Shivu

Construction worker in her late teens and cousin of Shubha, Shivu came to the city with her brother

## NGOs and unions

Akhila Karnataka Kattada Karmikara Union (AKKKU)

Modestly sized grassroots union for informal workers. Founded with assistance from FEDINA's unionising initiative

Featured union members

Ambika

Resident of the Ambedkar slum. Widowed construction worker and AKKKU member, Ambika lost her husband during a site accident

Anil

Construction worker and AKKKU member

Mariamamma

Resident of the Ambedkar slum, construction worker and AKKKU member. Mariamma sometimes hosts the neighbourhood meeting in her home

Satish

Construction worker and AKKKU member

Akhila Karnataka Vayorudhara Okkut (AIKYATA)

A small grassroots union for older (some retired) informal workers and those unable to work due to physical disability. Founded with assistance from FEDINA's unionising initiative.

Ananthamma

Activist and elderly domestic worker, retired from construction. Co-founder of AIKYATA.

### Citizens' Voluntary Initiative for the City (CIVIC)

Founded in 1990, CIVIC is a small NGO established with the objective of holding the state and local government (BBMP) accountable for service delivery to the urban poor in Bengaluru. It is also a central member of the KKKKKV.

#### Featured staff members

##### Kathyayini

Executive trustee of CIVIC and ardent advocate for children's rights.

##### Madhu

Former staff member and former member of  
Vocal activist for informal workers' rights

### Citizens for Social Action (CSA)

A medium size NGO, CSA's core focus is to empower the urban poor and provide education to the children of migrant workers. It runs a bridge school for migrant children and vocational training programs for the children of migrant and local construction workers. It holds SHGs for female construction workers, and facilitates registration with the construction worker's welfare board.

#### Featured staff members

##### Kauveri

Area head of CSA's Basavanagudi office, the locality of the Yadgir colony.

##### Shanti

Head co-ordinator of the Yadgir colony women's SHG

##### Tripathi

Executive Director and co-founder of CSA

### FEDINA

FEDINA also operates in Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Kerala. It promotes unionisation among informal sector workers and raises awareness of rights amongst the urban and rural poor including adivasi communities. It is the most activist-oriented of the NGOs featured in this thesis.

#### Featured staff members

##### Gayathri

FEDINA community liaison/fieldworker

##### Sebastian

Head of unionisation

### Karnataka Kattada Karmikara Kamila Kshemaabivirudhi Vedike KKKKKV

A pressure group consisting of the above organisations. Formed to lobby the state welfare board for construction workers to increase worker registration and deliver benefits more effectively.

## The KKKKKV public hearing

Manmohan Das  
Retired judge and head of Karnataka Legal Services Centre, an NGO.  
Guest speaker at the welfare forum

Shambhulingappa  
An elderly construction worker and audience member of the public  
forum

## Karnataka Construction Workers Union (KCWU)

### Featured union members

Darshan  
Union Secretary

David  
Head maistri at Shakthi and area head of the union for the Thimmaiah campus  
locality

M.N Mody  
Union President

## **The Yadgir Colony**

An overcrowded housing settlement of small apartments built by the Congress  
Government as part of a wider initiative for the influx of migrants from northern  
Karnataka in the 1970s.

Basamma  
Widowed construction worker and member of the sangha (SHG).

Yellamma  
Daughter of Basamma and mother of two, she works construction and  
lives with her mother in the colony.

Basalingamma  
An elderly widow, Basalingamma attempts to get loans for her friend  
Hanmanthi, from the sangha

Channamma  
Elderly widow and former construction worker, Channamma is an elusive  
sangha member

Chandan  
A domestic worker, Channamma's daughter-in-law and mother of three.  
She resides with Channamma in the colony. Chandan lost her husband,  
Channamma's son, in a construction site accident

Hanumanthi  
Mother of three and sangha member. Hanumanthi works in construction and is  
in a large amount of debt following her husband's accident and daughter's

wedding. Frequently denied access to credit from the sangha, she tries to borrow via Basalingamma.

Konnamma

Elderly sangha member and former construction worker. Her son has recently been sent to prison. Konnamma is in a large amount of debt to the sangha and other sources outside of it.

Laithamma

An elderly construction worker

Lakshmi

Mother of three and homeless resident of the Yadgir colony. Lakshmi is also a member of the sangha

Mariamamma

Retired construction worker and prominent sangha member

Radha

A teenage member of the sangha and construction worker

Sarojamma

A teenager working in construction, Sarojamma has a penchant for chewing betel and tobacco

Shantha

A teenage domestic worker and Basamma's niece. Occasionally she attends the sangha on behalf of her mother

Shanthamma

Former construction worker, mother to eight girls and one boy. Member of the sangha and mother to Durgamma. Sometimes referred to as 'Santana Lakshmi', due to her many children.

Ammu

Shanthamma's youngest daughter, a school-going teenager who resides with Durgamma and Hanumantha and their three children

Srikanth

Shanthamma's only son. Srikanth works as a driver and sporadically for CSA, assisting in registering colony residents with the construction workers' welfare board

Durgamma

Daughter of Shanthamma. Durgamma left construction for domestic work and now resides in the local sports centre with her family where she cleans

Hanumantha

Durgamma's husband and a sporadically employed mason

Hemanth  
Durgamma and Hanumantha's youngest child and only son

Hema  
Durgamma and Hanumantha's youngest daughter

Hanima  
Durgamma and Hanumantha's eldest daughter

Sithamma  
Former construction worker and sangha member. Sithamma's eldest son requires another operation to fix his vision

Sujatha  
Younger, former sangha member who kept the books

Uma  
Younger sangha member in her twenties, Uma is one of the few women who can read and write

Usha  
Elderly widow and expelled sangha member.

Yechamma  
Retired construction worker and prominent sangha member. Yechamma hopes to borrow a large sum of money for building a house

### **Real Estate Developers and employees**

Abhishek  
CEO and founder of a struggling real estate company

John  
A British expat working for a global property development consultancy

Kumar  
Heir to a business empire and former head of a modestly sized real estate developers

Matthew  
Head of Business Development at a real estate company

Praveen  
Co-owner of a small real estate developers.

Virender  
Former Project Manager and current Vice President of an expanding real estate development company

### **Research Assistants**

Aishwarya  
Shraddha



*Labour is for us, but the riches are for someone else.  
We hold the plough, we cultivate the land,  
We channelled our sweat like water towards the farm.  
Cropping is for us, but the food is for someone else.  
We get the silk worm eggs and grow the worms,  
We used our nerves like thread and wove clothes.  
Cold is for us but the cloth is for someone else.*

– AKKKU and AIKYATA union members' song

CHAPTER ONE:  
INTRODUCTION: BUILDING THE CITY OF BENGALURU

*It is a damp and chilly November day in Bengaluru as Shraddha, my research assistant, and I weave our way through the pile of chappals<sup>1</sup> outside the door where the women's self-help group, or sangha, is held for the residents of the Yadgir colony, a nearby housing settlement. Sithamma, who is in the process of leaving, turns around and faces us; 'Are you going to help us in any way? You just come and write things down in your books and go away. A lot of people have come in the past in a similar manner. But nobody helps us poor. They take notes and go away. There's no help for us or our children in any which way!' 'What kind of help do you mean?' Shraddha replies; 'If we have to do anything we should understand what you need, isn't it?' Shanthamma, Sithamma's companion and one of the older members of the group interjects; 'Help means... it's nothing (big). Just the issue of money. There's nothing for us poor people'. Radha, a usually shy teenage girl, pipes up; 'What we mean is... the poor put in a lot of effort and work very hard. But we are still poor'. 'But some of us don't work either, and we have nothing!' Shanthamma replies, before continuing; 'What one kind of people say is that 'we'll study and get naukri'' [a government or permanent job], she points at Shraddha and I, 'but what the others say... (she gestures at Radha, Sithamma and herself) is that 'we want money!'' The women laugh. Shanthamma turns to the others, 'This is all we say. Isn't it?' 'Yes, that's all we all ask. Do something for the poor!' Sithamma chips in, before adding in a more conciliatory tone; 'Don't take offence or feel bad that we're saying this to you. It's not intended at you particularly, everyone is like that'.*

The continuing labour of the poor for little financial recompense and the inaction of the state and wider society in addressing their needs, were frequent narratives of informants working or retired from *gaare* or *coolie kelsa*<sup>2</sup> in Bengaluru city, the capital of Karnataka state in southern India. Alongside Sithamma's anger towards the state, and the various figures of civil society and other non-government organisations (NGOs) that often visited the sangha; came the acknowledgement of the women of the Yadgir colony's exclusion from government and formal sector jobs. 'Naukri' (formal employment), was for 'one kind of people' as Shanthamma put it, whereas the construction work that she, her adult children (and nearly the entire sangha) undertook, was for *their* kind of people. Such work provided increasingly inadequate sources of income for the many families who had come to the city from drought-stricken districts; building the office complexes and apartments of Bengaluru's famed IT sector and its workers.

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<sup>1</sup> Typically plastic sandals of varying style

<sup>2</sup> This refers to cement moulding or helper work (sometimes used interchangeably) in Kannada, the language of Karnataka, in construction.

For settled former migrants including the women of the sangha, the instability of construction work and their living conditions did not necessarily diminish over time or significantly, generation. Interactions like the one described were frequent in my early days of research as I searched the city for fieldsites across a range of settlements which, while heterogeneous in location, size, permanence, and age; were united by the primary occupation of their inhabitants. Often, when I asked what residents wanted for the future, they voiced the desire that their children would find a better occupation, but also the expectation that they would join them in the ranks of *gaare* or *coolie kelsa*, too.

These formative experiences led me to question what a foothold in the city provided for families that their prior rural lives could not. If Indian cities offer aspirational currency as Sunil Khilnani claims (1997), what kinds of aspirations might the urban milieu and indeed, construction work itself allow or indeed, obstruct? Or, do other ethical frameworks take their place? Moreover, if construction work is no longer an adequate means of sustaining families as local workers attest, then what are the other amenities they might draw upon to find some form of permanence amidst such precarity? How might the capacity to identify and utilise what Gwen Van Eijk has described as 'Boundary-crossing ties essential to [...] the exchange and equal distribution of resources' (2012:1), be developed over time?

Considering these questions, the initial focus of this thesis centres around gendered progressions through the city, forming one central query: how is mobility envisioned and navigated by women working in construction in Bengaluru? In doing so, it seeks to establish the validity of Arjun Appadurai's claim regarding the diminished nature of the capacity to aspire amongst the poor (2013:188), going beyond economic accounts of poverty as an 'aspiration trap' (Fletcher, 2014; Heifitz and Minelli, 2006; Ray, 2004); and attending instead to the mutability of aspiration and individual capacities. It argues that the poor do not lack this form of imagination, and that their means of achieving and imagining long and short-term desires is shaped by an ethic of pragmatism. The social and financial manoeuvres undertaken to meet pragmatic ends may alter over time, just as imaginations may, too. This leads me to further question Appadurai's assertion of the limiting circumstances of this capacity, particularly since informants in their endeavours for various forms of permanence also sought to mute, hide or reflexively alter their aspirations for various reasons, as my thesis will discuss.

Using data from multi-sited fieldwork (from October 2014-May 2016 and two later visits in 2016 and 17), my thesis situates the present scenario experienced by families working in construction within India's wider property boom. It considers the ascendancy

of real estate in the last two decades in cities such as Bengaluru; attending to the metropolis as a site of speculation and opacity, enmeshed in global vectors of accumulation. By doing so, it tells this story from the perspectives of those working at the ground level of the industry and upwards, elucidating how construction generates capital flows within and outside of India post economic liberalisation, but to highly unequal degrees. Providing a macro-perspective of the real estate industry, I highlight the ways in which investor and consumer-driven desires may structure inequality for construction workers and their families.

The battle for visible forms of citizenship, often enmeshed in inaccessible webs of paper (A. Gupta, 2012; Bear, 2008; 2015; Mathur, 2016; Tarlo, 2001), lies at the centre of hard-fought processes the global poor are compelled to undertake for the fulfilment of various projects: whether forming a union (Pun and Huilin, 2010; Raj, 2018); claiming welfare (A. Gupta, 2012; Boo, 2012); ensuring the rights to one's livelihood (Boo, 2012; Duneier, 1999; Shapiro Anjaria, 2006); or exercising one's democratic rights as a voter (M. Banerjee, 2014). Attending to the efforts of the working poor to increase the visibility of their labour and at times, the efforts of employers to further conceal it, this thesis contributes to anthropological and sociological literature on the various scales of recognition sought by the poor in India and across the world (Agarwala, 2013; Appadurai, 2013; Auyero, 2003; M. Banerjee, 2014; P. Chatterjee, 2004; Duneier, 1999; Lazar, 2003; Lazar and Sanchez, 2019; Scheper Hughes, 1989; Shapiro Anjaria, 2006; Singh, 2015) in the advent of increasingly fragmented and flexible labour market conditions.

Given these exclusions and unequal forms of incorporation into the urban workforce, my thesis explores what resources female construction workers utilise to ameliorate hardships in the family unit. It also tracks their achievement of elusive pathways of upward mobility. Drawing upon feminist traditions of looking beyond the workplace, my thesis considers the spaces of social reproduction and attempted state interventions within these. Exploring women's usage of chit funds, SHGs and collective organisation, it attends to the differing socioeconomic strategies drawn upon by informants for various projects of building permanence. Observing interactions between local unions and NGOs with women workers, I consider the ways in which spaces of work and home, are utilised by organisations and women themselves. Examining informants' use of strategies and conceptual frameworks to establish permanence through time, I analyse the responses of institutions and civic organisations of support; including women's engagement with these bodies, or significantly for migrant women, lack thereof.

By exploring permanence as both an object of aspiration and project of endeavour, my thesis examines informants' attempts to establish it in various forms. Keeping oneself and ones' children fed, and thus alive, might be perceived as a most basic and literal form of permanence, and yet it was the most often voiced desire of informants. To fulfil this daily endeavour, women made frequent sacrifices: the liminality of labour migration; staying with an abusive husband (see also Dalmia, 2012; Fernandes, 1997; A. Shah, 1996); and consuming less food than the rest of the family (see also Dalmia, 2012). The considerable toll of manual labour on their health, also constituted such sacrifice, including calculations of necessary physical risk (see also, Prentice and Trueba, 2018).

Though I recognise the rich ethnographic tradition of labour studies in South Asia (A. Shah, 2006; Bear, 2015; Breman, 1996; 1999; 2016; Choudhury and Clisby, 2018; Choudhury, 2013; De Neve 2004; Fernandes, 1997; 1998; Joshi, 1999; 2005; Kapadia, 1999; Mollona, De Neve and Parry, 2009; Lindberg, 2001; Parry, 2014; 2009; Pattenden, 2012; Picherit, 2012; Sanchez, 2016; A. Shah, et al, 2018, amongst others), the need to make visible women's experiences in understudied segments of the informal sector (particularly those of migrant women) – in relation to men's - remains high. This is particularly pertinent given that the gendered division of work continues to prove a defining feature in labour experiences across the world (Chambers and Ansari, 2018; Kondo, 1990; Kwan Lee, 1998; Mills, 1997; Ong, 1986; Parry, 2014; S. Sen, 2007; Yoo, 2014; Zavella, 1987). At the same time, I acknowledge critiques of queer and feminist theorists that; 'The male/female dichotomy has no intrinsic biological or other essential reality; the sexed body is no more primary or 'real' – it is culturally constructed (Gatens 1983; Butler 1990; Haraway 1991)' (Ford and Lyons, 2012:4). Subsequently, my thesis attends to how bodies and abilities become gendered through value hierarchies of masculinised skill and efficacy. I will evidence how societal constructs of class, caste and gender become utilised in conventional and simultaneously, contradictory ways to devalue and control, labouring bodies.

By focusing my study on women's experiences of work, I illustrate how entrenched forms of collective and individual gender discrimination create collective impediments to labour and lifetime mobilities. Attending to the ever-present links between the city and the rural homelands of its long-term and migrant residents, this thesis builds upon Ananya Roy's proposition that 'a gendered critique shows how the agrarian and urban questions are also the woman question' (2003:28). To provide a macro perspective of the experiences of women workers, my thesis follows the social threads of construction work and real estate in Bengaluru, evidencing how property developers

partake in relational power structures of hegemonic masculinity (see Connell, 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). The resulting labour hierarchies devalue not only women, but also those deemed to be of lesser masculine worth. By attending to the primacy of classist and casteist categorisations of gender and the sexed body in defining labour experiences, I evidence how such intersectionality continues to inform women's means of navigation through life, work and the city. Exploring the multifaceted production of inequality using the analytical themes I lay out in the literature review, my thesis also engages with how these processes foster an ethic of pragmatism which is simultaneously drawn upon to negotiate them.

This introduction is separated into two chapters: a first theoretical framing, and secondly, a discussion of methodology and ethnographic setting. Foregrounding the nature of construction work, I begin with a brief analysis of the industry within India and Bengaluru, and the current status of the female workforce. The first section of the literature review addresses themes of uneven movement and permanence; elucidating how experiences and wider forms of urban mobility differ for migrant female workers, often excluded from participation in productive urban networks and organisations. By doing so, it attends to both the productive qualities of circular migration in maintaining desired futures within the village, while simultaneously locating working families within the city which in turn, ensures a continued reproduction of labour.

The second section provides a brief overview of the real estate boom in India and Bengaluru specifically. It examines how speculative practices and illicit interactions in construction generate opacity. While this opacity is productive in attracting investors and simultaneously, providing a smokescreen for the industry's myriad illicit and violent practices; the risks generated by these practices leave many companies and individuals within the industry precariously positioned. To offset such risk, precarity is devolved onto workers through violently extractive labour regimes. By exploring who is able to engage in such acts of speculation, it attends to evolving neoliberal forms of aspirational masculinity and how the resulting relations of hegemonic masculinity facilitate these regimes.

The literature review concludes by providing a contextual analysis of the status of women's labour and mobility in India. It grounds the historical legacy of enduring classist and casteist hierarchies concerning gender-appropriate spaces of work, movement and women's purity, and their implications today. Utilising feminist Marxist analysis, it examines how women attempt to counter the uneven hierarchies of industrial labour; reviewing studies of their presence within civic and collective organisation spaces, which

remain inherently gendered. It elucidates the extent to which women's presences in these spaces (or indeed, lack thereof) is dictated by both local and globally entrenched gender norms, which continue to negate their statuses as potential breadwinners. The final section of the introduction lays out the rest of the thesis and how each chapter engages with the literary and theoretical themes discussed.

*Background: Women in India's construction industry today*

For landless and land poor families in rural India: there are increasingly limited options to sustain lives and livelihoods<sup>3</sup>. Available work primarily lies within the country's vast construction sector which, despite its low-value productive output in terms of economic reward and mobility, constitutes the main alternative to agricultural work (see Jain, 2016; and *India Labour and Employment Report*, 2014). In Bengaluru, seasonal migration between agriculture and construction work is common. There are up to an estimated ten lakh workers (approximately one million) in the city at any one time (Sriramakrishnan, 2017; KCWU, 2017; Ranganath, 2019). A large portion of these are migrant workers from northerly states to Karnataka (including West Bengal and Bangladesh) although there is a significant presence of more closely located migrants from northern Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh.

While cyclical rural to urban migration has long been prevalent since colonial times across India, women's interstate labour migration to the south is comparatively rare from northern India due to differing gender norms (Srivasta and Jha, 2016, De Haan, 1999). As a result, female workforces on construction sites in cities such as Bengaluru primarily consist of southern inter and intra state migrants from Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. They have typically travelled with their families for work, often with children. That said, large numbers of women can also be found working in construction sites and roadways across the country. Construction work remains the second highest employer of women in India behind agriculture (Devi and Kiran, 2013; Madhok, 2005; Rahul, 2014). Similar to most forms of manual work, construction is dominated by scheduled caste (Dalit) and Adivasi (indigenous) workers of all genders (Institute of Human Development, 2014; Madhok, 2005; Srivasta and Jha, 2016).

Estimates have placed the proportion of women undertaking construction work to be anywhere between thirty to fifty percent (Devi and Kiran, 2013; Khanijow, 2018;

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<sup>3</sup>According to Jan Breman, land availability in India is shrinking to unsustainable amounts in rural areas. As a result, 'more than eight out of ten agrarian producers in the subcontinent have holdings of less than 2.5 acres, less than is minimally required for their household livelihood' (2016:43).

Rahul, 2014) of the estimated forty million strong work force (Bhalla, 2015; CIDC, 2012; Khanijow, 2018; Salve, 2013). As is often the case in the informal labour sector (and moreover, one that relies heavily on migrant labour), there are few reliable statistics. The fact that women are undercounted in Labour Force Participation Rate surveys (A. Deshpande and Kabeer, 2019; The Institute of Human Development, 2014:53) may explain the vast discrepancy in these figures. Although statistical evidence does point to a substantial increase in women joining the industry since the 1980s (Rahul, 2014; Srivasta and Jha, 2016). This low-visibility is not limited to the realm of quantitative data either. Though there is a growing body of literature on the exploitative conditions of construction work in India (Parry, 2014; Pattenden, 2012; Picherit, 2012), the experiences of female construction workers (particularly migrant women) remain largely underrepresented in ethnographic studies.

Industry-wide, both migrant and local women endure similar forms of discrimination. Although for migrant women, this is often exacerbated by the intersection of gender prejudices with already restrictive migrant labour employment conditions. Female workers are paid between a third to half the total wages men receive for performing the same roles (see Devi and Kiran, 2013; Bhalla, 2015; WIEGO, 2004), although this varies considerably by individual labour arrangements. They are also often the first to be laid off or underemployed, with a recent report claiming their share of employment has been decreasing since 1983 (Srivasta and Jha, 2016). Perhaps the most significant and overt form of discrimination of all is the fact that female workers are unable to ascend in the industry (Breman, 2016; Parry, 2014; V. Shah, 1996, Vaid, 1999). This also makes them further susceptible to losing their jobs to the slow but increasing mechanisation taking place (Baruah, 2010), as they are deemed superfluous in the wake of advancing technology.

Sexual harassment and sexual exploitation (particularly at the hands of employers) are common (Action Aid, 2017; Parry, 2014; Patel and Pitroda, 2016) but widely underreported. There is a palpable silence, or at times, even a culture of blame about these issues. This is related to a long history of a sexualised and classist discourse concerning working female bodies (Bear, 2007; Chatterjee, 1989; 1993; Parry, 2014; Patel, 2010; Phadke, 2013; Roy, 2003). Few women work in *gaare* or *coolie kelsa* past the age of forty upon entering it in their teens, and men (unless placed in trades which require less hard manual labour) seldom beyond fifty. Women's careers finished earlier not necessarily due to their physical decline (although this was of course, a significant



factor), but their diminished sexual attractiveness to would-be employers (Choudhury, 2013; Parry, 2014).

### **Seeking permanence in the city? Migrant mobilities**

Not all residents of the city are able to move through its spaces equally. For rural migrant women, physical and temporal mobility may be closely guarded by spouses and kin (Dalmia, 2012; Jatrana and Sangwan, 2004; A. Roy, 2003). This is further exacerbated by residence within construction sites or labour camps; heightening their invisibility from local organisations and networks. Although it is important to acknowledge how labour spaces may facilitate experimentation and various freedoms outside of the more rigid social and familial structures of the village (A. Shah, 2006; Bolt, 2011); such taskscapes simultaneously constitute sites of women's sexual exploitation (A. Deshpande, 2011; Parry, 2014; Patel and Pitroda, 2016). In construction, women may be expected to provide sexual services in return for employment from unscrupulous *maistris*<sup>4</sup>. For migrant women residing on site, their risk of sexual harassment and exploitation is heightened, and their movement may be correspondingly restricted by the men of their own groups as a result. Given the intersectional forms of inequality that inform female mobilities, this section attends to this further dimension by reviewing the challenges faced by migrant interlocutors within the urban environ.

Interstate and intrastate migrant women similarly constitute an understudied demographic, as Banerjee and Raju attest, 'For too long migration in South Asia has been framed by men's experiences [...] Such research ignores women's roles' (2009:115). This thesis thus contributes to the body of work by anthropologists of South Asia and beyond concerning why women migrate and what they seek to gain through migration. Attending to how migrant women dwell within and conceive of the city, it contributes to the growing but limited body of research concerning inter and intra state labour migration and gendered mobility amongst female construction workers (Parry, 2014; Dalmia, 2012; Jatrana and Sangwan, 2004; Suri, 2000). By providing a multi-sited analysis, I expand upon this literature to establish the ways in which the intersectionality between employment conditions, urban environment and gender norms, come to shape or inhibit pathways of potential urban mobility for migrant female workers.

Acknowledging the centrality of the Indian city in discourses of futurity and upward socioeconomic mobility (Dittrich, 2007; Gopalan, 2010; Khilnani, 1997; Krishna 2013; A. Roy, 2003), this thesis challenges current Lewisian-style narratives that link

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<sup>4</sup> Labour contractors

India's urbanisation with equalising economic prosperity (Alliance Experts; Consultancy UK, 2017; Kaka et al, 2016). Indeed, a growing number of critical voices are questioning the growth and inclusivity of Indian cities (Bhunia, 2017; Jain, 2016; Sahoo, 2016), noting an under-publicised return to rural occupations (See Bhattacharya, 2016; and Desai, Dubey, Joshi et al, 2005). Such accounts significantly challenge tropes of urbanisation-as-progress, in which vast segments of the rural populace flock to the cities, (see for instance, Epstein, 1969; Gluckman, 1961; Mitchell, 1969; Randolph and Gandhi, 2019). Moreover, they dispel Marxist predictions concerning the projected pathway from field to factory (Mollona, De Neve, and Parry, 2009; Pun and Huilin, 2010), as a growing portion of rural populations undertaking urban labour migration inhabit a permanently liminal status (Breman, 1996; 2016; Smith and Pun 2006; Solinger, 1999).

Although Arjun de Haan argues that cyclical rural to urban migration in India is a historically established process and should be viewed as such (1999), rather than the 'emotional appeal of the thesis of distress migration' (Kundu and Saraswati 2012:226); there is little ambiguity concerning the conditions experienced by both the local and transient urban poor in the cities of Delhi, Bengaluru, Mumbai, and Kolkata (Appadurai, 2013; Breman, 2016; Krishna, 2013; 2017; A. Roy, 2003). As Anirudh Krishna observes; 'The promise of steady progress by internal migrants and people in slums has not been fulfilled. The biggest cities have become the sites of the greatest inequality' (2017:79). Attending to the city as a site of precarity (Appadurai, 2013; Boo, 2012; Das and Randeria, 2015; Desai and Modyal, 2012), I consider how migrant families attempt to counter this, pursuing 'a range of strategies that criss-crossed the rural-urban divide in a variety of ways' (Ferguson, 1999:65). Such strategies allowed families to harness ostensibly precarious city livelihoods in construction towards projects that sought to establish permanence within this unstable scenario.

Migrant workers are aware of the sacrifices that must be made to fulfil such life-sustaining projects, including the frequent if not total denial of education to any accompanying children; the sacrifice of their health (and safety); and for women in particular – the heightened risk of sexual harassment, assault and exploitation. While migrants notably lack voice in urban areas, a number of studies suggest that both their financial and political status may be considerably boosted at home due to the extra capital they are able to accrue (Pattenden, 2012; Picherit, 2012; Srivastava and Sutradhan, 2016). In the case of my own research findings, much of women's mobility in the city came to rest on their employment conditions and accommodation arrangements, as this thesis elucidates.

My thesis attends to the challenges faced by migrant women in trying to raise children in unwelcoming and often dangerous environments. Though women workers frequently expressed their desire for children's futures outside of the construction industry (see also, Jagori, 2004; V. Shah, 1996), for migrant workers especially, this was often an unattainable aspiration. Regulations requiring crèches and educational facilities for construction workers' children are inadequate, as well as at times, producing detrimental results<sup>5</sup>. Parents are thus frequently left with few options but to let their children roam the site. Alternatively, older (typically female) children are often caregivers to their younger siblings, some assisting their mothers with work, thus repeating the cycle of labour.

As Ngai Pun and Lu Huilin argue, visions of 'home' for those that feel far away from it, may also be utilised by workers to endure the precarity and hostility often encountered by migrant workers in urban environments (2010; and see also Sahoo, 2016; Roy, 2003 L. Zhang, 2001). By considering the location of migrant aspirations and envisioned futures, this thesis also engages with Bunnell, Gillen and Ho's work concerning migrants' imagined desires of 'elsewhens' (2017). Such analysis invokes questions about the spatial, temporal and gendered locations of aspirational forms of permanence, including 'home'; and how these are conceived of by migrant families in their host cities.

Attending to the ongoing efforts of collective migrant endeavours to sustain lives and rural livelihoods, my thesis considers the ramifications for families ostensibly destined to lives of enduring impermanence. As Pun and Huilin have observed in the cases of second-generation migrant workers who, unable to build a future either in the city or their villages, embarked on a journey of collective organisation (2010); liminality may nevertheless prove productive. However, to achieve familial forms of permanence, migrant workers must routinely subject themselves to localised regimes of labour exploitation. Acknowledging de Haan's assertion concerning 'arguments that the rural link, a casualised labour force, or gendered divisions of labour, allow or enable employers to keep wages low and suit other requirements, do not prove that these were actually the outcome of managers' actions' (1999:275); I argue that the outcome of such actions remain central to migrant experiences – and are in fact, the expressed intention of some labour managers. Docile, disciplinable workforces are both an industry standard

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<sup>5</sup> The Construction and Other Building Workers Act of 2006 stipulated that sites employing over fifty women must provide crèches. However, this is rarely enforced and has also further contributed to the underemployment of women in the industry.

and requisite to the construction process itself, given the otherwise uncontrollable and unpredictable nature of an industry blighted by frequent interruptions in capital and material flows.

This emergent precarity of construction is thus devolved onto workers – particularly migrant workers – who are the preference of local companies, since they are conceived of as more efficient, cost-saving, and ultimately, more exploitable (Breman, 1996; 1999; 2016; Parry, 2012; A. Shah, et al., 2018). While such measures have fuelled the exponential growth of India's real estate industry, they have also cemented the status of construction work as one of the most dangerous and simultaneously lowest productive occupations (Ceresna-Chaturvedi and Kumar, 2015; Institute of Human Development, 2014; Olazábal, 2019). Acknowledging the enduring and evolving relations of this exploitation, my thesis considers how developers' desires to maintain substantial profit margins vis-à-vis the neoliberal state's pursuit of economic growth has created an ostensible real estate boom, but one which is not necessarily rooted in reality but built upon a cheap and exploitable labourforce. The next section subsequently analyses how interlinking economies of speculation and hegemonic masculinity within real estate facilitate and perpetuate myriad aspects of violence against construction workers.

### **Speculation, risk, masculinity**

Visions of unabated financial growth and accompanying market-driven solutions to poverty have become increasingly incorporated into global models of development (Huang, 2014; James, 2014; Lazar 2003; Tsing, 2005). Attending to the obfuscating nature of discourse relating to financial growth, this thesis considers the workers left behind by what Krishna drily describes as the 'gravy train of globalization' (Krishna, 2017:3). Whilst there has certainly been change, the promised 'trickle-down effect' (A. Gupta, 2012; Krishna, 2017; Tsing, 2005; Vera-Sanso, 2012), is yet to reach the bulk of India's poor following economic liberalisation in the early nineties.

Such changes instead can be witnessed via increasing capital flows in and out of Indian cities including Bengaluru; where global investment and rapid urban expansion have heightened demand for business infrastructure and rapid construction. The ostensible surge of India's real estate market in the last two decades has created new domestic and international investment opportunities. Recent reports suggest the domestic construction sector is on course to be the third-largest in the world in less than a decade, with a projected value of 850 billion to one trillion US dollars and total employment of 52 million people by 2028 (see KPMG, 2018; Leax Foundation, 2019; Pillai and

Kumbalath, 2019). However, counter-narratives attesting to falling employment rates and diminishing profits post government policies of demonetisation and GST (Goods and Services Tax) (Dhillon, 2019; M.C. Mishra, 2019; Nighoskar, 2019; Ranganath, 2019; Viyajakumar, 2019), argue otherwise. The tensions in discourse highlight not only the efficacy of such forms of speculation in concealing underlying realities of growth; but also indicate a collective unwillingness to recall memories of the subprime mortgage crisis.

Amidst this backdrop of conflicting narratives concerning the city's growth, my thesis explores the various dynamics underlying it, and how persistently vertical structures of production inhibit any potential trickle down of wealth to the working poor. By examining the hegemony of masculine forms of capital drawn upon by real estate developers as they attempt to convert land into money; it elucidates how speculative practices produce conditions of worker exploitation and precarity rather than sustainable or democratic forms of growth. Like their investors, Bengaluru's real estate developers and builders are also looking for fast profits with low risks.

The rezoning of areas across the city into SEZs is part of a wider growing vision of technocratic economic development across India (Bear, 2015; Cross, 2014; Dittrich, 2007; Gopalan, 2010; Levien, 2012; De Neve and Donner, 2015; Upadhyaya, 2017). This vision also informs central government policy, witnessed in the 2005 establishment of the SEZ (Special Economic Zones) Act<sup>6</sup>, the later 2014 amendment of the Land Acquisition Act<sup>7</sup>, and more recent initiatives to attract foreign investment. As the real estate market in India presents both domestic and foreign investment opportunities, agricultural landowners are increasingly under pressure (or at times, literally forced) to sell their land, part of a wider global phenomenon described as 'accumulation by dispossession' (Harvey, 2005).

While there has been much media portrayal of wealthy farmers in areas such as the NCR (National Capital Region) squandering newly found riches on highly visible forms of consumption including gold and SUVs (Levien, 2012; Cross, 2014), many of those forced off their land are not recompensed at the value of its new status as a developable commodity – rather its defunct value as agricultural land. Former farmers

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<sup>6</sup> The Act, in a bid to encourage foreign investment and take the lead from China, converted the country's existing EPZs (Export Processing Zones) into SEZs. Since the Act, numerous others have passed, including the 2006 SEZ Rules Act, and the creation of many more designated SEZs across India.

<sup>7</sup> The Act was established to counter difficulties in purchasing land. In what followed, huge swathes of 'derelict' urban and agricultural peri-urban land became earmarked for SEZs and India's growing service industry.

(including those renting land or using common lands) once able to sustain a livelihood through agriculture are largely excluded from many of the jobs created by the development of the land (Levien, 2012). Indeed, as Erich Harms highlights concerning housing evictions in Vietnam; ‘the brute exercise of power and influence to strip people of their land while compensating them at rates well below the anticipated profits is founded on planning for the future’ (Harms, 2013:365). By considering how informants conceive of and plan for the future, this thesis attends to the undemocratic nature of temporality (Auyero, 2003; Harms, 2013; Ozolina-Fitzgerald, 2016; Mullainathan and Shafir, 2013) experienced by workers vis-à-vis property developers, who through their own speculative acts of future profit anticipation, simultaneously deny the ability of many to conceive of a future for themselves and their families.

In Bengaluru, the demand for office space has made it the leading rental provider in India with 97.8 million square feet of eligible REIT (Real Estate Investment Trust<sup>8</sup>) assets valued at a projected 10.7 billion US dollars. (See Urs, 2019). Not only has mass construction visibly changed the layout and infrastructure of the city, but as Michael Goldman posits, ‘In Bangalore, this is changing the business of, and people’s relations with, government, in which a *speculative government* has become the new political rationality, and their primary interaction with government agents is over land’ (2011:232). It is thus upon real estate that ‘hopes for a wealthy new Bengaluru rested (Goldman, 2011 and Gopalan, 2010). Subsequently, not only individual actors, but the state too, is literally banking on a building boom largely yet to emerge.

For Goldman, state ambitions for the new city gained tangibility and credibility in the form of plans – which may never be fully realised (2011) or, as Shubhra Gururani has illustrated in the case of Gurgaon (2013) – are highly flexible according to the agendas of various players. In the neoliberal era of city planning and maintenance, real estate in primary cities such as Bengaluru becomes not only an indicator of future prosperity, but as Goldman posits, is perceived as the ‘‘secure foundation’ on which these remarkably speculative world-city projects are being built’ (2011:48). In this way, as Caitlin Zaloom has noted in respect to the quotidian practice of risk-taking on the trading floor, ‘Aggressive risk taking is established and sustained by routinization and bureaucracy’ (2004:365). As Deborah James has observed concerning the global recession of 2008; ‘high finance had become not only all-powerful but also unpredictable and uncontrollable. Market forces, previously kept in some sort of check, were driven by a

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<sup>8</sup> Real Estate Investment Trusts were established in the US in the 1960s, allowing individual investors to buy shares in commercial real estate portfolios.

need for continual expansion and reinvestment that moved beyond the realm of logic' (2014:234). There is no indication post-recession however, that either of these qualities have been extinguished.

The state of Karnataka is counting on investment. With a projected 700,000 jobs to be generated over 147 projects as a result of the 'Invest Karnataka' 2016 event, it has been described as a place 'where the future is made' (BS Reporter, 2016). As Llerena Guiu Searle notes, such language is also prevalent in respect to real estate, and yet also has an obfuscating effect; 'The constant harping on about the future of the Indian consumer market serves many purposes. It diverts attention away from India's current poverty and rhetorically converts the poor into future consumers' (2016:101). Such diversions, thus prove productive for some. Indeed, for the third year running, Karnataka has been named the most successful state in India for attracting investment (TNM Staff, 2018).

What is the difference between the rhetoric and realities produced from these efforts? As Goldman asks concerning IT sector investment in Bengaluru; 'Are they, as the World Bank and PricewaterhouseCoopers hope, providing exceptional leadership, innovation, and the telematicization of governance – the world-*classing* of the cities of India [...]? Will they be here tomorrow, when the projects are complete, and the bills come due?' (2011:237). In Bengaluru's real estate industry, projects often remain incomplete or never started – as illustrated by the ongoing case against Mantri property developers, which reportedly received advances totalling over five hundred and thirty crores (around £4,683,833 at the time of writing) between 2007-8 for a large real estate project in the city (Khan, 2017). A decade later, construction is yet to begin, and the funds remain unreturned. The promised riches of the state's future are yet to fully materialise in other ways, too. Between 2013 and 2017, less than ten percent of proposed investments had been realised in Karnataka (Express News Service, 2018). Such failures may be dismissed by officials, as illustrated by the president of the Federation of Karnataka Chamber of Commerce and Industry, who described the non-materialisation of investment as an "absolutely normal" occurrence accompanying the rising popularity in investors' meets (Express News Service, 2018).

As Laura Bear elucidates in her examination of how speculation is driven by technologies of imagination; 'public-private partnerships are forged by exemplary men or seers deploying divinatory action. The fortunes of business, trade, and the livelihoods of informalised workers rest on these practices, which generate short-term unstable forms of capital accumulation' (2015:1). How do such accumulative practices operate within an

industry notoriously murky (Y. Gupta, 2015; PWC, 2014; Searle 2016; Taneja, 2016) as construction? As my thesis elucidates, it is the murkiness of this reputation which enables the actions of state actors, real estate developers and investors to generate productive forms of opacity. In the real estate world of Bengaluru, it was the perceived prowess of a seemingly elect few company owners that were able to navigate the muddy waters of the market, although as I soon discovered, such divinations yielded varying results.

Exploring these practices, this thesis expands and creates further dialogue between the works of Appadurai (2013); Bear (2011; 2015a; 2015b); Levien (2012); Searle (2014; 2016); and Zaloom (2004). It analyses practices of real estate speculation, questioning informants' varying and often contradictory market predictions that bear little difference to what both Appadurai (2013) and Bear (2015b) have referred to as practices of 'divination'. Such practices by their very nature largely fail to accommodate the inherent instability of the real estate industry, which I elucidate by examining failed speculation and interruptions in the building process, and how interlocutors reacted to these.

Thomas Blom Hansen and Oskar Verkaaik's interpretation of 'urban charisma' (2009) further provides a productive analytical lens with which to consider opaque and frequently unstable forms of urban investment. Like interlinking discourses of urban growth and futurity, the real estate industry conceals more than it reveals – despite its highly visible presence across the cityscape. The opacity produced by such discourse is however, generative – as confirmed by the industry's status as a known vehicle for illicit investment (see Y. Gupta, 2015; Searle 2016; Taneja, 2016). As Blom Hansen and Verkaaik confirm, 'Instability and unpredictability are the heart of urban charisma' (2009:22). However, as also reflected in the consistently fluctuating fortunes of those I knew in real estate, urban charisma 'is a quality which cannot be permanently owned by anyone, but is only made visible through performance, action and exchange' (2009:22). In this way, even ostensibly powerful local figures and companies fell prey to competing actors in the land and property market.

Such actors may not always exclusively inhabit the informal worlds Blom Hansen and Verkaaik describe. State officials also engage in speculative and extra-legal practices of income generation alongside their state functions (Bear, 2011; 2015a; 2015b; Gururani, 2013). The construction industry habitually blurs boundaries between formal and informal – utilising grey areas between distinctions of official/unofficial, planned/unplanned, complete/incomplete, and legal/illegal. The outcomes of such manoeuvres were relayed in informants' stories of bribes, failed projects, cover ups, deals



gone awry, and local politicking. The transformation of local land into real estate is thus not dissimilar to Blom Hansen and Verkaaik's description of urban charisma; involving dynamic webs of actors and flows of money in a lengthy series of exchanges with lawyers, banks, planning officials, relatives and assorted middlemen, to name but a few.

Real estate investment via derivatives trading has financialised the homes of not only the middle classes, but also working-class aspirant home owners, too (Appadurai, 2013; D. James, 2014; Palomera 2014). As James observes, this 'ultimately spiralled out of control (Williams 2004), especially when those unable to afford repayment were included in the borrower client base and when the mortgage bonds in question were "securitized," (Lanchester 2010; Tett 2010)' (2014:234). India is currently moving towards the financialisation of urban housing, with the inclusion of affordable housing as infrastructure in the 2018 Union Budget, further opening up its real estate sector to foreign investment. There are warnings from industry insiders that such moves will increase the numbers of empty homes in India's cities (Sinha, 2018), something which many, including Bengaluru, already suffer from (Matthew, 2016; Urs, 2018). There are further fears still, they will trigger a subprime mortgage crisis (Azad, 2017; Iyer, 2018; Mukherjee, 2018). Should such an event occur, the poor again will suffer, as James notes, 'The fact that the loans were also, in a more conventional way, "secured" by being tied to landed property was of little use in the frenzy of repossession that ensued' (2014:ibid).

The practice of risk-taking across the finance sector belongs, as Kate Maclean asserts, to 'a broader cultural context for the masculine construction of risk, and in particular financial risk' (2016:433). Indeed, Maclean claims that 'The defining characteristic of the 2008 financial crisis has been identified as the maverick risk taking, and hypermasculine, culture of the financial industry' (2016:ibid). Such forms of hypermasculinity subordinate others deemed inferior along the lines of gender, race and class (Hartmann, 1979), akin to R.W Connell and James Messerschmidt's reworked concept of 'hegemonic masculinity' (2005). Previously described as 'The maintenance of practices that institutionalize men's dominance over women... constructed in relation to women and to subordinate masculinities' (Connell, 1987:185-6), the concept in its revisited incarnation is more dynamic, attending to how such relations may exist (or be rejected) across local, global, and non-static gendered contexts as a non-exclusively male practice (2005). Indeed, there were (albeit, rare) occasions when female informants would draw upon forms of hegemonic masculinity, albeit with varying results, as my thesis also attends to.

As heterodox researchers have illustrated, scenarios of ostensibly rapid change (Blom Hansen, 1996; Clare, 2001; Dasgupta and Gokulsing, 2013; P. Mishra, 2018; Showalter, 1990), including the process of colonisation (P. Chatterjee, 1989; Dasgupta and Gokulsing, 2013; Massart, 2013 P. Mishra, 2018) may be perceived as losses of power and failures in control that must be reasserted. Regardless of motive, the implications of both failed, threatened and dominant masculinities, may come to produce violent outcomes to the self (Parry, 2012) or others (De Neve, 2004; Kimmel, 2018; P. Mishra, 2018). This was certainly the case for informants coming from households where alcoholism and domestic violence were routine, often cyclical, spanning generations. My thesis engages with and expands upon the growing focus in both scholarly and media attention across the world on the violence of masculinity (Dasgupta and Gokulsing, 2013; Kimmel, 2018; P. Mishra, 2018). In doing so, it asks, what are the ways in which masculinity becomes embedded within speculative forms of capitalism and risk-taking? And in turn, what does speculative capitalism do to masculinities?

While construction work is itself a high-risk and ostensibly masculinised undertaking, it was primarily the managers and company owners that harnessed hegemonic masculinity over both female and male workers, meting out various forms of physical and financial punishment on site, as I discuss in chapter six. As Gokulsing and Dasgupta postulate, 'Masculinity can therefore be seen as both hegemonic and marginalized' (2013:7). Workers sharing traditionally low-value 'unskilled' roles in particular, were not only subject to routines of control and coercion but were also saddled with the further risks created by cutting costs and rushing through projects. This constituted an array of practices undertaken by property developers hoping to counter the precarity of fluctuating market forces and any potential obstructions, whether human, monetary or material. Financial risk can be eased and cash flows freed up by employing various strategies at the cost of building quality; health and safety; and sometimes, the lives of workers themselves. In this way, construction workers remain excluded from the capital gains of real estate, simultaneously shouldering the violence of both industry risk-taking and relations of hegemonic masculinity which are, I conclude, part and parcel of industry practice.

### **Navigating the city and the workplace: relational forms of women's mobility**

By exploring these aspects of the construction industry in India and how they shape workers' familial mobilities over time and space, my thesis expands upon existing literature on migrant and female (construction) workers (Choudhury, 2013; Choudhury

and Clisby, 2018; R. Desai, et.al 2014; Eisenberg, 1998; Jatrana and Sangwan, Parry, 2014; Ramakrishnan and Ramakrishnan, 1988; V. Shah, 1996; Suri, 2000). This intervention looks within but also beyond labour relations in the work of social reproduction; attending to broader processes of speculation and hegemonic masculinities, and female perspectives on making permanent lives in the city. This section first provides the historical grounding for my central research question concerning women's workplace and relational forms of mobility, foregrounding the intersectionality of labour relations vis-à-vis class, gender, and caste. It considers the legacy of 'the woman's question'<sup>9</sup> in India today and the ways in which as Jonathan Parry elucidates, 'class and gender intersect and reciprocally reinforce each other' (2014:1249) vis-à-vis labour. This is pertinent not only to my exploration of informants' movements within the city and the worksite, but also to wider inquiries into female labour mobility.

Building on this analysis and the first section review of migrant mobilities, the second half of the section explores how this legacy affects the relations of production and social reproduction. It elucidates how women's enduring association with the domestic sphere discounts perceptions of them as workers (see also Chambers and Ansari, 2018; Joshi, 2005; Kwan Lee, 1998), while they simultaneously remain subject to regimes of employer surveillance in the ambiguous spaces of worksite accommodation. By evaluating the resources and strategies women utilise in the urban milieu to counter precarity and establish permanence, it draws on feminist traditions by scrutinising the spaces of social reproduction. In doing so, it acknowledges how working class women in South Asia are further subject to NGO projects of empowerment and modernity, while simultaneously being judged by often unattainable standards of womanhood.

#### *The working class woman's question: historical legacy and the present scenario*

While the asymmetry of gendered labour is hardly unique to construction work, it remains worldwide, one of the industries where gender discrimination remains the most overt. Aside from the physical risks of the work itself, construction sites are also the hub of dangerous rumours for women workers. Even unsubstantiated rumours may have potentially violent outcomes for those involved as Parry reports (2014) and as my own data reveals, ranging from domestic violence to murder. How might forms of labour such as construction continue to reinforce and draw on existing class, caste and gender

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<sup>9</sup> 'The Woman's question' emerged during the independence movement as a counter to the British Raj over appropriate types of womanhood for an independent Indian state.

hierarchies? And what recourses are available to women working construction to contest these?

In India and across the world, women undertaking manual labour have historically been subject to classist codifications (Eisenberg, 1998; Humphries, 1981; Mollona, De Neve and Parry, 2009; R. Patel, 2010) and the various forms of violence that perceived transgressions of these may produce. As Reena Patel confirms, ‘the control of women’s bodies as a means of demonstrating social status is a pervasive practice that cuts through various cultures and a range of class strata’ (2010:51). Bear also notes this phenomenon with historical context to the Indian railway system (2007), arguing such spaces had the propensity to mark ‘Indian women with signs of respectability or immorality depending on which ticket they could afford’ (46). Women’s bodies in public spaces thus have been used and continue to be used, to reinforce caste and class boundaries (see also M. Banerjee and Miller, 2008). The continuation of this practice can be observed by the quotidian forms of violence committed against working class and typically Dalit and Adivasi women (Parry, 2014; Phadke, 2013a; A. Roy, 2003).

While the place of middle and upper caste women in maintaining such hierarchies has been widely acknowledged (Fernandes, 1997; Patel, 2010; Van Hollen, 2003), it should also be noted that working class women’s notions of respectability are also entangled within patriarchal hegemonies (Cassidy, 2013; Fernandes, 1997). This became apparent during my own fieldwork, concerning the widespread silence and at times, instances of blame, that accompanied attempted discussions of sexual harassment in the construction industry. Low (actively declining) female workforce participation within India<sup>10</sup> does little to dispel the continued significance of women’s bodies in boundary-marking and status-elevating exercises; highlighting the enduring legacy of the idealised and essentialist imagery of the nationalist movement (Patel, 2010; Bear, 2007; P. Chatterjee, 1993; 1989) in response to ‘the woman’s question’. Indeed, Veena Das poignantly illustrates the violent and horrific consequences of such practices in her various works concerning partition and its aftermath for women, in which, ‘women became signs’ (1995). To this day, women who do not, or by virtue of their socioeconomic status cannot, conform to such imagery, may become legitimised as targets (P. Chatterjee, 1989; Pande, 2008; Vijaisri, 2004).

The ongoing efforts of women’s movements in India which continue to contest this discourse and its influence should by no means be discounted; and have again

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<sup>10</sup> Female labour force participation stands between 24% (World Bank, 2019) to 26% (A. Deshpande and Kabeer, 2019; *The Hindu*, 2019; *The Economist*, 2018) by recent estimates.

renewed with increasing vigour following India's own pivotal '#MeToo' moment. However, as Srila Roy elucidates, such movements have historically excluded a significant portion of women by nature of socioeconomic status; 'While activists in the IWM [Indian women's movement] had always been middle class, the anti-colonial and socialist roots of the movement meant that class was privileged over all other social variables' (2018). Indeed, as Shilpa Phadke attests, 'The question of making streets safer for women is not an easy one, because the discourse of safety is not an inclusive one' (2013b:50). The inequality of this discourse is made apparent by very different outcomes concerning coverage of sexual assault, with 'wide reportage of any sexual assault that involves lower class men attacking middle class women [but] when lower class, Dalit or tribal women are sexually assaulted the media barely covers these attacks' (Phadke, 2013b:ibid). Although the failings and discrimination of the state towards this demographic of women is documented (Kelkar, 1992; Pande, 2008; Phadke, 2013b), contemporary women's activism including 'Take back the night' (2009 and 2013), 'the Pink Chaddi Campaign'<sup>11</sup> and the wider #MeToo movement across India; stand accused of omitting the interests and membership of lower caste Dalit, and Adivasi women (S. Roy, 2018). There is however, a growing establishment of Dalit women's groups (see Masoodi, 2018) although this simultaneously highlights the lack of unification across class and caste.

For working women across the city of Bengaluru, their physical or temporal movement may be subject to surveillance and restrictions. Indeed, the state of Karnataka, of which Bengaluru is the capital, only allowed women across all sectors to work night shifts as of December 2016. Even so, a joint legislature committee was recently criticised for renewed recommendations to IT and bio-technology companies to exclude women from night shifts, citing reasons of safety and family life (see Kumaraswamy, 2017; Scroll Staff, 2017; Thomas, 2017). Such rhetoric illustrates a concern for middle class women, who as Reena Patel states; 'are viewed as worthy of protection', 'whereas working class women are not' (2012:82), since the informal sector remains largely excluded from these debates and regulations<sup>12</sup>. The lack of concern about labour class women within wider

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<sup>11</sup> The Pink Chaddi movement, a 'Consortium of Pub-Going, Loose and Forward Women' (<http://thepinkchaddicampaign.blogspot.co.uk/>) urged supporters to send pink underwear to the head of the Shri Ram Sena, a Hindutva organisation in Bangalore, to deter them from targeting Valentines Day.

<sup>12</sup> Many of the fifteen recommendations ordered by the state to be adhered to by companies with female employees working nights are inevitably, designed with BPOs and IT companies in mind. While state laws require BPOs in Bangalore to provide safe transportation home to women workers after 8pm for instance, informal sector workers are invariably excluded from such safety concerns.

public discourse raises significant questions regarding access to democracies of space (and time) and the political capital available to them within the urban milieu, which constitutes a central form of inquiry within this thesis.

Given this scenario, in cases of increased mobility for families, women may drop out of employment altogether (Kapsos et al, 2014; Mollona, De Neve and Parry, 2009; Srivastava and Srivastava, 2010). Indeed, some scholars have highlighted processes of ‘Sanskritisation’ in the cases of upwardly mobile families, through which women become full time housewives, emulating upper class and upper caste families (A. Deshpande and Kabeer, 2019; Kingdon and Unni, 2001; Still, 2011). While Clarinda Still posits that this emulation of middle-class practices may be empowering (2011), for other scholars of women’s labour in India, this has proven the opposite, particularly with the introduction of upper caste praxis including dowry (A. Deshpande, 2011; Kapadia, 1995).

Women often do not recognise many forms of their own labour including subsistence work and agriculture that take place in and around the home as employment (A. Deshpande and Kabeer, 2019). That many women work within the informal sector which remains inaccurately and underrepresented in datasets further conceals the extent of their labour (E. Chatterjee, Desai and Vanneman, 2018; A. Deshpande and Kabeer, 2019; Institute for Human Development, 2014). Subsequently, Ashwini Deshpande and Naila Kabeer argue that a more inclusive methodology of measurement must first be developed to establish a comprehensive overview of women’s work participation in India (2019).

What researchers do corroborate however, is that women at the top and bottom tiers of the education spectrum constitute the highest employed proportion of their gender (E. Chatterjee, et al, 2018; U. Chatterjee, et al, 2015; A. Deshpande and Kabeer, 2019; Kingdon and Unni, 2001). This demographic remains bifurcated by caste as Ashwini Deshpande attests, Dalit women; ‘endure a combination [...] of poverty and gender discrimination that keeps them illiterate, low paid, malnourished, and unhealthy—all linked in an iniquitous cycle’ (2011:57). Moreover, women at the bottom of the education spectrum are presently experiencing the highest rate of declining employment within this group in terms of cumulative days (U. Chatterjee, 2015; Desai, 2017; Desai et al, 2018; A. Deshpande and Kabeer, 2019); as the agricultural sector shrinks and post economic liberalisation, companies shed female employees to avoid higher tariff rates (A. Gupta, 2015). At the same time, the emergence of new sector jobs with economic liberalisation has seen an increased entrance of men (A. Deshpande and Kabeer, 2019), while casual

forms of daily wage labour have seen an upsurge in women (A. Deshpande and Kabeer, 2019; A. Roy, 2003; ILO, 2018).

Acknowledging the corpus of literature concerning feminised informal livelihoods (Mills, 1997; Neetha, 2002; Ong, 1988; A. A. Roy, 2003; Yanagisako, 2012; 2002), my thesis attends to the implications of a global labour market discourse shaped by a masculinity that is associated with productive and accumulative potency and technical prowess (Bear, 2013; Cassidy, 2013; Freeman, K. Ho, 2009; Ong, 1988; Ortner 1972; A. Roy, 2003; Salzinger, 2009; Zaloom, 2012; 2004). It explores the ways in which this masculinity comes into being through various forms of speech and praxis. These linguistic and social practices obfuscate and reproduce gendered labour disparities and a devaluing of female manual labour. Subsequently, my thesis also considers workers' acknowledgments of their positions within such hierarchies, and their attempts to organise against these power relations.

The modest body of research on female construction workers within South Asia (Choudhury, 2013; Choudhury and Clisby, 2018; Dalmia, 2002; R. Desai, et al., 2014; Jatrana and Sangwan, 2004; Madhok, 2005; Parry, 2014; Ramakrishnan and Ramakrishnan, 1988; V. Shah, 1996; Suri, 2000; Vaid, 1999) has not fully addressed the multiple aspects of gendered inequalities within the industry, and the ways in which they perpetuate violence against both male and female workers. Moreover, it has primarily limited itself to questions of labour relations on the worksite. Drawing on feminist traditions of analysis of the global factory and migration (Kwan Lee, 1998; Mills, 1997; Pun and Smith, 2007; Ong, 1988; Zavella, 1987), I add a further dimension to this analysis, moving beyond the workplace and questioning its conceptual separation. By attending to the spaces of social reproduction, I also explore how (neoliberal) welfare affects them. It is by bringing together fully these aspects of speculative business, work, social reproduction and welfare that enables my thesis to answer questions about aspiration and politics more fully.

### *Gendered spaces of production and reproduction*

Social science research focusing on the relationship between manual labour and masculinity tends to treat the decline of industrial workforces as axiomatic, citing Euro and US-centric examples of the decay of the industrial workforce alongside a fixed form of (often white) 'working class masculinity' (Connell, 1987; Monaghan, 2003; Nixon, 2009). However, in many global contexts including South and Southeast Asia, manual labour is by no means dwindling – or male dominated – and is thus in further need of

contemporary study beyond these scenarios. Moreover, few ethnographic studies have attended to women's experiences of the interchangeable setting of work and accommodation within the construction industry. As I will discuss, such sites typically provide further means for control and the reproduction of labour. However, in their analysis of labour dormitories in China; Chris Smith and Ngai Pun (2006) illustrate how employers' deliberate blurring of the boundaries between work and 'home' also provides a fruitful analytical site from which to consider modes of worker organisation, as well as oppression.

The conceptual binary between public and domestic space (Engels, 1884) developed through Marxist theory retains its value as an analytical lens with which to consider and critique women's waged (and unwaged) labour today. It has invariably received due scrutiny over the years by feminist anthropologists (see Federici, 2018; Hartmann, 1979; Humphries, 1981; Sacks, 1973) critical of its failure to fully recognise women's unpaid roles in social reproduction. This unrecognised form of labour sustains capitalism while simultaneously justifying lower wages and other forms of discrimination against women in workplaces.

The construction industry in India is an atypical and often contradictory setting with which to consider the gender dynamics of manual labour. Much like the betting industry in the UK as Rebecca Cassidy elucidates (2013), construction provides employment to vast swathes of women, but in no way is it considered an appropriate space for them by employers. In fact, as my thesis illustrates, such views may adversely impact their employment within the industry. Like women's factory work in the global south, where essentialist doctrines of 'delicate hands and docile workers' circulate repeatedly (Mollona, De Neve and Parry, 2009; Ong, 1988; Yoo, 2014); construction harnesses and exploits traditional gender roles. However, women's considerable presence within such industrialised settings simultaneously subverts them.

Acknowledging that 'Male and female workers may not, of course, think about the home/work division [...] in quite the same way' (Mollona, De Neve, and Parry, 2009:190), I posit that while construction sites may appear the opposite, they constitute an extension of the domestic sphere, subsequently concealing the value of women's work and worth. Contra Marxist theory that the proletarianization of women would end their subordination and invisibility in the private sphere of production, the entry of women into construction entails their continued subordination to men, as an array of social science studies of factory work similarly highlight (Cross, 2014; Chambers and Ansari, 2018; Joshi, 2005; Kapadia, 1999; Kwan Lee, 1998; Ong, 1988; Yoo, 2014; Zavella, 1987).



Unlike many of these settings however, in construction, such forms of subjugation are not only imbued in everyday encounters with male employers and supervisors, but also via sexually exploitative *maistris* or the indirect payment of wages to spouses, further concealing recognition of women as independent workers (see also, Kapadia, 1999).

Attending to the multifaceted spatial aspects of construction sites, my thesis focuses on practices of home and boundary making between the public and private sphere on construction worksites and labour accommodation. While female construction workers are obliged to undertake household duties outside of wage work for their husbands and families (Jatrana and Sangwan 2004; Ramakrishnan and Ramakrishnan, 1988), which as Madhok states 'are rarely shared' (2005:20), Fernandes warns against the formation of 'false essentialisms [...] in relation to the nature of Indian male workers' (1997:131). Indeed, as became apparent during fieldwork, contra gender norms, men and boys do prepare meals and perform domestic chores, and women may both aspire to and succeed in becoming named landholders. As Roy, citing Henrietta Moore confirms; 'Essentialist ideas of gender as stable roles and ideologies accordingly give way to "the multiple and contradictory positionings and subjectivities" that constitute gendered hierarchies' (Moore, 1994:55 in A. Roy 2003:19). Acknowledging these subjectivities, I expose the paradoxical nature of masculine hierarchy within the construction industry.

Nationalist and regionalist movements in India have historically incorporated images of motherhood (Donner, 2008; McDermott, 2011; Uberoi, 2006; Ramaswamy, 1999), which retain strong religiopolitical currency, imbuing interactions between middle class female NGO workers (Caplan, 1985). Indeed, female construction workers may be judged by civil society concerning both their abilities as mothers, or experience state intervention to restrict the number of children they have. This became swiftly apparent in my initial surveys of female construction workers during fieldwork. Many respondents revealed they had been encouraged and subsidised (although this was not always honoured) by the state to have sterilisations. This procedure was undertaken without full knowledge of its consequences and had often led to health problems. As Bhatt et.al (2010) and Hancock (2001) postulate, attempts to incorporate working class women into middle class projects of modernity have roots in the nationalist and home science movements of the early to mid-twentieth century. As I explore by observing women's interactions with civil society actors, these may be inculcated in a number of ways (with varying results), including women's Self-Help Groups (SHGs).

### *Seeking redress and recognition*

If citizenship is increasingly modelled on market criteria (Ong, 2006), then the ways in which ‘exceptions to neoliberalism can both preserve welfare benefits for citizens and exclude noncitizens’ (2006:4), requires further analysis concerning who is deemed worthy of welfare benefits, who is excluded, and why. While migrant labourers frequently constitute an excluded category from state welfare (Ong 2006:ibid; Sahoo, 2016; L. Zhang, 2001), all workers, regardless of their origins, remained subject to valuations of the working poor in the civic spaces of Bengaluru. Although the state has taken some steps to redress the wage gap and shortfalls of care that are part and parcel of informal livelihoods across India (and beyond); Aihwa Ong posits that various administrations are simultaneously departing from usual forms of governance (and care) to better facilitate competition in the global economy (2006).

In India, the erosion of labour rights under the current government can be witnessed via amendments to labour laws to ‘help investors and accelerate growth’ (*The Economic Times*, 2019). The move has been equally condemned by leftist and right-wing union organisations alike (see ICLU, 2018; Mody, 2019; Y.S. Sharma, 2019). Simultaneously, the boom in SHGs and ‘do it yourself development’ (Huang, 2016) shifts the onus back onto individuals to lift themselves out of poverty; endorsing and concurrently profiting from their inclusion into formal markets as ‘micro-entrepreneurs’ and newly eligible borrowers (Cross and Street, 2009; De Neve 2014; Dolan 2012; Elyachar, 2005; 2012; Huang, 2016; Kar, 2013; Kar and Schuster, 2016; Kar, 2018; Karim, 2011; Mosse, 2011; Redfield, 2012; Schwittay, 2011).

The efforts of NGOs and microfinance organisations to economically ‘empower’ women have been widely criticised for promoting impractical and highly gender-stratified livelihoods (Huang, 2016; Lazar, 2003; A. Sharma, 2008; Venkatesan, 2010); and encouraging women to take on further forms of debt (Huang, 2016; Karim, 2008; Moodie, 2008). Conversely, while poorer women’s networks and affective forms of care become increasingly monetised as financial institutions and investors seek to enfold them into capitalist markets (Elychar, 2002; Guérin, 2014; Huang, 2016; Kar, 2015; 2018); their positions as mothers and homemakers discount them as productive workers in the eyes of colleagues, employers and trade unions – further inhibiting pathways of collective organisation and financial autonomy. Indeed, employers and union workers I knew referred to women as auxiliary workers. This framed their labour as necessary for the family’s survival, but also as supplementary. Tanzina Choudhury also notes this

phenomenon in her research of female construction workers in Bangladesh (2013; 2018); and Anna Lindberg (2001) in her research of cashew plantation workers in Kerala.

While acknowledging the various obstacles to informants' access to labour organisation and civic bodies, my thesis contributes to the limited body of literature concerning the use of domestic spaces of production and reproduction by unions and SHGs (Agarwala, 2013; Desai and Modyal, 2012; Kar, 2018; Pun and Huilin, 2010). It addresses the tensions and contradictions inherent between organisational pushes towards the state, and the state's (growing) attempts to deflect these; or indeed profit from delivery of such schemes, including financialising the affordable housing market as infrastructure to foreign investors. In doing so, my thesis attends to the dynamics between women and civic actors and bodies, including SHGs; local NGOs and unions; the Construction Workers' Welfare Board<sup>13</sup>; and the spaces where they overlap. While I assess the efficacy of such organisations for informants in their wider efforts to instil permanence, I also elucidate the ways in which women may subvert or utilise attempts by such bodies to train, stereotype, or financialise their communities.

By considering women's quests for permanence, my thesis acknowledges how alternative modes of labour organisation are not always directly focused on improving the conditions of labour, but rather counteracting the precarity they generate. Scholars have debated the extent to which a dearth of class consciousness within the informal sector (Agarwala, 2018; Herring and Agarwala; Hill, 2009; Joshi, 2005; Lazar and Sanchez, 2019; Lindberg, 2001) exacerbated by employer-exploited divisions of caste, gender, regionalism, ethnicity and religion (Breman, 1999; 1996; Chakrabarty, 1989; Joshi, 2005; Neetha, 2002; Parry, 1999; 2009; Sen Gupta and Sett, 2000); stalls its widespread collective organisation. However, as Sian Lazar and Andrew Sanchez (2019) postulate, class may not always provide the most appropriate lens of analysis concerning 'unorganised' labour; 'Precarious workers are not always anomic and lacking in work-based identity, nor are they necessary a class in the making' (2019:3).

My thesis addresses this tension by attending to the development of alternative paradigms for collective struggle. It acknowledges the shift of current efforts of informal sector organisation towards the state and away from employers (Agarwala, 2013; Kamath

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<sup>13</sup> The Karnataka State Building and Other Construction Workers Welfare Board was established in 2006 following the passing of the Building and Other Construction Workers Act in 1996 by the central government of India. All construction workers (including migrants) enrolled are eligible for accident coverage, healthcare and school fee provision (both are limited amounts), life insurance, and marriage allowance. Although endowed with considerable funds from a cess raised from the construction industry, the efficacy of the board remains under scrutiny (see Bharadwaj, 2014; Gunjan, 2019; Staff Reporter, 2019; Salve, 2013).

and Ramanathan, 2017). In the epoch of increasingly detached employers, informal workers demand the state recognise the worth of their labour and recompense them for it; pressing for the actual materialisation or reinstatement of promised welfare schemes. The diversion of demands for recognition from the direct spaces of production and to those centred around social reproduction may prove more efficacious for women workers – who remain continually excluded and underrepresented in traditional spaces of labour organisation (Breman, 1999; Fernandes, 1997; A. Roy, 2003), which remain to a large extent, dominated by local male figureheads (Fernandes, 1997; A. Roy, 2003; A. Shah, et al., 2018; Zavella 1987). Moreover, construction sites by their physical nature may be sealed off, far from the urban centre, or under surveillance by security guards or maistris, further inhibiting any potential interaction with authorities, NGOs, or unions. Local civic and labour organisations in turn, often discount both women and migrant workers from recruitment and organisation strategies.

Despite these obstacles, recent research highlights increasing occurrences of women taking up prominent places within unions and non-unionised forms of informal sector activism and collective organisation (see Agarwala, 2013; Raj, 2018; Kamath and Ramanathan, 2017). Acknowledging de Haan’s caveat that a focus on the way ‘labour recruitment has been orchestrated by managers and/or product market conditions neglect [...] workers’ strategies and priorities’ (1999:273); this thesis not only explores employers’ strategies and practices, but significantly, how spaces of exploitation may in turn be used productively by workers. The uneven nature of *who* can participate in labour organisation or access civic amenities nevertheless remains. Efforts to lobby the state or participate in SHGs (which also provided women access to the state) often exclude migrant workers, who typically hold no fixed address or formal documents for the state or city in which they reside<sup>14</sup>. However, even for those in possession of the requisite documents and a fixed address (also rarities for locals); accessing civic resources remains an uphill struggle – something labour movements often neglect to accommodate in longer term goals of labour welfare. My thesis thus attends to how women workers’ lives are not only shaped by gender; but the relational spaces of social reproduction, including migration and welfare.

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<sup>14</sup> In a study of migrant slums in Bengaluru, Anirudh Krishna found that only nine percent of residents interviewed of the eighteen settlements surveyed sample held voter ID cards; six percent had ration cards; whilst a meagre one percent possessed a Bengaluru based Aadhaar card (2017:57).

## Summary of chapters

The next chapter provides the ethnographic grounding of the thesis. It opens with a typical day in the lives of informants. Shifting across the temporal and physical spaces of the city it conveys the contrasts between the uneven democracies of movement and action in varying urban time and tasksapes. It then locates these manoeuvres within the wider conceptual city of Bengaluru in its current incarnation as India's 'Silicon Valley': a landscape of global and local forms of speculation, accumulation, and vying aspiration. In doing so, it attends to Smriti Srinivas' instruction concerning the subaltern majority of Bengaluru's population; 'Rather than representing them as a parallel reality of the contemporary city, we have to move past the flicker of images projected by high technology and its spectacles to recognize that these strata of society in fact produce the city in real terms' (2001:251). Following this instruction, it provides an account of the methodology used to locate this multi-sited field and its actors, including a situational analysis of the Hyderabad-Karnataka and Kurnool districts, where informants working construction primarily hailed from.

The third and fourth chapters situate the Yadgir colony amidst this backdrop, drawing on cross-generational narratives of the lives and labour of families located in a housing colony to the south of the city, following their migration some decades prior. Building on ethnographic studies of precarious lives and livelihoods (Boo, 2012; Breman, 2016; De Boas, 2015; Duneier, 1999; Han, 2012; Pedersen, 2012; Roberts, 2016; Scheper-Hughes, 1989; Singh, 2014; Stack, 1974); chapter three explores how colony women envision and strive towards various projects or permanence, although these may not always be voiced. In doing so, it attends to how women work towards achieving these via pragmatic manoeuvres through precarious life-worlds, and in turn, how this same ethic similarly serves them when these do not work out.

Chapter four develops this analysis further, examining the relational labour of saving via interactions between colony women and their local NGO in the sangha (SHG). It acknowledges how systematic attempts to enfold the poor into webs of credit and global derivatives markets utilise the perceived sociality of poverty. However, it also provides a complimentary counter-narrative to the corpus of ethnographic literature that attends to this aspect of micro finance (Guérin, 2014; Kar, 2013; Kar and Schuster, 2016; Kar, 2018; Karim, 2008; Pattenden, 2010); exploring how the same resource of sociality is used to undermine this. Scrutinising relations between colony women with each other and the NGO, it attends to the undercurrent of inter and intra class tensions, which become transmitted and critiqued through humour, jealousy and various forms of 'training'

women are beholden to undertake. In doing so, it iterates the disjuncture between appropriate forms of womanhood, market-based evaluations of age-based productivity, and the reality of working class, scheduled caste women's lives.

Amidst the backdrop of labour exploitation regimes across India that facilitate urban growth and speculation, the fifth chapter brings to light the experiences of an otherwise largely invisible population: the city's migrant labour force. It examines how the intersectionality between localised gender norms and supra-exploitative conditions produce differing experiences of urban mobilities, or indeed, a lack thereof; for the city's migrant construction workforce. Attending to informants' engagement with the urban milieu, it questions the existence of cosmopolitanism migrant labourers and other peripatetic demographics are said to experience (Appadurai, 2012; 2013; Clifford, 1992); acknowledging instead the potential value of rural-urban networks in migrant efforts to counter both urban and labour precarity. Through this analysis it acknowledges how labour reproduces itself through the maintenance of precarious conditions preventing migrant children from progressing into India's 'dollar economy' (Krishna, 2017), or any alternative occupation other than construction.

Locating these prior chapters in the moment of India's present construction boom, chapter six examines the praxis and urban networks of real estate developers in converting land into money. It elucidates how risk, indicative of the volatility and opacity generated by the industry and various interconnecting actors, is devolved onto the bodies of workers – made unwilling participants in informants' practices of speculation, while being excluded from their profits. Contextualising the experiences of local and migrant informants from the prior three chapters, I attend to the exclusion of settled workers from employment; exposing the underlying motivations behind employers' narratives of workshy locals, labour shortages and subordinate masculinities. Such rhetoric not only rationalises the hiring of cheaper, migrant labour; but enables employers to exercise (often violent) means of fiscal, temporal, and physical control – situated in wider industry power relations of hegemonic masculinity.

Attending to the resources and capital available in Bengaluru to counter such measures, the seventh and eighth chapters explore the role of the state and labour organisation in bolstering inadequate incomes through the Construction Workers' Welfare Board. Utilising ethnographic data collected from a public hearing arranged by several protagonists of Bengaluru's NGO community, chapter seven focuses on the historical legacy and continuation of subjective value systems of the working poor, and how these continue to inform the wider delivery or lack thereof, of welfare. Attending to

the co-operation required for the board to effectively function, it examines the ramifications of a breakdown in trust between the board staff and various external parties central to its operation.

Following this analysis, chapter eight examines worker reactions and actions in the wake of state failures to deliver adequate forms of welfare. It analyses the efforts of labour organisations in lobbying the state, attending to the emergence of new forms of demands and the ways in which these develop; including workers' calls for the recognition of their labour's worth and subsequently, their contribution to the growth of the city. In doing so, it addresses the contradictory and counterproductive dynamics of gender and class within labour movements, including women's frequent omission from union spaces. However, it also recognises the cultivation of female voice in local organisations; acknowledging how a life of labour and its concomitant interactions across the city may be utilised in the development of new and inclusive, labour paradigms in collective bargaining. Significantly, it observes how, despite the enduring failure of Indian unions to acknowledge women as equal workers, the domestic spaces women remain associated with, may also be utilised for organisation.

Chapter nine merges these themes, elucidating how the processes and practices that constitute localised labour regimes in construction are further informed by wider hegemonies and globalised flows of capital generated by practices of financial speculation. Such hegemonies comprise of old and new forms of inequality. Some may have locally specific contexts, including the caste system, and others universal ones; namely, the concealment of women's labour. The Indian construction industry may constitute a mere fragment in these global processes but remains an example par excellence of the maintenance and subsequent exploitation of gender inequality vis-à-vis the devaluation of manual labour worldwide.

By attending to these themes, my thesis addresses aspiration and timespace of the city differently from other literature on the poor in informalised livelihoods (Bremar; 2016; Desai and Modyal, 2012; Fernandes, 1997; 1998; Kwan Lee, 1998; Roy, 2003; Roberts, 2016; L. Zhang, 2001). It achieves this through a broader focus which unites speculation, migration, work and social reproduction and welfare. Informants utilise pragmatism to negotiate these spaces. Uniting these themes enables a nuanced and yet, simultaneously, fuller perspective of the gendered relations of production and social reproduction, including the political life unfolding around them. In exploring women's movement through these spaces, my thesis considers the ways in which 'getting by' becomes a pragmatic ethic through which projects of permanence are envisioned and

achieved. It thus reframes pragmatism as a positive ethic – an aspect often unrecognised in anthropological literature focusing on religious ethics, suffering, or other ‘different’ forms of ethics (for instance, V. Das, 2014; Fassin, 2012; Laidlaw, 2002; Lambek, 2010; Mahmood 2005; Stafford, 2013; Throop, 2012; Robbins, 2012; Zigon, 2018; 2012).

## CHAPTER TWO: ETHNOGRAPHIC SETTING

### **Locating the dynamic field: a typical day in Bengaluru**

*Wednesday morning, Basavanagudi neighbourhood, 3<sup>rd</sup> main, T block, Bengaluru, 10.25am.*

Durgamma hurries towards the sangha. It is a twenty-minute walk away near the Yadgir colony, where her parents and the majority of her extended family reside. She has been awake since four thirty, having already prepared the family breakfast and lunch, sent her daughters and youngest sister off to school, and cleaned two houses. After having her third child, Durgamma no longer works in construction, but her husband, Hanumantha, when he makes it to work, is a mason. Hanumantha was home when she left, having not been out for work in some time. Durgamma does not know when he will go again.

Aware of the small size of the room where the family stay and the fact it is anchored to her cleaning job at the sport centre, Durgamma constantly worries about finding a more stable and larger form of housing for her three children and youngest sister. She has asked at the sangha and her brother Srikanth, who once worked for the sangha registering colony residents with the construction workers’ welfare board. No one, however, seems sure of what schemes might be available or whether or not the family would qualify. A one-bedroom home in the Yadgir colony, requiring a deposit of ten month’s rent and four thousand rupees a month thereafter, was not only too expensive, but the place itself was a corrupting influence on the family she feared, having grown up there herself.

Durgamma’s young son, Hemanth, jiggles on her hip. At almost three years old now, his increasing weight adds considerable strain to her aching body. Had she not been running late she might have put him down and rested, or stopped to speak with her friend, Janaki, who she spies sweeping the steps of one of the houses where she works. Instead she flashes a smile and calls out ‘Chennagadeera? Nasta aithe?’ (‘How are you? Had your breakfast?’) before shifting Hemanth and picking up her pace. If Durgamma misses the sangha then her loan request will not be heard for another week.

*Women’s Self-Help Group (sangha), CSA Basavanagudi area office, 18<sup>th</sup> main, 10.42am*

No one notices as Durgamma enters late, dabbing her brow with her *pallu*<sup>15</sup>, having just climbed the many flights of stairs to the roof office where the local NGO, CSA, holds the sangha. Her mother Shanthamma, is in the middle of a debate about the LIC policy with Shanthi, an area co-ordinator and chief organiser of the sangha, who is growing frustrated. She explains to Shanthamma (again!) that this is not how the LIC policy works and that she would have to die for anyone to claim it. Shanthi’s phone rings

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<sup>15</sup> The end corner of the over-shoulder sari fold which sometimes doubles as a cloth.



and she answers. The older women of the group talk amongst themselves, while the younger women, anxious to leave and commence their work, glance up at the battered plastic wall clock. Some nurse their babies. Teenage girls share whispered conversations, laughing. Heads turn as a disagreement breaks out between Kauveri, the senior area head, and Channamma, an older resident from the Yadgir colony. Channamma is a frequent borrower from the group, but less frequent in her loan repayment or the required weekly sangha attendance. Channamma accuses Kauveri of calling her a bad name. Kauveri turns towards the group 'I would never speak to any of you like that!' She exclaims, scowling. Channamma, sensing defeat, and the knowledge that her reputation will do her no favours in winning the group's approval in this altercation, slinks away to the back of the room.

The young woman sat in the corner from a visiting NGO returns to her clipboard and surveys. Her sessions are interrupted at various intervals by other members of the group listening in and interjecting with their own local knowledge, should the interviewee be reluctant to divulge the truth. Sithamma, Shanthamma's friend, complains about the frequency with which such strangers visit the sangha, asking them the same, often personal questions, only to disappear. What good did it do for the poor? The morning's business of passing bank books, changing money and recording the weekly checks and balances into the register ends, and the women begin to depart. Shanthi bellows, 'Wait! Don't forget to come for tomorrow's training!' Shanthamma laughs and cracks a joke with Sithamma. Durgamma is yet to make her loan request. The opportunity has passed. A young intern asks Shanthi the location of the Construction Workers' Welfare Board. 'It's ten minutes by auto down the road' she informs him.

*Dr Sriramakrishnan's office, Karnataka State Welfare Board for Construction Workers, 1.22pm.*

Following a busy morning meeting with various members of the department to discuss the pensions deadlock with the central government, Dr Sriramakrishna is eagerly preparing his lunch, unpacking his steel tiffin box and assorted Tupperware on the large meeting table in front of him. His assistant fetches him his customary green tea. The matter of a new coalition of NGOs, the KKKKV, is still troubling him following the unsatisfactory outcome of last week's public hearing the group organised. Worse still, they had found a former judge to back them up. He frowned, recalling the loud assembly of women present at the hearing claiming to be construction workers, something of which Dr Sriramakrishnan was certain, was a lie. They were domestic workers, paid to attend, he was sure. Why could no one understand that the funds of the board were to be used sparingly? The welfare board were not made of money, and everyone in the city had eyes on their funds. Some people expected money for nothing! The sound of a loud series of chirps emitting from the bird song themed buzzer installed in his office interrupts his thoughts. It is time for his meeting with the various representatives of the KKKKV, a coalition of local NGOs. He sighs. 'Tell them ten minutes' he says, swallowing a mouthful of rice.

*FEDINA offices, BDA Colony, Domlur, 3.19pm*

After returning from the meeting at the welfare board, some forty-five minutes south through the city's traffic by scooter, Gayathri dismounts from her scooter and wheels it into the opening of the office entrance, propping it up against a pillar. Frustrated by Dr Sriramakrishnan's evasive answers and defensive attitude, she enquires as to the whereabouts of Sebastian, the head of FEDINA's unionisation wing, to update him on the outcome of the meeting and discuss their next course of action. Sebastian had left some ten minutes earlier, she is told, having gone to gather information on the

government-owned building site nearby where the workers reside under the flyover. FEDINA had frequently reported the site to the labour inspector, but without accurate information, or more importantly, *proof* of it, there was little that could be done for the migrant workers living there. The majority of women on site had disappeared since the team had spoken with them last, and the remaining workers had lied about their wages when the inspector had arrived, artificially inflating them. Gayathri was aware of the urgent need to organise the city's vast migrant construction workforce, and FEDINA had been trying various tactics, including convincing local workers to recruit them, although this was challenging due to the hostility between the two groups, as locals faced growing unemployment. Moreover, the organisation was already facing considerable challenge with the attempted onboarding of male (and female) workers for an equal wages campaign. Then there was the upcoming *Bisi Oota* (hot meals) protest to co-ordinate, too. That reminds her! Gayathri picks up her phone and dials Ananthamma.

*Ananthamma's house, Ambekar Slum, 3.34pm*

Ananthamma is sitting in the main room of her family's small *pukka* home, some twenty minutes north of the FEDINA office, towards the old Christian side of the city. She has finished her day's work of watering plants for a local produce grower and at the temple, where she sweeps and minds shoes. Her body is now too old for construction work, but she still has to bring some income home. Especially with a new child on the way. What if the family were to lose their house? The fear of eviction is an ever-present source of anxiety for her and the rest of the slum residents. Ananthamma has come a long way since her childhood in Gulbarga. She has worked hard for her home in the city, settling on previously uninhabitable land, and building it with the assistance of FEDINA, a local NGO who had entered her life back in the days she was still working *coolie kelsa*.

Ananthamma begins to settle into one of her favourite Hindi soaps as her pregnant daughter-in-law sleeps in the adjacent room. Her grandchildren are late back from school, and between balancing her various jobs and union role, stolen moments like this are precious. The shared family mobile rings and she wonders if it is about the upcoming protest. Recently, AIKYATA had begun campaigning for the reinstatement of the city's hot meals programme for elderly slum dwellers. With a new mayor in place, it was time to take action. Ananthamma herself is speaking at the protest, as a co-founder of AIKYATA, an elderly informal worker's union. Members had spent their lifetimes working as rag pickers, domestic workers and construction labourers – building the city, keeping it running and serving the wealthy, who had never known hard work or hardship. If they could not get what they wanted from employers, then it was time to make the state recognise what it owed, and to press it when it failed to deliver. She picks up the phone. It is Gayathri. 'Hē!u!' (tell me!) She answers.

*Praveen's site, Indiranagar, 5.32pm*

Rangamma threads her way around the large grey piles of rubble on the construction site that serves as both her playground and her home. She reluctantly takes the hand of her trailing younger brother, Shiva, prone to biting her, whose care she is charged with during the day when her parents are working, or her heavily pregnant mother is resting. Rangamma has been told the festival of Ugadi is coming, although she cannot be sure what day it is, or if the family will return to the village or not, since that will depend on how soon they get paid. It has been some time since they were paid last, and the money they usually send home has been halted to meet more immediate needs. In these instances, her father goes out to look for work in the neighbourhood. Sometimes he returns with a plastic bangle or a sweet for her. Other times he returns with nothing but the smell of *arrack*. Rangamma misses the village where, until she is old enough to work

in the fields, there is school, and friends to play with. There are also many festivals to celebrate there, including *Gowri Habba*, her favourite. But not here. Rangamma has been coming to Bengaluru for as long as she can remember, but she does not know the city. On her way to the small shack where her family lives, she hears an engine starting. The owner pulls away in his big car, leaving a dust plume behind, but still no wages.

*Vapours, Koramangala, 9.23pm*

Dinner at one of Praveen's favourite Italian restaurants has lightened his mood over the delayed project. Following a day of site visits, moving money, and greasing the palms of various planning officials who had proven a significant obstacle to ground-breaking at the Rajajinagar site, he is finally ready to go out. After some debate, his friends agree on a venue. Praveen collects his car from the valet and the party head to *Vapours*, a local 'terrace-resto-bar'. All the usual suspects are out in force for *Vapours'* popular karaoke night. There are students; international volunteers; their older, salaried and less idealistic counterparts; and the start-up crowd – a variety of well-educated twenty somethings who have flocked to 'India's Silicon Valley' from across the country. The crowd would be incomplete without an array of wealthy middle-aged men sitting at the bar, ordering champagne and eight-hundred-rupee Jäger shots, their shirts shining almost as brightly as their gold jewellery. Praveen spots his friend, a local party organiser, and goes over to greet him. Most of the international crowd stay anywhere between six weeks to two years and the city has a heavy rotation of new faces. The rounds are made and the usual questions are asked by recent additions to the city's transient community. 'What is your name?' 'Where are you from?' 'What do you do?' Above the thump of music Praveen leans forward and introduces himself to a young French intern. 'I'm Praveen', he yells. 'I work in real estate'.

\* \* \*

*Bangalore/Bengaluru: the changing faces of India's Silicon Valley*

Once lauded as India's 'city of the future' by Jawaharlal Nehru (Dittrich 2007:46), the city formerly (and frequently still) known as 'Bangalore', has been given many appellations ranging from 'the garden city' to 'pensioner's paradise'. It was officially renamed 'Bengaluru' in a nod to the state's official language, Kannada, in 2014. These vying narratives often incorporate a nostalgia for an idealised past alongside aspirational visions for the future, as Gopalan attests; 'On the one hand, there was a throwback to a mythicized past, a longing for the pensioner's paradise and garden city of old; there was also an aspiration for a neoteric future, a Singapore in Bangalore' (2010:2). While many of Bengaluru's shifting identities have been shaped and continue to be shaped by the desires and agendas of political elites, wealthier residents, and global investors (Goldman, 2011; Gopalan, 2010); as Smriti Srinivas, in her seminal work *Landscapes of Urban Memory* (2001), has illustrated, such voices constitute a small but highly vocal, minority of city residents.

Currently a site of unchecked urban development and speculation, Bengaluru has largely undergone a rapid transformation into its most recent incarnation – ‘India’s Silicon Valley’. The city has almost doubled in population density and size in the last decade, with conservative estimates placing the current population at over ten million (Kerur, 2011; Menon, 2017). As a result, Bengaluru is under-planned and over-populated – to the extent that some are now questioning its longevity (Bhasthi, 2017; Lakshmi, 2013). While its evolving identities hint at a jostling host of possibilities, desires and even fears, how is the city experienced by those who, while literally building it from the ground upwards, are excluded from both its development plans and the capital gains made possible by their labour?

Amidst this confused and kinetic backdrop, the superimposed imagery of smiling couples on real estate advertisements line urban roads and pavements, their looming faces serving as a reminder of largely unattainable lifestyles to its everyday populace. As if to obscure the city’s vanishing flora and fauna, further attempts by real estate marketers in appealing to a limited audience of moneyed NRIs and high-ranking tech professionals can be witnessed via increasingly fanciful names of residential developments (‘Oasis’, ‘Palm beach’, ‘Lakeview’, and ‘Grove’); water features; ice skating rinks; beach volleyball; and butterfly trails. Though the names, advertisements and layouts of such developments evoke luxury and exclusivity, what lies beneath is often not as pristine or in any way as complete, as it may appear.

In scenarios where women such as Ananthamma and Durgamma live in constant fear of losing their homes, and young girls such as Rangamma grow up on building sites, a fixed address is a luxury available only to the city’s smaller number of middle and upper-class residents. The housing colonies built in prior decades to accommodate migrants fleeing the drought-stricken north of Karnataka (and to capture urban vote banks), in the days the city was short of labour, are now a rarity as cheaper labour from further afield increases. Moreover, the city’s inhibitive ten-month rental deposit norms (for all prospective tenants regardless of income, location or vocation, see A.Das, 2019 and Damadoran and Sebastian, 2019), although being declared illegal, are still widely exercised by landlords, making it difficult for even permanent residents of the city to find a home.

While Annapurna Shaw has argued that ‘both the rich and poor can occupy public space temporarily to extend the boundaries of their habitable area in order to fulfil certain needs’ (2012:8); Elizabeth Chacko warns of ‘an escalation in disparities’ (Chacko, 2007:132) whereby the construction and demand for luxury housing creates off-limit

areas to the urban poor, simultaneously encroaching onto their dwellings. These practices encourage the privatisation of services to the detriment of those unable to afford them, as wealthy enclaves grow increasingly self-contained and fortified (see also Agostini et al., n.d; Caldeira, 2000 Gooptu, 2013). This has happened at an accelerated pace in Bengaluru and across India, whereby ‘recent urbanization has occurred within the context of a middle-class consumer revolution, and has been marked by a phenomenal expansion of what Shearing and Stenning have termed “mass private property”’ (Gooptu, 2013:11).

In addition to (but by no means mutually exclusive to) these developments, the hierarchal discourse of the global knowledge economy means informal workers are overlooked as co-contributors. Such oversights have implications for the non-elite citizens of Bengaluru (Gopalan, 2010; Narayanareddy, 2011; Nair, 2005), who become further invisible in civic discourse and planning, except invariably, around election time. Whilst the presence of thousands of IT, biotechnology, and outsourcing companies represent the highly publicised image of Bengaluru, there remain significantly larger numbers of informal sector workers and numerous slums within the city. Such populaces are systematically undercounted and neglected by the state, as Krishna attests concerning its migrant workers; ‘This segment of city society, not emblematic of a shining urban future, has grown rapidly, but the official record contains hardly anything about its existence’ (2017:56). At the same time, various segments of migrant populaces in India, particularly Muslims, are increasingly coming under scrutiny to prove their Indian citizenship via the National Register of Citizens (NRC) (see BBC, 2019; Khalid, 2019). With the recent shift in Karnataka’s government from a Congress alliance to the BJP, are actively being arrested and expelled from the city (see The Wire Staff, 2019; Kaggere, 2019). It is hoped that a renewed focus on migrant as well as local female construction workers in this thesis will thus enable a largely unheard counter narrative in a city frequently dubbed ‘Bangalore rising’.

## **Methodology and site selection**

### *In defence of multi-locale ethnography*

Following the establishment of the ethnographic setting of the thesis, this section outlines the fieldwork methodology used, and how I found myself assembling a diverse array of interlocutors – leading to an evolution in scope beyond the initial bounds of the proposed project. By placing key informants within the opening overarching narratives of their daily routines which I became familiar with over time, I illustrate the intersecting

inequalities of real estate speculation. Such examples elucidate how the financial and physical growth of the city enables some informants to reap dividends from their labours of speculation. Others however, experience ongoing states of precarity as a result of these actions, as they attempt to navigate uncertain futures through the available resources of the urban milieu.

I first begun fieldwork with a cross-city mapping and survey exercise to establish the housing, income, and living conditions of construction workers, searching for prospective field sites. The sites I was looking for materialised rapidly as the city's expansive vectors of accumulation and inequality revealed themselves in an interwoven, sprawling network. As I travelled with higher frequency to numerous destinations across Bengaluru (to the extent that by the end of fieldwork informants joked I knew the city better than they did), a macro-level perspective began to emerge.

While I acknowledge criticisms of the multi-sited field (Berg, 2008; Falzon, 2009; Hannerz, 2003), as Andrés Espinoza argues, many critiques of multi-sited ethnography, are themselves, critiques of single-sited ethnography, too (2014). As Espinoza posits; 'Experiences can point to different directions that the ethnographer might or might not choose to take. The case for multi-sited ethnography is actually quite similar' (Espinoza, 2014:3-4). It was through following these different directions, an approach similarly undertaken by Bear in her ethnography of the Hooghly river (2015a); that fieldsites expanded and informant groups broadened beyond my initially envisioned remit of construction workers and the organisations that worked with them. In the urban spaces of consumption and leisure, company owners and a wider overview of the presence and processes of the real estate industry also revealed themselves, demanding inclusion within this story.

By thus allowing the urban network to guide me, I positioned myself within the vectors of accumulation of the city. As the opening routines reveal, such vectors enfolded the lives of those hoping to financially profit from real estate; the workers who created property revenue from the ground; the state that encouraged and invested in such modes of accumulation; and those lobbying for worker remuneration and safer working conditions. As a result, the experiences and life stories of construction workers, NGO workers, trade unionists, real estate developers, and state officials; form a rich and interwoven tapestry in my exploration of women's efforts to produce various forms of permanence through the urban milieu. The informants introduced in the beginning of this chapter constitute a small cross-section of this tapestry.

In Bengaluru, it had been my initial plan to work with a relatively large, well-funded NGO upon completion of the first phase of its flagship project; a large-scale quantitative survey focusing on how citizenship and its accompanying rights are experienced by varying segments of its populace. Much of the research had been undertaken with the sociology department of an American university, but the need to bolster findings with qualitative data was highlighted at the survey launch I attended during a pilot field trip in Delhi. After agreeing to carry out ethnographic research to bolster the index, I relocated to Bengaluru, only to discover that the key staff member I had been liaising with had left India. Upon commencement of fieldwork, I soon realised that not only were a number of key datasets largely incomplete, but that this particular organisation was an unpopular body to be locally affiliated with. Subsequently, this relationship bore little ethnographic fruit and was abandoned. There were nevertheless, benefits to being back to square one, allowing me to follow the offerings of the urban network through more organic means. Such methodology lends itself to the usage of snowball sampling, whereby a small number of interlocutors broaden the research demographic by selecting informants through their own networks.

While Bengaluru does not have the same scale or history of activist and civil society movements I had encountered on my fieldwork pilot in Delhi (where I had initially planned to volunteer in *anganwadis* on construction sites), it did have a smaller, close-knit community of researchers, activists and NGOs, some of whom had known each other for years, whilst others were visiting researchers such as myself. By making the rounds within this network, I began establishing relationships with local NGOs, a number of which became more amenable to inclusion in my research when they realised I was staying longer than a few months within the city. This was how I first encountered the three main members of the KKKKKV pressure group (FEDINA, CSA, and CIVIC) – all distinct organisations with varying agendas – but united in their common goal of lobbying the state welfare board for construction workers.

To explore how quantifiable forms of urban mobility might be sought by my target demographic, I wanted to establish what resources might be available on a day-to-day basis to informants and who they might interact with to obtain these – including the construction workers' welfare board. Although I did not find the same types of big men acting as gatekeepers to civic resources and amenities that Chatterjee (2004), Blom Hansen and Verkaaik (2009) and Das (2011) report, for many I realised, NGOs served a similar purpose in respect to state benefits and interactions with local authorities. There were invariably patronage links present, but these were of a different sort, as I will discuss

in chapters four through six. During fieldwork, CSA acted in this capacity for residents of the Yadgir colony, as well as a quasi-gatekeeper to the colony itself. As a result, it took me some months before I was able to gain both their and the women's trust to begin visiting.

Following the expressed desire of one of the sangha's teenage participants to learn English, I also provided classes to the children of the colony for a period of around eighteen months. Through attending the CSA weekly sangha meetings conducting fieldwork inside the colony and teaching, I was able to regularly engage with three generations of women. This later proved the case with migrant informants – some having travelled with all three generations of the family to the city. Working with such varied age groups range enabled me to attend to the cross-generational, and gendered mutability of mobility over both space and time.

As was the case with the Yadgir colony, it took some months to establish myself within the social spaces of the city, but once I had, I soon discovered a dense, multiplex, and productive network. I met Matthew, my first contact in real estate through some friends when we happened upon him during an evening out. As indicated in the opening section, locals also frequented the city's expat scene, and I soon learned it was an invaluable place to network. Not long after, I was introduced to Kumar via a well-connected acquaintance, upon hearing that I was keen to meet people in the industry. Virender's appearance in this thesis had been the product of another friend calling in a long-owed favour from a previous professional connection. Praveen, I happened to chance upon at a joint birthday celebration of the same acquaintance who had led me to Kumar.

Following prior unsuccessful attempts to gain access to the urban wing of a nationwide CPM affiliated informal workers' union, some months later I approached another union under the joint role of researcher and research assistant to Rina Agarwala, a professor based at Johns Hopkins, who was working on a Ford Foundation project on women's informal organisation. Though I frequently stressed my link was tenuous and nor was I able to influence any kind of funding decisions; previous bodies and unions I had contacted in the past became markedly keener to assist with organisational interviews and group interviews. As Julia Huang notes concerning her own fieldwork, it was through the 'multiple inequalities inside the network' (2016:55) that similarly, allowed me access to many of these worlds and I acknowledge my place within them.



### *The Hyderabad-Karnataka region and Kurnool District*

Through interlocutors in unions and real estate, I was able to engage with two separate groups of migrant workers and their families who had travelled to the city from the districts of Raichur and Gulbarga (also known as Kalaburagi) in northern Karnataka, and Adoni in the neighbouring district of Kurnool, across the border in Andhra Pradesh. Both groups regularly moved between their villages and the city, undertaking *gaare* or *coolie kelsa* in Bengaluru, some nine hours away by train from both destinations. The inclusion of the groups further extended the scope of my inquiry, enabling a comparative analysis of the differing strata of precarity and mobility experienced by migrant women vis-à-vis locals, in the city, and the differing outcomes produced by local labour regimes.

The majority of migrant research interlocutors in this thesis hail from Raichur in north-eastern Karnataka, and near Adoni, a city in Andhra Pradesh's western Kurnool District, separated only by an hour's train journey across the state border. Informants from the Yadgir colony which features in the next two chapters, also hailed from Raichur, Yadgir, and Gulbarga, known as the Hyderabad-Karnataka region. Whilst by no means homogenous, this demographic experience arguably the same interlinking socioeconomic conditions as many other agricultural workers undertaking cyclical labour migration across India today (Breman, 1996). These include scheduled caste status; low education levels; prolonged spells of drought; insufficient access to irrigation systems; shrinking plots of land and landlessness; rising debts; and poor crop yields. I discuss these factors and their implications further in chapters three through five.

### *The present agrarian crisis in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh*

Both Karnataka and to a lesser degree, Andhra Pradesh, have suffered from increasing drought in recent decades. Karnataka is second in the national list of farmer suicides by state. While Andhra Pradesh, is still relatively low in the table, it has experienced a three hundred percent rise from 160 in 2014 to 516 in 2015 (see Dey, 2017; *National Crime Records Bureau*, 2015; Special Correspondent, 2015). However, it should be noted that no public data has been published since this period. In lieu of up-to-date figures, there are reports indicating that the Hyderabad-Karnataka region and Kurnool district are experiencing worsening conditions, with a high number of farmer suicides in the former, and markedly increased migration from both areas (Kulkarni, 2016; Reddy, 2017; 2018; RoyChowdhury, 2014; Sudhakar, 2017). In Kurnool district, where Praveen's workers who feature in the fifth chapter, largely hailed from, agriculture is primarily rain-fed, making the impact of drought catastrophic. Though Raichur, the

district of the Thimmaiah campus families, also of the same chapter, is positioned between two significant rivers (the Krishna and Tungabhadra) it suffers similarly from poor irrigation and failed monsoons. Both are among the most underdeveloped districts in their respective states (Express News Service, 2018b; Narain, et al, 2009; Pattenden, 2012), with Raichur having recently been named among the most one hundred backward districts in India requiring government intervention (See Suraksha, 2018).

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The broadened focus of my thesis iterates how a sole perspective on workplace relations and waged relations cannot help us to fully understand the nuanced aspects of workers' lives. By placing myself within the lives and speculative flows of Bengaluru's construction and real estate industries and their workers, my thesis is thus able to attend in far greater detail to the aspirations, political and social possibilities and constraints; that exist for female construction workers. Having now provided the framing of the interlinking geopolitical and socioeconomic scenarios through which informants came to find work in Bengaluru's construction industry, the next chapter undertakes an analysis of the lives and labour of settled (and not so settled) informants from the region of northern Karnataka. In doing so, it attends to how they cultivate and utilise a pragmatic ethic of getting by in attempts to establish forms of familial permanence.

CHAPTER THREE:  
'UNTIL THE END, THAT IS WHAT OUR PEOPLE DO':  
PRECARITY AND PRAGMATISM IN THE YADGIR COLONY

*I am sitting opposite Channamma on the roof of the blue apartment building that houses the women's self-help group or sangha<sup>16</sup> as it is colloquially known. Channamma is wearing a rust-coloured cotton sari with checked border – a uniform style amongst the older women of the Yadgir colony who primarily hail from northern Karnataka – though Channamma's sari and stained blouse are more careworn than most, and I have never seen her wear another. It has been some time since I saw Channamma, who has barely attended the sangha in the past four months, having had no money to save. Like many of the women in the colony, Channamma started working as a labourer in the city when she was a child. 'There were no schools for us, work was everything. Back then we didn't know about education. We were ignorant. This [gaare kelsa] is what we knew. We didn't study. This is what we did', she informed me. 'Are there many people still working gaare kelsa in the colony?' I asked. Chewing tobacco wedged firmly in her cheek, Channamma pauses, before concluding; 'Until the end, that is what our people do'.*

### **Introduction**

The next two chapters examine the lives and labour of the residents of the Yadgir colony who migrated to Bengaluru from the rural north of Karnataka. They explore how different forms of permanence in the city may be conceived of and strived towards. Numerous scholars have argued that dense, restrictive networks (Jatrana and Sangwan, 2004; Parry, 2003; Van Eijk, 2012; Walker, 2016) have a negative impact on the opportunities of poorer demographics; while others have stated both the belief systems subscribed to by the poor (Appadurai, 2013; Bernard et al., 2011), and a scarcity of resources (Scheper-Hughes, 1989; Mullainathan and Shafir, 2013) reduce aspiration and the ability to plan ahead. Responding to these arguments, this chapter elucidates how, despite the pernicious effects of poverty, visions of improved mobility and indeed, stability endure and are actively strived towards, even if not typically vocalised.

In attempts to explore various aspects of poverty, heterodox researchers have attended to the nuances within dominant themes of precarity and hope (Boo, 2012; Butler, 2012; Breman, 2016; De Boas, 2015; Han 2012; Pedersen, 2012; Roberts; 2016; B. Singh, 2015; Stack, 1974), including temporality (Pedersen, 2012; De Boeck, 2015); care (Han,

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<sup>16</sup> The name 'sangha' translates from the sanskrit word 'community' and is often used to describe associations, unions, and charitable groups in India.

2012; Roberts, 2016; Stack, 1974); and health (Krishna; 2011; Scheper-Hughes, 1989). This chapter engages with these themes by exploring the potential for mobility amidst everyday precarity and the bodily world of work, while also drawing on an alternative unit of analysis via its discussion of the role of pragmatism.

### *Towards an ethic of pragmatism?*

Though acknowledging Brighupati Singh's critique of ethnographic gloominess in qualitative studies of poverty (2015), and his resulting call for researchers to look beyond material living standards and elucidate 'how people establish measures of dignity and freedom for themselves within a milieu of relative scarcity' (2015:132); I also recognise the need for caution in over-romanticising lived experiences. The pragmatic ethic elucidated in this chapter offers a compromise which attends to but also moves beyond materialist foci of the limiting conditions of poverty on agency and aspiration (Bernard, et al., 2011; Fletcher, 2014; Mullainathan and Shafir, 2013; Ray, 2003). An ethic of pragmatism serves as a meta-language of mediation between reality, what is ideal, and significantly, the ground between the two: possibility. The concept of pragmatism put forward in this chapter provides a middle pathway for heterodox researchers seeking to attend to idealist and materialist approaches. In doing so, it attends to how people struggle with what Das describes as 'the difficulty of reality' (2014) in conditions of material scarcity.

Conceived of primarily as a methodological approach in philosophy and sociology (Bourdieu, 1977; Bogusz, 2012; Dewey, 1977; Durkheim, 1983; W. James, 1978; Peirce, 1905; 1878), pragmatism as an ethic remains largely underdeveloped in anthropology. And yet, as Dewey, and James have noted, pragmatism is both instrumental and experimental; facilitating playfulness between ideas and action (Dewey, 1977 W. James, 1978). This chapter considers the place of pragmatism as an everyday ethic, and how for the women of the colony, it is cultivated across generations in the face of scarce work, rising debts and non-working spouses. Beyond its face-value interpretation, pragmatism is much more than the ability to think practically. Indeed, to critics of utilitarianism that described it as "impractically dry" (2018:87), John Stewart Mill argued that such ethics, while practical, were by no means limiting or; 'to be contradistinguished by pleasure' (2018:87).

While pragmatism is an ethic similar to stoicism, and fulfils the need to make ends meet, in doing so, it may also reveal more expansive fields of possibility. It facilitates reflexivity, skilful manoeuvre and creativity. The pragmatic ethic is aspirational while

being rooted in reality; enabling informants to conceive of and achieve longer term futures for themselves and their families through the often limited means available to them in the present. For some, the goal of this ethic is permanence - the ability to endure through time as an individual, a family and into the next generation. Pragmatism does not negate measurements of structural inequality, or indeed, attention to non-economic ethics of care (Roberts, 2016); rather it is utilised by colony residents to work towards ethical goals in the face of precarity.

By exploring how pragmatism serves as a prominent but by no means singular ethic in informants' everyday lives (pragmatism after all, facilitates negotiations between and visualisations of differing approaches), I discuss how this principle underlines women's projects of permanence. I define projects of permanence as the attempt to achieve various forms of stability, including securing somewhere to live, or the provision of adequate nutrition to one's children. This pragmatic ethic allows women to skilfully navigate uncertain livelihoods and uncertain futures. It enables them to take various forms of care; undertaking the work of social and familial reproduction amidst the challenges of construction work as gendered workers, health crises and the fragility of kinship and family relations, especially marriage.

#### *Fate, time, and agency within the pragmatic ethic*

Concerning ethnographies of Southeast Asia, Charles Stafford has argued that fatalism can be interpreted too literally by researchers (2012). Indeed, speaking of the potential difficulties of disentangling relations between language and ethical ways of being in the world, Das notes in her response to James Laidlaw (2014), 'cosmologies might appear as coherent and well integrated when they are narrated but not as lived' (2014:490). This apparent tension need not make researchers question the validity of informant's statements or life worlds, as Nate Roberts rightly cautions against (2016:241). Rather, it is important to look more deeply into what they reveal and indeed, what they conceal in context to lived experiences of poverty; including aspiration endeavour, and disappointment.

This chapter subsequently attempts a more nuanced interpretation of the location of fatalism within the convergence and divergence between temporality, speech, action and thought. By doing so, it considers the position of fate within an ethical framework of pragmatism, attending to fatalism as one truth amongst multiple others in the life worlds and temporal realities of informants. While representations of agency in time within the pragmatic ethic may appear fatalistic, something echoed in the language of informants

who often referred to their futures as predetermined; this did not mean they did not envision or work towards alternative futures to the ones they voiced. Though interlocutors frequently spoke of fate, they still looked for ways to evade it, drawing upon a multiplicity of religious, economic and social devices to achieve this.

The temporal and cosmological significance of fate thus constitutes an aspect of the pragmatic ethic. When life outside the realm of immediate present is unknowable, the passage of time vis-à-vis chronologically ordered senses of ‘progress’ is disrupted and non-linear (Allison, 2014; Allison and Piot, 2014; Bear, 2016; Bryant, 2016; Ozolina-Fitzgerald, 2016; Harms, 2013). Time may also serve as an eroding force, provoking a sense of urgency to earn and take greater risk when faced with the diminishing bodily ability of income generation (Bear, 2015a; Prentice and Trueba, 2018). In this scenario, answers to questions that might otherwise inform a sense of futurity concerning work, payment, urban residence and one’s health, prove lacking. Das posits that if ‘we are fenced off from certain regions of life, then [...] coherence yields to other ideas, such as those of luck, chance, and other contingencies that shape our lives’ (2014:490). With this in mind, can we not also understand the certainty bestowed by pre-determinism as an answer to draw upon in the absence of stable futures?

Such acts themselves are pragmatic; allowing for the utilisation of available concepts and cosmologies to comprehend the incomprehensible. Indeed, the ostensible religiosity and pre-determinism of destiny may also be drawn upon to make sense of the world when familial endeavours for permanence do not work out, constituting a ‘culturally acceptable idiom of distress’ (Drew and Schoenberg, 2011:179). Expressions of fatalism may guard one’s aspirations against misfortune and jealousy, which may thwart desires for familial permanence and mobility across time.

Since pragmatism has not been explored as an ethic, the ways in which the poor plan and aspire to a materially secure future have been made less visible. There is a scholarly tradition within social science of suggesting that the poor lack the capacity to aspire due to fatalism (see for instance, Appadurai, 2013; Bernard, et al., 2011; Hayati and Karami, 2005; Law and Shek, 2014); they are victims of a brutish life measured in structural statistics of material poverty (Bremner, 2016; Ehrenreich, 2001; Ray, 2003; Mullainathan and Shafir, 2013; Scheper-Hughes, 1989); or they have developed transcendental, non-materialist ethics (B. Singh, 2015; Day, et al., 1999; Roberts, 2016). My approach recognises agency in the face of scarcity. It elucidates that the poor do reflect ethically on the dilemmas generated by the material and social inequalities derived

from their structural position in life and aspire to move beyond, or endure it, by using pragmatism.

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Following an introduction to the Yadgir colony, this chapter is divided into three sections, examining the journeys of Durgamma, Basamma and Mariamma, as they move through life in the city. By examining various aspects of life trajectories, I explore the ways in which colony women strive towards and frame various forms of permanence for their families, and how work, marriage, health, and their fragmentation, may come to shape these throughout the life course. I attend to shifting bodily and familial capacities for viable urban futures, and how permanence remains for many, an ongoing endeavour.

I begin my analysis by describing the gendered instabilities of construction work, ill health, injury, and fragile familial relations faced by women. I then explore how women negotiate these challenges with a pragmatic ethic against the odds to build permanence in the city. I focus in particular on the accounts of Durgamma, Mariamma and Basamma, who skilfully deploy networks; savings; land; borrowing; medical help and otherworldly intervention. With this pragmatism these women aspire for social mobility and an enduring project of being urban. However, their futures are also contingent on the booms and bust of the property industry. Such projects that combine idealist and materialist ethics in attempts to mediate the difficulty of reality are often invisible in anthropological accounts of the precarious poor who are seen either to lack aspiration, are imaginatively constrained by the pursuit of security, or are without interest in the material.

#### *A brief introduction to the Yadgir colony*

My first visit to the Yadgir colony took place some months after I began attending the weekly sangha meetings of its female residents, hosted by CSA, a local NGO. Having grown tired of the long procession of visitors over the years who had come, asked questions, and left, my presence was initially, grudgingly tolerated. Following three months of childcare attempts, awkward compliments on tattoos<sup>17</sup>, jewellery, and saris, and an array of clumsy greetings in Kannada; the women finally showed a semblance of acceptance, expressing their desire to feed me and inviting me back to their homes.

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<sup>17</sup> Most women from rural areas in Yadgir, Gulbarga and Raichur get tattoos when they are girls although the practice is now dying out.

The Yadgir colony consists of hundreds of low-rise two-room *pukka* apartments in faded hues of the blues, greens, pinks and oranges. It is populated almost exclusively by families from the regions of Raichur, Yadgir and Gulbarga, who, displaced by drought, sought their incomes in construction work several hundred miles to the south. Like many residential areas of the city, the colony is situated near a lakebed, and is prone to flooding during Bengaluru's monsoons. It is entered via a dirt lane scattered with tempo trucks, wheelbarrows, and cement mixers, alluding to its residents' primary occupations. The decades old establishment of the colony, vis-a-vis residents' shared occupations, make it a fruitful site from which to consider the changing landscape of construction labour and its corresponding impact upon long term resident workers. It provides an individual and yet scalable example of the endeavours of migrant families to achieve permanence over resulting generations in the city.

Home to over five hundred families, the colony's population is rapidly growing since out-migration to other areas of the city is low, while in-migration from village relatives is high. Cross-cousin marriage remains the prevalent norm, meaning those born in the colony often reside there for the entirety of their adult lives. Overcrowding and the prohibitively expensive rental deposit requirements of the city meant a number of residents live under the communal block stairwells for want of affordable or available alternatives.

Similar to Mary Searle-Chatterjee's settlement of scheduled caste sweepers in Varanasi (1981), the Yadgir colony constitutes its own micro-community – in many ways closed-off to the surrounding city. At any given time, a number of unofficial guardians (men and adolescent boys indulging in 'time-pass') loiter by the entrance; smoking, spitting, and staring at passers-by. Aside from the residential buildings, the colony houses an *anganwadi*<sup>18</sup>, a government school, a small shop, and a never completed 'community building'. Between residences lie a rabbit warren of pathways which transform into a quagmire during the monsoon. When it is dry, they are occupied by an array of wandering animal and human residents; firewood bundles; flame-blackened pots; rubbish; and various drying laundry and food items.

### **Precarious work and quests for permanence**

This section analyses experiences and representations of precarious, unskilled construction work among women in the Yadgir colony. It begins by providing a brief context of colony residents' relationship with the two main forms of unskilled

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<sup>18</sup> An *anganwadi* is a children's nursery school which provides midday meals.



construction work: *gaare* and *coolie kelsa*. It examines the ways in which construction may inhibit or enable women's urban mobilities and quests for permanence. At times, this work breaks down the rigidity of gender norms; enabling the quest for permanence by colony women, and yet, as Choudhury (2013) and Choudhury and Clisby (2018) also evidence, it simultaneously upholds gender distinctions. Women's expressions of pragmatism subsequently serve as attempts to negotiate the contradiction between opportunity and constraint in construction work elucidated in this section.

*'Any other job would be better': The limited offering of construction work*

Construction work was spoken about by research participants in their narratives as a hard and often unavoidable part of life. The wage for *gaare kelsa* earned in the colony is between two hundred and fifty to three hundred and fifty rupees per day for women and three hundred to four hundred and fifty for men<sup>19</sup>. Although it remained the colony's chief source of income, work was increasingly scarce. To rise to a better position within the industry, a pre-existing amount of capital was required – to be a *maistri* one needed sufficient financial and social capital to call upon enough labour power to fulfil contracts – which some in the colony had achieved due in part, to their close physical and relational proximity. Few however, had managed to ascend to trades, since the requisite forms of capital to do so were often outside of the financial remit or social networks of the majority of colony residents. For women, trades were forever unattainable due to the gendered discrimination of the industry.

When I remarked on the physical exertions of construction work to Basamma, one of the colony's first residents, she replied; 'But that's our fate. We're used to it'. Basamma, had spent most of her life in Bengaluru, arriving when she was in her own words, 'wearing frocks'. In her mid-fifties, Basamma is a rare exception to the typical retirement age from construction. Basamma works whenever work is available (three to four days per week) – something she is keenly aware of since the family's *maistri* lives behind her house<sup>20</sup>. When I ask Basamma if there was not something else she could do

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<sup>19</sup> While due to demand, Bengaluru generally offers a higher wage for construction workers than many other big cities in India, living expenses have risen exponentially for the urban poor in recent years (Vera-Sanso, 2012; Rao, 2018; Roy, 2018), meaning this did not necessarily translate into higher earnings for workers.

<sup>20</sup> Recruiters are primarily long-established colony residents who may call or visit nearby houses when work is available, or simply spread the word and wait for their trucks to fill up in the morning. They charge around ten rupees per worker for equipment and transportation costs. These local connections are perhaps the reason that Basamma was able to stay employed for so long within the industry in spite of her advanced age.

given the frequent instances of finding no work she replied that domestic work ‘involves working with water, and I can’t do that’. This was a frequent consensus regarding the apparent health risks of working with water, with a number of women I spoke to expressing apprehension concerning this or because they didn’t feel confident using the kinds of cleaning products and methods that middle-class employers expected.

Yellamma, Basamma’s daughter, confirmed there were not many other options in the colony. Home based work such as tailoring was not enough to make a sufficient income from, having become saturated due to dense networks and limited clientele; ‘a lot of people stitch here. Construction work is better’, she concluded. Indeed, construction work was viewed as a preferable alternative by many women I spoke to, since it paid higher wages than domestic work, something Choudhury similarly reports in Bangladesh where domestic work was also ‘virtually the only alternative’ (2013:888).

While there were few opportunities outside of construction to progress, there were fewer still within it. Entrenched gender discrimination ensured women would never move beyond ‘helper’ work. Women were widely perceived as unable to learn – an obstacle they were aware of. Indeed, when I asked informants if there was anything else they could do, I was often greeted with incomprehension or irritation for making such a naïve inquiry concerning this predicament; ‘Learning is out of question! We have only learned to do hard, physical labour, how can we be expected to learn anything else now given that we aren’t even literate?’ came one exasperated response. ‘This is all we know how to do’, constituted a frequent answer of multiple women regarding future employment prospects outside, but also within, construction.

Such replies communicated women’s frustrations as well as their pragmatism concerning the static nature of the industry and the limited options outside of it. Indeed, Lakshmi, a colony resident who lived with her family under a stairwell, voiced her desire for more work in lieu of a higher position; ‘There is no higher thing for us, the only thing we can do is accept more work every day. There is nothing such as a promotion’. However, this did not mean that women were unwilling to learn, contra the indications of employers I knew. When I asked if there were other positions she would like to learn in the industry, Lakshmi, similarly to some of Choudhury (2013) and Shah’s (1996) female informants in construction, did express this desire, but simultaneously, the knowledge this was not an option available to her as a woman; ‘I would like to learn but there is no one to teach me’, she reflected. Whereas ‘unskilled’ male workers had more of a potential to learn a trade and work their way up, women were routinely discriminated against, unable to rise above their positions (Breman, 2016; Choudhury, 2013; Parry, 2014; V.

Shah, 1996; Vaid, 1999). As Lakshmi's answer and various other findings (Choudhury, 2013; Eisenberg, 1998; V. Shah, 1996) including those of this thesis, illustrate, there were few men willing to break industry ranks and teach them. Even for male labourers; 'it is a difficult process to move up from unskilled to skilled labour because one needs regularity of work and a willing teacher to gain the required skills, both of which are difficult to find' (R. Desai, et al., 2014:10-11). Given the diminishing amount of work and their gender, for women this was impossible.

For colony residents regardless of whether it was monsoon or summer, or whether sand prices or the market were fluctuating or stable, the one constant in their working lives was its growing scarcity. Concerning employment in SEZs, Jamie Cross has observed that 'workers in these spaces are frequently held hostage by the way that they facilitate the global mobility of capital, making it easy for employers to move from one zone to another to take advantage of cheaper labor costs' (2014:132). This is not limited to SEZs, but has become the norm in construction across India and beyond, where many employers have turned their interests to a cheaper interstate or rural migrant workforces.

Although the construction industry in India continues to heavily rely on manual labour (Jha and Srivastava, 2016), the effects of both mechanisation and migrant worker preference were felt across the colony, with many families reporting around three days of work per week each. 'There is barely any work available nowadays', Lakshmi complained, adding; 'the workers from other states, they work for lower wages, making them the first preference'. While the favouring of migrant labour was a primary reason that residents were finding less work, the women were also aware of the growing toll of mechanisation; 'it's because of machines that can help in moulding' Lakshmi told me. This was also confirmed by Hanumanthi, an infrequent member of the sangha, who was deep in debt; 'We barely have work two days a week. With new machines that reduce human labour we have borne the cost'.

For women, whose share of employment days have been reportedly decreasing steadily since the early eighties (Jha and Srivastava, 2016:26), the effects of fewer available working days are more keenly felt. As construction becomes increasingly mechanised, women's are the first jobs to go (Baruah, 2012; Devi and Kiran, 2013). At the same time, despite a reported shortage of skilled workers (Baruah, 2010; Barnabas, et al., 2009), women are excluded from learning to operate machinery, further attesting to gendered binaries of skill perception. Such binaries, or 'gendered job segregation' (Zavella, 1987) are a pernicious trait of the global labour market; valuing risk-taking, speculation and technical ability, while gendering them masculine (Bear, 2013; Cassidy,

2013; Gooptu and Chakravarty, 2018; Monaghan, 2002; Mies, 1986; Ong, 1988; Ortner, 1972; V. Shah, 1996; Zaloom, 2004).

As Nandini Gooptu and Rangan Chakravarty note; ‘women’s skill, work and enterprise are often undervalued. For instance, dominant conceptions of enterprise are largely male gendered notions that purport to be universal and gender-neutral (Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Bruni, Gherardi, & Poggio, 2005)’ (2018:4). These ostensible norms they argue, become replicated in everyday praxis, influencing and subsequently gendering government and NGO policies (2018:ibid). In Bengaluru, this can be witnessed in the various NGO-led training schemes for working class women which are often impractical and inherently gendered, such as CSA’s continued insistence to promote tailoring within the colony, despite its saturation.

It is the same structures of discrimination which banish women to low-mobility positions within construction that similarly shape global assembly lines (Ong 1988; Kapadia, 1999; Mills, 1997; Pun and Huilin, 2010; Kondo, 1990; Kwan Lee, 1998; Salzinger, 2009; Zavella, 1987). While women find ways to critique and counter the exploitation they experience (Agarwala, 2013; Choudhury, 2013; Choudhury and Clisby, 2018; Parry, 2014; Picherit, 2012), construction work to a large extent, ‘traps’ generations into zero-mobility industry positions. Such limitations are as discussed, vocalised by women who, as their employment dwindles, believe they possess few outwardly marketable skills. Subsequently, many interlocutors did not want their children working construction, but acknowledged that options outside of the industry remained limited, as Lakshmi informed me concerning her own children; ‘They will probably be construction workers. There are no other options’.

The non-existent job mobility of *gaare* and *coolie kelsa* thus had the propensity to keep women in a static position for the rest of their working lives. On the one hand, unable to rise to a trade or higher salary, whilst on the other, lacking in the perceived requisite skills suited to alternative vocational pathways due to a paucity of material and social capital. ‘Any other job would be better, but there are no opportunities’, Hanumanthi observed. In his study of manual labourers in post-Soviet de-industrialised Russia, Charlie Walker states informant responses were ‘indicative of both the material and the symbolic impoverishment of manual labour’ (2016:51). With this in mind, while the low-wages and low-prestige of ostensibly unskilled construction work in India is evident, how might the women of the Yadgir colony consider their work? What forms of urban or extra-urban mobility might construction labour also facilitate?

*'The first time you hold a pen can you write everything perfectly?' The skill of 'unskilled' labour*

From the late seventies onwards, the work of *gaare kelsa* became a family affair in the Yadgir colony. Recalling the first time she worked construction after moving to the city following her marriage, Mariamma, who had since retired, described how she learned the process of cement moulding with her husband and affines:

There were both men and women. We were a big gang. The whole family. My husband has two brothers. So the brothers and us, their wives, we all went together. I was scared. The first time you hold a pen, can you write everything perfectly? No. Just like that, we watched and observed the others. They did it. We followed.

As Walker argues concerning the example of a worker who 'likened the ability to operate his machine to playing table tennis which requires similar alertness and precision' (2016:57); such descriptions may invite the listener to reconsider distinctions between skilled/unskilled work such as *gaare kelsa*, the setting and moulding of thick cement slabs which form building foundations, floors, and ceilings. Despite the persistent labelling of this work as 'unskilled', *gaare kelsa* like *coolie kelsa*, nevertheless requires an amount of bodily skill, strength, and speed – of the lone body but also co-ordination with other workers. Indeed, as Trevor Marchand elucidates in his research on labour apprenticeships and embodied learning (2008), actions which must be learned, and require worker co-ordination are indeed skilled, even if they are not perceived as such (263).

Performing *gaare kelsa* with one's family demanded physical strength, developed in the fields from an early age, and the correct judgement to ensure the cement was mixed and set evenly, contributing to the structural integrity of the building. Although this significance was widely unrecognised by the upper echelons of the industry, when an entire 'slab' or floor was completed, some *maistris* would provide food for their team to mark the occasion. In this way, *gaare kelsa* constitutes one of the most integral parts of the construction process, even if it was not directly recognised as it.

Whilst Susan Eisenberg's journeywomen informants in the US spoke with pride of the projects they had been involved with (1998), there was little sense of connection expressed by the women I knew and the buildings they had worked on. Although Choudhury has argued that experiences of women working construction in South Asia are 'not directly comparable' (2013:885), there were nonetheless, some small degrees of independence and pride conveyed concerning construction by informants. This may not have been overt pride in the act of building itself, but additional aspects of *coolie* and

*gaare kelsa* which provided other avenues of freedom and knowledge which the women of the colony may not have otherwise enjoyed, as I now discuss.

*'I've been to every place in Bangalore': women's alternative mobilities in construction*

On the one hand, construction work initially kept women under the eyes of watchful kin and affines, and on the other, it allowed them to establish a degree of mobility within the city they would not otherwise have had. Though female residents increasingly engage in movement outside of the Yadgir colony, this is by no means typical of all households, and has evolved over time. Indeed, many families continued to keep close tabs on daughters, sometimes removing them from school once it required a longer journey and restricting them to the colony.

Construction enabled a degree of movement and acquisition of knowledge of the wider city, as Channamma attested; 'I've been to every place in Bangalore. I've been to Nelamangala, Koramangala, Bannerghatta, Jigni, Kanikunte, Banashankari, HAL [the city's old airport] on work, I've seen all these places', 'but now I don't go anywhere' she added, ruefully. Before the days where *maistri*-provided transport had become the norm, families used to take buses and walk great distances across the city. Similar to David Picherit's migrant informants who spoke with pride of the places they had travelled to in Chennai (2012), many of the women I knew would refer to their days walking and travelling by bus as tiring, but with pride and nostalgia, recalling how much the landscape had altered in the years since they had first traversed it. Indeed, Durgamma, one of Shanthamma's eight daughters, would similarly list the places she worked, as if considering her own contribution to the growing cityscape, while joking about the time she got lost taking a bus back from Electronic City, Bengaluru's first IT office campus hub. Here she advised, giving not dissimilar advice to the property developers she had indirectly worked for, was a suitable place to invest in land.

For some women, construction also allowed them to utilise the same structures of masculinity within the workplace that were often used against them. Although higher job mobility was out of the question, female workers who were paid directly<sup>21</sup>, would not shy away from asking for their wages (see also Parry, 2014), or from acknowledging, as Choudhury and Clisby observe (2018), that they worked just as hard as male colleagues and husbands. As Durgamma declared; 'I've done everything men are doing now, and

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<sup>21</sup> It should be noted that not all women worked in family groups and therefore some, like Durgamma, whose husband seldom worked, were paid their own wages, rather than their male kin or husbands, which was common industry practice.

I've fought for my pay; if they say something, I tell them to pay me first and then talk. I've never not gotten paid for my work!' In comparing herself to male workers and referencing norms of masculine productivity in both her capability as a worker and a breadwinner; Durgamma was critiquing and yet upholding the gender norms inherent within construction work. As numerous scholars have noted concerning working women's experiences across the globe (Choudhury, 2013; Choudhury and Clisby, 2018; Freeman, 2009; Mills, 1997; Salzinger, 2009; Searle-Chatterjee, 1981; Tenhunen, 2003), low-paid and low-prestige positions may provide new opportunities and experiences; expanding capacities and understandings of self-worth in myriad and at times, contradictory ways.

### **Unhealthy marriages, unhealthy bodies**

This chapter has thus far provided an overview of the main source of employment in the Yadgir colony, evaluating how construction restricts women's pathways of vocational mobility; and yet may facilitate otherwise unpermitted forms of manoeuvre in the city. This section places women's narratives of labour into a wider context; attending to the precarities located within the everyday, including ill health and neglectful husbands. It examines how colony women look to contain situations of economic and residential liminality brought about by the precarious conditions of work, non-earning husbands and sudden setbacks in health.

*'After going through all that trouble, I wonder why I need a husband': critiques of non-working husbands*

Just as limited employment options had a tangible impact upon women's mobility in life, marriage too, inevitably played a substantial role. Since divorce and remarriage remained rare in the colony, women who married men that later eschewed work, typically faced a more difficult life. The location of prospective husbands also had an impact on place of residence, meaning that for those born into the city, urban life was by no means, permanent. In the event of a village-based groom, a life of agricultural work and relocation some hundreds of miles away to the north remained a daunting prospect for many girls of the colony.

While there is a multitude of work on women's informal labour in South Asia (Agarwala, 2013; Choudhury 2013; Choudhury and Clisby, 2018; Fernandes 1997, 1998; Kapadia, 1999; Parry 2014; Roy, 2003; Vera-Sanso, 2012), fewer studies have fully attended to the experiences of women as the primary breadwinner within their

households. As well as contributing to this dearth of literature, by examining women's narratives of providing for their families and containing 'critical events' (Han, 2012), this section also considers how women describe non-working husbands. In doing so, it attends to how orthodox and hegemonic masculinity is also practiced by women (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Cassidy, 2013; Choudhury, 2013; Monaghan, 2002) with the failure of men to live up to gender normative roles as providers.

Concerning scheduled caste male relationships with masculine ideals, De Neve has argued that theirs is 'a highly contradictory relation with this dominant model given that their material conditions seldom allow them to live up to common expectations, and their manual labour compares poorly with the widespread aspirations of white collar jobs' (2004:64). As Barbara Ehrenreich notes in relation to the American casual labour market, for already lower mobility populaces, finding alternative or higher forms of income increases in difficulty (2001). For colony men, who saw their work and its worth diminishing over time, there were similarly few alternative avenues of income outside of construction. Domestic work is considered a female occupation, and other enterprises, including the recent aspiration of working as an Uber driver, required considerable sums of investment, often out of reach for most families.

In the absence of regular work, some men gave up looking, passing time in the colony loitering by its entrance, or choosing the company of alcohol. While Penny Vera-Sanso has argued that 'The very pervasiveness of the ideology of man as provider reduces available masculinities to a single, idealized figure' (In Cornwall, Kariroris and Lindisfarne, 2016:16), what of those that chose to eschew this? In the face of not being able to adequately provide for one's family, an outright rejection of this role may offer more agency than attempting to live up to it. At the same time, for some who did not or could not work, the need to assert patriarchal authority at home was embodied through forms of domestic violence and demands placed on the family (Choudhury, 2013; Choudhury and Clisby, 2018; Reid and Walker, 2005; Roberts, 2016). Husbands at times treated their families as their source of income, physically and verbally shaking down wives and children for money. When Basamma spoke of her late husband who died during *Shivraathri*<sup>22</sup> some years prior, she did not eulogise him, rather she recalled the difficulties of performing the financial and affective duties of care he demanded of her:

If he was alive, he would ask for money from everyone, he'd take ten rupees from you if you came home. I didn't like that. he would quarrel with me if I told him not to do it. If you're good, you'd give him ten rupees, if

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<sup>22</sup> *Shivraathri* is a Hindu festival that marks the day of consummation of Lord Shiva's marriage to Parvati.



you're not you'd ask why you should give him the money, he can't say anything then. And he wanted good food like meat<sup>23</sup> and *ragi mudde*<sup>24</sup> all the time, and if that wasn't prepared, he'd start a quarrel again. He'd tell us to take loans, he just wanted food. By this time, he'd be drunk. He'd wake up, and he'd start drinking alcohol before his morning tea.

Though such examples ostensibly support feminist post-Marxist critiques of women's familial exploitation (Federici, 2018; Hartmann, 1979; Humphries, 1981; Sacks, 1973), gender roles and relations are by no means fixed, particularly over a lifetime. As Vera-Sanso cautions; 'attempts to shape gender [...] relations by tying adult masculinity to men and breadwinner roles are constrained by the interaction of social and labour market factors and by the potential for reversal' (2016:81). Though a number of women were exploited by their spouses as Basamma's testament reveals, at times they undermined such attempts, or negotiated, drawing on the authoritative and masculinised rhetoric of breadwinner; albeit with varying results, as I now discuss.

Like her mother Shanthamma, Durgamma had been one of the first women to approach me from the sangha, chiding the others for their lack of friendliness; 'They are very suspicious. These people [the sangha members from the colony] they don't know how to make friends. I make friends everywhere I go', she laughed. Despite being from the colony, Durgamma lived outside since she could not afford the rental deposit. However, these were not her only reasons for doing so; 'if someone is good, then other people [there] will ruin them', she once confided.

Outside of the colony, Durgamma had many friends and acquaintances, ranging from the local MLA (Member of Legislative Assembly)'s wife who gifted her saris and food, to a mother and daughter who invited the family over during festivals. One lunch time, I even encountered a sleeping policewoman on her floor. In the company of her Christian visitors, Durgamma became formal, whilst with her friend Janaki, she would crack jokes, or hold semi-whispered conversations about the workings of magic. Finding time between her four cleaning jobs, Durgamma received this array of characters in her single-room dwelling in the sports complex she cleaned, which she was permitted to stay in rent-free through her employer. While this had been a considerable relief to her following the family's prior life of living on construction sites, as Durgamma noted, it

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<sup>23</sup> In the colony, many families ate a vegetarian diet, largely due to the expense of meat. Poorer families would usually keep a stock of old *akki rotis* (rice based bread) they would eat with some chilis and offer to guests. Rice with a watery vegetable gravy were relatively common fare, but dal was rarer.

<sup>24</sup> *Ragi mudde* is a ball made out of millet and is a popular dish in Karnataka and some of the regions of Andhra Pradesh.

also meant she was at her employer's disposal any time of the day; 'They've given us this house, we can't really say no to them'.

Though outwardly cheerful, one of Durgamma's main sources of angst was her husband of fifteen years, Hanumantha, who, fully immersed in the grips of alcoholism, regularly failed to seek work. It was not only Hanumantha's failure as a provider and at times, violent behaviour that troubled Durgamma, but his prior desertion. When the couple had been living on site together with their two daughters, Hanima and Hema, Hanumantha had left Durgamma for another woman. Often mocked by her brother Srikanth for her large appetite, Durgamma had stopped eating; 'I was so thin that if a strong wind blew, I would have fallen down!' She informed me. 'Then I prayed to God, [and] he left that girl'.

God was not the only force Durgamma had called upon to return her errant husband; having taken a lock of his hair and a photo to pursue non-church sanctioned methods of retrieval. As Roberts observes, religion was for the slum dwellers he worked with at times, a fluid and multifaceted entity (2016). People from the colony similarly held a plurality of beliefs in the same household, as highlighted by Durgamma's multi-theistic family (she came from a Hindu-Christian household, and her brother was a Buddhist). Subsequently, an array of religious and at times, magical methods could be sought for the betterment of lives.

Regardless of which invocations proved efficacious in the end, Hanumantha returned, but also tried to take his own life, consuming rat poison. 'Anyone else would have left him for the dogs' Durgamma once said, bitterly. However, Durgamma had taken him to hospital, incurring sixty thousand rupees of medical bills; 'After going through all that trouble, I wonder why I need a husband', she confided. In spite of her initial longing for her husband's return, Durgamma now dreamt of a world in which she could be alone:

After looking after him, taking care of him, he doesn't even go to work, he doesn't look after the children, he doesn't bring the rations, and he doesn't do anything. He drinks and sleeps. If I say something, he fights with me. One day he'll die and then I'll be okay.

At times, Durgamma dared to dream of divorce. However, when pressed, she admitted 'I can't, because of the way people talk. They will accuse me of having an affair with another man and ruin my reputation'. Maintaining one's honour and the honour of one's family was paramount, and many women were prepared to see difficult marriages through to the end. For the next generations, such cycles often proved repetitious. After the birth of her son, Hemanth, Durgamma, whose father was also an alcoholic, alongside numerous other family members, decided she did not want the burden of raising an even

larger family with her husband; ‘I told them what my husband was so they had to do the operation’<sup>25</sup>, she recounted.

Though Roberts claims at times, female informants quelled their critiques of husbands, particularly concerning their alcohol consumption, (2016:51), such privileges may be revoked when women are the main wage earners. Just as Basamma knew how to stall her husband’s demands for money for alcohol by knowingly asking what it was for, Durgamma was also not afraid to shame her husband into helping around the home when she felt overwhelmed by work and fatigue. One morning, following a particularly unpleasant encounter which had resulted in Hanumantha forcibly taking money from her the night before, she exclaimed in front of (but not directly to) him; ‘Don’t I get tired, looking after the children and doing all the work? The clothes have to be washed. I’m getting him only to do the washing!’

### *Women as providers*

In lieu of spousal income, how did women married to non-working husbands attempt to seek permanence for their families? Low interest loans from the sangha were often relied on for private services such as medical care and school, in the absence of sufficient state infrastructure. However, it offered a limited means of borrowing, and there were few alternative credit avenues outside of the colony. Durgamma, whose wages supported her husband, three children and her youngest sister Ammu, focused her energies on embedding herself within many networks in the locality. Harms speaks of this quality in relation to one of his informants, Tu’, who was able to cultivate the kinds of social relations which ‘enable people to develop a network of associations and reciprocal relationships that facilitate social and economic development (Kipnis 1997)’ (2013:358).

Though Durgamma did not possess the same large expanses of idle time as Tu’, she had managed to build a substantial web of connections via the colony, the sangha, and the neighbourhood. The outcome of these efforts over time yielded toys, food, clothes and life insurance from various well-wishers. Loans were obtained via the sangha and free tuition for the children and the family home via two of her employers. Indeed, Durgamma took great pains to interact with those around her including myself; illustrating the pragmatic deployment of the social capital she had cultivated over time and space within the city, the colony, the sangha, and her various workplaces.

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<sup>25</sup> This refers to tubal ligation or a hysterectomy.

Basamma however, was less able to draw upon such resources due to her more advanced age, aversion to domestic work, and denser-colony dependent networks. For Basamma, whose peers had mostly retired from construction, her income from *gaare kelsa* was not only needed to help support her family with increasing daily expenses (a growing occurrence Vera-Sanso (2012) also notes concerning older female slum dwellers in Chennai), but to pay for her unmarried daughter's dowry and wedding. In the colony, this could easily amount to over two lakhs, and Basamma had already borrowed a sizeable sum from the sangha to pay off debts and buy her daughter's jewellery. Until she was forced to leave construction, Basamma's main concerns centred around providing for the household. Indeed, many of the women of the colony experienced an over-distribution of roles – taking on singlehandedly at times, the position of caregiver and household provider. In these instances, children (especially girls) were more likely to work from earlier ages to supplement an absent income, look after younger siblings, or raise their own dowries, as Durgamma herself once had.

There were however, also downsides to Durgamma's seeking of fragile forms of urban patronage. While the accommodation provided through her domestic work was a boon to the family, she now had to contend with the uncertainty of when she might get paid, or called on to perform extra cleaning duties. Though she attempted her own negotiations at home with her husband, by entering an occupation where caste, class and gender intersected but produced markedly different outcomes and interactions with employers than in construction; Durgamma was unable to frame her demands for pay in the same way. However, she still keenly asserted her independence, albeit in a different way; 'After I've come here and started working here, I don't even take money from anyone, nor do I ask for it, I only take it if they ask me to take it', she told me.

To counter the unpredictability of sporadic payment and the unknown longevity of her home, Durgamma however, was working on another project towards familial permanence; travelling north to Raichur and leaving Hanumantha the sport centre cleaning duties while she took care of securing some family land. Not only was it a highly unconventional act for a woman to register land in her own name, but as Durgamma confided, it was necessary to safeguard it against her husband, who she feared, 'would probably sell it after drinking too much'. It was her desire to build a house there one day, providing herself and her children with an alternative living arrangement if necessary, or an additional source of income. Land, as Durgamma knew, was one way of securing permanence.

While the roles and actions of female providers challenged traditional gender norms, they also contributed to the maintenance of orthodox masculine hierarchies (Connell, 1987; 2005 Cornwall, Karioris and Lindisfarne, 2016; De Neve, 2004; Reid and Walker 2005,). As De Neve notes ‘women’s actions and discourses can generate, affirm, or contest particular masculinities as much as those of men’ (2004:65). Counter-deployments of the provider rhetoric to non-working husbands may conversely, reinforce patriarchal norms while challenging the rigidity of gender roles. For instance, while Durgamma was fiscal head of the household and would remind Hanumantha of his failure to provide, which he at times would respond to by performing housework, as a wife she felt unable to break with colony marriage norms; remaining subject to his violence and yet duty-bound to care for him as he took her money.

While I acknowledge critiques of misinformed and casteist/classist generalisations of alcoholism and poverty (Roberts, 2016; Duneier, 1999) including Krishna’s findings that alcoholism ‘did not appear to be associated preponderantly with [...] households who have suffered descents into poverty’ (2011:81), reports suggest that households headed by female wage-earners send children into work, and have the highest chances of falling into poverty (A. Krishna, 2011; Kabir, Jesmin and Salway, 2000). Such dynamics have a lasting impact on the overall wellbeing and future pathways of families – for Basamma’s children, who had to work construction from an early age, or Durgamma – who had been in a similar position herself as a child. Women attempted to counter the absence of male support by seeking productive networks and loans, looking to alternate possibilities in the village, or prolonging their working lives. Dependent on bodily labour, the physical cost of work and their dwindling capacity to meet this demand, remained a constant source of anxiety and calculated risk for informants (see also, Prentice and Trueba, 2018), as the next section elucidates.

### *The costs of maintaining familial health*

Given the reliance on their bodily strength for their income, health was a frequent concern for the female residents of the Yadgir colony. Indeed, spending the majority of one’s life working construction shaped the body; many interlocutors had grey hair, shuffling gaits, stooped backs and an array of health problems by their thirties. Women especially shouldered daily routines of wage labour and domestic chores while experiencing (and simultaneously exacerbating) a number of health problems and injuries. Moreover, informants often put the physical wellbeing of the rest of the family

above their own. As Basamma put it; ‘you can’t restrict how much the smaller children eat’.

As a result, many women suffered from routinely bad health, often aggravating old injuries while creating new ones to put off hospital visits and the prospect of lost earnings. This often proves counterintuitive, as Krishna observes; ‘Households who have remained persistently poor have also experienced a disproportionately high level of health-related events involving major expenditures’ (2011:72-3). It is thus unsurprising that for the residents of the colony, the fear and realities of ill health, physical ailments and chronic pain, were a daily source of conversation, calling to mind Scheper-Hughes’ conclusions concerning her sugarcane cutting informants of the Alto in Brazil, whereby the nature of their work ‘privilege[s] the body and [...] instruct[s] them in a close attention to the physical senses and symptoms’ (1989:185).

Money was not the only reason that women delayed their own medical treatment. There remains a profound distrust of hospitals among poorer populaces – particularly government establishments (Scheper-Hughes, 1989; Jatrana and Sangwan, 2004; Van Hollen, 2003). Given previous and continued state efforts to limit poorer populations by often badly performed sterilisation procedures (see R. Das and Singh, 2004; Gupte, 2017; Pulla, 2014) such distrust is hardly misplaced. It was also present in the colony, where many women I knew were incentivised by the state to have ‘the operation’ (tubal ligation or hysterectomies), but had little knowledge of the procedure or its after-effects, which were often significant. Indeed, alongside the effects of manual labour and the strains of multiple childbearing, for many interlocutors, the difficulties encountered from ‘the operation’, which they believed made them weaker, often dominated women’s discussions and restricted their range of physical movement.

Many colony residents thus preferred to use private hospitals when they could due to accusations of negligence and corruption against the state medical facilities. Experiences with government hospitals often involved the handing over of unofficial ‘fees’ levied by various hospital staff members as Janaki confirmed; ‘They won’t give [an] injection if you don’t give them money. The attendants do it without the doctors knowing’. Other times, they were dismissed; ‘They say nothing is wrong’, Basamma told me. The worst incident I encountered was the tale of Mariamma’s husband’s stolen kidney. As a result of such medical encounters, many residents did not trust government hospitals but had few affordable alternatives.

Durgamma’s latest experience with the local government hospital was another such example. Barely two months after Hema, her youngest daughter’s bout of dengue

fever and hospitalisation, Hemanth experienced a prolonged urinary tract infection, something he suffered from frequently. The boy was hospitalised for almost a week and Durgamma had to pay the medical staff for every small procedure performed and each item used. Moreover, she stayed in the hospital with him, incurring large expenses in meals for her daughters, and losing her wages. Durgamma got into further debt with the sangha in her attempts to cover the extra costs and loss of income. While such illnesses are not unusual, they are far greater among the urban poor due to crowded conditions, open water and poor sanitation (Appadurai, 2013; Kabir, Rahman and Salway et al, 2000). As indicated, they may also prove unfeasibly expensive to treat, not only due to corrupt hospital workers ('they are careless' I was informed), but also lost wages, at times decimating whatever women might have saved over years in the course of a few days.

*'What can we do if we fall?': The bodily world of work*

Though many informants often attributed their pain to construction work, for Durgamma, the majority of her pains had begun when she stopped working *gaare kelsa*; 'When I was working I was fine, it's all started when I stopped. I've worked a lot back then; I've done everything the men do. Now I find it difficult to walk'. For Durgamma, *gaare kelsa* had imbued a sense of strength and leverage equal to men. Having left the physical and social world of construction, this energy was spent, and she was susceptible to the aches and pains of everyday life. As Hollan elaborates:

*The body does not exist in a physical, social, or cultural vacuum. Indeed, the self-system maps the body as it moves through a culturally constituted world, which, like the internal dynamics of the body, is characterized by dynamic states of both stasis and change.* (2009:213)

Undertaking construction not only as a lone actor, but also as part of one's wider social and familial milieu shaped outlooks on health and bodily ability, as Basamma's earlier assertion concerning the colony's capacity for manual labour ('we're used to it, it's our fate'), also indicates. In Bear's ethnography of shipbuilders (2015a), *shahosh* is an essence similarly associated with male productivity; growing 'gradually inside you through the act of labor. It reduces your fear of dangerous conditions and increases your ability to make a living' (2015a:181). Indeed, in Durgamma's somatic ontology where she had once 'done everything men do', the change of leaving behind the more physically demanding work of *gaare kelsa* prematurely and entering the feminised realm of domestic work, had diminished her strength.

Like *shahosh*, the income-generating efficacy of a young, healthy body also diminishes over time due to old age and weakness or accidents. As a last resort, many

women sought pain-dulling injections, continuing to work at the cost of their long term health. But when the implications of missing daily pay were more immediate vis-a-vis longer-term detriments to health, there was little other choice. Durgamma expressed her acknowledgment of this lack of options when we were discussing the potential consequences of not seeking appropriate medical care for her hip pain. ‘God is there. What can you do? God should not let me live till that long, he should take me away from here before that. He shouldn’t let me suffer’, she mused. Others cured their pains through more immediate encounters with God, as Radha, a teenager working *gaare kelsa*, informed me; ‘My legs were hurting. I had a pull so I couldn't walk at all. I got an injection but it didn't help. Sunday I went to church and everything became alright’.

While women might have called upon both injection and divine intervention to prolong their working lives and endeavour to build familial futures, the ageing body remained an inescapable inevitability. For Basamma, in spite of her intentions to continue saving for her daughter’s marriage, her days working *gaare kelsa* were limited. Basamma frequently complained of pain – experiencing aching legs whenever she placed any weight on her head, a common ailment for women in the industry<sup>26</sup>. When I asked Basamma how long she would continue working for, she answered; ‘for as long as God allows’.

Given the deaths and injuries that had befallen many households within the colony, there were few options for informants to maximise the full potential of bodily labour possible before time or misfortune eroded it; leaving women to trust in the medical and at times, the divine. When such methods lost their efficacy younger family members stepped in, entering but seldom leaving construction once they had given up their schooling to support the family. As Mariamma, who had once fractured her back during an accident on site, asked me, ‘what can we do if we fall?’

### **Looking to urban futures (or not): whither mobility?**

Accounts such as the above were commonplace in the colony where God and fate were interspersed in everyday speech; both placeholders and evocations in the absence of surety concerning work, the family, and health. This final section subsequently explores how women, despite the precarities of uncertain and hazardous employment, ill-health and marriage, attempt to build urban futures. In examining such endeavours, it also

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<sup>26</sup> One of the main duties of female construction workers in India is lifting loads of bricks with their heads.



acknowledges the potential for disjuncture between speech and action – particularly concerning the language of fate and religiosity and women’s overall subscription to them.

Appadurai argues that the subscription of the poor to various belief systems reduces ‘their dignity, exacerbate[s] their inequality, and deepen[s] their lack of access to material goods’ (2013:186). Such norms, he claims, ‘take a variety of forms: some have to do with fate, luck, and rebirth; others have to do with the glorification of asceticism and other forms of material deprivation’ (2013:ibid). Do sentiments such as those expressed by residents of the Yadgir colony really contribute to the longevity of pernicious conditions of poverty? Or, rather are they utilised alongside other conceptual frameworks to make them less biting? As Stafford and a number of anthropologists have observed (Elliot and Menin, 2018; Graeber, 2012; Moore, 2003; Sangren, 2012), understandings of fate may be malleable or indeed, ‘tinkered’ with, ‘through sheer effort directed primarily at other human beings’ (2012:101).

Like the co-existence between magic and religion, informants’ narratives illustrate the multidimensionality of life worlds in which cosmologies, strategies and senses of temporality vary. While norms concerning rebirth and reward in the next life do to some extent, perpetuate caste oppression (Cotterill et al., 2014; M. Deshpande, 2010; Sankaran, et al., 2017) as Appadurai rightly indicates; striving towards a better next life does not negate efforts to seek permanence in the present one. True, the act of work and sustenance gained from it were for many, vocalised as the sum-total of their lives; and yet, informants’ actions often alluded to a greater universe of aspiration – if not for themselves then for their children. Moreover, it is important to consider how the voicing of aspirations, achievements or positive sentiments in general may also be cautiously muted, to safeguard against misfortune or jealousy (see for instance, Dean, 2013; Hughes, 2017; Moodie, 2013), something explored in further detail in the next chapter.

### *Poverty and the language of fate*

Franz De Boeck discusses the relationship between poverty and language whereby the former “cuts away from” the capacity of one’s language to reveal, demystify, clarify, or explain the unsteady ground of one’s life, a life that seems to be formatted by conditions that are increasingly dictated by fate or by miracle’ (2015:S147). For residents of the colony, the uncertainty of both the everyday and the future was articulated through a mixture of fatalism, silence, and at times, ostensibly unanswerable questions. As Shanthamma, once put it; ‘What to do... in this poverty?’

While belief in fate or miracles was evident, such subscriptions ran alongside others in resident's ontologies. For instance, Durgamma had suggested her husband's return was the result of prayer and Radha attributed her injury healing to her attendance of church, but both also sought alternative solutions to their respective problems. Durgamma, who once declared 'everything is because of God only' had practiced magic alongside prayer to secure her husband's return; whereas Radha had sought medical pain relief, and yet attributed her recovery to church, though she was not Christian.

Allusions to God (it was not always clear which) were employed as a frequent speech device by colony women in discussions of uncertainty or misfortune. Laithamma, an elderly colony resident had tried to send her oldest son to school. He had made it to tenth standard, but was now unemployed, sporadically working construction, a not infrequent occurrence for the educated children of the colony. 'We had some good aims, but it didn't work', she told me. 'All the gods will see us. We are having future planning and we are working hard but it doesn't work and the children don't benefit. It doesn't improve our children'. When I asked her now what it was she wanted for the future, she answered; 'Until the strength leaves my body it is good enough to eat until I die. If God gives food it is good enough'. For Laithamma, and a number of women I knew who had tried to obtain a better future for their children by sending them to school, there was no linear career path in an increasingly competitive job market – especially for scheduled caste graduates with little social or financial capital to draw upon (A. Deshpande, 2011; Jeffrey, et al., 2008).

For some, the act of striving itself had spiritual significance as Laithamma's statement 'all the gods will see us' attests. What might it mean to be seen by a higher force when invisibility is routinely experienced by the poor (Appadurai, 2013; Chatterjee, 2004; A. Gupta, 2012; Roberts, 2016)? Such utterances may also serve as evocations: calls for recognition of one's hardships from the divine. Indeed, Katy Gardner has argued for their agentic quality, claiming; 'Narratives that stress passivity and acceptance of their 'fate' are one way – amongst various others – of representing the self' (2012:121). Also in relation to Islam but, I argue, equally applicable in this context, Auke Smid has stated that 'regardless of whether their work is valued or reciprocated, women imagine themselves to be aiming for another stabilizing, sacred moment: divine judgement' (2010:48). For those uncertain of the future, permanence might be sought in the next life or afterlife through their actions in the present.

Though I remain cautious of over-emphasising the connection between the capacity to endure amongst informants and their faith in various forms of divine reward;

such references were made and drawn upon in times of difficulty or the quotidian (sometimes one in the same) to provide strength and solace. These beliefs need not necessarily be as disempowering or imagination-reducing as they are sometimes interpreted (Appadurai, 2013; Bernard, et al., 2012; Forster, 1965). Rather as stated, they co-exist alongside other strategies, subscriptions and ambitions, such as seeing one's child enter a different field, or Durgamma's frequently expressed desire to fly on a plane and visit me in London. In these ways, the norms described by Appadurai and other scholars as being detrimental to the aspirational capacities of the poor, are not as damaging or as absolute as suggested.

*'It's hard to have any mission for the future because they don't pay': temporal and spatial locations of uncertainty*

For many residents of the colony, the concept of the future shifted by their changing fortunes, remaining vague and uncertain for some and jarringly close for others. Just as poverty may create 'its own vocabularies and verbal regimes' (De Boeck, 2015:S147) as I have attempted to illustrate, it creates its own temporalities, too. As Ann Allison and Charles Piot note; 'Such a reconfiguring of temporality is accompanied by an intensified attention to the materiality of everyday existence, one focused on shelter, food and body – on an everyday here and now' (2014).

Though informants frequently expressed ambivalence and at times, incomprehension towards future planning, it was not always for lack of trying. The nature of their employment presented a prime obstacle to this, as Lakshmi, reflected; 'It's hard to have any mission for the future because they don't pay'. Indeed, colony dwellers often identified the capriciousness of construction work and the actions of employers as culprits in their ongoing poverty, reflecting on how precarity prevented the realisation of their future planning. As Tsing similarly observes; 'A precarious world is a world without teleology', in which 'Indeterminacy, the unplanned nature of time, may prove frightening' (2018:20).

In cities such as Bengaluru, where urban development plans and concomitant construction processes are highly uncertain and often non-linear, women such as Lakshmi, unable to find a more permanent home for her family beyond their stairwell space in the colony; experience unclear futures due to their highly flexible employment. The opacity and precarity produced by real estate speculation and decentralised forms of public-private planning, thus removes financial stability for some, while enabling more for others. As discussed in the introduction, India's real estate industry and related forms

of infrastructure investment by global speculators have only grown following the 2008 crash. After this event, stock markets have sought more ‘secure’ property investment in the global south, and shadow banking<sup>27</sup> has also injected increased capital flows to arenas such as property, because of low or risky returns from other sectors. The completion, or indeed, the *proposed* completion of urban housing and infrastructure generates income for the state, various corporations, and property developers; while producing unstable futures for the labourers responsible for their physical execution.

For some women, including long term residents, their period of residence in Bengaluru itself remains a further unknowable aspect of the future. Reverse migration was not an uncommon occurrence in the Yadgir colony, not only for reasons of marriage. Since Basamma did not have the resources for the overspill of relatives in the family home or the money to rent another similar property, it had been decided that selected members of the household would have to go back to Yadgir, including her daughter Yellamma. Basamma herself also acknowledged the prospect that she might have to return to the village once she was no longer able to work, due to the growing living costs of the city and her immanent retirement.

Life in the villages of northern Karnataka is a legacy of highly uneven state development (see S. Mishra and Bhattacharya, 2015; Ram and Bhatt, 2018; R. Rao, 2013), with scarce electricity, water and livelihood opportunities. In this environment, the future is equally unknowable, as Yellamma attested; ‘We strike deals that we’ll till someone’s land for a year. If it rains, we make a profit, or we don’t’. Born in Bengaluru, like many of the colony, Yellamma spoke of the debilitating heat of Yadgir, that she was unaccustomed to; ‘It’s too hot there, so you don’t feel like working in that heat. For people who have worked there forever it feels normal, but we have adjusted to working here’. Yellamma’s family would relocate once their loans in the sangha were paid off; ‘We are planning on going back to the village next year, we have some loans here. We’ll have to pay them back and then go back’. While some families were bringing in their families to settle in the city and increasing their urban foothold, others faced enduring uncertainty, shifting family members between the city and the village, which was referred to as a place of hardship in comparison.

### *Building familial futures*

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<sup>27</sup> Refers to forms of lending and other forms of financial activity outside of the regulations. It is important to note that this does not refer solely to the transactions of unregulated institutions, but under-regulated ones, too.

Given the precarity of construction work, the instability of family relations and gendered inequalities, how was it that some residents had managed to achieve permanence in the city while others had not? Though Mariamma's family for instance, had suffered its share of misfortune including her back injury and her husband's ill health, they had managed to lease her husband's land in the village to raise their daughter's dowry for her marriage to an engineer – a coveted match. Following these developments, the family had taken on a neighbouring property for their growing household of fourteen, as more kin from the village joined them. In comparison, Basamma had little claim to her husband's family's land, which had gone to his brother, since inheritance within colony families remained male-dominated. Patriarchal norms of inheritance may thus shape the futures of children and spouses, making Durgamma's efforts to secure land in her own name significant as a step away from this.



*Playing chowka bara with Mariamma. Photo credit: Shraddha Nelamangala*

With a host of daughters and daughter in laws to call upon, Mariamma now spent her days watching TV, talking with friends, and playing *chowka bara*<sup>28</sup>. While the adults of the house still largely worked in *gaare kelsa*, speaking of the prospective mobility for her grandchildren, Mariamma was cautiously optimistic; ‘just like us, our kids have also worked in construction. But their children are going to school. They will be the change. They are literate. So, they can work in some office. We should see what their fate is.’ However, more of the family's hopes within Mariamma's household and across the colony tended to rest with sons, who it was widely accepted, would remain in the

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<sup>28</sup> *Chowka bara* (‘twelve squares’) is a game similar to ludo

household as future providers as opposed to daughters who they had to raise a dowry for. Mariamma's grandson for instance, went to private school while the girls attended a local government one. 'How can we afford it?' She asked. 'For them (the girls) we have to save and then spend on their weddings.'

Mariamma herself had wanted her daughter to stay on in college but she told me, there had been 'too many people to fight' on the issue. While her grandchildren had a chance of progressing beyond construction work, steps towards alternative careers paths and futures thus remained largely governed by gender. Indeed, although many women had the aims of educating all their children if financially viable, often it was not, and a number of girls in the colony still received little to no education as a result. Moreover, the returns from such considerable investments were becoming increasingly doubtful.

Although reports and studies attest to the growing enrolment of scheduled caste populations in education (A. Deshpande, 2011; Hnatkowska, et al., 2013; Jeffrey, et al., 2008) this demographic remains largely excluded from the formal labour market (A. Deshpande and Newman 2007; A. Deshpande and Palshikar 2008; Iversen, et al., 2016; Iversen and Raghavendra 2006; Jeffrey, et al., 2008; Thorat and Attewell, 2007). This in turn, is increasingly characterised by rising demands of higher education levels (A. Deshpande, 2011; Jeffrey, et al., 2008). While recognising that it was the best chance for their children out of construction, colony residents thus remained wary of the perceived benefits of education.

There was also the issue of financial practicality. Channamma for instance, whose grandchildren were the first generation to be enrolled in school, had mixed feelings about whether this would be of any use; 'God knows if it's for the better or not' she concluded. When I asked Channamma if she thought the girls of the colony could become doctors or lawyers, some of who had expressed these aspirations during our English classes, she replied; 'It's possible, but we can't give them that level of education. It's enough if they study until the eighth standard and know how to write four letters. We have lives to lead, if we just educate them, where is the money going to come from?'

Given the low-income level of her household, where her daughter-in-law Chandan was the sole earner (Channamma's son had died in an accident on a construction site some years prior), the possibility of Channamma's grandchildren completing their education was unknown. However, in the colony where such situations were not uncommon, school attendance was increasing, though an uninterrupted education was yet to be established as the rule rather than the exception. While colony children continue to enter construction at relatively young ages, this may also be balanced with school,

although this varies by household. They may also be encouraged to absence themselves from school if there is a rare overabundance of work and a shortage of workers in the colony. Interruptions in schooling may thus echo the uneven rhythms of the city's construction industry. For some children, significantly, their efforts also helped fund their education, including four members of my English class, who worked *gaare* and *coolie kelsa* in their holidays to do so.

Peggy Froerer claims that girls' aspirations in Chhattisgarh are gradually adjusted over time to 'what they could practically achieve' (2012:352). However, as I have attempted to convey concerning the manoeuvrability that comes with pragmatism, this did not necessarily rule out familial aspirations for later generations. While Shanthamma once (rhetorically) asked concerning her children, 'What can they do? They'll work and they'll eat', this did not mean parents were immune to disappointment over failures in upward mobility for their children (and by extension, themselves) either. This is not only highlighted in the example of Laithamma, but Shanthamma's own efforts to educate her only son, Srikanth, who is now an Uber driver (although he acknowledges this is a far less profitable occupation than previously envisioned). Her daughter Durgamma also had high hopes for her son, Hemanth, but became crestfallen when a friend informed her it was all but impossible for him to join the police force due to the unattainable size of the bribe required. As this section has illustrated, the frequent and ostensibly pragmatic language of working and eating in the everyday of the colony is belied by more expansive fields of possibility, vis-à-vis interlinking forms of aspiration and care.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has presented a picture of urban and vocational mobility among the women of the Yadgir colony as they attempt to establish various forms of permanence for their families in Bengaluru. It has illustrated how the closely connected networks of the colony may prove valuable in the face of labour precarity; enabling residents such as Basamma to retain employment, despite being past their working prime. On the other hand, it has also shown how dense networks, by nature of marriage and the low mobility of construction, may prove restrictive, with *gaare kelsa* remaining the primary employment option for many colony families. Perhaps sensing these shortfalls, Durgamma had sought additional mobilities outside of the colony, through the wider urban milieu. In doing so, Durgamma was able to expand the field of immediate (and longer term) possibility; building friendships and productive networks where she could

and going against colony gender norms by attempting to secure land in her own name and not her husband's.

For some families, construction did provide the foundations upon which to build permanence in the urban milieu, ensuring the reproduction and longevity of households and at times, the education of children. Indeed, as later colony generations increasingly attend school, improved social and economic mobility is becoming possible for residents including Mariamma's family. However, the extent to which inequality is experienced, even among ostensibly similar demographics, also shapes possible fields of manoeuvre in women's engagement with pragmatism.

The distribution of capital and concomitant forms of colony mobility however, are uneven – influenced by gender, rural land ownership, marital status, and the ever-present shadow of alcoholism. Stable familial residence within the city remains fragile for many interlocutors; threatened by numerous fragmentations of the everyday through accidents, a child's illness, the death of a husband or prolonged unemployment. It is arguably because of these fragmentations that the language of fate retains a powerful presence in everyday speech, existing alongside a plurality of cosmologies, and at times, obscuring innermost desires for alternate destinies which may or may not come to fruition. This not only guarded against possible misfortune, but also the potential for jealousy from one's neighbour and kin which I discuss further in the next chapter; or simply, disappointment.

While I have shown that a language of fate and feeding were regularly drawn upon in colony women's narratives of unknowable futures, the past, and potential failings of their endeavours; these were not all encompassing. Although the everyday capriciousness of work continues to make the future for some, barely conceivable, this does not mean women did not or could not consider exit strategies from their own or their children's, stated destinies. Indeed, the multiplicity of beliefs witnessed in simultaneous adherences to medicine, religion and magic, attest to the flexibility and adaptability enabled by a range of pragmatic engagements with the everyday and beyond to meet various ends in the city. This lived and exerted ethic of pragmatism allows women to focus on the most pressing needs of their children given the failure of the state, and their husbands and employers, to provide.

It may not quite be the measure of freedom and dignity that Singh suggests, but as evidenced, a pragmatic ethic allows women in precarious livelihoods to work towards and sometimes, achieve, various degrees of stability and permanence. While Bengaluru's rapid expansion and prolonged real estate boom has enabled the establishment of the



Yadgir colony, should the market bubble burst and work completely dry up, the capacities of colony women to instil permanence across generations will be further stretched. They will nevertheless, respond, and endure.

CHAPTER FOUR:  
'LOOK WE UNDERSTAND YOU HAVE PROBLEMS BUT YOU HAVE  
BORROWED MONEY':  
THE SOCIAL LIFE OF A SAVINGS GROUP

*Kauveri, the CSA area manager, sits on a plastic chair above the rest of the sangha members seated on the concrete floor. By her side behind a substantial pile of worn ledgers and the metal trunk holding the deposits and documents belonging to the group, sits her lieutenant Shanthy, the primary co-ordinator of the CSA hosted SHG (Self-Help group). 'We won't be giving you interest today, we can only give you the interest if Konnamma pays at least half her debt', the group is informed. Shanthy focuses her attention on Konnamma; 'Look, we understand you have problems, but you have borrowed money. You may have a thousand problems, but we can only wait for so long'.*

*Konnamma, a frail older woman, remains silent as the women begin to raise their voices until the room reaches a loud cacophony. It is near impossible to follow who is saying what as questions and accusations fly thick and fast around the room; 'Because she hasn't paid, how can you not give us money?' 'Why did you borrow so much if you couldn't pay it back? You should have been responsible!' Finally, Konnamma responds; 'It was going well before'. 'How was it going well before?' Shanthy, asks. 'You borrowed money here to pay off debts you had somewhere else. We shouldn't have lent you the money in the first place'. 'We were doing well before, after one of my sons went to jail, we've been in a lot of trouble' Konnamma replies. Yechamma, a, bespectacled middle-aged woman interjects; 'Don't you think we want to borrow money as well? We give up on so many things to save up and come pay it here, how can you do this to us? You've been saying for the past four months that you'll pay, and now you do this!'*

## **Introduction**

Building on the previous chapter's analysis of the physical and ethical labours undertaken by the women of the Yadgir colony, this chapter explores how these are supported by the relational work of saving and borrowing via a Self-Help Group (SHG), or the *sangha* as it was colloquially known among informants. Many researchers have deconstructed narratives of finance-oriented development initiatives, and the resulting analysis is largely polarised. Some have observed and critiqued initiatives of 'do it yourself development', which systematic of neoliberalism, place the impetus on the poor for their own economic empowerment (Batliwala, and Dhanraj, 2009; Elyachar, 2002; Guérin, 2014; Huang, 2016; Karim, 2008; Lazar, 2004; Moodie, 2008; Pattenden, 2010). On the one hand, others have praised them for giving voice and expanding economic resources to marginalised groups (Acharya, et al., 2005; Burra, et al., 2005; Finnis, 2017; Mohapatra and Sahoo, 2016; Peters, 2016; Swain and Vallentin, 2009; Tesoreiro, 2006).

Acknowledging but also going beyond the binary nature of these arguments, this chapter provides a nuanced account which explores the entanglement of the Self-Help Group (SHG) with social relations of envy, reciprocity and inequality. While also acknowledging that the SHG reproduces top-down gender relations, I show that it opens up avenues of low-interest credit and facilitates a social space that support projects of permanence for colony women. Moreover, I illustrate the ways in which at times, its aims are diverted by the social relations of the Yadgir colony. In particular, I show that the sangha is a site that enforces dominant concepts of femininity and productivity that contradict the lived experiences of female construction workers and their families. These have problematic and unequal effects particularly on the financial mobility of those most materially worst off (Breman, 2016; Moodie 2008; Pattenden, 2010). However, I conclude that in spite of its shortcomings, the sangha remains vital to the endurance of colony life and projects of mobility.

While this chapter identifies the significance of a male-free space, it thus acknowledges the caveat that SHGs do little to challenge patriarchal norms (Garikipati, 2008; Kabeer, 2001; Mayoux, 1999; Moodie, 2008; Pattenden, 2010); at times upholding them through idealisations of appropriate (and unattainable) forms of womanhood, and gossip. Subsequently, for certain subsets of its members, the SHG project imposes gendered and conventional notions of productivity. These often prove detrimental to the most deprived in the community. Top-down, such constructs are informed by middle class judgements of poor women. From the bottom upwards, by colony women who may also judge others on the basis of age, femininity, and marital status. The ethics and social relations produced in this space are therefore not always beneficial, producing their own forms of valuation and gendered inequality. Such inter and intra class inequalities however, should not negate the potential of the sangha as a place where (some) women could pursue projects of permanence away from the male-dominated leadership of the colony.

The efficacy of the Yadgir colony's SHG group cannot thus be judged from a binary position which other studies have tended to adopt. While the sangha was created from and depended on the closeness of the colony, such entanglements I will elucidate, may produce curious and contradictory outcomes; threatening the sangha's very longevity, and yet simultaneously ensuring its functioning through an ongoing state of near-rupture. The SHG has thus taken its current form from this social and ethical tug of war. On the one side, the social relations and ethics that CSA attempt to 'impose' on the sangha, and on the other, the social relations and ethics of the endogamous kinship groups

of the Yagdir colony. In the ensuing struggle of position, gendered and patriarchal relations, are present in both sides. As a result, neither full empowerment for women or full oppression are the outcomes. Mirroring the arrangements of many other institutions in the city, the sangha creates a place of potential for realising pragmatic ethical projects, while the outcomes of these endeavours are often contingent on women's positions in its socioeconomic hierarchies.

This chapter is arranged over three sections. It first begins with a brief introduction to the sangha and the now ubiquitous SHG model, and the present context of neo-development they sit within. The second section focuses on how colony women respond to and critique middle class attitudes towards the poor and their lack of recognition. Within this context, it attends to the role of humour as a mediator and simultaneously, a boundary enforcer, between working class and middle class actors. In doing so, it acknowledges the class disjuncture between middle class forms of training and awareness raising and working class women's lived experiences. By considering who is deemed worthy and more responsive as deserving recipients of loans and training, it attends to the contradiction between valuations of social and fiscal productivity, and how these often fail to recognise the worth of older women (see also, Cohen, 1998; Lamb, 2000; Vera-Sanso, 2012) in hierarchies and processes of loan seeking and 'education'.

The final section examines relations of jealousy and envy vis-à-vis reciprocity and repayment between colony women and CSA, attending to how the overspill of colony entanglements informs these practices amidst a backdrop of ensuing conflict and accusation. In doing so, it contributes to the modest body of literature on envy and mistrust (Ben-Ze'ev, 1992; Castellanos, 2015; Dean, 2013; Hughes, 2016; Foster, 1965; Van Vleet, 2003; Zhang, 2010). It concludes that while the closeness of ties within the colony may foster jealousy and mistrust, such closeness is also productive; ensuring reciprocity and an albeit fragile, group unity. This unity I argue, is forged by the need to maintain harmonious kin relations and women's pragmatic desires to ensure the fulfilment of their own projects of permanence, which in both instances, are closely aligned with the sangha's fate. If as CSA's website claims, the women's SHG program is 'designed to provide the poor with access to savings and credit systems, seeking to catalyse that process of empowerment through stimulating economic change within the lives of the group members' (CSA website, 2017); then what did this 'process of empowerment' through 'economic change' look like? And how inclusive was it?

## Women's Self-Help Groups and the rise of 'financial inclusion'

Across the world, the past two decades have borne witness to an increased state focus on informal economy workers (Agarwala, 2013; Elyachar, 2002). In India, this has taken form via various welfare initiatives and reforms. One of the most notable efforts includes The Building and Other Construction Workers' Act (1996), which was brought into law in Karnataka in 2006, alongside the establishment of the Construction Worker's Welfare Board and cess fund. Other similar initiatives have since followed, including the Unorganised Workers' Social Security Act (2008) and significantly, the recent attempt to extend the Employer's Provident Fund (formerly the exclusive domain of the formally employed) to day labourers in construction. However, as I discuss in chapter seven, such initiatives have benefitted few workers in reality.

Nevertheless, the current administration appears to be following this trend; undertaking projects including the *Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana* (2014), which aims to provide a bank account and basic insurance for every household, responding to a growing desire across a number of countries in 'banking the unbanked' (see D. James, 2014). However, in doing so, such initiatives simultaneously seek to financialise this demographic by introducing them to formal credit markets. Indeed, accompanying this focus on inclusive growth is the well-documented proliferation of micro-finance and self-help groups (SHGs) (Elychar, 2002; Guérin, 2014; D. James 2014; Kabeer, 2001; 2016; Kar, 2013; 2018; Karim, 2008; Kar and Schuster, 2016; Lazar, 2004; Moodie, 2008; Pattenden, 2010). In India, this prevalent model is primarily targeted at working class women, thus providing financial 'inclusion' to groups normally considered outside of the formal economy and its accompanying credit providers.

SHGs frequently incorporate 'life skills', vocational training, and awareness programs alongside the provision of microcredit. Such programs focus on 'female empowerment' while offering modest amounts of credit at low interest. Although the CSA staff referred to the savings group as the SHG, this was not a name ever taken up by its members, who referred to it exclusively as the *sangha*<sup>29</sup> – an appropriate example of the disjuncture between the language of development and local interpretations.

As well as offering loans pooled from its members' savings, similar to traditional *chit funds*<sup>30</sup>, the SHG provides various forms of the abovementioned training and

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<sup>29</sup> The word 'sangha' translates from the Sanskrit word 'community' and also refers to associations, unions, and charitable groups.

<sup>30</sup> Chit funds are common throughout the world and have functioned historically as an informal means of group savings. Turns would be taken so that one member would be eligible each week to take the money pooled by the group in the savings cycle period. The *sangha* differs as women are not

awareness sessions, including assistance with welfare claims from state institutions. Significantly, though CSA had initially attempted to get the SHG to take on additional financial products including bank loans and life insurance policies, these have been largely rejected by its members and the colony leaders. Indeed, while colony leaders had indicated they wished for the sangha to remain operational, it is perhaps because they did not wish to create further conflict, or indeed, further debt within the colony that they resisted such attempts.

Every Thursday morning, the sangha meeting is held in the area offices of CSA, close to the Yadgir colony. Members have been regularly attending on a weekly basis since its establishment some ten years ago. Until a year before, the sangha was held in the colony itself, but had to relocate due to friction between CSA and one of the colony leaders. Since its relocation, climbing the many narrow steps of the green apartment building to reach the small rooftop office had become a frequent source of complaint amongst the older women, often the most vocal participants of the group. Once they have made the strenuous climb, the sangha does however, offer a social space for its members to exchange daily aches, pains and gossip.

The (approximately) twenty group members are meant to contribute regular savings every week, although this is often not the case. Contributors each had the chance to take a loan from the week's payments if they desired (although only one loan is awarded per week), and there is no limitation on the amount of times a person can take a loan. Following each meeting, a member of the sangha visits the bank, depositing the cash and completed paperwork. Around two percent interest is charged on loans, which are repaid in weekly instalments, although this varies from person to person. Interest from the accumulated savings is paid once or sometimes twice a year, with a plate of celebratory biryani or another hot food. The longevity of the sangha however, is in question, as is the relationship of continued interdependence between CSA and the Yadgir colony, which the former seeks to partially disengage from.

## **Socioeconomic spaces of judgement**

### *'Do something and help us!': critiquing failures of care and recognition*

The opening vignette of the chapter provides a brief glimpse into the daily life of debt in the Yadgir colony where any number of interrelating scenarios could consign a

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restricted to taking loans only once each in its yearly cycle, although it should be noted that each SHG may operate different variations of this system.

single person or an entire family to a cycle of destitution. While informants spent a great deal of their lives attempting to manoeuvre through such obstacles as discussed in the prior chapter, it would be remiss to deny the lived state of temporal immanence also elucidated in the last chapter. Economist Sendhil Mullainathan and psychologist Eldar Shafir have described this immanence as a ‘scarcity trap’ (2013), which inhibits not only the ability to absorb ‘shocks’ (see also, Krishna, 2011; 2017) but the capacity to prepare for predictable ones too, including debt repayment. For Konnamma, who had retired from construction, the loan repayment might have been a predictable scenario, but losing the earning capacity of her jailed son was not. As a result, the loan repayment was becoming harder to put off, as were the demands of her angry neighbours and fellow sangha members.

This lived state of immanence is often dismissed or interpreted as further proof of the ill-discipline and impulsiveness of the poor (Appadurai, 2004; 2013; Breman, 2016; Roberts, 2016; Scott, 1985), who are considered to lack the ‘accumulative behaviour which would mean readiness to defer immediate gratification of their (basic) needs for future gains (World Bank 2015)’ (Breman, 2016:61). With such opinions expressed by employers, welfare workers and even activists, judgement-laden perceptions of poverty continue to seep into the lives of the poor via daily interactions (Breman, 2016; Duneier, 1999; Ong, 2006). As Huang notes, these views also come to inform the underlying logic of development initiatives whereby; ‘The poor were not simply entitled to a better, more secure, less vulnerable life that they could take for granted; rather, unlike the privileged classes, they must work hard to earn it’ (2016:160).

Saving in this instance, is presented as a disciplined practice of self-improvement for the otherwise undisciplined – increasing economic prospects and also building ‘a certain kind of political fortitude and commitment to the collective good [which] creates persons who can manage their affairs in many other ways as well’ (Appadurai, 2004:74). In her analysis of savings group literature, James examines how, contra attempts of various authors who ‘have often tried to divide their “economic” features from the “social” ones’, ‘Sociability disciplines people to save money in a manner that might not have been easy for them to do otherwise (Ardener 2010; Geertz 1962; Verhoef 2001)’ (2014:124). While as I will discuss, the sociability of the Yadgir colony was central to the exercise of saving, this was not always recognised in the SHG valuations of economic productivity, despite being utilised by it.

Indeed, the poor were not only concerned with the economic conditions of their inequality either. As Roberts reports, there was resentment among his informants towards

higher caste citizens for failing to help (2016), but also vis-à-vis the lack of recognition accorded to them by this demographic in their daily lives. Such failures are rooted in but extend beyond caste, including the failure to acknowledge and fairly recompense the labour of the working poor (Bear, 2015; Roberts, 2016; A. Shah et al., 2018; Scott, 1985); and at one of the most basic and human of levels, the failure to identify and empathise with their suffering (Roberts 2016; Scheper-Hughes, 1989; Scott, 1985). This fundamental lack of recognition constitutes a wider historical tapestry of structural violence, into which the strands of poverty, caste and gender are interwoven (Bremman, 2016; A. Deshpande, 2011; Roberts, 2016; A. Shah, et al., 2018).

Colony women are well aware of these failures which they perceived as an injustice. The women were not looking for hand-outs, as Durgamma had also stressed in the prior chapter, but a form of more meaningful, lasting change as I was once informed by Sithamma; ‘we are trying to tell you, these are our problems. We are poor. We don't have money. Do something and help us! Don't give us money. But repair [fix] this’. What was embodied in Sithamma’s plea to ‘repair’, was an acknowledgment that there was an imbalance which needed addressing, as well as a demand to both recognise and fix it. In this way, the failure of the better off to administer aid or provide adequate employment was one way in which informants critiqued the quotidian injustices of poverty.

Acknowledging the stereotypes employed against them by stressing that they did not want hand-outs, informants defensively responded to them – frequently inquiring if I had or knew of any available work. At the same time, in an action that constituted both mocking and acknowledging the judgement of the poor, older women would jokingly ask for money, aware of how they were perceived by the NGO visitors and the outside world, as Shanthamma’s joke (‘some people just say ‘we want money, that is all we do, isn't it?’) in the opening vignette of the thesis highlights. In his ethnography of second generation Turkish Hauptschule students in Berlin, Stefan Wellgraf (2014) discusses how humour and joking may be used as critiques of societal discrimination, while also attempting to protect oneself against it. By identifying the tropes that stereotyped them, the women subverted them; using them as a source of banter, but also to vent their frustrations. As Wellgraf suggests, humour critiques ‘certain forms of extreme symbolic degradation linked to inequality within the existing order and in doing so suggests the need for a transformation’ (2014:182).

The line between humour, hostility and affection is a fine one (Castellanos, 2015; Wellgraf, 2014; Sanchez, 2016; Scott, 1985). Indeed, unlike CSA, while I was able to enter the colony when I wished, the jokes from friends and informants (sometimes one



and the same) often carried an acknowledgement of our different positions as Lakshmi once illustrated, taking my hand, mock-deferentially, while others laughed; 'I am a simple woman, you can ask me questions and pay me for a day's work!' Whilst Andrew Sanchez (2016) postulates that highlighting one's differences through humour may unify ethnically and religiously different groups; in this case humour made visible class and race difference. It thereby brought to the fore underlying tensions in women's relationships with outside visitors to the sangha, who came, took surveys (and often unauthorised photos), and left, never to be seen again.

Tensions in class relations were also expressed through humour during sangha meetings. These were particularly visible in the interactions between group members, Shanthi, and Kauveri. Shanthi herself would engage in banter when she was in the mood to, but this was often barbed. This is demonstrated by an incident when she jokingly asked the women if they 'ate cheques for lunch', chastising them about overdue repayments. As Elisabeth Betz and Toon van Meijl observe in relation to intergenerational interactions between members of the Tongan diaspora; 'The perpetrator uses humour to shame people into behaving without directly shaming them' (2016:116). At the same time, they note the discomfort and even distress, that belie such acts in a society where extreme emotions are otherwise discouraged (117). This passive aggressive element of humour can similarly be perceived of as a requisite to the running of the sangha, where to avoid open conflict between its members, and between members and CSA, both sides attempted (and sometimes failed) to keep their emotions in check.

During what had been a heated discussion concerning the lack of trust in the group, Kauveri, exclaimed in a half-mocking, exasperated way; 'The point is... you people don't want an infant born at dawn, or at dusk or even in the night!' This remark critiqued the irrational superstition and paranoid vision of the poor drawing a distance between them and the rational middle classes. Trust was represented as a capacity of particular classes, one which the women of the colony were perceived to be lacking. The women however, laughed off this insult.

'Joking relations', according to Alfred Radcliffe-Brown (1940) require the use of humour between parties to maintain hierarchy. While colony women joked amongst each other, on few occasions did they attempt to use the same form of humorous barbs frequently interspersed in Shanthi and Kauveri's communications with them. In this way, the women's laughter may have been an acknowledgment of their place within these uneven power relations, to thus accept the 'joke' put forward by those ostensibly better placed in the relational hierarchy. It may also have been a defence mechanism; releasing

the nervous energy in the room created by such a barbed remark (see also, Freud, 1925; Martin, 2007; Scott, 1985; Yue et al., 2016).

Indeed, a number of otherwise openly tense interactions (of which I should stress, there were many) were frequently diffused through this awkward kind of satirical humour which served as an antagonistic mediator between class-based forms of judgement and uncomfortable truths. As James Scott attests concerning the relations between villagers of his fieldsite; ‘The rich have the social power generally to impose their vision of seemly behavior on the poor, while the poor are rarely in a position to impose their vision on the rich’. (1985:24). In this way, the humour of the poor might be deployed as a counter critique or indeed, a small act of rebellion, but the critiques of the better-off become far wider-reaching than jokes. They re-stigmatise the poor and push them to recognize themselves in the mirror of the stereotypes of the middle classes.

*‘I thought you were a good girl!’: Training for what? Training for whom?*

Training was a site in which classist ideals of respectable womanhood were imposed on participants. Indeed, the very assumption that women were ‘free’ for training reflects distinctly classed notions of gendered temporality. That is, that colony women’s time was like that of a middle class housewife – for whom ‘leisure’ periods could be taken up with education activities. The women of the Yagdir colony were to the contrary, constantly balancing demands on their time. Nevertheless, many did attend sessions since access to credit was an integral element in fulfilling various forms of familial permanence. As indicated by informant’s earlier critiques, this did not, however, mean they accepted classist visions of respectable womanhood, or their portrayals of the poor, endorsed in these sessions. Indeed, older women in particular were often unruly and refused to accept a compliant role during these scenarios. How then, did colony women respond to such efforts of ‘capacity building’ and their accompanying rhetoric?

Training sessions were not interactive, typically including a dissemination of information followed by an invitation of consensus from the audience that they agreed to what they were being told, or ‘taught’. Among the majority who had work at home or outside, the frustration at the time they would have to wait to either make repayments or bank their savings was evident. For most sangha members, time was neither a plentiful or evenly distributed resource, and even for those without work that day, there was plenty to be done around the home, including fetching water, which was only available twice a week to those without working connections.

Many women did not actively engage in the sessions, although undoubtedly this was a mode of behaviour exhibited more by older members, less likely to remain silent or be coerced into further activities, and more likely to disrupt them. As Ashar Zaidi states, global ‘development discourse until now seems to have given minimal attention to women beyond reproductive age’ (2015). In India, the omission of the elderly as productive citizens on numerous levels can be witnessed in both state data and independent research, which continues to largely overlook this demographic (Vera-Sanso, 2012). This section attempts to correct this absence, examining and contrasting the forms of training and borrowing available to older members vis-à-vis their younger peers, and their often divergent outcomes.

Bestowed with the nickname of ‘Santana Lakshmi’<sup>31</sup>, an ironic quip referring to her abundance of daughters, for Shanthamma, humour served as a regular defence mechanism. At times, she exaggerated or made light of her illiteracy and innumeracy; perhaps preferring to at least intentionally provoke the laughter of others. Shanthamma’s frequent joking also facilitated small acts of rebellion, often expressed in training sessions, when she presented herself as seemingly untrainable; inviting laughter from her fellow sangha members, and dismay from CSA with her reactions and antics. On one such occasion when everyone was seated on the floor, Shanthamma pulled up the only plastic chair in the room, temporarily reversing the usual seating hierarchy between herself and CSA. She sat on it obstinately for some time, refusing to move and repeating ‘I am old’ in way of semi-mocking excuse; but one which still invited respect for her senior status. While women like Shanthamma might be mocked for their lack of education and perceived ignorance, they also purposefully encouraged this image, giving them a ready excuse should additional responsibilities be requested of them, but also through their episodes of ‘acting up’ providing a form of resistance akin to Scott’s weapons of the weak (1985).

Kauveri as it transpired, was displeased by the reception of the colony women to the training; ‘That area sangha – they don’t have time or discipline. Very difficult to give awareness and training there. I tried. The old ladies they all scold us. They have a lot of issues with the sessions and because of what we tell them, they find a lot of concepts difficult to accept’. However, according to Mariamma, part of the reason behind the dissatisfaction was the fact they had seen it move from the colony to the CSA office in the last year. This meant that; ‘now it feels boring when we go here’. When I asked why

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<sup>31</sup> This refers to wealth and abundance – in this case befitting of the women’s humour.

they no longer preceded the sangha meeting with a song (a frequent practice that existed among unions and organisations and until recently, was part of the sangha's routine too), Mariamma responded; 'before, there were small sanghas, now all of them are clubbed into one, and there isn't enough time for all of them to speak. And before we used to gather in our homes, now we gather at places surrounded by different houses who have a problem with the noise'.

To Mariamma, the sangha's upheaval from the colony had not only meant a physical shift but a social one too, removing a great amount of the pleasure she had derived from the group; 'Before, there were fewer sanghas, and there was a lot more time, so we would socialise. Now they try to stuff everything into a few hours, and that leaves no time for anything else'. Indeed, it was in part, the sociability of the colony which had fostered strong enough bonds to continue Yellamma's sangha for the last decade. At the same time, this was utilised as an asset which attracted and maintained a supply of foreign donors – from whom CSA received the majority of their income. Julia Elyachar similarly observes the harnessing of the social networks of the poor in the present era of development, whereby; 'The embeddedness of economy in society—that modernization and capitalism were supposed to have severed is seen as a positive attribute to be emulated' (2002:500).

The decreasing amount of time to catch up with one's kin, friends and neighbours thus correlated with the increasing amount of 'capacity-building' exercises which appeased international donors, but delivered little in way of return to their target audience (see also, Lazar, 2004). Alongside this shift in the development paradigm came a renewed domestic focus on women. Following the nineteenth century women's reform movement, which centred around education and the refinement of idealised nationalist qualities among typically higher caste, middle to upper class women (P. Chatterjee, 1989; Donner, 2008; Pappu, 2004; Uberoi, 2006); current development initiatives in India have now altered the subjects of their focus. Scheduled caste and working class women have become the new priority for attaining aspirational forms of modern Indian womanhood, as Rekha Pappu attests:

*The tone and the nature of the concern (regarding population control for instance) clearly indicate that the woman that is being discussed is lower class. It is this woman who needs to be made literate. It is also taken as a given that it is this same woman who needs to be "empowered". It is important here to note that the thinking within the field of development that seeks to empower poor women on the one hand, and the rationale within the field of hard core economics on the other, seem to have found points of convergence in the present time.* (2004:31)

This convergence between nationally and globally informed ideals of ‘women’s empowerment’ and the logic of the market economy has the tendency to produce exclusionary forms of development. Within the remit of these emerging initiatives, older women are simultaneously rendered unable to *earn* and unable to *learn*.

The women’s complaints about the training were not without foundation. Domestic violence sessions were monotonous and unengaging, featuring a CSA staff member holding up pictures of the ‘ideal’ family versus an arguing, violent family and inviting the audience to identify which was the ‘right’ one, while another member read from a script, often losing her place. At times, there would be a visiting NGO conducting surveys with lone women to the side, which afforded little privacy, with other women at times, mockingly interjecting if the respondent was lying.

In a considerable departure from her mother’s antics, Durgamma initially expressed her approval for the domestic violence training, including a session which sought to illustrate the usefulness of the social linkages within the colony by encouraging women to group together. ‘We need to stand up for ourselves’, Durgamma said, adding ‘If something like this happens we should try and sort it ourselves, or if we cannot we should go to them [CSA]’. However, on later enquiry, she admitted she had found the session condescending; ‘They don’t teach anything [.]. Assume you don’t know anything. “We’ll teach you what we know” [they say]’. Basamma provided a similarly mixed answer, declaring; ‘It is useful to listen to, but a lot of people don’t’, she paused. ‘There’s always trouble in a family, he might get drunk today and hit someone. We must scold him’. The impetus of such sessions as both of these evaluations reveal, fell to women.

Durgamma also highlighted the primary flaw concerning the group intervention tactic, declaring; ‘It is hard because you need to protect the honour of the house’. It was during such sessions that the disconnect between the realities of trainers and trainees became clear. In the colony for instance, women often learned about domestic violence first-hand. It was thus condescending as Durgamma had hinted, to be ‘taught’ various incarnations of it via picture cards with cartoon portrayals of poorer families. Moreover, the same ties the trainers wished to utilise were also the ones which kept women in abusive marriages, as Durgamma hinted, to protect the honour of the family. The high rate of intermarriage within the colony, where those closest may also be the perpetrators of violence, further complicated the matter, as Shantha, a teenage domestic worker, once revealed concerning her sister’s abusive marriage at the hands of her husband and in-laws; ‘We married her to kin! Can you imagine?’

During another session, participants watched adverts from the famous ‘Bell Bajao’ or ‘Bell Maadi’ (‘ring the bell’) campaign. This depicts male protagonists intervening in various scenarios by ringing the doorbell when they hear the apparently tell-tale sounds of violence. One woman turned to her neighbour, (audibly) whispering; ‘what about people who don’t have bells in their house?’ The disjuncture between these differing material and social realities was finally given a voice when Sithamma, in response to the speech given by a visiting lawyer on seemingly unattainable legal recourses and processes, commented; ‘There is a court, there is law but we don’t get [justice] fast. The law is distant for us, it is difficult for it to reach us and difficult for us to get as well’. This observation received no reply.

Informants’ attendance of these training sessions and also various meetings for other organisations, unions (of which they were rarely members) and vocational courses, thus formed part of a carrot and stick approach. This applied not only for access to credit, but also access to the state. Basamma for instance, was still awaiting news of her daughter Yellamma’s maternity benefit from the state construction workers’ welfare board, which CSA had begun assisting her with almost two years prior (the baby was now a toddler). When I asked Shanthi about this, her reply was that Yellamma had not been for training. It was implied that were she to attend, CSA would be more proactive in pursuing the case. However, given that the colony already had an abundance of home-based tailors, something Yellamma pointed out in the last chapter, the use of such training was questionable, with some women inevitably seeing little value in it.

While younger women were persuaded to attend vocational training, facilitators did not encourage older women. This is despite the fact that many still worked and also required access to credit. Older women in the colony with reduced support networks (particularly widows) thus had few options outside of getting into debt with moneylenders or their neighbours (both of which charged higher rates of interest than the sangha), or continuing with construction or domestic work until their bodies gave out and they became unemployable. Moreover, they were perceived as unsuitable borrowers due to their ageing bodies, frequently widowed statuses and ‘closeness to death’ (see also Kar, 2018, 2013), further adding to their financial instability.

In spite of their significant presence within the sangha, older women, were thus conceptualised as less desirable female citizens — illiterate, frail, prone to bad habits and unreceptive. As a result, they were often left to their own devices. While older women openly chewed betel for instance, this was not a habit the young were permitted by CSA, as I discovered when Sarojamma, in her late teens, was ‘caught’ by Shanthi; ‘What are

you chewing? Areca nut? I didn't think you were like that. I thought you were a good girl', she exclaimed. Sarojamma does not reply, but another woman chimes in; 'she's been doing it since she was young. She takes some *paan* and keeps it between her gum and her teeth. It gives a buzz'. 'A buzz?' Shanthi replies incredulously. 'Why don't I just bring you a bottle of alcohol next time?' As Lazar discovered in her fieldwork with microcredit groups; 'Through them the women are encouraged to work on their selves within a particular image of womanhood' (2004:311). Older members were allowed their habits due to their perceived inability to reform, whereas younger women were steered towards the path of being 'good girls'. While Lawrence Cohen notes, gendered ageism is rooted in history in India and beyond (see for instance, Cohen, 1998:74), it is also symptomatic of the neoliberal ethic underlining these forms of development; valuing subjects on their assumed income-generating capacity.

Indeed, this hierarchy of education and concern revealed one of the underlying paradoxes of the SHG project. It harnessed the sociality of the colony that the older women had produced through both their waged labour and labour of care for two generations; while eschewing their potential as productive members of society. If the aforementioned 'economic change' proposed on CSA's website that helped 'empower' women was not available to older women, then what forms of financial assistance did the sangha provide to this demographic?

*'We do not give large amounts to old people': age, debt and loan eligibility*

The loans received by members were not only supplemental but at times integral to sustaining the possibility of life. For the better-off of the group, loans formed part of a wider accumulation of resources to stabilise and advance projects of permanence in the city (and the village). For the more precariously positioned, in a world of uncertainty, the sangha was, as one member attested; 'our permanent source of money when we are in need'. For many women the sangha was a preferred source of loans. It offered 'fairer' rates of interest than moneylenders and even neighbours who charged interest higher than the two percent of the sangha. But the sangha could be an unreliable source of funds because of the judgements on credit-worthiness made in its interactions. For example, Sithamma, had borrowed fifty-five thousand rupees to correct the vision in her youngest son's eye. But when Sithamma sought funds for a second eye operation for her son it was not granted. Sithamma complained to me; 'We ask for help to be given to such people'. In this instance, Sithamma was not only referring to her son, but the poor. Such comments

also raise the important question of what constituted the ‘right’ kind of help in the sangha, and to whom was it given?

In this section, I explore this question by showing that not only are considerations of age crucial, but that status and reputation within the community are equally important. The sangha, like the relations of debt in SHGs explored by Guérin, was permeated by ‘local systems of social hierarchy’ (2014:S42). Particularly significant were relations of age and reputation within the colony. These led to tense daily situations of moral judgement of trustworthiness within the group. This usually led to decisions that excluded those who were old and in precarious situations and were known to be engaging in cross-borrowing. But sometimes more rarely these moral judgements also excluded more powerful women too who had not conformed to the rules of the group or were seen to be making excessive demands. Both age discrimination and a collective desire to equalise aspirations worked together. Always in these encounters it was the SHG’s middle class leaders who arbitrated and pushed the groups of women to particular decisions on the trustworthiness of the members of their community. These dynamics existed in daily meetings such as the one I witnessed when Basalingamma, a destitute and elderly widow and Yechamma, a powerful, middle-aged woman who had retired from construction, both sought loans from the group, as I now describe below.

In a scenario where few women retired out of choice rather than age, Yechamma, had managed to leave the industry behind following the improving fortunes of her husband, the owner of a small fruit wholesalers. A rarity in the colony, such women bore the noticeable signs of a higher household income in the ways they dressed, spoke, and engaged with the sangha. Like Mariamma, Yechamma experienced a greater engagement in sangha affairs, since she had more time than the majority of others. As well as potentially being able to exert more influence, such figures also held more knowledge of the resources that might become available through CSA than those less temporally and financially better off.

On the day Yechamma, smartly attired in a sheer blue sari and large ornate gold earrings, came to ask for two lakhs<sup>32</sup> (an unprecedented amount in the sangha’s borrowing history), there was also present another contender. Basalingamma, a thin, elderly widow, had come to borrow thirty thousand rupees; a considerable sum for a woman of her limited means, although still far less than the loan Yechamma had requested for the ongoing construction of her house. Since both loans could not be given on the same day,

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<sup>32</sup> At the time of the meeting, a lakh (100,000 rupees) was worth approximately £1,000.



the group was requested by Shanthi to prioritise accordingly. Although Basalingamma was asking for far less money, the women did not believe her stated reason for the loan, which was also to build a house. Indeed, one member visibly shook her head when Basalingamma said this.

Shanthi was the first to put the mistrust that permeated the room into words; 'I know why you are here asking. It is because you have another loan outside'. As if this was not reason enough she adds; 'We do not give large amounts to old people'. 'Why not?' Asks Basalingamma, becoming angry. 'Is it because we die?' There is a pause and to my surprise Shanthi replies 'haudo'. *Yes*. 'I'll just die then' responds Basalingamma, dramatically. Realising her retort had little impact on Shanthi, who, used to being in the centre of quarrels, had developed a thick skin over the years, Basalingamma changes her tone, making intermittent statements regarding her poor health such as 'I am very ill and weak'. However, Basalingamma's pleas for the duty of care owed to her by her neighbours go unanswered.

While it is true that there was a discriminatory attitude against elderly women and widows in the hierarchy of borrowing, Shanthi's apparent callousness was not without reason. As it transpired, Basalingamma had been borrowing money on behalf of Hanumanthi, an errant and highly indebted sangha member. 'They're friends. They sit together in the evenings' Shanthi informed me. It was not uncommon for the women to borrow money on behalf of another, or for the purposes of paying off debts accrued elsewhere. In such instances, as with the case of Basalingamma, the borrower often attempted to conceal the exact reason or recipient of the loan, although the dense population and communal links of the colony, made any attempted deception a near impossible task. As a result, the various prejudices, favouritisms, grudges, and rivalries that featured in colony life, played a strong part in the decision of the group regarding whether or not to grant a loan to a fellow member, and requests were often greeted with suspicion, explaining why Basalingamma's pleas concerning her apparent ill health fell upon deaf ears.

Microcredit organisations hold a low regard for 'cross-borrowing' (Guérin, 2014:S44) viewing it as 'a symptom of overindebtedness or mismanagement' (2014:ibid) going against the disciplined ethic of saving. However, a growing number of scholars are critiquing the hierarchy of the imbalance between negative concepts of debt (Guérin, 2014; D. James, 2014; Graeber, 2011; Kar, 2013; 2018) in opposition to credit; which is not problematized in the same way. Contra the debt of the poor, credit is still not typically perceived as a problem stemming from the inability of middle class consumers

to live by their means (Graeber, 2011; D. James, 2014). Just as credit card debt is part of life for numerous middle class consumers for the majority of informal sector workers, including all of my informants, debt was a necessary and near constant part of life – only it fed into narratives of the ill-disciplined and uneconomical nature of the poor.

Unlike the majority of the sangha however, Yechamma was a model saver, and yet she had also made various errors according to Shanthi. First, CSA had changed its prior policy of letting members borrow up to twice the value of their savings, meaning she was not eligible to borrow two lakhs. Second, Yechamma had been certain she had one lakh in savings, whereas Shanthi informed her it was ninety thousand rupees. Thirdly, though the majority of the women were in favour of Yechamma, Shanthi also brought up a discrepancy of four hundred rupees. It had been Yechamma's responsibility for banking that day. 'If I could make four hundred rupees into a mansion out of the air I would have done so!' Yechamma had exclaimed, nonplussed by this sudden revelation. 'This is our sangha. My sangha! We need to find out what happened' interjected Yellamma, the sangha's namesake.

When I asked Shanthi about it later, she told me that Yechamma had forgotten to pay the sangha money to the bank. 'When we do the audits we know if there's anything missing, but she was arguing that she had paid it. She has a habit of forgetting', Shanthi stated. 'How do you deal with that situation?' I asked. 'Because she was really upset'. 'That's why I told her to get the other book, and she would have thought about it the entire week, and she'll come back and accept that it was her mistake' Shanthi assured me. Had the discrepancy been by another sangha member such as Basalingamma, the group may not have been as patient.

What this episode reflected was not only the sometimes opaque nature of the sangha's operation to its members, including the inaccessibility of many women's own records to them due to illiteracy<sup>33</sup>; but also, despite the fact loans had to be agreed upon by all members of the group, the considerable power wielded by Shanthi and CSA in directing the session. Sensing the loan Yechamma was requesting was still of such a size that it would have potentially caused issues, it is possible Shanthi invited the anger of the group by bringing up the unpaid week's savings to delay it. Overall, this incident reflects the complex dynamics of judgement enacted in the sangha, which drew on notions of worth and trustworthiness from both within the colony and within the terms of the SHG

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<sup>33</sup> For middle-aged members, younger daughters often assisted them, but not everyone had a literate member of the family.

‘self-help development project’ itself. Crucially for my points about age discrimination it was older women who were disadvantaged in both cases.

*‘All of this is for women only!’: The sangha as (female) social space*

In spite of the problematic forms of judgement that operated within the sangha which frequently denied the most deprived of loans, it did however, provide another kind of resource to its members. Concerning informants’ use of their local SHG in rural Rajasthan, Megan Moodie claims that while women received little in ‘significant benefit or material gains’ they continued ‘to invest not only money but significant emotional energy in them’ (2008:456). This emotional labour according to Moodie, fostered a space for important critiques of social relations and exchange (456). Likewise, the sangha also provided a space for colony women’s critiques; not only of class, as discussed, but also the men of the colony, including husbands. However, while for members, the sangha created a different kind of female community space that could at times be used to pressure people within the broader colony, the women of the colony were much closer than Moodie’s informants. As a network of neighbours, kin and quasi-kin the colony was so densely interwoven, that these relations were often one in the same – at times, indistinguishable. The closeness of colony relations meant that as discussed, this was not an entirely free or benign space. It was consequently subject to dynamics of gossip and reputation, as this section also explores.

Nevertheless, the sangha provided women with a rare moment where time could be spent in a space outside of the home that was not the male dominated space of the colony exterior or the construction site. Despite protestations concerning its location or the time it took from their days, many members appeared to make the most of their time together there. On days when Shanthi and Kauveri omitted to tell the women there was no sangha, which I would then corroborate by phone at their behest, rather than immediately dispersing, members spent time loitering, laughing and chewing betel. While some were frustrated at the waste of their day (and potentially, earnings), others saw it as an opportunity to catch up, having already allocated the time from their daily routines away from the colony or other worksites.

As Sian Lazar argues, it was through such acts women were able to ‘reinforce a collective sense of self’ (2004:314), which existed beyond, but by no means was separate from, their domestic and income-generating roles as caregivers. As Shanthamma put it; ‘[when] we’re together, only then can we share our happiness and sorrows’. The change brought about by this (albeit small) distance from the colony was for some, striking.

Shanthamma for instance, was usually one of the loudest participants in the sangha; a place where even if the other women did at times mock her perceived ignorance, she was seldom told to be quiet. While she often echoed her husband's assertions that she didn't know anything, outside of the house her confidence grew (in fact she was the first woman to talk with me and always invited me to sit with her), she would crack jokes, and had no shortage of friends.

While husbands or male family members played a significant part in the borrowing of money as the case of Konnamma's son illustrated, Yellamma's sangha remained a primarily female only zone, with any male presence from the colony deemed not only undesirable, but a threat to group integrity. Indeed, as well as a site of gossip, the sangha also provided a space of critique of husbands. One Wednesday morning, a young woman, upon discovering I was running English lessons for the children of the colony asked if I would teach her and her friend. Giggling, she pointed at her companion: 'her husband understands if she swears at him in Kannada, so she wants to learn English!' While there was humour in this remark, as it transpired, members were serious when it came to keeping the sangha away from the influence of men.

Indeed, members were selective about which women could join based on their husbands, as I discovered when the group were debating the admission of a woman whose husband was keen for her to join. There was much apprehension regarding the man in question, deemed argumentative and likely to 'come to fight with us'. 'If one [husband] comes they all will come and then what will we do?' grumbled Shanthamma. Given that husbands were regularly the source of their financial and emotional woes, it was hardly surprising that sangha members desired the ongoing exclusion of men from the group, in spite of complaints. 'All of this is for women! No one gives loans to us men!' I was once told by a disgruntled male colony resident.

The sangha also served as a site of gossip and further forms of social judgement. Shanthi was not immune from participating in these either, having known the women for years. While as discussed, the humour used by Shanthi and Kauveri reinforced hierarchies of class (and caste) difference, it was gossip however, that served to bring them closer. As Max Gluckman observed, gossip was usually an activity shared between those close about whom they were close to (1963). Indeed, according to Kauveri, it was Shanthi who was reluctant to withdraw from the sangha, just as the women were dismayed at the eventual possibility that she one day, might leave their lives ('why don't you sell her to us!' Yechamma had once (half) jested).

Gossip however, is of course neither democratic or benign (Dean, 2013; Van Vleet, 2003). It creates divisions – something reflected in the hierarchy of who was able to gossip with Shanthi. In this case, Tamil-speaking members such as Yechamma had the upper hand, and Shraddha often overheard the two conversing in Tamil about other women; ‘She wears *churidars* [a type of trousers] and owns a vehicle! She goes about’. Shanthi leans in ‘Tell, tell!’ However, this was not as covert as the two women assumed, and during one such episode, another member who also understood some Tamil, asked; ‘Why are you talking about us?’ ‘This isn’t about you. It’s about the office’, Shanthi casually replies. In this way, whilst the sangha provided a place to escape from the male dominated spaces of construction work, it also remained a site of judgement about ideas of appropriate forms of womanhood and behaviour, as the above example illustrates; attesting to the role of gossip as a form of social control and regulation (Dean, 2013; Gluckman, 1963; Van Vleet, 2003) as well as one of social cohesion.

Shanthi’s closeness with the group may have been a further reason for Kauveri’s desire to disentangle CSA from such connections – particularly since its usual model was to leave the SHG to its own management once fully established. To further explore why this has not been the case, I now address the practices and politics of borrowing vis-à-vis the dense webs of relations in colony life, and the labour undertaken by both CSA and its members to ensure its longevity. In doing so, I examine how jealousy, debt, and reciprocity are constitutive of the sangha – and how, like the practice of gossip, these various acts and emotions produce the ostensibly contradictory effect of simultaneously encouraging both rivalry and unity.

### **Conflict and camaraderie: jealousy, reciprocity, repayment**

This section examines more fully the entangled, intimate relationships between the sangha and the Yagdir colony. It pays particular attention to the instabilities of the social relations that emerged within and in relation to the sangha. As I will evidence, the sangha was caught up in cycles of resolution and (near) rupture that were generated from dynamics that CSA was not in control of. At times, CSA was a resource that could support women’s attempts to construct permanence which in turn, maintained the sociality of the colony and the group. Indeed, Kar notes a symbiotic quality to such relationships whereby; ‘domestic relationships are managed through the loans themselves, [whilst] the everyday practices of microfinance such as meetings also shape domestic life’ (2018:114). This relationship also brought sangha members together under a previously

unknown dynamic through which they were 'also responsible to for each other's creditworthiness' (Kar, 2018:118).

At other times however, forms of jealousy and envy disrupted this collective project. The fragility of the sangha, its failures and limited successes are related to these social entanglements. Ironically perhaps, the ways in which such development projects rest on an 'embedding' in social life subverts their aims. In particular, in this case, their aim of making women 'independent' from the NGO and 'empowering' them to run the SHG themselves. Informants were ambivalent about taking on this role. Members believed that not only were the majority of the sangha lacking in the requisite forms of literacy and social capital required to engage with the bank to ensure its running, but that it would also produce too many possibilities for conflict within the community. By exploring these issues, the final section elucidates how colony women attempted to ensure the sangha's longevity.

*'You don't trust your own people': fighting in the sangha, fighting for the sangha*

Regardless of women's apprehension concerning their prospective ownership of the sangha, CSA were growing increasingly weary of the conflicts within it. Indeed, it was the various forms of women's in-fighting according to them, that continued to stall its independence. While residents of the colony may have continued to share the same occupations, there existed a considerable heterogeneity in social and economic capital, as numerous scholars have also observed in low income urban neighbourhoods (V. Das and Kleinman, 2000; V. Das and Randeria, 2015; De Boeck, 2015). Suspicions and jealousy between residents were not always communicated, but they existed and spilled over into the running of the sangha.

One late morning, following an argument over interest payment, Kauveri, exasperated, points towards Shanthi and another colleague:

We're coming here for you only. We're only doing it out of good will, we're doing this for your benefit. You get the loans, you save, and you get the interest. We don't get anything from this. Our intention is that you should set up a sangha of your own, because we've been doing it for you for the past eight years, we just want you to take some responsibility.

'The problem with us taking responsibility is that there are good and bad people' responds Yechamma, still unsuccessful in obtaining her loan. 'The first problem with you is that you don't trust your own people', Kauveri answered. There was a murmur in the room, Yechamma nodded; 'haudo'. Yes. Kauveri continues; 'How do you know that tomorrow,

Shanthi or I won't make a mistake? Sujatha is from your area, do you think she will betray you?' 'We didn't say that' Yechamma replies, 'People who think that will think it'.

Kauveri then recalls the instance of Sujatha, one of the few members who could read, write and record figures, performing some administrative responsibilities for the group. After some time however, Sujatha had been unable to continue due to the pressure from others, which had made her leave. 'You know what I suggest?' asked Kauveri. 'Take this as a challenge. Try to take your own work forward'. 'But we have never gone to school!' responded Yechamma. It was Mariamma who interjected this time; 'Yes, we haven't, fine. But if we haven't gone to school, do we also not feed ourselves?' There is a murmur of consensus. 'They teach us how to do it even if we are not literate, right?' Sithamma chimed in.

However, literacy was not the only issue facing the proposed independence of the sangha, as Sithamma elaborated; 'Even when madam (Shanthi) writes, they (the bank) clarify so much. Then if we write, then what?' 'Yes, they do...' Shanthi admits. Kauveri concedes; 'That's true... I have written for some two sanghas some time back. So many doubts! They don't trust us at all!' 'But if they do have doubts. They clarify it', Shanthi adds. 'No, they ask in particular if any old person goes, because they'll think they won't know much. They want to double check' Sithamma responds. Even if the group were to find a new bookkeeper then, their efforts dealing with the bank, charged with class and caste tension, looked to produce further problems.

As indicated, the illiteracy of its members remained a significant hurdle, at times exacerbating an already charged environment. 'If anyone intentionally writes differently (intentionally wrong), who can it possibly benefit? Who will have the money?' Kauveri asked the group during one such discussion. 'The other members', came the reply. 'Another thing is that, they'll take the book and write but they won't actually give the money' Yechamma said. Some of the other members laughed. 'Why are you laughing? It is possible... it has happened...' She trailed off. As a result of these misgivings, the women were reluctant to take over the running of the sangha from CSA. Uma, one of the younger members who had been asked, was not keen to take up the mantle; 'Now what I'm saying is... I'll be running the sangha, fine. Then when I say go to madam [Shanthi or Kauveri] for the loan, they'll all say 'You're running it aren't you? Why can't you give us the money?'

Knowing the potential for conflicts that would spill over into daily life, the few women who could read and write put forward by Shanthi and Kauveri were reluctant to do so, in spite of Kauveri's coaxing; 'Okay look here everyone, Uma says she will write.

Who all say okay? Uma, there's no connection to borrowing and writing. If you yourself take a loan, it has to be entered, that's all'. 'That's what even I'm saying. I don't want to be in charge of the loans', replied the besieged Uma. The ever-vocal Yechamma interjects; 'That's what madam [Shanthi] also does. It's not like she talks to anyone separately in secret and gives money. She asks everyone in open and only then issues it'. Misunderstanding this, Uma replies angrily 'Not in secret! What is done in secret? That's not what I said!' An argument ensues with women across the group choosing sides.

As this episode illustrates, the endogamous colony ties which instilled a sense of obligation also threatened its cohesion. On the one hand, the sangha's location in CSA's office arguably hindered its autonomy which Kauveri was keen for it to have; on the other, it significantly reduced the potential for interference from the leaders of the colony and provided a source of (somewhat unbiased) mediation. It also ensured CSA stayed in the lives of the women, something crucial for any engagement with the state, enabling them access to an array of resources they might not have otherwise had including healthcare, as Kauveri elaborated; 'Before women used to give birth at home in the colony. Now that has changed. CSA has provided us with a vehicle. I've had to take the pregnant women to the hospital to get the check-ups done and get them the nutrition they need. There is a nursery home [...], they have a scheme called 'Vande Mataram'<sup>34</sup>, under which all the tests and scans, breakfast and nutrition drinks were free'. While the colony leaders were opposed to outsiders coming into the colony, this small act of care for colony women (and its future children) had gained Kauveri a small amount of favour; 'there was a leader who was completely opposed to us before, but he supports us now', she told me. 'But the other leaders don't like that'.

Sangha members were doubtless aware group independence would have its drawbacks and potentially distance them from CSA, having pushed for the sangha even when Kauveri had stopped coming due to troubles with the colony leaders; 'I stopped but people are coming. That's why it's still running'. Kauveri however, had since distanced herself from the group after the women failed to support her in a confrontation with one of the colony leaders over an 'unauthorised' visitor who had attended a meeting in the colony. The women had since asked Kauveri to accompany them to discuss her concerns with the leaders; 'come with us once madam. We'll ask... we'll speak to them', Yechamma had told her during one of the frequent discussions about friction with the self-appointed colony leaders. 'All they're [the leaders] saying is that they've given us the permission to

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<sup>34</sup> 'Vande Mandaram' translates to 'Mother, I bow to thee'.



have the sanghas going', Kauveri had replied. Sithamma interjects; 'Yes madam, we give the permission to have the sanghas. But you're doing other things... the LIC. That's what we're saying no to'. 'But after they [the leaders] told us to stop, we have stopped', Kauveri responds. 'In your area we're not doing any of that' Shanthi adds. 'That was the only reason we did that. 'But for sangha we won't do any harm' is what they [the colony leaders] said', Yechamma concludes.

As the above interaction indicates, the resulting movement of the sangha outside of the colony had if anything, made colony leaders interrogate CSA more – particularly concerning any extension of credit beyond the women themselves. It was Shanthamma who voiced their concerns to me; 'After collecting all our money [what] if they [CSA] run away somewhere? Where should our women go? So we need some proof'. Indeed, women's earnings were not perceived as their own, but the property of the family and thus, the colony as a whole. This was expressed as a moral dilemma which made some informants uneasy, as Basamma elucidated; 'This money that we women deposit, we would have saved it by taking it away from husbands or children... by depriving them of it... without being able to give a single rupee to the children for some aspiration or want'. Half-jokingly, she asks Shraddha and I, 'If the madam collecting it runs away with our money, then where do we search for your house?' At the same time, the lack of support and this apparent lack of trust had clearly hurt Kauveri, who regardless continued the sangha anyway, against the wishes of CSA and by her own admission, her better judgement.

Although the women were not able to fully discard their mistrust of each other and of CSA, they were still able to collectively contribute to and borrow from the group. There remained a unified pragmatism observable in the ways members dealt with threats to the sangha. Sangha members had mediated with colony leaders and continued to turn up at the CSA office for meetings during CSA's attempted exit. Further resolutions included the group's methods of periodic expulsion; exclusion (based on the criteria of potentially troublesome husbands); refusing loans that had absolutely no chance of repayment (Basalingamma); and their careful but forceful approach in retrieving debts (Konnamma). Keeping CSA involved as reluctant and (somewhat) impartial adjudicators, was also, I argue, a further strategy to ensure group longevity. Indeed, CSA and its middle class NGO managers were used to manage or defuse problematic elements of social relations in the colony that threatened the existence of the SHG. They also mediated on behalf of colony women with state actors, an otherwise difficult undertaking requiring

assistance from the male political channels which operated between the colony and the immediate locality.

Despite the colony leaders' aversion to the interventions of non-colony people, CSA was at times, approached for help by members of the sangha and the community regarding matters of domestic violence and sexual harassment. CSA was for the most part, there for the women and children of the colony in particular, when no one else was. This was certainly significant when it came to mediating with local authorities – particularly law enforcement, towards which, as expressed earlier by Sithamma, colony residents remained highly apprehensive. Indeed, CSA's role in the local community was poignantly highlighted at the very end of my fieldwork, when I arrived early at the office to teach my final English class to find a grave-faced police officer in attendance. While the girls greeted me in their same loud, and enthusiastic manner as every week, it turned out that with CSA's assistance, they were filing a case of sexual harassment against a local male resident, who had been molesting them when they left home to either attend school or run errands.

The girls, according to Kauveri, had informed CSA who were now attempting to get the man arrested. On my most recent return I learned that the offender had not been jailed, because of his old age. Whilst CSA's attempt to intervene on behalf of the girls of the colony, was unsuccessful, it was to their credit that the members and their community were at least provided with an avenue for recourse, even if it did not work out. It also showed that contra Kauveri's frequent complaints, a bond of trust did exist between CSA and (at least some of) the community – and over a highly sensitive matter that could not necessarily be entrusted to the colony's male leadership.

*'There are too many jealous people here': the productive and destructive qualities of envy*

Although CSA continued to promote the SHG model, and the women continued their participation in the sangha, as the above illustrates, there remained an ambivalence towards the very act of saving, expressed and rooted in the underlying mistrust of one's fellow members and CSA. Indeed, when informants referred to fate and downplayed their own roles in various endeavours for permanence including saving, they may not have only been guarding their desires against the disappointments of life, but also against their neighbours and kin. Indeed, a number of women I knew, while undoubtedly poor, were also reluctant to state the full extent of their material assets or earnings (see also, Moodie, 2008).

Basamma once told me that ‘It’s in our fate to work and eat, we don’t have the income for anything else’. And yet, Basamma saved what she could for her daughter’s wedding expenses, hiding the wedding jewellery she had bought her in various pots and water vessels in the house. While I have discussed the disjuncture between speech and action in the previous chapter, a further reason for understating of one’s economic activities or intent, may have been the over-closeness of the colony. To explore this tension in further detail, this section examines the puzzling contradiction of why it was that women in the colony did not appear to trust each other and yet continued to accommodate requests for each other’s loans in the sangha.

When I asked Channamma if she believed life was improving in the colony, she replied with what could be interpreted as a cautious optimism; ‘it’s getting better, but there are too many jealous people here’. In an environment where one might fall rapidly succumb to sickness, every young child was dotted with *kajal* (kohl) on their forehead or cheeks to deflect the evil eye, and most wore amulets. In the realm of the sangha, jealousy might inhibit one’s ability to get a loan. In the world of the colony, it had the potential to cause illness, theft, quarrels between kin, and domestic violence. Or, as Channamma hinted, the propensity to stall the collective progress of its residents. Indeed, as Shantha’s earlier account of the mistreatment of her sister revealed, the sources of distress and pain were at times, uncomfortably close.

As Han discusses in relation to her informants in Chile; “‘Falling out” can be composed of a multiplicity of subtle forces that may wax and wane: not paying back a loan, avoiding one’s neighbors in everyday courtesies, testing or reaching limits with intimate kin’ (2013:236). In the environment of the colony, where threads of relations were interwoven so densely that they had become irrevocably tangled, there were few places to hide from actual or fictive kin. Indeed, if one considers Judith Butler’s interpretation of precarity as something which ‘exposes our sociality, the fragile and necessary dimensions of our interdependency’ (2012:148), such sociality may prove simultaneously invaluable and at times, hazardous (Castellanos, 2002; Foster, 1965; Ghosh, 1996; Han, 2012; 2013; Hughes 2016; Zhang, 2010).

In his philosophical exploration of envy and inequality, Aaron Ben-Ze’ev postulates that ‘those who are close to us, but still above us, emphasize our own inferiority more than those who are distant from us’ (1992:158), As Ben-Ze’ev elaborates; ‘We compare ourselves with people whom we consider to occupy an approximately similar position or possess similar ability’ (158-9). Such an interpretation would indicate the colony was to all intents and purposes, a hotbed of envy. But could this same

(over)closeness not also be productive? Daniela Castellanos' anthropological intervention argues that it is. Noting that envy also formed part of the 'moral obligation to give something similar or equivalent to what was received' (2015:28), Castellanos posits that 'the entanglements of Aguabuena people [including envy] were means of keeping people close (to the point of discarding the idea of moving elsewhere) and a dynamic way of constantly activating peoples' exchanges' (2015:29). With this in mind, such an explanation could also help answer the question of why the sangha continued in spite of the overt and covert forms of everyday envy and rivalry.

The closeness of colony life was for women like Durgamma, who noted that it 'ruined' good people, too much to bear. Her stoic and almost defiant cheeriness was something that I believe in her mind, placed her in opposition to the more insular looking residents of the Yadgir colony, who she complained, never smiled and were too suspicious. Indeed, as Kristina Van Vleet observed during fieldwork, her relationship with a friend and informant she lodged with was the source of gossip and misplaced envy between residents concerning what was in it for whom (2003:503); something Durgamma informed me similarly happened about our relationship. While many of her own kin lived there, Durgamma saw the colony as a potentially restrictive place for her and her family's futures, preferring instead to build her networks outside of it as the previous chapter elucidated. At the same time, like Castellanos' informants who complained of the rivalry between each other but could not leave Aguabuena (2015:28-29), Durgamma too was irrevocably tied to the Yadgir colony by birth, blood, and the sangha, even if she had managed to put some physical distance between it and herself. Indeed, it was after all, colony ties that had helped her secure a loan to register land in her name via the sangha, as she admitted; 'Where else will they give loan? I had to take from the sangha only'.

What further contributed to the tight-knit atmosphere of the colony was the actions of its self-appointed leaders, who barred access to most outsiders, as discussed. As a result, CSA had been initially concerned that Shraddha and I would be rebuked and expelled by them. However, when I conveyed this to Mariamma she was taken aback; 'No one will say any such thing! Has anyone said anything to you?' 'No, nothing like that' I hastily replied. Mariamma continued; 'No one asks or questions. Our people are good. None of them wish ill upon another. They don't steal and they work hard to feed themselves'.

If this was the case, then why did the sangha members hold so little trust for each other? Or was Mariamma merely defending the reputation of the colony, though she was doubtless aware that while her people certainly worked hard, contra her statement, they

did sometimes steal<sup>35</sup>? Though there was evidently, mistrust among the populace of the colony, to admit there was an issue with one's people, with one's own *kin*, above all to an outsider, was not how the relations of closeness and reciprocity of the colony, even when they did not work out, were repaid.

The importance of such relations was revealed during one sangha meeting when Sithamma angrily inquired about Konnamma's outstanding debt; 'You take interest from me, but if you loan money to Konnamma, will you take interest from her?' If as Guérin advises, 'we analyze practices and the feelings and emotions associated with them, we can see that debt is much more than a material transfer over a limited time span' (2012:S40), then it becomes clear this issue is not solely about money, but also reciprocity and 'fairness'. Why after all, should one member avoid interest while the other not? This instance thus illustrates the close correlation between a collective sense of fairness and the subjectivity of envy (Ben-Ze'ev, 1992; Van Vleet, 2003). It is those closest to us after all, that one envies the most.

It was however, through maintaining some semblance of fairness via loan reciprocity that Yellamma's sangha continued to run and retain a healthy rate of membership. This wider question concerning the longevity of savings groups as James notes, further attests to the efforts of its members 'to build trust and to offset the considerable risks of default or non payment by members who were proving to be far from collegial' (2014:125). For colony women, it was an ethic of pragmatism underpinned by kinship, that informed their necessary acts of group cohesion. Even if seemingly small, such acts remained vital to the longevity of the sangha, as highlighted by one of the members who recounted the incident of a fake note entering the deposit; 'No matter how much we asked, nobody came forward. Finally I put in sixty<sup>36</sup> rupees from my pocket and covered for it.'

#### *'Go and demand it': strategies of repayment*

The challenges the sangha faced in securing its own future are as elucidated, considerable. The internal politics of the Yadgir colony and the uncertainty of livelihoods among sangha members made its existence precarious. How then, does the sangha ensure

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<sup>35</sup> This was something I discovered when Durgamma and I ran into her cousin, *chik* Mariamma (small Mariamma) in the colony, who informed us she had some jewellery stolen from her house.

<sup>36</sup> Sixty rupees (around sixty UK pence at the time of fieldwork) is for many sangha members, between a quarter to a third of their daily wage.

the retrieval of its money? What strategies are available to incentivise women who do not, or are reluctant to repay?

Although the inequality of intra-colony disparities informs subsequent regimes of judgement and borrowing, oftentimes the group would make allowances for late payments. While this may have been grudgingly done, as the opening vignette concerning Konnamma highlights ('We give up on so many things to save up and come pay it here'), the pragmatic need to maintain group (and neighbourhood) unity, at times overrode individual interests. In this instance, Konnamma had not paid any interest in over five years, and yet the group had still agreed to loan her money towards her son's bail, indicating the urgency of the situation took precedence over her outstanding debt. Moreover, the amount of smaller loans approved was reasonably high, in spite of the fact chances for loan default were considerable, which members were clearly aware of. Given the amount of rising debts I saw when I returned last, this practice continued regardless. This may have involved some level of calculation based on the fact that it did not go well to reject another member's loan when one would invariably need their own approved at another time<sup>37</sup>. However, considering how drawn out the process of loan or indeed, merely interest recovery was, such actions illustrate an ethic of community care in the absence of other viable safety nets. It was the same ethic that informed Mariamma's earlier statement concerning the 'goodness' of colony people.

In the case of Konnamma, the sangha's response was to utilise a mixture of group pressure whilst simultaneously allowing for flexibility to encourage debt repayment. As Shanthi explained; 'If she doesn't pay then we will say to all the members to force her to pay. They will force them [Konnamma and her family]. Then they will pay money. Interest. They will [apply] pressure to her because [it is] their money they are spending'. However, this strategy still took time, and when I asked some months later Shanthi told me 'Half amount she paid. Half amount still she didn't pay. Her son has taken the money [the loan]. Still she is paying. We spoke with that son and the son is nowadays paying in monthly wise. He's not paying weekly'. Indeed, every time Konnamma's son saw a sangha member, 'he tries to hide', I was told. Given that at least half of the loan had since been repaid, however, it seems that this approach was at least partially successful.

While as mentioned, loans were often given despite the high chances of delayed repayments, should the deferring borrower be present, additional tactics were employed, including statements that seemed purely used to shame the borrower through utilising

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<sup>37</sup> For loans to be approved the whole group had to be in consensus. However, due to sporadic attendance and ongoing absenteeism by some members, this was not always possible.

intimate knowledge ('everyone knows what your husband does'); or at the most severe, threats to remove the offending member from the sangha itself. Usha, for instance, an elderly woman who had outstanding debts and had fought with Kauveri, was subsequently ejected from the group. 'Whether or not you hold the sangha I will remain here!' She had defiantly stated. 'You don't have a voice any more' came the reply.

When it came to the issue of repayment, from CSA's side, I had seen numerous reactions ranging from jokes to angry frustration, threats to close the sangha (which drew looks of grave concern from members), and similarly to what Kar describes in her 2013 work in Bangladesh, *Recovering Debt*, instances that bordered on emotional blackmail. Indeed, the women were often reminded that CSA was essentially doing them a service by remaining at the heart of sangha administration and operation, and both Shanthi and Kauveri were unhesitant in bringing this up whenever members became overly argumentative, either with them, or each other.

During such instances Kauveri would also remind the women of the inconvenience of reaching the area; 'I have to come here [...] I have to spend fifty rupees every time. If I can stay there [the CSA main office] and work every day, I can travel only by bus with a bus pass. But I come here for you. I spend on auto.' As Kar discusses regarding the relationship between loan officers and borrower; 'Such affective pressure on borrowers obliges them to recognize their personal responsibility to the loan officer' (2013:488). Kauveri, in trying to explain to the women her own personal costs of money, time, and comfort, in running the sangha, was similarly attempting to invoke a feeling of obligation.

Nevertheless, CSA's various attempts to reclaim debts met with middling success, due in part to the relatively free lending habits of the group. Given the frequency of work and the precarity of everyday life for many members, repayment issues were, at some point, inevitably something experienced by almost the entire group. I was reminded of this upon my most recent visit when I met with Durgamma, who had been avoiding interest payments on her loan of ninety thousand rupees she had taken three months prior to ensure the land deal discussed in the previous chapter. This was in spite of Kauveri's declaration that 'no one wants to take the risk of giving them a loan'. While Durgamma was a less than ideal borrower due to sporadic periods of absences and her non-earning husband, CSA were unable to curtail the lending of money to members such as her.

Since Kauveri had decided to cease visits to the colony following the aforementioned difficulties, any absconding debtors who avoided the sangha had to subsequently be pursued by its members. While the sangha did not typically employ the

same means as informal moneylenders and some of the local banks, which was to secure a lock onto the outside of the debtor's home once they were absent, this was at times, suggested ('you can talk to her, or you can go lock her house and get her to pay it'), although I never heard of anyone going through with it. Sangha members were encouraged by CSA to congregate outside of the defaulting member's house, which publicly identified and shamed the debtor to the entire colony.

During one meeting in response to the women's complaints about outstanding interest, Kauveri informed them that they should be more proactive: 'Go and demand it! Create a scene in front of their house!' However, the group was not particularly united in performing public acts of debt collection, and often Shanthi and Kauveri would berate them for their perceived apathy in retrieving payments. Although this might seem surprising given that the interest from the loans went back to the members, it became less so given how little time most women had between work and familial duties. Time was a luxury available to few members, except the few retired women such as Yechamma, who, perhaps wanting the books balanced before she made her own loan request, did attempt this tactic. Considering the frequently indebted status of the majority of sangha members, it is also possible that empathy drove the women from visiting their kin and neighbour's houses to loudly demand money, when they could very easily be in the same position themselves in the following months.

## **Conclusion**

By analysing the social negotiations between a development initiative that aimed to harness social relations and colony residents' efforts to subvert its goals, this chapter illustrates the potentially paradoxical outcomes to such endeavours. The current incarnation of the sangha does not fit the teleological SHG to microcredit route promoted in development initiatives worldwide. However, what it has achieved through the group's pragmatic suspension of this 'progression' is continued access to low-interest credit and valuable forms of brokerage via CSA as its state intermediary. In the ongoing absence of affordable alternatives and stable work, loans from the sangha became a lifeline to many colony residents. They also enabled others to tentatively develop their aspirations towards permanence.

The sangha allowed informants to access credit without relying on local moneylenders or inaccessible government welfare schemes. This was however, not without a cost – namely women's time and required presence at what they believe to be



pointless training sessions, or as seat-fillers for organisational meetings and protests. For CSA, such exercises were vital in meeting the requirements of international donors and remaining operational, while leaving sangha members critical of the power relations between themselves and those better-off. They were often frustrated, patronised and sometimes, angered. Though this anger was at times evident, it was also masked and discharged via humour and other forms of 'acting up'. The latter in particular was taken up by the most marginalised and excluded of the group, the older women consistently placed at the bottom of the sangha hierarchy.

Fellow group members were also not immune from the critical gaze of each other, as evidenced through gossip, and the entanglement of debt with everyday relations of envy and suspicion. Nevertheless, the sangha did provide a conceptual and physical space for the fostering of various desires and needs, information exchange, and gossip. It allowed for the maintenance and development of pragmatic strategies of building towards mobility and stability within the city. These ranged from aspirations of familial advancement, to the prolonging of life itself. Yet it is also true that the sangha upheld patriarchal norms, through the behind-the-scenes involvement of colony leaders, gossip, and the promotion of rigid gender roles through training. But such a finding is also nuanced by the ways the sangha created a space for women to critique husbands and more substantially, enabled acts as Durgamma's purchasing of land in her own name.

Given tightening restrictions faced by international donors and competing development issues including a rising global refugee crisis, a number of the NGOs in Bengaluru now face funding difficulties. It could thus be pivotal for the sangha's survival that it become self-sufficient. Though its members have shown through their labour and persistence over the last decade that they, like CSA's independently functioning SHGs in other areas, are capable of achieving this, the same closeness which allows them to continue the relational work of saving may ultimately, tear them apart. However, for the time being, following a decade of their pragmatic persistence, informants have woven a fragile safety net with which to alleviate their precarity.

The sangha does ameliorate the uncertainty of work and supports families through frequent bouts of poor health and injuries. Overall this chapter has shown, that while it is true that development projects based on 'do it yourself development' are problematic, it is also true that women are not passive recipients of such efforts. Precisely because such initiatives seek to tap into social networks they become entangled in complex community and individual projects. This at times allows the capture of these projects for quite differently imagined projects of permanence. However, it also means

that these forms of development are permeated with the tensions and potentials of community relations such as collectivity, envy and jealousy.

CHAPTER FIVE:  
'THEY DON'T KNOW HOW HARD WE WORK WHEN WE COME HERE':  
LABOUR MIGRATION AND URBAN NAVIGATION

*It was the Sunday of Ugadi when I visited the families living and working on Praveen's construction site, a four-storey office block midway through completion. Ugadi, a Hindu festival, heralds the new year in the southern states of Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, marking the day Lord Brahma created the universe. It is a day for new clothes, the preparation and consumption of special foods such as holige or obbattu<sup>38</sup>, and the commencement of new projects. It also signals the coming of the monsoon, the sowing and reaping of crops, and the ceaseless rhythms of movements between the city and the village, as Hemavathi, a visibly pregnant worker, verified: 'there will be a little rain after Ugadi, so some people will go back to the village until the crops grow, and they'll come back here again'.*

*For those away from the village during Ugadi there were often pangs of regret. For Hemavathi, her husband and two children, one of two families living and working on site from Adoni<sup>39</sup>, Ugadi went largely unmarked, save for the absence of their pay, along with the company owner, who had taken a trip overseas with friends. The workers residing had not been paid for the last fortnight, stalling their return to the village for the pujas and celebrations that marked the festival. While Ugadi is a principal and widespread celebration, on site the workers did not have the means with which to mark it, as Lingamma, Hemavathi's workmate and neighbour, informed me, in the village 'they make holige for the festival, but here there's no way to make those things'. For Lingamma, Hemavathi, and their children and rural kin, working in Bengaluru provided a vital source of income. However, as a result, they missed many such occasions, as Lingamma attested; 'we are completely unaware of festivals. We can't even realise the new moon day (Amavasya) here. [But] back in village, we are aware of many festivals'.*

## Introduction

In this chapter I move from the islands of permanence created by female construction workers in Bengaluru such as the Yagdir colony, into the lives of women who are permanently mobile. Although the precarity of construction is devolved onto all workers, the risks are not evenly distributed even among female construction workers. The preference of a wide number of real estate developers across Bengaluru and India as a whole is for interstate and intrastate circular migrant workforces. They are perceived as better value for money and less likely to refuse work in dangerous environments or to collectively organise (see Breman, 1996, 1999, 2016; Pattenden, 2012; RoyChowdhury,

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<sup>38</sup> Sweet coconut roti

<sup>39</sup> Adoni is a region of Kurnool District, Andhra Pradesh, next to the Karnataka border.

2014; A. Shah, et al., 2018). While the residents of the Yadgir colony experienced a substantial decline in working days because of this preference, what are the ramifications of these employment practices for the migrant workers themselves? How is life experienced in the city by those who could not or choose to make their homes in Bengaluru?

In Bengaluru, the human costs of risk devolution and cost reduction can be witnessed in the frequent instances of deaths, injuries, and diseases among migrant workers (see Bangalore Mirror Bureau, 2018; Chaturvedi and Kolkad, 2019; M.M. Rao, 2019; Shruthi, 2017). Industry norms and wider informal sector employment practices place ‘unskilled’ migrant labourers at the lowest rung. Aihwa Ong has noted such processes in southeast Asia where ‘exceptions to neoliberalism exclude migrant workers from the living standards created by market-driven policies’ (2006:4), but ‘Populations governed by neoliberal technologies are dependent on others who are excluded from neoliberal considerations’ (2006:ibid). Indeed, though migrants in Bengaluru constitute the most exploited group in the construction workforce, they are also the backbone of the industry. They bring the luxury apartments and villas of the city’s upper middle classes and wealthy elites into being, but remain largely unrecognised as rights bearing citizens in the regions where they work (Amrith, 2011; Ong, 2006; Solinger, 1999).

How might migrant workers improve their rights as citizens without adequate access to the urban milieu and its concomitant resources? While a growing number of scholars argue cosmopolitanism extends beyond the elites (Appadurai, 2013; 2013; Amit and Gardiner Barber, 2015; Clifford; 1992; Werbner, 1999), what meanings do female rural migrants give to their lives in cities such as Bengaluru? Appadurai has argued for the capacity-building qualities of ‘cosmopolitanism from below’ (2012, 2013), which ‘begins close to home and builds on the practices of the local, the everyday, and the familiar, but is imbued with a politics of hope that requires the stretching of the boundaries of the everyday in a variety of political directions’ (2013:198). In their endeavours to limit worker interactions with state bodies and NGOs – something I discuss in further detail in the following chapter – employers may actively attempt to stifle the potential for any such manoeuvres. Given this scenario, do migrant families experience being part of a wider urban community in any sense? While a number of scholars have illustrated that emerging forms of hybrid identifications may develop over time among migrant workers (Mills, 1997; Parry, 2003; Pun and Huilin, 2010; Zhang, 2001), for those shifting from construction site to construction site for the entirety of their working lives, what indeed, constitutes ‘the local, the everyday, and the familiar’ (2013:198)?

Focusing on how migrant workers experience urban life and employment, the three themes of the chapter trace the path of migrants from rural to urban locations. The first section provides the context under which intra and interstate workers enter the city; analysing how employment practices in construction build on and reproduce urban precarity. Section two then follows women's and family's navigations through the cityscape. It explores the ways in which they endure and contest the uncertainty of urban residence and restrictive employment practices. Building on the works of heterodox researchers concerning the reproduction of labour (see Davidson, 2011; Pun and Huilin, 2010; Willis, 1977), it attends to the experiences of children growing up on site vis-à-vis the cyclical qualities of precarious livelihoods. The final section examines how migrant experiences shape their strategies and sentiments towards the city and village. Ultimately, this chapter reveals how a lack of external urban networks and resources in Bengaluru ensure continual liminality for many migrant families.

Despite the existing body of literature on the exploitative conditions of migrant construction work experienced by migrant workers in India (Ceresna-Chaturvedi, 2015; Pattenden, 2012; Picherit, 2012; Parry, 2014; RoyChowdhury, 2014; Srivastava and Sutradhan, 2016), family units remain an underrepresented demographic in qualitative studies. Indeed, few ethnographies have attended to the blurring between work and accommodation sites within construction, or the relations between work and social reproduction. This is a fertile ground for analysis, as Chris Smith and Ngai Pun (2006) have demonstrated with their study of women's migrant labour dormitories in China.

Examining these frequently omitted experiences, this chapter engages with the growing but limited body of scholarship concerning migrant labour and gendered mobility among female construction workers (Suri, 2000; Jatrana and Sangwan, 2004; Dalmia, 2012; Parry, 2014). It also answers the calls of scholars to attend to the nuances in local experiences of labour (Fudge, 2019; Rancière, 2012; Torres et al, 2012). As Judy Fudge attests; 'a robust concept of local labour control regimes does a much better job at capturing the complex mix of consent and coercion in extracting value from labour power' (2019:208). Through a multi-sited analysis of local labour control regimes using a gendered focus on social reproduction and domestic life as well as work, I track such processes (see also, Bear, 2007; Biswas, 2018; S. Sen, 2007), In particular, I analyse the ways in which an intersectionality of employment conditions, the urban environment and gender norms come to inhibit and more rarely at times, facilitate urban mobility for migrant female workers and children.

**‘They keep calling people from my village to come and work here’:  
Coming to the city**

This chapter draws data from two field sites in the city – the Thimmaiah campus and Praveen’s site in Ramnagar. Informants from both locations came to the city several years ago, hailing from similar backgrounds (as briefly contextualised below) and returning ever since. However, while they spent the majority of their time in Bengaluru, the mobility they experienced in the city differed highly. Nevertheless, neither expressed a strong preference for urban life – ostensibly perceiving Bengaluru as a site where pragmatic ends could and must be met rather than any form of long-term or prospective home. While the time spent with informants in this chapter was for a lesser period than other research interlocutors in this thesis, this is largely a result of the inevitable issues that come with accessing building sites and company provided labour settlements.

Following the below introduction to both field sites, this section explores the conditions under which many migrant construction workers enter Bengaluru’s construction workforce. It acknowledges the ways in which employers attempt to restrict urban mobility for rural workforces, keeping them enclosed within and yet also apart, from the city. In doing so, it attends to the resulting and frequently gendered forms of ambivalence experienced by families towards Bengaluru.

*Praveen’s site*

Only three decades prior Ramnagar, a large neighbourhood in the south of the city, had been little more than a village. Now it was a hub of trendy bars and restaurants, boutique shops, co-working spaces, and offices. When I began my visits the office building on what I refer to as Praveen<sup>40</sup>’s site was covered in bamboo scaffolding<sup>41</sup>. Though apparently nearing completion, it seemed little more than a hollow shell with an unfinished interior, supported with a thicket of wooden stilts. The building’s bare concrete floors were strewn with detritus, and the rough, unplastered walls were inscribed with various children’s (and adult’s) drawings, some signifying luck and fortune (a peacock adorned a wall) whilst others merely the scribbled whims of restless minds.

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<sup>40</sup> Praveen is a property developer who was introduced in the opening vignettes of the ethnographic setting chapter. I came to know well during my time in Bengaluru and I discuss his employment and business practices in greater depth in the following chapter.

<sup>41</sup> Bamboo is a traditional material for scaffolding although many sites have since phased this out and replaced it with metal due to safety concerns since bamboo is susceptible to shrinking and slipping out of its bindings, proving incredibly dangerous for workers.

Across construction sites in India, workers' accommodation is often regionally and spatially designated (Parry, 2014). Praveen's site was no exception. Two families from Adoni, Andhra Pradesh, lived side by side in small one-room breezeblock huts hastily assembled from scavenged materials, adjacent to the site. Inches from the huts was the rubbish dump for the surrounding offices and apartments as well as the parking spaces for residents' and office workers' two wheelers. The rest of the workers (around twenty or so when work was quieter) lived on site. Two additional families from Gulbarga dwelt in makeshift tents on the ground floor of the unfinished building, while the lone men from the northern states lived upstairs, screening off empty rooms for shelter with the ubiquitous blue tarpaulin sheets that formed the backbone of migrant workers' homes across the city.

All four families had young children with them, the number fluctuating over time as some returned home and others arrived, joined by (typically female) siblings or cousins to assist in child-minding. The workers from Karnataka and Andhra had been with Praveen since he co-founded the company some eight years prior. Moving from site to site with each new development, they returned to their village with their families whenever they could. For all residents, water was provided by the neighbouring office block, also owned by the same company, in twenty litre plastic bottles. Any further sanitation facilities were non-existent and the workers washed their clothes in a small pollution-choked stream at the back of the site.



*Worker tarpaulin screening for accommodation*  
*Drawing of a peacock*





*Cement delivery truck outside Praveen's site (Hemavathi and Lingamma's huts are at the end of the lane behind the vehicles)*



*A worker walks to her lunch break on the campus site*



### *The Thimmaiah Campus*

The university complex to the east of the city is a sprawling site of ceaseless mechanic and human activity as its two-decades old development continues. There are between two hundred to two hundred and fifty workers on the campus at any one time hailing from a multitude of states. Among the workers were around thirty women primarily from the south<sup>42</sup>. The women wore bright yellow helmets (pictured on the above page) which not only denoted their status as helpers but were used to carry materials such as bricks on their heads, rather than for safety.

All informants from this group had travelled with their families via their local *maistri* to whom Sujathamma, one of the women, was married. They resided a fifteen-minute walk away in a separate labour camp, consisting of tin and concrete sheds provided by the construction company. The land for the camp was temporarily given by the university, which had been continuously expanding its various institutions over the last thirty years. Subsequently, some families had been working there for over a decade. The construction company also provided residents with approximately four hours of electricity in the evenings, and water delivered weekly by tanker. As was also the case with Praveen's site, water for purposes other than drinking had to be fetched from a nearby stream. In the growing heat of the summer, inside the tin shacks became unbearable and workers would sit outside on the raised concrete slabs that flanked the doorways.

#### *'I didn't even give them sweets': maintaining bonds, discarding ties*

Jan Breman has argued that as neoliberal conditions continue to shape the growing informal labour market in India, both stable forms of employment and previously existing forms of patronage diminish alongside each other (see 2007; 2016). However, in spite of the scarcity of work for locals, both groups of migrants I knew had regular working arrangements in Bengaluru, via ties that at times, mimicked a tenuous form of patronage to individual builders. To provide a clearer picture of how such ties operate and the migrant workforce enters the city, I briefly outline typical employment arrangements below.

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<sup>42</sup> As discussed in the thesis introduction, women from north India rarely accompanied their husbands or families to Bengaluru for construction.

While smaller scale, locally based employers often cultivated their own labour networks via regional and caste-patronage<sup>43</sup> ties, labour contractors or middlemen, (*maistris*); larger companies utilise wider-scale contractors who draw upon regional networks of contractors and sub-contractors, adding further layers between the workers and the company. Informants from Praveen's site were involved in the former arrangement, while informants from the campus, a much larger project, were employed by the latter. Regardless of scale, *maistris* are usually the principal providers of labour. Some *maistris* are themselves construction workers, recruiting fellow villagers and kin, receiving a small commission from their day rates (see for instance, Pattenden, 2012). Others however, may be removed from personal ties with workers altogether and further incentivised by companies to maintain onsite discipline and surveillance, interceding with local authorities where necessary to avoid any unwanted police or media attention.

While as I elucidate in this and the next chapter, a quasi-patronage exists in the urban scenario, it does so in an increasingly one-sided manner; ensuring captive ties of employment whilst denying little in the way of reciprocity outside of low wages. As discussed in the introduction, the lack of concern for workers can have fatal consequences, but also takes subtle ones, too, as Bear highlights in her ethnography of a Hooghly shipyard, recalling how workers were denied the gift of meat traditionally given to them during *Vishwakarma puja*<sup>44</sup> (2015a:170). To the workers, this offering was more than material; it was an acknowledgement of their sacrifice through labour and the powers of masculine productivity, providing them with the clarity of mind and ability to do 'good work' (2015a:170). For the management to neglect this offering was not only a failure to acknowledge workers' skills: it marked yet another form of the relinquishing of responsibilities and the devaluation of their work. Indeed, when I mentioned my Ugadi visit to Praveen upon his return, he shrugged, laughing sheepishly recalling his financial and social absence; 'I didn't even give them sweets'.

If employers are failing in acknowledging festivals such as Vishwakarma, Ugadi or, as also highlighted in the opening vignette, the obligation to pay their workers on time, what is the impact on familial mobility in the spaces of work and the city? For migrant workers and their children, such failings are made all the more palpable by their absence

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<sup>43</sup> In such scenarios the employers will be upper-caste landowners with significant local influence who have relocated to the city, and established themselves in real estate, but maintain links to their rural labour supplies.

<sup>44</sup> a celebration of the Hindu deity Vishwakarma, also known as the 'divine architect' due to his design of cities and weapons. Workers are meant to be acknowledged by their employers, while they in turn, acknowledge the role of their tools/machines

from the ritual time and space of the village, as Hemavathi and Lingamma's testament revealed. Moreover, their example also highlights how late payments create conditions of uncertainty. Although these are often due to the frequent blockages in the various financial stages of the construction process, delayed payment also serves the dual purpose of retaining workers – replacing the historical system of cash advances as a form of bondage (Breman, 2016; Parry, 2014). This practice as I discuss in the next chapter, was justified by property developers as a form of insurance to purportedly prevent workers downing tools and absconding. However, as Searle posits, this is largely a convenient narrative rather than reality; 'the image of the fickle migrant that contractors have painted [...] obscures the use of "transience" to Indian developers and contractors. Construction labour is a transient job because contractors profit from a flexible workforce, not because labourers view it as an irregular occupation' (2014:225). Indeed, for both groups of informants in this chapter, construction was their primary source of income over agriculture, and returns to the village were becoming infrequent and sporadic as the underdeveloped north of the state and its neighbouring regions across the border continued their prolonged spell of drought.

*'The workers are our family': steady employment as neo patronage?*

Although there are almost no known examples of permanent employment for those undertaking coolie or cement work, for families on the campus managed by Shakti construction, work was for the moment, in plentiful supply due to the continuing expansion of the campus. As Sujathamma, a worker in her thirties who was married to a *maistri*, attested; 'They keep calling people from my village to come and work here. For the past fifteen years, people from our village have been coming and staying here'. Hinting that this was a growing phenomenon across the city, she added 'just like this, there are sites all over Bangalore which have their own labour, but the company is the same'.

At a time when the property developers I knew were further distancing themselves from responsibilities of worker conditions, there was admittedly, something unconventional in the way that Shakti operated in comparison. The longevity of the project may have also had something to do with this. Since Shakti had been overseeing the works on the campus for over a decade, the company placed some small amount of investment in worker residences, providing water and also electricity for a small part of the evenings. 'The workers are our family', the Managing Director paternalistically informed me when I inquired about this. Festivals were marked at the worksite and

campus too, with male workers from northern states playing *holi*<sup>45</sup>, while the southern workers made the ritual food of *obattus* in their accommodation to mark Ugadi.

Whether motivated through actual concern for the workers or the desire to maintain a high level of productivity, these actions contributed towards the cultivation of a more settled work force, while simultaneously securing the labour needs of the company. For the workers themselves, this additional security came at a price. Already paid substantially less than locals, migrant workers are often paid an even lower rate by larger companies such as Shakthi in exchange for slightly improved residences (see also Pattenden, 2009:175). Indeed, Praveen's workers, while denied what could be described as even basic facilities<sup>46</sup>, earned between fifty to a hundred rupees extra a day, comparatively.

In these scenarios, workers are thus forced to choose between a marginally more comfortable period of residence in the city, or more money to remit for the sustenance of the village. In this way, the semi-stable provision of employment has become in itself, a neoliberal form of patronage, allowing the company to secure a captive worker base and meet long-term project completions while making considerable savings on labour. Moreover, paternalistic attitudes towards workers, as expressed by the Managing Director of Shakti, may belie ulterior motives of limiting worker's movements and networks within the city, as I now discuss.

*'Why should we fight for them?': whither cosmopolitanism?*

While the workers of the Thimmaiah campus were separated spatially from their workplace, they were still subject to forms of surveillance and temporally controlled movement. David, a local *maistri* in charge of the Raichur work group, made appearances whenever he saw fit, showing up at the labour camp when I was visiting and warning me not to stay after dark when the walled settlement was sealed off. Moreover, though David was the area union representative, none of the workers I spoke with had any knowledge of the union or were registered with the construction workers' welfare board. In this way, figures like David had the potential to further mobility for migrant workers, whilst simultaneously withholding it.

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<sup>45</sup> *Holi* is a spring festival primarily celebrated across the north of India and Nepal. Although it can be celebrated for days, the most famous form this celebration takes is the throwing of water and brightly coloured powders at each other, or 'playing holi'.

<sup>46</sup> However, most large company sites seldom include toilets, washing facilities, adequate sanitation or drinking water.

As it transpired, the union in question was an advocate of the Shakthi company, which David spoke of in glowing terms, echoing the Managing Director's earlier sentiments of a familial worker-employer relationship; 'I've been working for this company for more than fifteen years now. The owner of our company helps out as much as he can, he works according to his conscience, he treats us like his family'. However, as indicated above, there were signs that indicated all was not as it seemed. Despite the union's presence, none of the workers, knew of it, having had their photos taken for the welfare board some two years prior, though the applications had not been made, and the workers remained unaware of the board's existence.

Though the union had strong ties with *maistris* across the city and was commissioned by the state to register workers with the welfare board, it continued to exclude women and migrant workers, their secretary informing me they were too 'difficult' to unionise. This attitude was reiterated by Madhu, a former staff member who had resigned in protest following an argument over the conditions and deaths of migrant workers building the city metro; 'They're migrants. They're not members of it. So, some of the office bearers within the trade union were saying 'why should we fight for them? In a city such as Bangalore, they know that big violation is happening, and they pretend that they have not seen it', he angrily informed me.

Subsequently, even for those with access to potentially useful local figures and gatekeepers in the immediate urban milieu such as the campus workforce, this did not necessarily equate to political action or broaden the capacity for it. Indeed, bonds to employers via pay, residence and *maistris*, often denied workers the capacity to engage with any sense of cosmopolitanism or in this case, cross-community engagements that the urban milieu might have otherwise offered. Indeed, it is fully possible given the union's involvement with the campus, that the same figures were also meant to stifle it.

For workers living on site, there were fewer chances still for such encounters. However, whilst they also had no access to a union, Praveen's workers did at times, strike for their unpaid wages, refusing to work until they were at least partially reimbursed. When there were pauses in work due to the fluctuating cost of materials or disrupted cash flows, Basappa and Suraj, Hemavathi and Lingamma's husbands, would scout for alternative work in the vicinity, visiting nearby construction sites and going door-to-door offering their services as handymen. Inevitably, their return was secured by the same reason they left: unpaid wages. Moreover, the consequences of leaving the site would mean the loss of their housing and the small semblance of security it provided in the largely unknown urban terrain. As a result, for both families, each with two young

children in tow (Hemavathi was also expecting her third in the coming months) and hundreds of miles from home, the leverage they were able to employ for their pay remained limited.

It is nevertheless important to acknowledge acts of resistance in spaces of surveillance and control such as worker accommodation, including the decision to strike, regardless of their scale or efficacy. As Smith and Pun illustrate in relation to workers' dormitories in China, such spaces by nature of the close proximity between people, have the potential to become 'bases of organized opposition and solidarity' (2006:1469). In this way, the 'compression of time' Pun and Huilin argue is necessary for maintaining production and surveillance in the dormitory labour regime, may also encourage collective organisation (Pun and Huilin, 2010:180). However, both authors also acknowledge the confines of such spaces, through which; 'protests have structural limitation and specificities, and these condition the form and nature of these protests' (2006:1469). Indeed, while there are instances of migrant workers organising (see Pun and Huilin, 2010; Raj, 2018), these events often come with little to no union intervention. Moreover, to dissuade inter-state collective action between workers, employers also tend to separate workers by state in their accommodation as aforementioned. Migrant networks in lieu of more diverse forms of urban cosmopolitanism are thus often the only resource available to workers and are often further restricted by regionalism (see also Bear, 2007; Chandavarkar, 1981; S. Upadhyay, 1989).

Though I acknowledge James Clifford's proposition that; 'The differential, often violent, displacements that impel locals to travel create, [...] 'discrepant' cosmopolitanisms' (Clifford, 1992:108), cosmopolitanism is not a resource available to all. As Werbner attests; 'Diasporas, by definition, are heterogeneous, and not all their members are equally cosmopolitan' (Werbner, 1999). What then of regional diasporas? Does the city ever become less 'foreign' to rural migrants who spend the majority of their time there? As this section has illustrated, for those living on worksites and in company provided accommodation, interactions with urban spaces and long-term city residents may not always be encouraged or facilitated. If the city does not come to them, how do families seek to engage with it?

### **‘The city is scary’: Navigating urban space and the workplace**

As Veena Das and Shalini Randeria have illustrated, slum communities, like the city, are a ‘dynamic entity’ in which ‘heterogeneity of the low-income localities in terms of control over assets or access to political connections translates into different outcomes’ (2015:S6). Indeed, the heterogeneity of building sites, including scale, employment and accommodation conditions for migrant informants, which in turn, may intersect with gender norms; producing differing responses and outcomes. As I outline in the below section, these various factors had the propensity to shape pathways of present and future forms of socioeconomic mobility – not only for adult workers – but their children, too.

With the majority of urban networks, union organisation, and the state welfare board largely out of reach, how then do migrant women attempt to navigate the precarity of the city and the workplace? Networks invariably play an integral part within urban life – particularly for poorer populaces with a lack of formal avenues of access to resources (P. Chatterjee, 2004; Breman, 2016; V. Das, 2011; De Bois, 2015; Parry, 2012; Picherit, 2012; van Eijk, 2012). With this in mind, while the first section discussed the lack of external networks outside of employers in the city, this section focuses on the influence of internal networks on migrant mobility. Picherit and Pattenden posit that the political leverage available in the village is diminished in urban informal labour contexts (2012, 2009), but as I illustrate, gender and age also have a significant amount of influence on migrant mobility, too. By subsequently attending to the intersection between accommodation and the influence of village gender norms, this section elucidates how these factors may come to restrict or indeed, at times, facilitate varying forms of urban mobility.

#### *‘I worry what will happen’: women’s movement on and off site*

While the city is already stereotyped as a sexualised and corrupting space for women, for migrant populaces, the view from the village also magnifies such imaginaries (See A. Roy, 2003; Dalmia, 2012). Migrant women’s movement in such spaces may thus be socially and physically restricted or regulated by kin (Jatrana and Sangwan, 2004; R. Patel 2010; A. Roy, 2003), and also themselves (Suri, 2000). Within this context, the construction site itself is often perceived as a disrupting and polluting space, with the capacity to damage family honour as Parry elucidates; ‘Lurid tales of sex on construction sites also suggest to many ‘labour class’ people themselves (both male and female) that it is only ‘loose’ women who work on them and that respectable ones remain at home’ (2014:1251). These entrenched views damaged migrant women’s mobility within and

outside of their work, impacting not only their freedom of movement, but their very chance of employment too as Virender, a senior industry figure confided; ‘I’m always worried typically the women are in the camps sometimes the boys are not at work. I worry what will happen. This is the reason I keep the ladies to the bare minimum’. By Virender’s reasoning migrant women were both targets and temptresses – their very presence in the ostensibly masculine domain of the labour camp after hours marking them thus.

As numerous scholars have illustrated concerning the distinction between daily wage labourers and their contracted colleagues, it is not only caste, but also class and intra-class distinctions which produce moral codifications of working women’s bodies (Bear, 2007; Gooptu and Chakravarty, 2018; Kapadia, 1995; Kelkar, 1992; Parry, 2014; Patel, 2010). An intra class division was evident in both field site compositions to some extent – migrant men working in trades (and usually better off) seldom had wives with them, preferring them to stay at home rather than the site or labour camp – spaces charged with the potential of sexual impurity and impropriety. In this way, class (and to some extent caste) boundaries on site are further enforced – with those who can afford to, keeping their wives and female kin away. This pattern is by no means exclusive to construction but can be similarly observed across India in studies of class and caste mobility vis-à-vis women’s declining participation in the workforce (Kabeer and A. Deshpande, 2019; ILO, 2018; Kapsos et al, 2014; S. Desai et al, 2018; *The Hindu*, 2019).

On the Thimmaiah campus site, jealousy was purportedly rife. Many women were reluctant to discuss interactions with men other than their husbands or kin, and fictive kinship terms were sometimes employed to stress the platonic and relationship between men and women. David however, had no qualms discussing the disputes that arose between jealous spouses in his experience as a *maistri*:

There was a fight here even today, that’s why we sent everyone home. The way they think is not right. That is why they come here together. Just before you arrived we sent them home after warning them that we won’t employ them anymore if they fight on site. There’s a lot of doubt [jealousy] among them. During the first phase of the construction of this building, a man killed his wife by hitting her with a stone because of doubt. They’d only been married for a month. The girl was in love with someone else before they got married, he found out somehow and killed her the day after they came to Bangalore.

Indeed, it was often middle-class men who were eager to reveal the salacious details of construction site life. Perhaps unsurprisingly, female workers, often objectified and stereotyped in these stories, were far more reticent to discuss such matters. Indeed, when I asked Radhamma, a worker in her thirties, if were issues working with men I was



told, 'They are like our brothers'. This answer was similarly echoed across informants and I soon learned with the allusion to this (usually) fictive kinship between men and women<sup>47</sup>, that the matter was closed. Given the language used about them by employers and hidden instances of sexual harassment and exploitation on site (of which I discuss in further detail in the next chapter) it is perhaps unsurprising that the majority of female informants were reluctant to speak on this matter, or subsequently fuel these damaging stereotypes.

On site, Hemavathi and Lingamma avoided the migrant men from the northern states who they claimed, frequently stared and made them feel uncomfortable. However, it was not only the construction site but what lay outside of it that caused them unease. The women seldom ventured out, having little idea of what lay beyond the changing building sites where they lived and worked. Their children too, were afraid to wander far. Echoing her young daughter Narsamma's apprehension towards the wider urban unknown, Lingamma once confided; 'The city is scary'. As well as their peripatetic accommodation arrangements, this uncertainty was instilled by the women's restricted movement in the urban milieu. Their husbands Basappa and Suraj, while not exactly endowed with the same temporal and financial means to engage with the city as Baudelaire's *flâneur* (see Benjamin, 1997; 2006), were at least familiar with the locality and its transport, having some time to loiter and drink after work, venturing out to a nearby market by bus on Sundays to buy food. The women primarily stayed on site looking after the children and undertaking various household chores, unless in the instance of a halt in construction, when they might travel to another site for work with their husbands. In this scenario, both sets of men and women inevitably had very different experiences and perceptions of the city as a known and unknown entity.

This lack of engagement significantly reduced the potential formation of 'boundary crossing ties', integral to accessing networks which may facilitate alternative employment opportunities and other forms of vital information (Van Eijk, 2012:1). Living on site thus had the propensity to deny greater knowledge of one's surroundings, allowing not only *maistris* but husbands and kin to maintain higher levels of surveillance and control. Local women comparatively in some instances, received their own wages and worked unaccompanied by the watchful gaze of kin and affines, enjoying greater freedom of movement, as discussed in relation to the Yadgir colony. In this way, the

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<sup>47</sup> I am aware that Parry discussed the use of fictive kinship terms among his informants in Chhattisgarh as flirtatious (for instance *babhi*, an oftentimes flirtatious reference to one's older brother's wife was used). This was not the case among the majority of my informants who tended to invoke the term 'brother' which does not have the same connotations.

ambivalence of the urban environment that was effectively utilised by employers to keep migrant workers on a tight leash, did not necessarily fade over time for women workers especially – or the children raised on site, whom I now discuss.

*All work and no play? Learning for the future*

Despite their location in a busy neighbourhood in the heart of the city, the combination of insufficient regulations<sup>48</sup> and the logistical effort required to send them, kept all twelve children on Praveen's site from attending schools or *anganwadis* (nursery school). Even though the workers were engaged in longer term employment with the same *maistris* and property developer over the course of some years, their shifting accommodation with each new project prevented this, as did their lack of urban connections. As Basappa, a mason and Hemavathi's husband, stated; 'I would like to send them to school, but we'll need someone to pick them up and drop them [...] Our work sometimes goes on until eight in the evening'. It was Basappa's ambition that once his son<sup>49</sup> Shiva was old enough he would attend school in the village, since the consequences of no education were apparent; 'If we get them to study, they'll end up with good jobs, if we don't, or we pull them out of school too early, they'll end up doing the same work we're doing' he concluded.

During one of my early visits to Praveen's site, I remember my initial alarm at a toddler tottering towards an open elevator shaft, only to be scooped up by his watchful mother seconds later. The children spent their days playing among piles of artificial sand and heaps of rubble, throwing various items down elevator shafts, and running around barefoot, stained with cement dust. Babies slept on makeshift cradles of knotted saris, which also served as swings for their slightly older siblings. Although they were of varying ages (from six months to eleven years), the eldest children were all girls, a not uncommon occurrence, since they were primarily taken along to provide childcare to their younger siblings while their mothers worked.

As well as suffering from the similar everyday afflictions of workers, including prolonged exposure to cement dust and the resulting chemical burns and toxic fumes, the children on site were listless, and under-stimulated. Prone to long spells of boredom

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<sup>48</sup> Despite certain provisions in the Karnataka Building and Other Construction Worker's Act of 2006 for children including education grants and crèches for sites where there are over fifty women residing, no part in the act stipulates that children must be provided with any means of actually getting to school. Furthermore, there are few state-led education initiatives for children of migrant labourers, save for scant collaborations with NGOs in the city.

<sup>49</sup> Due to their limited resources and gender norms, it is still common for families to preference the education of boys over girls among many of the families as was also the case in the Yadgir colony.

punctuated by accidents, they mimicked their parents, performing their tasks in miniature – lifting, carrying, washing vessels, and sifting stones. The structural limitations of informal employment and labour migration thus had the propensity to cut across generations, continuing labour’s reproduction as Basappa acknowledged. Such sentiments were mirrored by the young girls, Eramma, Rangamma, and Narsamma, who Aishwarya and I would play with amidst the rubble. Indeed, when I asked Rangamma, Hemavathi and Basappa’s six-year old daughter what it was she wanted to do in the future, she replied ‘This job only’. For those dwelling on them, the habitus of the construction site comes to shape bodies and minds from an early age.

While for the girls, their futures appeared to hold *gaare* or *coolie kelsa*, since for women as Breman states; ‘their all-round discrimination does not leave them, throughout their working life, with any other label than that of ‘helper’ (2016:193); when it came to a possibility for advancement within the industry, their brothers might at least learn a trade. ‘They might be painters or carpenters or plumbers’, Suraj informed me, although somewhat doubtfully. Indeed, were their sons to succeed in these areas, they would surpass their fathers, all of whom undertook *gaare* and *coolie kelsa*, having failed to ascend beyond their initial roles – an issue also noted by Supriya RoyChowdhury in her study of migrant construction workers from northern Karnataka in Bengaluru (2014). Indeed, as discussed in chapter three, to elevate to a trade, a worker had to find a tradesman willing to take on an apprentice, an action already requiring enough social and financial capital to incentivise the tradesman in question. Moreover, since most informants from northern Karnataka and Andhra had not achieved this, their own networks remained insufficient to enable vocational growth.

Although Suraj had at least hinted at the possibility of a trade for his son, the lack of any other options for girls was perhaps best summed up by Hemavathi, who asked somewhat incredulously during a conversation about her daughter Rangamma; ‘*What* will she learn?’ For Rangamma, girlhood was considered an important stepping stone in preparation for the world of work and marriage, and her apparent lack of commitment thus far to various forms of girlhood training was viewed dimly by her mother; ‘She’s only good for dressing pretty and looking good, if you ask her to do any work, she’s no good’, Hemavathi grumbled. Rangamma a small, skinny girl with closely cropped hair like her mother, lived in oversized hand me down t-shirts, often asked me for a new dress. ‘She has plenty of time in her life to work’, I somewhat naively replied. ‘Where I’m from, the kids have to be doing something, they’ll be smart when they grow up if they do. If they’re dull and don’t do anything now, they’ll grow up like that’ Hemavathi responded.

Whether looking after her troublesome younger brother, Shiva, who was always biting her, making *chapattis* (which she regretfully told me she was yet to fully master) or assisting her pregnant mother, there was plenty to do for Rangamma on site. Being ‘dull’ was not associated with a lack of a formal education, rather a lack of practical skills. As Soumhya Venkatesan posits ‘the acquisition of a skill is embedded in larger social knowledge about the value of the skill based on ideas about the body, gender, identity, politics, and economics. Acquiring, utilizing, or depending upon a skill positions individuals or groups in particular ways, not necessarily of their choosing’ (2010:S158). Just as colony women’s perceptions of skill and possibility were shaped by the limited options they perceived available, so too was this the case for Hemavathi and Lingamma. However, unlike the women of the Yadgir colony, Hemavathi and Lingamma could not see their children moving beyond their own positions either, highlighting the disparity in aspiration between those with access to productive local networks and schools for their children (however inadequate) and those who did not.

*Alternative avenues of urban mobility: productive networks from within*

Given the restricted vocational and at times, physical movement experienced by informants, what alternative forms of mobility did the city offer migrant families? For the families at the Thimmaiah campus, though David might have often been close at hand, the separation between worksite and labour camp effectively granted a greater level of access to their immediate surroundings<sup>50</sup>. The women of the campus would walk to and from work unescorted by male kin, talking and laughing. Indeed, I once ran into Shivu and Shubha, two cousins in their late teens and early twenties who had joined several generations of their family in the city; on their way back from the local market, their arms laden with bags of vegetables. Whilst seemingly insignificant, this event illustrated that unlike Hemavathi and Lingamma, whose husbands received their wages, the women of the group handled at least some of their own money, and were subject to less strict gender norms when it came to their movement and financial autonomy. Indeed, the women had also started their own chit fund; ‘We manage to save a little, around forty to fifty thousand [rupees]<sup>51</sup>. We send it to our family back in the village’, I was informed by Radhamma, a

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<sup>50</sup> Labour camps are at times, far from work sites located on the outskirts of the city due to a lack of availability of land and the desire to keep workers separated from urban life as much as possible. In such scenarios workers are bussed to and from their worksites. The campus is a less than typical example, since in a city where land prices are at a premium, the university had space to house its various workforces – albeit in close, scattered locations.

<sup>51</sup> This was between £400-£500 at the time of writing.

worker in her thirties residing with her husband, a *maistri*, and siblings-in-law. This was no small amount. The money also provided a vital safety net in the case of emergencies. It was not just money that flowed back to the villages in Raichur either - Shivu's nuclear family were awaiting the purchase of a new television, having sent their old one back to their relatives in the country

In the absence of wider reaching cosmopolitan networks, bonds between workers (and in this case, kin and affines) in labour camps may, according to Pun and Huilin 'generate intensive information exchanges about external job opportunities that thereby create and strengthen workers' mobility power' (2010:181). The fact that some of the women had organised their own chit fund attests to the capacity of these spaces for productive forms of collectivity. Moreover, other women of the settlement who had accompanied their kin and spouses to the city but were unable to work in construction, had found domestic work in surrounding apartments – again attesting to the potential of such networks.

If, as Appadurai posits; 'Housing provides the link between kinship, reproduction, dignity, and shelter' (2013:117), it is also one's networks that facilitate this, too. The ongoing work taking place on the university campus and the location of their accommodation thus allowed women workers to develop tentative but not insignificant ties to the locality with the influx of supporting kin – even if these were facilitated in turn by their ties to Shakthi. This was further illustrated by the fact that, unusually for migrant workers, some of their children even attended nearby schools – something made not only possible by the length of time the workers had spent in the locality, but also the presence of non-working older kin, such as Devamma, Shubha's grandmother, who looked after the children.

The spatiality and of the campus labour also enabled various forms of sociality. Children played outside, while groups of women prepared vegetables, chewed betel, and braided and oiled their hair sitting on the exposed concrete foundations of the tin shacks, which effectively served as exterior porches. Moreover, although Jagori, a Delhi based NGO working with migrant female construction workers, warns against putting too much stock in the ownership of electronic goods as mobility markers for migrant workers (2004:31); the purchase of a television for Shivu's family in Bengaluru signified an investment in the growing city homestead. The gathering of families to watch television in each other's houses also added further to a sense of community in the company settlement.

While their spatial and employment relations enabled informants of the settlement a sociality largely denied to the workers on Praveen's site, the presence of a large bulk of the village also meant a continuity of its kin local networks into the city. As Carol Stack illustrates in relation to the Projects, in the absence of the state, such networks prove vital to sustaining shelter, sustenance and the reproduction of families in precarious situations (1983). These networks, according to Stack, connect households and domestic life, consisting of kin and quasi-kin, they expand, contract and adapt, with economic and social necessity (1983:94). As evidenced by the women's chit fund, childcare and alternative job arrangements, for those able to bring with them a substantial portion of this network, life in the city, at least on the surface, appeared more manageable than for the majority of migrants unable to form such communities. Indeed, according to Devamma, up to three members per village household were now frequently residing in the workers' residence, and more were coming, an idea that did not displease her; 'if they come here it'll feel like our entire village is here, so that makes me happy', she concluded.

However, while various social scientists (Breman 1996; 2016; Ferguson, 1999; Parry, 2003; Béteille and Srinivas, 1964), amongst others, have argued the village and city are inextricably linked via webs of social relations, the fact that so many families from the same village were present in the Thimmaiah settlement, also highlights the worsening prospects of rural livelihoods in Raichur, as framed in the ethnographic setting. Moreover, despite significant discrepancies in mobility indicators between both groups of informants, as the final section now explores, neither felt particularly invested in or moved by the city as a potential home – and indeed, nor was this something the urban environment invited.

### **'Our village is better': here, there or elsewhere?**

While Sunil Khilnani describes rural idealisations of the city as a source of wealth, claiming that 'spreading rumours of their opulence, have made the cities universal objects of desire' (2012:1859-1860), this apparent mythical quality quickly evaporates for migrant workers on arrival. Although, according to numerous studies urban areas offer more resources in terms of medical care, employment and education (Deb, 2018; Jatrana and Sangwan, 2010; A. Krishna, 2017; D.C. Sharma, 2015), these are often only available for those with permanent addresses and the requisite social networks to access them. Even for those more permanently settled in the city, daily wages were largely subsidised by a combination of loans, their own networks, and to some in rare instances, the state. The residents of the Yadgir colony had little choice therefore, but to rely upon CSA and each

other, maintaining their roots within northern Karnataka through remittances, land, and marriage. However, for newer arrivals from the region, the affordable accommodation built in prior decades for migrant workers (and simultaneously, to garner urban vote banks for Congress) in the days Bengaluru was short of labour, are now a relic of the past. With this in mind; what means of a ‘home’ did the city provide for its migrant families?

In a national context, the low quality of life in Indian cities available to migrants prevents families from permanently settling there (See, Jain, 2016; Sridhar, et al, 2012); bringing accounts of growing urbanisation into refute (Bhattacharya, 2016; S. Desai et al, 2005). Despite their ostensible lack of political voice in the city, migrant families may refuse jobs if the accommodation is below the already low standard, as Lingamma attested; ‘The shed [residence] is inspected first. If it’s habitable we’ll go there’. Conditions in many forms of worker accommodation from construction sites to large company-run labour camps are barely habitable for adult men, let alone families bringing young children. Both onsite and offsite accommodation may incur disease and illness, or in the case of two migrant workers who contracted cholera from inadequate sanitation facilities, even death (see Shruthi, December 30<sup>th</sup>, 2017).

At the same time, it was the liminal extra-urban status of migrant workers that kept them in urban employment – with local workers reporting approximately half the amount of working days, as I have discussed. Since the city’s huge rental deposits made it difficult for even ostensibly permanent residents of the city to settle, both local and migrant families would dwell underneath tenement block staircases and in blue tarpaulin encampments. Demographics living in such arrangements are highly susceptible to exploitation by unscrupulous landlords, local big men, and eviction from the state (Anjaria, 2006; Appadurai, 2013; Blom Hansen and Verkaaik, 2009; Chatterjee, 2004; A. Roy, 2003; RoyChowdhury, 2014). Attempting to make a more permanent life in the city was thus a risky and expensive endeavour. As a result, for many families, years of labour in Bengaluru’s construction industry produced no readily attainable pathway from rural to urban settlement, nor significantly, was this necessarily desired, as I now discuss.

#### *Here: disruptive urban presents*

Whilst for Ferguson’s informants, ‘Rural connections and rural kin were not a matter of sentimental attachment; increasingly they were resources upon which bare survival might depend’ (1999:40. See also, Mills, 1997), what of those who found themselves unable to attain an adequate means of survival from the village? For Shivu, Shubha, and majority of residents from the Thimmaiah labour settlement, while they had

physically left the village, its social ties remained around them; providing a greater number of familiar faces and productive networks via the proximity of kith and kin. However, Hemavathi and Lingamma, through the more mobile nature of their employment and the smaller company size, found themselves unable to form such a community.

For families such as Hemavathi's and Lingamma's, opting not to invest too heavily in urban life enabled them to effectively utilise their liminal status to meet aspirations located outside of the city, in the village. As Tsing observes; 'Thinking through precarity, indeterminacy also makes life possible' (2018:20). Their disengagement from the city moreover, whilst a result of the various controls of employers and male quasi-guardians; was also a means of protecting themselves and their families from hostilities real and unknown. Such hostility was never far away. Indeed, Hemavathi and Lingamma were made to feel unwelcome by the scrutinising gaze of the surrounding neighbours who threw their rubbish by the sides of their houses and who came to scold them for letting their children climb over their two wheelers, parked just outside the women's huts. As Breman asserts; 'migrants realize all too well their status as transient workers is tolerated as long as their labour power remains in demand but is experienced as a nuisance by citizens [...] The restricted intercourse these outsiders have with the urban inhabitants forces them to seek a low profile' (2016:194). Perhaps such experiences over the years had taught the women their presence would only be grudgingly tolerated as workers.

#### *There: The village as a site of longing*

While varying conditions on both sites influenced informants' ways of moving and ways of being in the city, did they as might be presumed, alter overall impressions of the city vis-à-vis the village? Might it, whilst acknowledging the numerous critiques of the rural-urban divide, be productive to think of these as two separate but interlinking locations in time and space that may vary in perception by individual experience? As Jonathan Parry has argued, for some circular migrants, the village takes on the quality of a waiting room between periods of work (2003). Not too dissimilarly, Breman suggests that the village is a site of necessary recovery, recuperation, and partaking in festivities after long periods of urban hardship and exclusion (2016). Certainly, the framing of the village varied by individual situation. With this in mind, I now consider the spatial location of aspirations vis-à-vis conceptions of home for migrant informants. The desired location of futures is by no means static – prone to alter with age, gender (often



overlooked factors in studies of migrant experiences as Gardner (2002) also attests), and the varying conditions workers experience within the city.

Tim Bunnell, Jamie Gillen and Elaine Ho alternatively frame the city as a site of action for ‘prospecting the future’ (2017). In their multi-sited research across Southeast Asia, Bunnell, Gillen and Ho attend to the shifting spatial and temporal locations of aspirations, primarily amongst migrant interlocutors, concluding that; it was ‘the prospect of elsewhere—and of being elsewhere—that nurtures imaginings of aspirational futures and spurs efforts to realize them’ (2017:3). Such aspirational geographies can also be considered within the wider context of rural to urban migration in India today, and significantly, the experiences of those unable to dwell in a single location.

Across the three (female) generations I spoke to on Praveen’s site, the superiority of the village over the city was expressed in numerous ways. Rangamma would describe her favourite festivals (the winner was *Gowri Habba*<sup>52</sup>) in the village and all of the activities the children missed undertaking there. For the older girls on site (all of the boys were infants), the village was associated with places to play, being able to attend school, and festival time. Yet to be able to partake in village life, they also had to spend a great amount of time away from it. As Eramma, Lingamma’s daughter once told me, her family had been travelling between Bengaluru and Adoni for ‘many years’. The idea of settling in the city however, was never vocalised, at least by the women of the families, as a viable or desirable option.

Seeking to dispel western-centric constructs of teleological urbanisation, Ferguson stresses the impermanence of urban lives and how for some informants, the return to the village in lieu of adequate urban livelihood opportunities was a reluctant one (1999). While this was also the case for some of the Yadgir colony residents, for migrant workers, a desired return to the village often lay at the heart of their aspirations even if this was not ultimately achievable. The families of Praveen’s site for instance, followed a schema largely centred around futures built upon returns to the village, even though these were few and far between.

As Bunnell, Gillen and Ho posit, such futures are ‘rendered amenable to calculation and strategic action in relation to available economic resources [and] social capital’ (2017:5). For families with low to no land ownership and little social capital to draw on due to their low caste status, fewer returns to the village were possible. The

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<sup>52</sup> *Gowri Habba* celebrates Ganesh’s mother, the Goddess Gowri. It is a festival that primarily acknowledges women and their role as wives and includes the gifting of new clothes.

diminishment of plots of agricultural land across the last four decades due to rural population increase and shared inheritance across multiple sons is a common issue experienced by a substantial array of informants beyond Praveen's site and the wider population of daily wage labourers (see Breman, 2016:43). As a result, land ownership constituted one of the primary aspirations amongst the men on site, despite the chronic drought of the region. 'If there's money left, and there's land available in my village, I would buy it', Basappa once declared. Moreover, owning enough productive land was also presented as an opportunity to spend more time in the village, although this was largely dependent on the rains, as Basappa confirmed; 'Only people with a lot of land go back when it rains, if it's a small patch of land, there's no point of going back'. Indeed, increasing spells in the city no longer reflected the reaping and sowing seasons of the agrarian calendar, but more so the failing rains, as Basappa explained; 'We take loans while seeding the fields, but if there are no rains, there are no yields, the loan must be repaid'.

Though one could earn around double in the city, continued spells of drought and growing debt meant that maintaining a life and the lives of dependents in the village was a growing challenge. As a result, nearly all non-essential wages were sent back home by the men of Praveen's site to clear their debts, though the families spent typically less than half a year there. Their existence in the city was thus a very frugal one, with little money spent on anything else bar food, water, cooking oil and alcohol by the men. Though occasionally Basappa might return with a sweet or two for the children or a plastic bangle for his daughter Rangamma, no money was put towards any substantial purchases in the city, unlike the Thimmaiah campus. Indeed, for lifecycle events and debts to be fulfilled in the village, work in the city was the only option, a situation, as Hemavathi reminded me; 'We have to get the young ones married, we have to build houses, so we take loans, and then there's no savings, so we come here'.

One humid afternoon when Hemavathi was resting in her hut from the heat, I asked how she liked the city; 'Our village is better than here [Bengaluru]'. The reason, she responded, was simple enough; 'Because it's our village. It's more like home, the surroundings, and all that'. Or, as Lingamma summed it up; 'If we got our salaries there [the village] we would happily live there'. For Pun and Huilin, expressed nostalgia for the village among migrant informants, 'could be understood as a "weapon of the weak" (2010:504), through which "'Home" becomes their imaginary anchor to life' (2010:ibid). For the two families, who did not know where they were headed to next within the city ('They'll call us and let us know', Suraj told me), the longing for home was also a longing

for the familiarity and comfort of the village – contra the residents of the Yadgir colony, who frequently depicted it as a place of hardship and little comfort. While the nostalgia experienced by the families of Praveen’s site for the village was bittersweet; it also made its continued existence possible – informing a collective pragmatism to sustain a life and livelihood there, even though in reality, they were now, primarily located in the city.

Not all workers on Praveen’s site were similarly invested in a romanticised ideal of the village, however. Though Hemavathi would soon be returning to give birth to their third child there, Basappa informed me that, ‘If our wives and kids are settled here [the city] we’ll stay here.’ For Basappa, a desired home was not necessarily the village, but where one’s family could reside comfortably. For the present time, neither location fulfilled this requirement. Basappa and Hemavathi’s differing opinions of the city were also inevitably informed by the discrepancies of gendered urban mobility. For Basappa and Suraj, the city was something of a known entity, albeit a fragmented one due to the shifting localities the families had worked in. For Hemavathi, Lingamma, and their young children however, the urban realm of what was known extended only to the end of the dusty lane. This may also explain why they could not envision a familial future in the city.

*Elsewhere: neither here or there*

As Pun and Huilin observe in China, the new generation of migrant workers, finding themselves in a permanent state of betwixt and between, unable to settle in either the city or their rural homeland, experiences increasing levels of frustration (2010). The ambivalence and at times, resentment generated from a potential lifetime of liminality, was also elucidated by Shubha and Shivu. When I asked Shubha how she liked the city, she acknowledged that life regardless of location, remained difficult, quickly dispelling any idealisations of urban life; ‘Like? There’s nothing to like. We work here. We have to work if we’re back home, we have to work if we’re here’, she answered, seemingly incredulous at the naivety of my query. However, Shivu’s answer, at least on the surface, appeared unusually enthusiastic; ‘When we compare it to our village, Bangalore is so much better’, she told me on our very first meeting. It transpired the reason was simple enough: ‘Because we can earn here, we can’t earn in our village’.

For both young women, the city was a worksite where the immediate needs of life and potentially, village life, could be met. While the women on the campus worksite undoubtedly had more freedom and knowledge of their locality than Hemavathi and Lingamma, few could name any particular aspect of the city they liked beyond its income

generating capacities and cooler weather – a common answer from nearly all migrant interlocutors. Indeed, to relatives in their village who did not venture out to work, the city appeared to be the source of considerable wealth, something Shubha was quick to dispel; ‘People back in the village think that if we come to Bangalore, we’ll earn a lot of money, but they don’t understand how hard we have to work here’.

Referring to her recent trip to Raichur for Ugadi, Shivu did however, inform me that the city had become more familiar, to the extent that; ‘When I go there I feel like coming back here, and when I’m here I feel like going there. Both places feel like home now’. As these somewhat conflicting accounts reveal, frequent labour migration may generate a sense of frustration or ambivalence for younger workers who, faced with inadequate financial opportunities in the village or the city to sustain them in either indefinitely, come to realise their lives must be divided across both.

Whilst employment within the Thimmaiah campus enabled several generations of Shivu and Shubha’s village their subsistence, it simultaneously enabled the supply and maintenance of the campus labour force, contingent to its needs, keeping the village in a state of suspended animation betwixt and between. However, ties to informal employment in urban environments are in many cases all too easily uprooted (Anjaria, 2006; Breman 2016; and Doshi; in Desai and Modyal, 2012). Should the site expansion halt, or cheaper labour be sourced from elsewhere for instance, the tentative inroads made by informants from the Thimmaiah campus will inevitably be tested. Sending money back to the village was therefore also a means of hedging one’s bets.

## **Conclusion**

Attending to construction employment practices and the city as respective and interlinking aspects of precarity, this chapter has illustrated the centrality of worker accommodation and the ability to form a community in accessing urban surroundings. Whilst it has highlighted how size and proximity of networks, gender norms and residential conditions influence women and children’s movement especially, through various aspects of the urban milieu; it has also shown how Bengaluru offers little in the way of a home or progression beyond its building sites – even for more ostensibly settled residents. As Krishna has attested concerning settled migrants (2014) and as I have also shown concerning the former migrant residents of the Yadgir colony, this does not necessarily change for later generations, either.

Contra studies that present the city as a site of greater freedom for women vis-à-vis the often patriarchal norms of the village (Dalmia, 2012; Jagori, 2004; Mills, 1997;

Pun and Smith, 2006), this chapter has also illustrated how for some women, cities do not necessarily offer additional freedoms – if anything, certain aspects of women’s mobility are potentially more restricted by urban residence. Indeed, as these two groups have shown, while the close quarters of accommodation on the worksite might foster forms of worker mobility and solidarity, they also have the counter-effect of restricting women’s overall movement and engagement in the city.

As evidenced, there is no readily accessible journey from rural to urban life – nor was this something informants necessarily desired. Indeed, the profound denial of cosmopolitanism in the city for many migrant workers through a lack of engagement with other residents and spaces did little to alter an enduring nostalgia for the village. This was by no means as de Haan has claimed, a by-product of employment practices (1999), but as I further elaborate in the following chapter, their intended effect – producing cheaper, captive, and yet potentially permanently liminal workforces across the city, with one foothold in Bengaluru and the other in their native village.

Nevertheless, though the village remained a site of fiscal priority and labour’s reproduction for both sets of workers, urban work and living spaces were also utilised in ways employers had not anticipated or desired. As highlighted, forms of worksite accommodation, whilst serving as spaces of exclusion and control, at times became sites for forging productive networks and practices – for savings groups, strike action, and finding alternative means of employment. In this way, informants’ efforts to counter the instability of urban life and employment may not always prove successful, but remain fundamental acts of acknowledgment, contestation and resilience, vis-à-vis the precarity of construction work and the city.

The value of migrant labour may be placed financially lower than their local counterparts by property developers, but its worth can be witnessed beyond Raichur and Adoni – across villages in India, where, in lieu of any Lewisian economic transformation, residents are increasingly turning away from shrinking crop yields and plot sizes to seek a living in the city. In this way, it must not be forgotten that circular migration enables the continuation of lives in otherwise unsustainable scenarios, too – facilitating the paying off of agricultural loans, the marking and fulfilment of life cycle events, and the very sustenance of the family itself. However, the prolonging of rural life has a price. For migrant families this includes the frequent if not total denial of education to children; a forfeiture of health, safety and comfortable residence; and for women primarily, the heightened risk of sexual assault and exploitation. So long as city livelihoods in

construction are required to sustain rural lives and livelihoods, the considerable cost of urban expansion borne by migrant workers and their children, will also remain.

CHAPTER SIX:  
'I HAVE A WAR CHEST OF A THOUSAND CRORES BACKING ME UP'  
MASCULINE ECONOMIES OF THE BENGALURU REAL ESTATE INDUSTRY

*Of the luxury homes, tech parks, convention centres, and up-market hotels that emerged across the city from swathes of newly designated SEZs, Matthew once told me; 'that is the future, that is where everything will come'. When I asked if Bengaluru was merely experiencing a bubble, he informed me I was mistaken, adding; 'Dubai is a bubble, but Bangalore will not burst'. However, some eight months later Matthew appeared to have lost his prior confidence, stating, 'If somebody is saying 'it's all good, we are doing okay' they are lying. It's in such a shitty condition. One hundred thousand units empty in Bangalore'. When I mentioned this number was refuted, Matthew countered that the media was 'trying to assure the market of good times continuing'.*

## **Introduction**

This chapter shifts the lens of analysis from workers to company owners and property developers in the Bengaluru real estate industry. It attends to the speculative and interlinking qualities of discourses concerning the city's real estate boom, urban development, and futurity; which, like the real estate industry itself, conceal more than they reveal. The resulting extractive economies draw value from global connectivity and social disconnectedness, removing previous relations of obligation between company owners and their workers. Pre-existing prejudices vis-a-vis region, gender, caste, and class elucidated by informants in real estate circulate and intersect with newer forms of masculine currencies of speculative prowess. Historically forged forms of discrimination thus continue to shape labour relations but also shift to meet the increasing needs of developers to build cheaply and sell swiftly before Bengaluru's real estate bubble bursts.

This chapter begins by exploring attempts of interlocutors to harness the profitability attributed to real estate speculation. It then examines the harsh realities of the city's real estate sector for workers who bear the brunt of failed speculation and employers' efforts to guard against this by devolving risk. Drawing on multi-sited data from key industry informants, I explore the praxis of property development and its outcomes through three principal themes. Firstly, via land accumulation and speculation; secondly via valuations of workers; and thirdly; the resulting and often violent outcomes of these practices via the relational capital of hegemonic masculinity. This I argue, is closely bound with the discussed praxis of speculative accumulation.

The first section begins by describing the operations of various real estate industry players within Bengaluru, including the deployment of what Blom Hansen and Verkaaik have referred to as ‘urban charisma’ (2009) in the purchase of land and its associated activities. The involvement of such characters, some of them state actors, further generates opacity in the Indian real estate market, where; ‘Beyond rumor and hearsay, information on land transactions (many of which are unrecorded or occur partially in cash) is scarce’ (Searle, 2014:68). Acknowledging the potential productivity but also the risk generated by this opacity vis-a-vis land transactions and market speculation, it considers the lack of clarity concerning the current scenario of real estate within Bengaluru; scrutinising the concept of a land boom and predictions of informants in relation to wider capital flows and financial investment practices.

Continuing with the prior chapter’s analysis of migrant experiences of local labour regimes; the second section examines the consequences of real estate speculation – attending to the devolution of financial risk onto workers via cost cutting measures and regimes of value. Examining dehumanising and patronising attitudes which rationalise the subsequent treatment of workers, I attend to the disjuncture between the language of real estate developers and their actions towards their de facto employees. While some informants expressed the wish for better lives for workers, or indeed sharing some of the industry profits, whilst acknowledging the poor living and working conditions they experienced; they largely failed to express reflexivity concerning their own roles in both enforcing and perpetuating these. That these remained sentiments and not actions, attests to the ongoing process of detachment in informal labour arrangements. These move away from client-patron relations; facilitating conditions whereby ‘bodies capable of generating enormous profit [are] treated as lacking in value’ (Prentice and Trueba, 2018:43)

As a result, responsibility for working and living conditions, and overall worker welfare is largely devolved onto an apathetic state, further dis-incentivising employer motivations of care and creating what I refer to as the ‘violence of indifference’. By attending to the lack of care and valuation of workers as both people and producers, I contribute to the modest corpus of literature exploring the exploitative conditions facing construction workers worldwide (Choudhury, 2013; Choudhury and Clisby, 2018; Pang, 2019; Parry, 2014; Pattenden 2012; RoyChowdhury, 2014; Torres, et al, 2013); illustrating how broader neoliberal practices become localised through labour regimes and various intersecting factors (see also, Carswell and De Neve, 2014; Fudge, 2019; Torres, et al, 2013).



Finally, I evaluate the actions of interlocutors within the context of managing workers and the ways in which working conditions including concomitant forms of control and discipline, are rationalised. I scrutinise relations of hegemonic masculinity vis-à-vis the economy of emotions (including detachment) produced by the anticipation of accumulation on construction sites. My analysis makes visible how various forms of masculinity (see for instance, Bear, 2015a; 2015b; De Neve 2004; Chopra, 2004) are enacted by employers to subdue workers, cultivate image, and ultimately, maintain discipline. In doing so, I contribute to a further ethnographic corpus regarding violence in the workplace (Eisenberg, 1998; Monaghan, 2003; Pun and Huilin, 2010; Smith and Pun, 2006) vis-à-vis hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005).

### **‘Dubai is a bubble, but Bangalore will not burst’: speculation and accumulation**

This section firstly considers the difficulties informants face in buying and developing land in Bengaluru, and the ways in which, with the assistance of local networks, bribery and illicit transactions, property developers attempt to secure substantial profit margins. Continuing its examination of the blurring between the formal/informal legal/illegal and speculation/reality, it considers the unanswered question of what creates the foundations of urban real estate growth, and informants’ attempts to predict the vagaries of the market. It then examines the interactions between various actors involved in the purchase of land and the issues that may be encountered in the following stages of construction, ranging from the foreseen (including blockages in materials) to the unforeseen, such as the government’s sudden demonetisation initiative of late 2016.

#### *‘You need to be well-networked’: buying land and the importance of being ‘local’*

Regardless of the heat and ever-present clouds of dust, Praveen can be found on site well-groomed and wearing a neat blazer all year round; a cultivated image of competent, cosmopolitan businessman (See also, Heslop, 2016; Tsing, 2000). Hailing from a relatively modest background, Praveen co-founded a small real estate business building, selling and renting offices and apartments with his former girlfriend, Suchitra, both prolific figures in the city’s expat social scene. As we sat on plastic chairs during my first visit to the Ramnagar construction site, Praveen explained how being a ‘local’ developer gave his company the edge in negotiating with the various informal/formal

(and often in-between) machinations of the state: planning authorities, ambitious politicians, safety inspectors, and the police. A fluency in Kannada also proved highly useful concerning negotiations with land owners, many of whom were farmers, their lands now enclosed by the sprawling city. Praveen acknowledged the problems he encountered upon first entering the business, and how things had changed for him now he was a well-connected local:

There's a lot of mafia in terms of land. I had problems with my project when I started off, so you need to be well networked and you need to make sure that all of your documents are right, because there are always people trying to make some money out of you – like a parasite behaviour. If you go to a particular area and try to do a project, the locals of that area sometimes try to show the massive power, thinking to extract some amount or some things like that because they think... they claim to have some relationship to the land. So, these things arise a lot in India especially in Bangalore realty market, but if you are as well a local from another area and you do have good networks, those things will not matter.

Being 'well networked' in the Bengaluru property world Praveen informed me, was crucial since Kannadigas preferred to sell to fellow Kannadigas, and furthermore, in the event of word-of-mouth land sales via one's friends and acquaintances. As Searle maintains, 'the complexities of acquiring land reward local knowledge and political connections' (2014:76). This was certainly the case with Praveen, who had built his business to a seven-million-pound operation. In the city centre, competition for scarcely available land was inevitably fierce, and according to Praveen, often relied on information from the people in his networks. This had also been the case with the site in Ramnagar, where Hemavathi and Lingamma resided with their families:

In properties [it's] location, location, location. Okay? There's so many big, big builders. And they have huge banks of money. They will out-buy you, you know? So, it's very difficult to compete with such players, so if you find some location like this [Praveen gestures to the building site around us], it should happen within the network, so you should keep it hush hush and get it done and it's done [he vigorously wipes his hands as a gesture of completion]. So that's how we bought this project up. If it's open in the market there will be many buyers for it and you know, some of these are going to out-pay you and someone's going to have it.

The ability to draw on local networks and use them effectively is part of what Thomas Blom Hansen and Oskar Verkaaik refer to as the workings of 'infra power' by practitioners of urban charisma, whereby 'Quintessential urban figures – be they artists, taxi drivers, cops or those belonging to a more opaque popular world – may be charismatic by virtue of their actions and the knowledge and resources in the city they are rumoured to command' (2009:6). Transactions in the real estate world are largely

fuelled by informality and the exercise of infra-power, although; ‘The potential of the network, the connections and the capacities of the people involved, only show themselves in actions and outcomes’ (2009:22). As Luke Heslop observes in his study of market networks in Sri Lanka, multiple actors partake in the competition for knowledge (2016:538); ‘in terms of supply and quality, as well as [being] privy to an economy of rumour and gossip’ (2016:ibid). However, while Praveen appeared to be benefitting from his own informants, such connections and capacities do not always pay off as expected, or may be sabotaged by other actors, as revealed by Kumar.

The son of a local property developer with his own subsidiary company specialising in small, luxury houses, Kumar was the heir apparent to a vast family network of businesses ranging from brick kilns, mining, education establishments and real estate. During one of our early meetings when I asked Kumar if land was hard to come by, he replied:

It’s a hassle actually, because usually you don’t find genuine land. That is the major thing we are facing now. If I like a land, and I pay the advance amount and stuff, and later I find out that the land was not genuine, I find out that it was a fake certificate sold to me by a middleman. That is a hiccup, actually, you know. When we meet a hiccup like that, people are waiting to scam us, you know? And everyone knows you are not going to the court, because court takes a long time. They know that you will not sue them. So, you come to a mutual understanding or a compromise, you get two to three lakhs and clear off this hassle.

This episode highlights how the same networks which might yield dividends for canny developers, may also prove traps for those with less experience. It also illustrates the volumes of money available to those seeking to capitalise illicitly or as I now discuss, legitimately, from the rising cost of land within Bengaluru.

*‘Sometimes your investment has tripled’: transforming land into profit*

Given the lengthy process of negotiations that came with buying land and what followed, it was perhaps unsurprising that informants such as Matthew, the Director of Business Development for a midscale national developer for mid-range apartments (‘I poke my nose everywhere!’ He once informed me of his job); expressed a weary cynicism towards their work. It was not only unscrupulous middlemen one might have to pay off, either. Since meeting the legal requirements alone was far from adequate when building apartments, Matthew informed me that his company was ‘bribing these guys just to make sure we are not fighting with the system’. Recounting the occasion of an exchange with the new planning official who invited them to his home, Matthew expressed his distaste

for what he considered to be both dishonest and greedy behaviour, despite the fact it was a routine he was accustomed to from six years in the industry, as he recounted during one of our meetings:

‘You are asking too much money’, we said. ‘This is very reasonable – pay fifty lakhs’ he told us. ‘We have already paid [the former inspector]’. ‘Come to my house – I have the files’... he keeps the files there – he has a penthouse [...] And his project files... they are all in his living room! ‘I will find your future projects... I will sign it, I have already signed it... okay, give me twenty-five lakhs<sup>53</sup>. We [the department] will come back in twenty days’. His wife offered apples. While eating the apple we think ‘each apple is costing us a million rupees!’

Subsequently, the ability of being able to negotiate with an array of interlocutors and successfully not only purchase land but also gain the necessary state documentation for it is thus highly valued by Indian real estate brokers (Searle, 2014). However, to be successful in doing so, Matthew had to participate in a system which by his own admission, he found ‘disgusting and filthy’. Nevertheless, the social labour and financial costs undertaken by Indian developers were not factored into the valuations of Western investors in the same way. As a result, the latter judged land in India and the expertise involved in buying it to be financially overvalued (Searle 2014:68). The consequences of disparity between these competing concepts of value are yet to be fully revealed, but certainly there are potential ramifications for the Indian real estate market and the millions of workers who serve it, since as Searle attests; ‘In India’s highly speculative and volatile land markets, uncertainty renders conflicts over value all the more acute and commensuration all the more difficult to achieve’ (2014:68).

For real estate developers who felt they had overpaid for land, any potential loss to profit margins was offset by increasing property prices, as Praveen confided; ‘You will lose margins, you can’t reduce your costs but what happens is you can put this off on[to] the customer’. In this way, it was possible to ‘buy the land at a premium, and [...] sell the land at a premium’. While this was hardly ideal for aspirant home buyers, in the case of cleaning black money, something the real estate industry is well known for (see Y. Gupta, 2015; Searle, 2016; Taneja, 2016), such arrangements benefitted both sides; with developers selling overpriced properties to buyers looking to legitimise illicit assets via property ownership. Whether increased foreign investment will partially stifle these practices if values decrease, or in fact merely fuel them, remains to be seen.

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<sup>53</sup> Approximately £26,625

For the time being, such were the margins from these transactions according to Praveen that; ‘In construction, if you are doing [building] an apartment for a project you should keep your margin three hundred to four hundred percent’ so it was acceptable ‘even if you lose one hundred percent’. ‘So, you’re making a profit?’ I asked. ‘Sometimes your investment has tripled, or four times, you know? So naturally you’re making enough money’ he confirmed. In this way, profits were maintained, black money was converted into white, and Bengaluru’s real estate developers continued their seemingly inexorable transformation of India’s erstwhile ‘garden city’ into a concrete metropolis. But how had it become possible to routinely achieve such large profit margins and more importantly still, what were the foundations of such growth? Who was able to successfully harness it, who failed, and why? I now explore these questions and their implications by considering informants’ practices of real estate speculation.

### *‘Reading’ the market?*

For Praveen and his co-founder, the combination of local connections, the cheap cost of labour and relatively inexpensive materials had allowed them to grow their fledgling company into a multi-million-pound enterprise. However, whilst Praveen had confidently spoken of triple or even quadrupled profit margins, how sustainable or even predictable were such assurances in reality? Although Searle has claimed that in the past three decades, ‘speculation has given new life to pre-liberalization real estate practices, rewarding quick sales and inexpensive construction with high profits’ (2014:76), recent reports are less optimistic about the status of real estate, claiming that the profits once seen as guaranteed are now a thing of the past, partly as a result of greater taxation and higher regulation (See Radhakrishnan, 2018; A.K. Sharma, 2018).

The reliance of the finance industry on charts based on prior price movements that serve ‘as the basis for predictions of the future’, is as Appadurai observes ‘regarded by others as highly unscientific’ (2013:244). Such methodologies, referred to by Zaloom as ‘folk wisdom’ (2012:3) are continuously updated with the latest technologies, adding further scientific credibility. As a result, they ‘have very good standing in the financial markets’ (2013:244), while being ‘in reality no different from the charts of astrologers, psychics, or tarot card operators’ (2013:244). Traders themselves are aware of the pitfalls in their equipment, Zaloom claims, which, inevitably ‘seem to fall short of optimally presenting the market’ (2012:6). Rather than admit to the unpredictable and arbitrary outcomes of human (and at times, machine) action that drive the market, informants instead chose to interpret the failures and successes of themselves and others in ‘reading

the market' as a result of perceived individual economic prowess or shortcoming, depending on the outcome. In this way, as Zaloom posits; 'profit draws the distinction between the virtuous and those the market has deemed lacking' (2012:12-13).

Concerning the intangibility of the market in relation to Indian real estate, Searle posits techniques are even hazier, since; 'there was a sense among my informants that the market itself was so new that established techniques for determining value did not work. There was little consensus as to how profit was to be achieved' (2014:66). And yet profit as Praveen indicated, was achieved, although how, was not always clear. Indeed, informants in property development based their predictions on a triangulation of industry and bank reports (often themselves contradictory), their own past experiences, and outright hunches; attempting to find patterns from prior periods of boom and bust in the market. Indeed, it is arguably, the very intangibility of these conceptual forms of accumulation and though no one would admit it, not actually fully understanding them, that allows people to harness their power. The closest I ever came to an accurate admission of the unpredictability and instability of the industry was from Matthew, who once told me, laughingly; 'No one in real estate buys properties!'

While the Bengaluru real estate market has ostensibly flourished with the state's assistance, much remains hidden beneath the surface. This opacity is not only limited to land transaction, however. During fieldwork, I often found myself puzzled by the ostensibly unknowable status of the property market in Bengaluru and the discrepancies between media and informant reports of the real estate economy. This was not something I would ever decipher, nor arguably, was I meant to, since the quotidian routineness of this unpredictability was symptomatic of the industry itself. Indeed, it was reflected in the vague and contradictory answers of informants when I asked them about the status of their projects and the market, or, as highlighted by Matthew's differing responses in the opening vignette, was prone to wild swings over the space of less than a year.

Such discrepancies also became apparent whenever I attempted to cross-check the status of property and construction in the city with press reports and the information given to me by informants in the industry itself. In her study of conceptions of knowledge in the Indian real estate industry, Searle also reported similar findings, claiming that 'when the Indian business press features successful foreign investment deals, it glosses over the uncertainties that internal industry debates lay bare, presenting instead an image of a unified and optimistic private real estate sector' (2014:68). As Matthew suggested, and as Bear, Burla and Simonsen Puri, attest, what often prove to be little more than 'dreamscapes of media imaginaries' are complicit in upholding the vision 'of a

governmental project primarily focused on the generation of speculation' (2015:390). The disjuncture between the narratives and realities of urban growth and what was told to me by real estate bosses, left me wondering if anyone could correctly call the highs and lows of the city's real estate market, as they claimed. However, this uncertainty also arguably provided a smokescreen, which for some, proved productive. The very unknowability of the future vis-à-vis the intangibility of the market itself, allowed it to be moulded into whatever developers desired to see; a product of capitalist imagination which may have been driven by 'fictional expectations' (Beckert, 2016), but produced varying material outcomes.

*'He is in deep shit': the miscalculations of failed speculation*

Although there exist methods to measure and calculate risk, there is no such possibility when it comes to uncertainty. Uncertainty instead becomes perceived as quantifiable risk (Appadurai, 2013; Bear, 2015b) rather than that which it really is – the unknown. Bear argues that the blurring between such boundaries is 'motivated by technologies of imagination that generate speculation' (2015:1b). It is through such acts that; '*possibility* and *probability* [...] become dangerously confused in many popular understandings, thus opening the door to myriad schemes, scams, and distortions based on emergent forms of personal charisma' (Appadurai, 2013:244). In Bengaluru, the failure to distinguish between the probable and the possible for aspirant real estate developers is physically evidenced across the city and its peri-urban regions via empty layouts, incomplete projects and ghost developments. These are the result of over-zealous investors or first-time home buyers falling victim to illegal practices of pre-sales, whereby properties are sold before completion; buying land too far out for even the hardest of commuters; or discovering too late, that they have bought into one of the city's growing number of illegal layouts.

Whilst empty and partially developed plots for some symbolise the failure to find a desirable home or increase their capital, for those with the means, empty land or indeed, the misfortune of others, provides the means for further accumulation. Large plots of land across the city lie empty for years, seemingly abandoned, due to the speculative practice of land banking, when land is purchased and then held indefinitely as developers wait for the prices to rise. During this time, developers also take out loans on the land to generate further income, as Kumar confirmed, 'I want to keep the land, take the money to the bank, get the interest get the land back. That is the best way as far as I know'. 'So, the land is going to increase?' 'Yeah, hopefully', came the answer.

Land is still envisioned by many to be a guaranteed source of revenue, despite the fact forecasts made by developers I knew were often vague. When I relayed this to Kumar, he decided to help clarify matters for me by providing a brief recent history of the land ‘boom’, though he had still been in school when it had begun:

You see, Becky, the boom came into land in 2004 until 2006. That is the time everyone wanted to invest in land, you know. The reason behind it, you were getting lands for cheap and you were selling for a fifth of the price mostly to the government or some official or someone who wanted to invest. This is how the boom worked. After 2007, people started realising we don’t have a lot of money any more. The money is the land. So, they started selling it again. In 2009 again, the boom came.

However, despite Kumar’s assertion that ‘the money is the land’, owning too much land with little other revenue coming in could quickly become a hindrance, as he revealed; ‘Now I’m in a bind to sell my land for free. Because I need money. I need to keep my other businesses in rotation. I can’t afford to invest in a dead land where it is eating away at my income’. Land banking was in reality, no more guaranteed than the various other forms of failed speculation from overconfidence in the city’s real estate market.

What became the failure to accumulate for the city’s smaller developers however, turned out to provide opportunities for others. For bigger companies that had more liquid capital to draw upon, such instances provided further opportunities for profit, as Virender, who project managed and oversaw the construction of new developments, revealed:

I have a war chest of a thousand crores backing me up right now. So, we are very bullish, and we have a surplus cash ready to buy out. Very few people are buying out, because of the stagnation in the market. So, we are getting lands at very good prices and we are targeting those prices and these kind of people. What happens is people who are holding onto their land so that the price will increase, and in the last one year there is hardly any sales as per land is concerned, so many people cannot wait.

Unlike Kumar’s smaller operation, for Virender’s new company, the real estate wing of a huge textile empire from Gujarat, taking loans on land to generate extra revenue was not desirable; ‘we are the only real estate company in the market with hard cash’ he proudly declared. John, a consultant for a real estate project management company, also suggested that for bigger companies the market appeared favourable, whilst also hinting at underlying corruption; ‘There’s seven hundred odd apartments at that Pristine job and there’s only one hundred customers. So, there’s only about one hundred clients. All sold. There’s *that* much money’. ‘Property should never go down’, he added, confidently. Indeed, bigger companies had the luxury of waiting for land to decrease in price or flatten out when companies such as Kumar’s which were more reliant on loans and increasing



land prices, sometimes got their timing wrong, or simply waited too long for a boom that always appeared just around the corner.

Nevertheless, whilst the larger companies of the city undoubtedly had more resources, they too, were prone to miscalculation; with developers who had overbuilt and overstretched their finances resorting to numerous tactics ranging from mortgage fraud to slashing prices to free up projects, as they became increasingly desperate. Abhishek, an old school friend of Matthew and the CEO of a north Bengaluru developers, was now in dire straits, having overbuilt and like Kumar, taken out too many loans. As a result, he now had large amounts of unsold inventory and owed money to banks and landowners. Abhishek, and the various marketing materials I had accessed prior to our meeting, had claimed the company was at the forefront of industry design and construction technology in the city. However, on second glance, the company's own website inadvertently illustrated it was using older, money-saving, techniques and building materials, including wooden scaffolding<sup>54</sup>. 'His construction quality is mediocre', confirmed Matthew, who had high standards, before confiding; 'He [Abhishek] is in deep shit... so deep that I come across one bad story after the other. He went too aggressive too fast without reading the market'. However as illustrated, the market, although presented by those who deemed themselves proficient in reading it as something that could be profited from, was, like the future, far from predictable – something I now explore in relation to disruptive industry circumstances.

*'Everything came to a standstill': future-proofing and fragility*

The construction process is governed by external incidents, often beyond the control of company owners. Completing a project on time, despite a recent change in regulations<sup>55</sup>, remained a rarity. Since land, materials, liquidity and labour are reliant on social connections inextricably bound up between the state, politicians, middlemen and an array of urban actors, flows of cash into construction projects became frequently blocked. That is if the developer does not choose to halt the process themselves: a normal occurrence during periods of illiquidity. However, existing systems of credit and coercion could not always fix the fallout from certain events. Work regularly ground to a halt if

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<sup>54</sup> As discussed in the prior chapter, bamboo scaffolding is outdated and dangerous due to its instability but is continually used as a means of cutting costs, endangering workers' lives.

<sup>55</sup> The Real Estate Regulation and Development Act passed in 2016, means that developers will now have to pay interest to buyers for late completion.

for instance, there was a local election<sup>56</sup>, the price of sand rose substantially, or migrant workers returned home during festivals, elections, or for the sowing and harvesting of crops. However, generally it was the workers from further distances who left for longer periods of time.

The propensity for such disruptions has fostered short-sighted construction methods to build as rapidly as possible (see Searle, 2014; and Shatkin, 2014), which ultimately prove unsuitable for long term urban planning, or indeed, reflect the lack thereof, as Shatkin attests; ‘In a shifting political climate where there is no stable urban vision emerging from a central font of power that can implement such a vision, real estate developers focus on consolidating their control of land and extracting value from it in a fairly tight timeframe’ (2014:10). The legacy of this strategy sees the generation of money from pre-sales (now an illegal practice but one that remains ubiquitous throughout the industry) to finance incomplete projects elsewhere. Such practices Shatkin claims, are common strategies for ‘effective in hedging against market downturns’ (2014:10). Due to the rising price of land, taxes, and building materials including ready-mix concrete and steel (see Adlakha, 2018; Bain & Company, nd:2; Parhi, 2019), costs have rapidly escalated. Progress has become reliant on a delicate balance of moving real and imagined cash flows between banks, investors, landowners and material suppliers. Within these flows the wages of the labour force, despite their centrality to the project, are often an afterthought. Indeed, deferred payment to workers was a common occurrence across nearly every site I visited, even prior to the onset of demonetisation – one such external event few were able to future-proof against.

Following the sudden implementation of demonetisation on the eve of November 17<sup>th</sup>, 2016, cash became the least desirable (or indeed, available) form of transaction in the real estate market, and across India as a whole. Demonetisation served as a reminder from the most hardened of real estate veterans to aspirant fledglings, that in an industry which relied on a fine balance between cash, material and loan flows, nothing could be truly predicted in the end. Indeed, during this time, the aspirations of many hopeful investors came crashing to a halt or were indefinitely put on hold. For those living on a daily wage, this was inevitably worse as construction sites in Bengaluru, alongside the

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<sup>56</sup> It is not an uncommon practice for candidates to approach construction companies and ask for contributions towards fundraising. If the site owner does not agree then construction may be halted using a number of methods at the politician’s disposal ranging from denial of requisite permissions or even blocking access to the building site. The number of politicians siphoning funds into real estate decreases during this time and generally there is a slump in investment during this period.

entire informal economy of India, ground to an abrupt halt by the government's withdrawal of all five hundred and one thousand-rupee bills. For those able to, such as Kumar, who had now sold his company to 'a friend' and was working once more for his father, it was better to take a break from the industry:

To avoid all of that bullshit, I need to stop my work or every month, I have to draw out twenty-five thousand which is not enough, but I have to root the money into my manager's accounts and draw from their accounts. This is how we have to complete the job until... I don't know, until Modi announces something else. So, I stopped taking a gamble on it. I just brought everything to a standstill, you know? That's how it affected. We don't have the buyers. You know, if you build the apartment, you have to have someone to buy the place, and the worst part is, the buyer who comes, he doesn't have money in white or black, I mean he'll take a bank loan. But usually my buyers will pay me fully in black money. Those are my buyers, you know. Because we are going to put half of the rate in white, so pay taxes for the five bucks [rupees]... if the property is ten bucks, we put only five bucks, pay tax for five bucks, so this is how it has been happening, Becky. Everything came to a standstill. No construction projects are going on. I mean the labourers are suffering a lot.

As Kumar saw it; 'this is the best time for a vacation for the construction company. Put your land on hold, send it to the banks, get the loan out, have a good vacation with your family, or go broke'. For the workers, however, there was little choice but to take significant pay cuts. Indeed, for those who had attempted ploughing through, Kumar revealed; 'labour has gotten cheap, though. Which is a great result for us. What we used to pay... two hundred bucks or three hundred bucks or something. It has come to one fifty. People are working for you, they just want to get paid [.] If you feel bad for them or something, then you are not in a position to employ them'. Whilst as Kumar pointed out, paying the workers the same wage was not possible due to the then inaccessibility of cash, now real estate developers are once again able to pay their workforce in their entirety, recent reports indicate wages have remained at a lower rate (see M.C. Mishra, 2019; Nighoskar, 2019; Ranganath, 2019).

By attending to the opacity of the real estate sector produced via unstable flows of capital, material and at times, labour; this section has illustrated how opacity may prove productive for some, whilst simultaneously ruining others. In doing so, it also iterates the disparity of speculation – who is able to speculate on the future and who is not. Indeed, whilst company owners, business developers, investors and various middlemen routinely speculate and profit from the imagined future of the fluctuating property market; they are often only able to do so by denying others the opportunity to make their own.

## What price profit? valuations of workers

It is well-documented that a primary product of neoliberal capitalist society is the (also internalised) valuation of population groups by their economic outputs, denoting their societal worth via measurement of financial output and fulfilment of heteronormative milestones (Allison, 2014; Bear, 2015a; Ong, 2006; Prentice and Trueba, 2013; Zaloom, 2012). In Bengaluru, company owners and employers routinely devalue workers; criticising their skill, intelligence, and output levels – particularly ‘local’ workers. There was however, an underlying tension between rhetoric and reality, as some employers expressed the desire for higher-skilled, ‘stable’ workforces, but continued their enforcement of flexible, low-paid and exploitative working arrangements, negating this possibility. Moreover, other forms of rhetoric also proved harmful, with the frequent projection and circulation of regionalist, sexist, elitist and at times, casteist stereotypes, justifying the ill treatment, underpayment and selective underemployment of workers.

The subscription of employers to these stereotypes carries both insidious and at times, visceral consequences for those at the receiving end. For the migrants living on site or in labour camps, their effects are harder to counter, still. Building on the experiences presented thus far of migrant and local workers, this section examines how informants in real estate perceive the workers who made their acts of speculation and accumulation possible. In doing so, it elucidates how various and often contradictory hierarchies of value influence and are influenced by financial motives to cut costs and maximise profit. This true motivation is obscured and simultaneously justified by an industrywide rhetoric that rationalises poor working conditions.

*‘Policing it is hard because they obviously don’t want to spend this money’: conversations on worker welfare*

Facing heavier taxation and greater regulation, the onus on property developers to keep construction costs low and boost purportedly dwindling profits (Alexander, 2019; Parhi, 2019; V. Mishra, 2019; Tanon, 2009) is only increasing. Indeed, how such practices impact the quotidian lives of workers I have evidenced via the low employment rates and stagnant wages experienced by the Yadgir colony, and the low pay and inadequate dwellings experienced by migrant families. However, rather than acknowledge their own involvement in conditions on site or the skill levels of workers, informants working in real estate routinely failed or indeed refused, to make a connection between their own employment practices and worker exploitation, rationalising it as an

inevitable industry norm. Nevertheless, there were occasional initiatives within the industry to improve conditions, as I now examine by exploring the concerted efforts of an international project management consulting firm and the (less concerted efforts) of Praveen and Kumar.

John, a health and safety and quality control advisor, had lived in Bengaluru for over two years. Though he enjoyed his work, he would often swap horror stories with colleagues about the conditions faced by workers in Gurgaon and Bengaluru over a beer or their monthly brunch or golf session. While standards had been slowly improving on site due to measures put in by Genesis, the multinational construction project management consultancy John worked for, the company had little to no say over where labour was sourced from, or the condition workers arrived in after long periods of travel. ‘We’ve had a horrible time at one project where they’ve come straight off the train and straight to the project without even going to the camp. Poorly, been on the go for a long time... then they put them on the buses...’ John told me, appalled. ‘Don’t they get medicals?’ ‘They’re supposed to have medicals first’, John replied, continuing:

That’s what the problem is. They get the medicals when they get on site. Then they find out that they’re really poorly and ill, then they have to wait for the bus at the end of the day to take them back. Crazy. They never get any rest. They just want their blood out of them [...] But obviously, despite what we say... they’re [the company in question John consults for] from higher up.

John’s own company was however, trying to make improvements to areas that were in their control. Since Genesis also managed cash flow during the building process, they were able to forcefully incentivise construction companies to adhere to health and safety regulations and improve worker welfare via contractual stipulation and the levying of fines, which it was able to detract from the funds it released throughout various phases.

One of the main reasons for improved conditions on the sites John worked on however, was due to the demands of foreign investors. ‘Do investors get put off by deaths on site?’ I once asked as we sat round the kitchen table of his apartment; ‘Yeah they do. It’s bad PR. Gives a bad vibe to the site when something horrible like that goes on’ he replied. ‘If the Americans see there has been a death on site, they will not be happy about that. I don’t know if there is any clause or anything... I mean they can’t pull out, but they won’t invest again’. As it transpired, the need to maintain good PR and good investor relations was beneficial for all, since, John asserted:

With good health and safety comes good quality. Along with health and safety goes along with welfare. You’ve got decent quality [materials] being shipped to you, proper tanker drinking water. Correct holding tanks,

toilets at regular intervals, we now have intermediate level toilets, so all of this is being demanded now from contract, but they know they have to fund that right from the word go.

However; ‘Policing it is hard, because obviously they don’t want to spend this money’, John conceded. Whilst John’s company, Genesis, could regulate conditions on site, ensuring toilets, a canteen, and potable water were present, they had little dominion over what went on off site in labour accommodation.

Although De Neve observes that ‘organization of production and regimes of labour deployment are also shaped by the ethical codes of labour practice imposed by global buyers (Barrientos and Smith, 2007; Blowfield and Dolan, 2008; Lund-Thomsen and Nadvi, 2010; Nadvi, 2008)’ (De Neve, 2014:189-90), smaller companies were seldom subject to the same standards. They rarely had any external project management, and state inspections were minimal, so none of the features John mentioned were in place for Praveen’s or Kumar’s workers – nor was anyone there to ensure this (see also Bear, 2013). For Kumar’s family, when the construction business had started some years back, it had been a condition that any children went to the school established by his grandfather in the north of the city, although as Kumar explained, this was also for practical purposes, too, since it led to a higher risk of attracting the authorities:

On the first project we had small childrens [sic] running around and you know, we didn’t like that because if anything happens to any one of those on site, the project immediately gets shut down. For instance, we have to pay the corrupt official... they can run around if we pay them. They don’t give a damn about the kids so long as they are getting paid.

Despite his complaints that the authorities did not ‘give a damn about the kids’, when I last quizzed Kumar on this subject, asking how he was getting the children from site to school, he revealed he had since stopped this policy since; ‘I used to join [register] them there [the school] [but] I didn’t monitor that’. He shrugged; ‘It’s like I can help one or two, I can’t help hundreds, you know?’

While foreign, multinational companies could enforce certain stipulations to ensure better working conditions (and as John pointed out, ultimately better productivity and quality), the informal means of welfare once given to workers of smaller companies which still drew on village and caste networks, was diminishing, even if the paternalistic language remained. Praveen for instance, exploited his lengthy employment of workers to maintain cash flow to other areas of the project when there were blockages elsewhere; ‘Sometimes it [the longstanding relationship with workers] helps for me as well. Sometimes I’m not able to pay them for almost two weeks, so I pay them one short. So,

they know all about that, they're very flexible, they understand'. The workers however, were not as understanding as Praveen suggested, having halted work when they hadn't been paid for two weeks, as discussed in the previous chapter. Indeed, flexibility was highly prized by employers, whereas for workers it was a further defining feature of their precarity.

Despite undertaking actions that were to their financial detriment, Praveen also expressed a desire to reward his workers, acknowledging their role in his wealth creation and the industry as a whole:

Because of them is what this industry is running on and we've got to understand that. If they stand up for better payment, better life and other things, we will need them, and we have to pay to them, and I will increase the amount so much. I don't care. I don't mind because it is important that everybody grows. It's not just you as a company that grows, you as a person to make a lot of billions, the people are making hand to mouth. They can also have comfortable homes, a TV, you know, things like that.

However, while Praveen hinted at a wish to increase wages and thus improve the lives of his workers, I saw little indication of this on site, as evidenced by the living conditions experienced by the majority of workers (Hemavathi and Lingamma were in fact, slightly better off with their small shacks), and the denial of financial and ritual obligations; including timely payment or minor acts of gifting during pivotal festivals. Praveen had also expressed a desire to register his workers with the state welfare board for construction workers when I informed him of its existence. However, when I made arrangements for this through contacts at the board, he informed me that the workers had returned to the village, something I later learned had not been the case; highlighting the disjuncture between speech and action and significantly too, developers' distrust of the state. Although Praveen was one of the few informants to acknowledge the role of workers in production, when it came to dividing the capital generated from their labour, this was quietly and quickly forgotten.

*'How will you retain him?': limiting skill, limiting pay*

Whilst the issue of many local women I knew was finding enough work, at the other end of the spectrum, employers often complained it was difficult to source enough skilled workers. As Bipasha Baruah has indicated, though there is an obvious solution to this apparent dilemma (2010), no one I knew in the industry was willing to address this by training women workers. For Virender the problem was simple; 'Skillsets are low because the only people coming into construction sites are not educated. They are dumb'.

However, he conceded that the only way to increase skillsets was to make construction a more desirable vocation by increasing wages – something few companies are willing to do. Conversely, when I asked Virender what he thought about the Construction Workers' Welfare Board's (since abandoned) plans to build a training centre for workers in the rural outskirts of Bengaluru, he replied derisively; 'It is a nonsense ma'am'. 'But... if you need more skilled labourers then... I mean there are labourers in Karnataka, but you were saying they're not the right 'quality' for what you need...?' I inquired. 'Karnataka per say, you need to understand... the enterprise level of the people is very low'. 'But if you could train them?' I persisted. 'What is the guarantee that after they get trained they will stick with you? Once the training is imparted, now he is a free man. There's no bond here. In Karnataka you can never sign a bond... so how will you retain him?'

As I have argued, the ongoing devaluation of manual labour coupled with the lack of construction industry job mobility experienced by workers is by no means coincidental (see Bowers, 2017). Bear similarly notes this correlation, observing how management actively kept worker skill levels and use of machinery low to maintain low wages (Bear, 2015a), or, in the case of Virender's previous company, to retain workers. Such practices further widen the disjuncture between demands for quality and the convenience of maintaining a flexible labour force. On the one hand, workers were portrayed as unreliable which enabled their flexible and low wage employment, and on the other, companies were not willing to invest the pay or conditions to train them or incentivise worker 'loyalty'. Indeed, Virender was aware of the undesirability of the job, and was constantly trying to source new labour on site, on a salary level that was at times, insufficient to draw in the workers; 'I'm not able to get them for the rates prescribed by the company. So that is holding off my project', he confessed. By the time Virender left the company, the same project, a sprawling residential development, which had begun some three years prior, remained incomplete.

Those relying on cheaper workers from further away states however, also ran into problems. Indeed, Virender's former site annually ground to a standstill around *Durga Puja*<sup>57</sup>, due to its high number of Bengali workers. 'The contractors have tried increasing the rates. Even that doesn't seem to work' he lamented. 'we had one thousand people in February. We now have seven hundred' 'how many people do you currently need?' I asked, 'Because we are so behind, about fourteen hundred', he replied.

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<sup>57</sup> *Durga Puja* is one of the primary Hindu festivals in West Bengal. It is celebrated by the Bengali diaspora across the world and lasts approximately ten days.





*The apartment development in Bengaluru at Virender's previous company*

As well as the desire for a stable workforce while maintaining unstable conditions of employment, a further contradiction is revealed between increasing numbers of foreign (and domestic) clients demanding higher quality homes and the timely meeting of construction deadlines, but at no additional cost. Indeed, one real estate agent at a property exposition confided; 'You can't get a teak door for the prices people want to pay. They want fitted kitchens included now too at the same cost!' Changing middle class hobbies and consumptive habits also meant that developers had a much longer list of 'amenities' to contend with, as one informant told me, there was now 'demand for multiple swimming pools [one inside and one outside], club house, with all facility gym, yoga, [and] small screen theatres'. This he attributed to the influence of NRIs; 'They come back and demand. Because the demand is there we builders are trying to provide those things'. Apartment complexes were also becoming increasingly self-contained, with cricket pitches, ice skating rinks and even an artificial beach featuring in recent additions to city developments. With the reported slow-down in the market (Alexander, 2019; Parhi, 2019; V. Mishra, 2019; Tanon, 2009), developers are being forced to incentivise buyers even more, with free fitted kitchens, parking spaces and further discounts. How was it possible then, for such amenities to be provided, money saved, and profits maintained?

*'You are our person': labour patronage as control*

Though Kumar may have held a deep-seated mistrust of the local workers in Bengaluru, this was not based on their region of origin. Indeed, locals were by no means inherently 'lazy' 'useless' 'terrible' or 'dumb', or any of the other derogatory terms I heard about them during fieldwork. As Carswell and De Neve evidence concerning shifting caste relations and differing outcomes of neoliberal processes, such essentialist discourse often refers to a dominant group's loss of control over its labour force (2014:123). City dwelling Kannadigas were harder to intimidate, generally worked lower hours for higher wages, and were also more likely to collectively organise, although this remained rare. Indeed, Kumar was one of the few developers I knew who was more up-front about his preference for migrant labour; 'That is how we have to work with the workers. They don't know the city [...] and they don't leave the work space because they don't know much of the local language and they stick to you. That is the whole game point actually'.

Carswell and De Neve argue that 'the road to freedom from caste dependency is largely shaped by the degree of connect between rural locations and urban centres' (2014:129). However, this was not always the case, as evidenced by Kumar, who had been sourcing the same workers for decades from his parents' villages in Andhra Pradesh; 'My dad is head of the village and stuff, so he wanted to employ them, to get them to Bangalore and show them how it is, and put a roof over their heads, you know?' He continued; 'a few years back, our village went into recession and they lost all the money, so we got fifty people to Bangalore, offered them accommodation and at the end of the day, used them for the construction business'. Although Kumar's narrative initially made it sound as if the act of employing workers from the village was doing them a kindness, the family's caste status in the village invariably demanded worker loyalty:

If they are from your native, there is a bond saying like 'you are our person. You are one of the family or part of the group', so that you have eyes and ears in the site. If something goes missing, there will be a gossip and end of the day they come and tell us everything. It is like they are our inside person. Usually that is the only reason we take them from our village. Because if anything goes wrong on the site or anything happens, you have a person who is backing you up.

In this sense, Kumar's presentation of worker ties was not related to the frequent broad regional value assessments that Virender had expressed, but the intersecting ties between caste and village that traversed beyond their rural setting. Of course, it was not only the worker's caste status that kept them bound to the powerful Thakur family: should

there be any issues on site they lacked the connections in Bengaluru to move elsewhere; ‘It’s better to take people from other states, so they’re not very comfortable about the city and [are] a bit scared’, Kumar confirmed.

Using labour power through established familial networks then, had multiple benefits for Kumar, whereas his workers were open to greater exploitation due to their status as migrants and as Dalits. Nevertheless, from Kumar’s point of view, they were relatively well looked after. ‘Usually in this field people don’t care about people. They just want the work to be done and to make profit’; he said. However, Kumar contradicted himself when I asked him if he would consider training women workers, answering ‘It’s sad to say this. But, no. We just want to get the work done and send them off’.

In recent months I discovered that Kumar’s family no longer sourced or oversaw labour, signalling an end to the tenuous ties of patronage. Despite his claim that the Thakurs were different and showed some semblance of care towards their workers, Kumar acknowledged that increasing their usage of outside labour contractors meant workers would inevitably be exploited. ‘The middleman is the devil. The guy [...] will become rich because these people don’t have education to stand for their own rights and there is scarcity of money’. For women workers, he hinted, there would be greater ramifications from this management shift; ‘They don’t get much of protection from the contractor or the builders and the builders doesn’t [sic] give a fuck, you know?’ Indeed, the contractor would handle ‘any problem from the workers’, meaning that the issue of personal intervention, and the subsequent risk of muddying one’s family name, was now far lower – something by no means inconsequential given the fact that Kumar’s father in law was a prolific politician. As Kumar surmised; ‘If you have a labour contractor, it’s on his head, if you don’t have one, it’s on yours’.

Significantly, a further reason for the shift away from patronage was also that, according to Kumar, finding enough people to come to the city was more difficult than previously (‘It was becoming a hassle’). Indeed, I learned that the ‘workers filed a case against us saying that we didn’t provide them employment’. Given the ostensibly diminishing levels of care that might have previously set the Thakurs apart from other employers, their usual labour force had finally lost their patience and gone in search of employment elsewhere. If after all, the patronage of the Thakurs could no longer ensure regular employment or an education for one’s child, then what was left to set it aside from the poor living and working conditions of any other of the Thakur’s competitors?

## **‘I am the alpha male here’: situating masculine hierarchies in construction**

Building on the prior section’s exploration of value hierarchies, hiring policies and patronage, this final section addresses how lone male actors maintain onsite discipline and control through the deployment of masculine capital, contributing to existing works on labour and the cultivation of masculinity (Bear, 2013; Connell, 1987; Connell, 2005; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Chopra, 2003; De Neve, 2003; Monaghan, 2002; Willis, 1977). To explore how workers are retained or disciplined via an array of practices including delayed payments, firings and physical violence, I examine the speech and actions of Virender, Praveen and Kumar against a framework of Connell and Messerschmidt’s interpretation of hegemonic masculinity described below:

*Hegemonic masculinity was distinguished from other masculinities, especially subordinated masculinities. Hegemonic masculinity was not assumed to be normal in the statistical sense; only a minority of men might enact it. But it was certainly normative. It embodied the currently most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men.*  
(2005:832)

While attending to how the enactment of hegemonic forms of masculinity shaped informants’ attitudes and actions towards workers; I also acknowledge the caveat that locating masculinity within the ethnographic realm is by no means straightforward and can often lead to binary essentialisms (Chopra, 2003; De Neve, 2003). Indeed, as Connell and Messerschmidt also advise, ‘masculinity is not a fixed entity embedded in the body or personality traits of individuals. Masculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and, therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting’ (2005:836). Moreover, masculinity can remain hidden or indeed, frustratingly inaccessible at times for women in the field. Rhadika Chopra, for instance, found masculinity hard to always grasp, since ‘One fragment may be enacted and on display as it were, while another vanishes’ (2003:38) – something I will also discuss in relation to the role switching of informants.

My own position within spaces perceived to be masculine – namely construction sites – often meant that I was not conforming to the social norms of a then married woman in her late twenties, something I was often reminded by friends and interlocutors. This also meant that while I was able to inhabit certain spaces within the industry, my view was at times, restricted because of my gender, particularly regarding access to the spaces of single male workers and their labour camps. However, interlocutors were more than willing to talk about the illegal and often violent activities that transpired within the

industry and their own roles within this. Whilst Praveen had been quick to point out my female physicality ('when I first met you, I thought you were cute'), to Kumar, my own status became akin to that of a (male) friend, and during interactions he would call me 'dude' and 'bro'. John, however, had been even more unequivocal than Kumar in his projection of masculine traits, often proclaiming 'you've got some big balls, Becks', something he ostensibly believed necessary to undertake research within the industry. In this way, through partaking in a number of social activities largely designated as male, I was able to hang out both on and off site with Kumar, Praveen, John and Matthew, witnessing their shifting behaviours between construction sites, bars and at home. As De Neve has illustrated in his ethnography of a textile factory in Tamil Nadu, 'The 'spatial' contexts [...] refer to the need to situate masculinities in the particular locations in which they are enacted or contested. To put it simply, men do not behave in the same manner everywhere' (2003:65). This became increasingly apparent as I spent time with Kumar and Praveen in particular, and I was able to observe first-hand the disjuncture between their performances of onsite and offsite masculinities.

*'I would crush your sensitivity without thinking twice!': shifting between masculinities*

Kumar, despite his considerable height and build came across as a young, somewhat goofy man with a playful demeanour. He was often (car) accident-prone, perpetually petrified of horror movies, and had a tendency of losing his bank cards on nights out. As a result, he frequently drew the ire of his father, a respected figure and strict disciplinarian, of whom Kumar, admitted he was afraid – his most vivid childhood memories were being chased around the house by him wielding a belt. While there was the bumbling and childish side of Kumar myself and other friends knew well, there was also an aggressive side. I caught glimpses of this during our time together, such as when Kumar got into a fight outside a bar, or his goading of Brutus, the fearsome Rottweiler the family kept chained up on their roof, which quietened only when he approached. Kumar's aggression however, would shift to detachment when he discussed work. 'Money is our leash you know', he once told me, matter-of-factly. 'It's like if I pay you every day, you are going to stay. If I pay you once you are going to run'. Not only did such sentiments underline the lack of trust on the side of employers such as Kumar, but it also dehumanised workers, equating them to little more than the family's dog.

Virender too, transitioned between masculinities depending on who he was dealing with. I will never forget the moment I was awkwardly sitting in his office involuntarily observing a loud dressing down in Hindi-laced English to a newly employed

engineering student, who had purportedly taken unauthorised time off work. ‘Very nearly I told you... now you want to give me this bullshit!’ Virender exclaimed. The man, whose gaze was fixed firmly on the floor, mumbled something. Virender continued, his voice getting louder whilst the other men present looked on in stony silence:

This is simply indiscipline. I can fire you right now! Show me the work. Get the bloody job done. If not, then get out. I’m not interested in your problem with whom and all that shit. You have to go in the evening and come in the morning, that is your job. All of this drama - I don’t care! I’ll watch you for another two weeks. Any fucking complaint comes and I’m sending you home. I’ll terminate your services. Simple.

After the tirade had finished, the young engineer quietly thanked him and left. Once they had gone Virender turned to me, unlit cigarette behind his ear, his voice back to its usual soft cadence: ‘Sorry ma’am. Now, what did you want to ask?’ For men such as Virender, maintaining an aura of power though such displays allowed him to keep labour in check, and I became used to witnessing the lambasting of employees during my visits.

On another occasion when he was looking particularly agitated, I asked Virender what was wrong. It transpired that the labour contractors he used had been taking workers elsewhere for more money. Virender was livid, wanting to ‘get those bastards in’ so he could ‘sort them out’. ‘Find out who it is and get the bugger in and I will give them a talking to!’ he had exclaimed. When talking directly to me however, it was rare for Virender to use expletives, and he also presented a courteous, softly spoken and at times, quite charming demeanour which I and other high-ranking colleagues witnessed. Nevertheless, it also seemed important for Virender to remind me of the level of his authority as I believe was his intention by having me sit in his office as he vented his anger at the engineer. ‘I suppose I am the alpha male here’, he once mused, another time ‘jokingly’ telling me; ‘I would crush your sensitivity without thinking twice!’

Praveen, also encouraged a harder image on site, stressing the need to convey both detached indifference and aggression when he believed it was required. Otherwise, he carefully cultivated the image of a sophisticated, quietly spoken man known across the expat social circles of the city, or as the sympathetic employer during our meetings offsite. Shouting at the children playing nearby us during an onsite interview one time, Praveen attempted to justify his behaviour by explaining; ‘I have to behave a little rude out here. Usually I’m tougher here. Because you’ve got to do that’. Indeed, contra his earlier statement that workers essentially deserved a fair share of the profits of the industry, he added; ‘If you show your soft side they tend to take advantage’.

Given the reputation of the construction industry as a place of illicit deals and black money, there existed a continual state of paranoia concerning ‘trust’ or acting too ‘soft’, emotional responses which since they could invite financial loss, had to be suppressed accordingly. Nevertheless, it was not only always the fear of being taken advantage of that prevented employers from presenting a more emphatic exterior or becoming too concerned with the lives of those on site, as Virender revealed; ‘There is lot of risk to it for me there as I have huge emotional attachment with the guys. Something happens to them you feel guilty’. Following a death when a wall collapsed, he admitted; ‘I went through a harrowing time. You have to treat them as human beings, you know’, echoing Praveen’s earlier sentiment. As a result, Virender had been advised to become more removed from goings on onsite; ‘the company believes that you have to detach yourself from all this matter [...] I said ‘no more, no more, we work for the company we will do our job, go home. No more getting labour and all and running after them for the payments not happening and taking care of them’.

This episode illustrates the growing distance construction companies and individuals attempt to cultivate between themselves and workers. In this scenario, men expressing a direct interest and interacting with workers such as Virender become perceived as ‘old fashioned’ or indeed, a potential liability for their perceived sentimentality. Expressing too much care or attachment towards one’s workers was thus deemed a risk which would not yield any form of dividends in the long run – only further costs. Finally, it highlights how contra the frequent defence I heard, that higher up employees in large companies had no direct control or contact with their labour (and are thus powerless to improve worker conditions); this is by no means always the case, and significantly they also *choose* not to. As Susan R. Bird postulates concerning expressions of emotion vis-à-vis masculine hierarchy; ‘emotional detachment (i.e., withholding expressions of intimacy) maintains both clear individual identity boundaries (Chodorow 1978) and the norms of hegemonic masculinity. To express feelings is to reveal vulnerabilities and weaknesses; to withhold such expressions is to maintain control (Cancian 1987)’ (1995:122).

#### *Unproductive masculinity: value hierarchies in the construction industry*

As illustrated, there exists a consistent contradiction between how employers and company owners talked about and acted towards workers. This tension reveals the variations and slippages in enactments of masculinity among informants, something they have (both consciously and subconsciously) taken pains to cultivate over the years. As

these examples highlight, informants in real estate ostensibly invested in the perceived need to perform hegemonic masculinity amidst other charismatic forms, both on and offsite. Acknowledging Ford and Lyons' necessary criticism; 'The linking of men with masculinity appears to be based on an implied (and essential) heterosexual dualism – men/women – which gives primacy to the sexed body in understanding the performance of gender' (Ford and Lyons, 2012:3), I posit that in the construction industry, such primacies, invariably influenced by caste and class structures, are used to maintain rigid industry hierarchies – albeit in sometimes contradictory ways.

De Neve has also criticised the essentialism of work and masculinity in ethnographic studies, claiming 'Too often working men's identities and masculinities are exclusively associated with the work they do, which in turn is identified with the physical labour it embodies' (2003:67). However, at the same time, as Connell states 'Emphasizing the masculinity of industrial labour has been both a means of survival, in exploitative class relations and a means of asserting superiority over women' (Connell, 2005:55). The Indian construction industry, due to its considerable proportion of female workers, provides a productive lens of analysis through which to explore these claims. While women may perform similar and at times, the same tasks as male counterparts, this does not engender them with attributes of strength and productivity, as the final chapter also examines. Contra a fixed model of masculinity tied to labour; the patriarchal hierarchy of the construction industry promotes gender norms, excluding women from higher pay and positions while simultaneously utilising female strength. At the same time, the strength and abilities of women workers are denied, since these are deemed masculine qualities. Although female informants have found ways to draw upon traits perceived to be masculine as discussed in the case of Durgamma; such enactments yield contradictory results, highlighting also additional factors of class and caste that intersect masculine hierarchies (see Bear, 2013; De Neve, 2004; Parry, 2014; Kapadia, 1999).

Such intersections also meant any potential masculine currency otherwise associated with the physical undertaking of manual labour became devalued vis-à-vis normalised industry hierarchies of hegemonic masculinity. Physically, the bodies of workers were thinner, in poorer health and darker, next to those of their well-fed employers. For Virender, I learned, such appearances also fed into his essentialist theories on the genetics of caste. Indeed, the fact that many informants had never undertaken a day of physical work further set them apart from their workers; allowing them to channel alternative forms of masculine capital which were not accessible to those whose bodily labour and subsequently, whose bodies also, were deemed low value and replaceable. As



Gautam Mody of the New Trade Union Initiative (NTUI) attests; ‘Looking at the labour hierarchy means looking at the caste hierarchy. You are just as unlikely to find any upper class Hindus performing manual labour as you are to find high-risk jobs not being performed by lower castes, Dalits (untouchables) or Adivasis’ (Olazábal, 2019).

Further marking them out as powerful and influential men, the wealth and modernity of upper caste real estate company owners was displayed through various forms of consumption. As Zaloom notes concerning traders’ display of wealth in cities ‘market survivors deserve urban luxury: elaborate meals, trendy clubs, fashionable hotels, and other clothes of fine design and fabric’ (2012:14). As could be observed in the four star hotel brunches and nightlife scene of Bengaluru; ‘cities serve as stages for consuming the deserts of market success’ (2012:ibid). In the case of Praveen, such markers were evident through his out-of-office pursuits, personal styling, dress and the distinctive car he drove. Indeed, while Praveen certainly encompassed the fashionable young man young male workers might have aspired to, but ‘few have the resources—in terms of capital, status and networks—to live up to the masculinities displayed around them’ (De Neve, 2004:88).

While men working *gaare* and *coolie kelsa* especially were often fiscally unable to live up to societal expectations of male householders, as discussed in relation to the Yadgir colony, internalisations and narratives of failed or threatened masculinities are entwined with ontologies that may be interconnected with understandings of work; skill (Salzinger, 2009); and the ability to be a productive household head (De Neve, 2004). As a result, many men appeared to surrender vying for their place in this unwinnable system. The societal pressure of these ideals is not exclusive to men working low wages: rather it manifests itself in various and often means-dependent ways. Kumar for instance, also experienced difficulties living up to his father’s expectations of how a patron and the heir to the Thakur line should behave; leading to his abrupt departure to a faraway country to unsuccessfully pursue an MBA; temporarily escaping the looming prospect of arranged marriage.

#### *‘We have to use a little bit of brute force’: Policing ‘wild’ masculinity*

While the potency of male labour was devalued, perceptions of ‘unskilled’ (and thus low-value) male workers especially, as uneducated, wild, violent and unruly bodies, often sexually threatening to the women around them (the latter as discussed, often portrayed as sexually promiscuous); allowed employers to cultivate and rationalise violent forms of discipline. In this way, the patriarchal status of gender relations is laid

bare within construction, in which women workers are deemed inferior to (all) male workers, and unskilled male workers are perceived as inferior to skilled male workers. Men at the bottom of this hierarchy however, still have their masculinity policed accordingly, as Connell and Messerschmidt attest, 'to sustain a given pattern of hegemony requires the policing of men as well as the exclusion or discrediting of women' (2005:844). While I analyse the subordination of women in the final chapter, I now attend to the surveillance and treatment of men deemed to be subordinates, and thus of masculine inferiority.

For Kumar, the act of maintaining worker discipline extended beyond expletives and verbal threats and into the realm of physical violence. Not long into our first meeting, he had recounted an incident in which a worker had accused his wife of adultery with the *maistri*. 'Most of this though, we don't get to know who the situation is with until it goes very bad', he admitted, before continuing with his story; 'There was one worker who threatened to throw his kid away from the top floor of the apartment, he was so drunk', 'I've heard about a few deaths that are really suspicious on site...' I said. 'That's a bummer actually. You can't get up to that news' Kumar stated, before returning to his story; 'We got a call saying that... he was going to throw his kid away from the roof. Later me, my dad, we end up going there... you know, talking the guy down'. Kumar admitted that afterwards they had beaten him 'very badly'.

When it came to issues of sexual harassment and exploitation of women workers by *maistris* on site, Kumar was unequivocal; 'If we hear about that deal, we will fire the guy'. However, Kumar admitted that the incidents that reached the family's ears were doubtless fewer than the actual number – soon to be even fewer as the family was now giving up their involvement with labour. When I asked Kumar how the family used to deal with these, he replied; 'We cleared them out in our own way'. I later learnt that this also applied to women workers accused of adultery, too. Whilst men were seemingly subject to physical forms of discipline, expulsion from site was routinely used as a punishment for women deemed to be morally transgressing, even in apparent cases of sexual harassment:

There was a sexual harassment case between another guy's wife and one of our drivers. We had to teach that driver some manners in our own way and said that it was wrong, and, we threw the female out of the property. Because, it will erupt into a big fight if the husband loses his control [...] They will take that matter into their own hands. Before they do that, we did it. And, we sent them back to their native.

As well as sexual harassment, fights would break out between workers, often from other states; 'We get a lot of problems, with falls and stuff. Later, we have to put them in line, we have to use a little bit of brute force to get them in line, and make them feel like it's not their state to do whatever they want or fuck around, you know?'

Workers were thus presented as unruly, undisciplined, and prone to violent clashes fuelled by alcohol, sexual jealousy and the same regional divisions ironically, that employers also utilised to prevent them from organising. Despite Kumar's description of his workers as 'unpredictable' he was keen to stress that he was able to handle them by whatever means seemed necessary or were available at the time. However, the labour camps were deemed another matter, where it was harder to keep workers in check, as Kumar admitted; 'You give the accommodation [...] you never ask after that you know? We don't know what happens after that'. Off-site accommodation especially, was seen as an issue for employers wishing to maintain order and surveillance, and while gaining access to construction sites with on-site accommodation had proven less of an issue, though I tried at various intervals, the only off-site labour camp I was able to visit was the Thimmaiah campus, which consisted largely of families, and may have thus been deemed a safer space for myself and Aishwarya to visit. As Henrike Donner observes, fieldworkers' experiences of gendered access are important and all too discarded from studies; 'The fact that so few anthropologists have commented on this process belies the impact that gender differences have on our fieldwork experience' (2008:15).

Labour camps were referred to as cramped, unruly spaces devoid of employer surveillance (although as discussed in the prior chapter, this was not always the case), as Virender elaborated; 'the labour camps are too small. There are six people per room. It is about space economy'. 'Most of these guys have sex' he added. 'Too many women in the camps is dangerous so I keep their numbers down. It keeps law and order', he stated. Concerning the demographic of workers which dwelt in the camps, Virender concluded; 'These are at best casual labour. It sounds a little harsh when I say this: productivity is generally very low. It is also a social issue – we have a two-acre area with seven hundred men all away from home. Cultural levels are basically low. General levels of civilisation are low'.

In these ways, workers (especially 'unskilled' workers) were portrayed as of low productive value, low intelligence, and driven by their libidos. As Connell attests; 'where work is altered by deskilling and casualization, working class men are increasingly defined as possessing force alone' (2005:55). It was after all, solely the force seemingly possessed by the men that employers wished to harness, and which they also evidently

feared and underplayed. Despite this fear however, many companies were unwilling to provide more spacious or comfortable accommodation for workers, although it would have almost certainly relieved tensions, improved health, and thus, productivity.

On site accommodation was easier surveilled and, as was the case with Praveen's workers, often spatially separated by family status and state. Family units were perceived as more docile, as Praveen assured me; 'in terms of families, without having any distractions, people come here to work, make money and live a life and most of them stick to it'. Unlike Kumar, who undoubtedly had more muscle power, Praveen solely preferred the route of expulsion as a means of maintaining worker discipline and harmony, in part because of PR; 'there was a fight and people were actually sent home because of the fights because we didn't want it to mess our image... because it is very important to portray a good image of the company'. The idea that fights might be bad for the company image may have also indicated that resulting physical discipline too, had its own associational risks – a potential reason why Kumar and his father had since largely handed over control of their workforce to middlemen in light of their growing political connections.

As Lee Monaghan has pointed out in his study of doormen in UK nightclubs, 'Not only is violence practical in various situations, talk about violence constitutes subjective social identities and delimits embodied group and personal boundaries' (2002:348). In the case of Kumar, this may have actively worked in his favour to maintain image, although as he became a family man and looked to move away from real estate, this was something he chose to distance himself from over time. Nevertheless, violence or indeed the threat of violence against workers, served the dual purpose of both punishing, and instilling further discipline, through fear. It was also seen as necessary by Kumar so that the authorities did not become involved; 'Because, they are like leeches, who will always suck the blood out you know, if there is a small problem on the site, they try to make it into a big situation, so that they can extract money from us. So usually it's not the authorities, but we take the matters to our own hands, because they [the workers] are a bit scared of us'. Keeping migrant workers 'scared' thus denied them greater leverage and further enabled worker exploitation for employers such as Kumar, while avoiding scandal and any profit loss that might have occurred through dealings with the state and various other urban actors offsite.

## Conclusion

Following the previous chapter's examination of the living and working conditions experienced by the city's migrant construction workers, this chapter has shed light upon the circulation of industry forms of rhetoric and rationalisation informing these. It has addressed how speculation and subsequent forms of neoliberal conceptions of worth take shape at the ground level: creating high-risk, low-cost work environments which not only drive contemporary construction practices in India, but much of the present world, too. The hierarchies shaping these urban landscapes of exploitation and their resulting labour markets, draw on both global and local hegemonies, including class, gender and caste.

Informants partaking in these localised forms of wider global real estate speculation strive to undertake generative forms of intellectual and affective labour. They attempt to harness (with varying degrees of success) various forms of urban charisma through local networks of various state actors, banks, fixers and middlemen, manoeuvring through formal/informal spaces of the city thus generating and also utilising the opacity of the urban property market. To be successful within this scenario, informants such as Matthew had to dirty their own hands by engaging in illegal practices, while others including Praveen and Kumar hedged against potential losses through rerouting capital flows away from workers; subsequently denying the most basic levels of care and the value of their labour and bodies.

While migrant members of patronage networks such as the families of Praveen and Kumar's sites, may have (at times) had more work, this was by no means guaranteed, and facilitated further forms of exploitation and violence through enactments of dominant forms of masculinity. Masculinity is multitemporal, multispatial, and multifaceted; varying in forms of usage and capital. Hierarchies of masculinity and speculation are intertwined – informing who is deemed of masculine (and market) worth and subsequently, who is able to speculate and who is not.

While it has acknowledged criticisms of normative gender roles by scholars (De Neve, 2004; Ford and Lyons, 2012; Messerschmidt and Connell, 2005), this chapter has illustrated how masculine currency in the construction industry is not tied to physical labour itself, rather it is determined by industry and individualised value hierarchies. These evolve from the need to hedge one's bets; countering against the potential losses that may ensue from speculating on unknowable futures – or – maximising profit from potential gains. Such practices will continue as long as the transition from 'brawn' to 'brain' jobs, is celebrated in the contemporary vision of a knowledge-based economy

(McDowell, 2009). In Bengaluru, those building and maintaining the very infrastructure that makes such economies possible remain excluded as contributors and as speculators in their own futures; entangled within these localised and often violent vectors of accumulative neoliberal labour regimes.

CHAPTER SEVEN:  
'PEOPLE WANT MONEY FOR FREE!':  
UNRECEPTIVE SPACES OF WORKER WELFARE

*The 'Public Hearing' was envisioned as an open discussion session between workers, the state Construction Workers' Welfare Board, and the Karnataka Kattada Karmikara Kamila Kshemaabivirudhi Vedike (KKKKKV), or 'friends of construction workers welfare forum'; a panel of NGOs and unions from the city coordinated to lobby the welfare board. Following speeches from the organisers and the late arrival of Dr Sriramakrishnan, the deputy board director, the floor is opened up for questions. One of the audience members, a man with greying hair raises his hand and stands up; 'My name is Shambhulingappa and I came from Gulbarga fifteen years ago. We have gotten a labour card done and they said that when I reach the age of fifty-five, I will get pension. I was a little relieved and happy to hear that. Now I am fifty-five years old, but they are saying that the age of pension has been increased to sixty by the government. After the age of fifty-five, we can hardly lift a bag of cement. Forget about lifting bricks. How can you expect us to work until sixty?'*

### **Introduction**

Building on the prior chapter's analysis of how employers in construction both shape and utilise precarity, the next two chapters address how workers attempt to counter the resultant physical and fiscal risks of these practices through various forms of attempted engagement with the state. With the ongoing informality of India's economy vis-à-vis a worldwide erosion of labour rights (Agarwala, 2013; 2018; Breman, 1996; Joshi, 1999; Prentice and Trueba, 2018; Pun and Huilin, 2010), workers, grass roots unions, and labour organisation are increasingly turning away from employers and focusing their scrutiny on the state with the objective that; 'if the state will not ensure a living wage sufficient to meet the costs of labour's reproduction then the state must directly compensate for the inefficiency through welfare benefits that can ensure it' (Agarwala, 2013:197). Indeed, the presence of the welfare board in Bengaluru has altered the narratives and strategies of local organisations regarding worker's rights – something this chapter evidences through its examination of the actions of the KKKKKV; which frequently directed workers to the board and other state modes of welfare.

Singh conveys both the simultaneous beneficence and (often arbitrary) violence of the state, which he christens 'Mitra-Varuna', after the two Vedic deities that protect and uphold the order of the universe<sup>58</sup> (2015). As evidenced, state actors in Bengaluru

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<sup>58</sup> According to Singh 'A new image of Mitra is formed as the immanent and transcendent justification of sovereign power, as a welfare provider and policy maker. Mitra embodies the promise or

have a complex and at times, illicit relationship with the construction sector. Moreover, the state as a wider entity is perceived by city activists, workers, and the real estate sector alike as being corrupt, uncaring, and ineffective. Charged with being markedly reluctant in the practice of actual welfare distribution but over-zealous in its accrual and maintenance of funds; the state thus remains an active contributor to the continued disregard for worker health and safety via lax enforcement of regulations on its own construction projects. Considering this context, I attend to the role of the state as laid out by Singh, by examining the welfare board in its simultaneous roles of making and breaking laws and promises. Analysing what the state offers to construction workers in recompense for their underpaid and hazardous livelihoods and also who is able to claim this; generates both important questions and revelations concerning the democracy of welfare, labour organisation and gendered classifications of work and value, as the next two chapters elucidate.

This chapter begins by framing the present scenario against a backdrop of pre-existing, historically rooted conceptions of the working poor. It then provides the context through which state construction workers' welfare boards were formed across India under a central mandate, and the current status of Karnataka's board, based in Bengaluru. Following this framing, the first section examines the contradictions inherent between the delivery of the act and the welfare mechanisms of the board via its analysis of the subjectively informed, and yet totalising worker evaluations made by state actors. Secondly it explores the ramifications of the arbitrary enforcement of the act via a series of exchanges that took place at the public welfare forum for workers organised by the KKKKKV, also featured in the opening vignette. Concerning the issues highlighted from this episode, it analyses the contradictory categorisations made by the board of who is deserving of assistance and who is not, particularly vis-à-vis workers' refusal to adhere to the performance of docility. The final section attends to the unintended results of board lobbying by external actors and the accumulation of funds by the board itself, via the hardening of staff attitudes over time towards the NGOs and unions mandated to work with the board. This analysis is preceded by an introductory note on the central members of the pressure group, who I now describe below.

*An introductory note on the KKKKKV pressure group and its participants*

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hope of security (.) Varuna's force is transformed as well into disciplinary mechanisms of security within the territory and mercantile agnostics (modes of contestation) outside of it' (2015:60).



For the three primary NGOs that made up the most active participants of the KKKKKV pressure group, their focus often sat amidst many additional project goals and concerns; corresponding to the desires of international donors. Consequently, momentum was rapidly lost due to CIVIC, the organiser of the group, failing to secure further funding and all but abandoning the initiative some months later. While the organisations worked closely together, CIVIC's activities became severely inhibited by its diminishing funding. The majority of NGOs and the unions discussed in this and the next chapter, centre access to state-provided resources at the heart of their mobility and capacity enhancing initiatives.

### *CSA*

CSA, the largest NGO of the group and one of its core members, ran many other initiatives across the city beyond the SHGs of the Yadgir colony discussed in the third and fourth chapters. More recently, they have begun working with a large construction company to improve worker living conditions in the company provided accommodation. Originally founded in the mid-seventies by a group of sociology students, including their current director, the activity of CSA's 'construction worker collectives', remained rather low-key. However, CSA did work directly with local communities and used its connections to register workers with the welfare board, as discussed.

### *CIVIC*

CIVIC was established to hold the state to account for failure to deliver services to the urban poor, although it has also heavily focused on scrutinising municipal political operations in recent years. Its activities are limited by its foreign sponsors and its scope and focus of projects is largely determined by grant awards. CIVIC was initially, the central protagonist of the KKKKKV pressure group but was less condoning of collective action than the other members, preferring to employ a strategy of paperwork over protest. It did however, continue to make field visits and record worker's issues receiving welfare with the state board. CIVIC habitually utilised the RTI (Right to Information) Act and other legal avenues to pursue the welfare board with<sup>59</sup>. It arranged focus groups and hearings (including the public forum discussed in this chapter) targeting legislators and the local government.

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<sup>59</sup> At the point of my fieldwork, the board itself had just received a court order after a successful bout of lobbying from the KKKKKV which instructed them to perform its function more swiftly and efficiently, setting a deadline to dramatically increase its worker registration numbers.

*FEDINA* (including AKKKU & AIKYATA)

FEDINA also comprises a construction workers' union (AKKKU) and a union for retired informal workers (AIKYATA). It is significantly the most vocal endorser of collective action and protest. Like CSA, FEDINA has strong connections with foreign donors and a high number of women fieldworkers in local communities. Significantly, FEDINA also attempted to engage (albeit with limited degrees of success) with migrant workers in comparison to the majority of the city's unions and NGOs.

### **The deserving and undeserving: state welfare and the working poor**

Prominent scholars have compared the evolution of state welfare and distinctions between the 'workshy' and the 'worthy' poor in present-day India to the (short-lived) appeasement policies of nineteenth century England enforced to avert a similar revolution to the one that had just taken place across the channel in France (Breman, 2016; P. Chatterjee, 2008; Gupta, 2012). Indeed, Partha Chatterjee (2008), posited a similar fear of class war motivated the emergence of numerous welfare policies to prevent the working classes from turning further into the "dangerous classes" (A. Gupta 2012:291) they were deemed to be. Akhil Gupta is quick to point out the contradictory nature of this form of appeasement whereby; 'Democracy has created a situation in which the funding for electoral politics and for redistributive social programs comes increasingly from capitalists, but the popular vote comes mainly from rural populations and the urban underclass, the denizens of political society (Chatterjee 2008)' (2012:292). However, such measures achieve little by way of sustainable outcomes, since their efforts are consecutively undermined by the state's facilitation of formal avenues of accumulation to capital, allowing the private sector 'access to decision making and central authority, to create tax holidays, new export schemes, Special Economic Zones, allow agricultural land to be converted to industrial use, and so on' (A. Gupta, 2012:ibid).

In recent years, the state's mediation between these groups appears to be growing more uneven. In its first term for instance, the current BJP government channelled vast amounts of government money into infrastructure stimulus while cutting the budgets of welfare programs (see CNBC, 2015; Dreze, 2017; Kalra and MacAskill, 2015; Mander, 2015); threatening to scrap NREGA (the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) altogether. Indeed, it was perhaps for fear of voter backlash, particularly in India's rural hinterlands hard hit by demonetisation in 2016; that despite calling it a 'living monument to your UPA [the United Progressive Alliance] failures' (Scroll Staff, 2015) the BJP

continues to allocate government funding to it. The significantly delayed post-election release of long overdue unemployment and farmer suicide figures also indicates this.

In the wake of such cuts, the argument has been made that more opportunities will be created through increased infrastructure investment (G. Das, 2019; S.N. Sharma, 2019). However, the 'trickle-down effect' has been rightly critiqued by numerous scholars (A. Gupta, 2012; Krishna, 2017; Sen, 2003; Tsing, 2005; 2018), and yet it remains a focus of government policy (see Drèze and Sen, 2013; Ghatak, 2014; 2015; Ghatak and Mukherjee, 2019; Patnaik, 2016); signalling a shift away from Nehruvian socialism, which stipulated that workers 'should receive pay not only sufficient for mere survival' but a salary that allowed 'for expenditure on education and health' (Bremar, 2016:70). Although the establishment of the construction workers' welfare board and its array of benefits (including education scholarships and marriage allowance) acknowledges such needs, its ongoing failure to deliver them evidences both the lack of workable mechanisms in place to deliver such benefits and moreover, the continued scrutiny faced by the working poor as recipients of state welfare.

#### *From womb to tomb: The Building and Other Construction Workers' Welfare Board*

The Building and Other Construction Workers' Welfare Cess Act, which mandated each state to establish a welfare board and raise funds from construction projects valued at over ten lakhs, was passed on August 19<sup>th</sup>, 1996; alongside the Building and Other Construction Workers' Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service Act. The context of its establishment was itself an anomaly since; 'Unlike earlier union movements that were tied to left-wing political parties, the revived national construction workers' campaign transcended political and ideological affiliations to hold the state, regardless of the party in power, responsible for workers' well-being' (Agarwala, 2013:50). Indeed, this period of nationally co-ordinated collective struggle was viewed as a triumph by the union and NGO workers I knew who had worked together to bring it about. Descriptions of the movement remain imbued with a fierce sense of nostalgic pride of a battle well-fought and eventually won, even in the face of the growing challenges of getting states to implement it.

The regulatory accompaniment of the Cess Act, however ‘catered to the requests of the builders’ association to apply minimal protections of work conditions’ (Agarwala, 2013:51), rather than playing any tangible role in improving working conditions or safety. Its size and specificity (and of course the presence of industry members sitting on the construction workers’ welfare board), have made it too unwieldy to implement. Nor was regulatory enforcement attempted – with few state or company actors concerned with this, as Parry notes; ‘I have never heard of a labour inspector inspecting a construction site’ (2014:1260). Indeed, during my time in Bengaluru, I soon learned of the dearth of site inspections and the staff to undertake them.



*The Construction Workers’ Welfare Board, Bengaluru.*

Over a decade from the original act, Karnataka, one of the pivotal states in the construction workers’ movement, formally implemented the Building and Other Construction Workers Welfare Board in 2006. The board became operational in 2007, running a skeleton staff seconded from the Department of Labour. Money for the provision of an array of welfare measures for workers was collected courtesy of the cess law, which mandated that any construction project costing over ten lakh rupees (around £11,600) must pay one percent of its total costs to the board. In a city such as Bengaluru, this was a substantial amount – at the time of my fieldwork the board had raised 27,98,42,09,896 rupees<sup>60</sup> (Board

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<sup>60</sup> Approximately £326 million. The figure has since surpassed 7,000 crore rs or £ 795,410,000 (By K.R. Balasubramanyam).

Progress Report, 2015:11). However, the frequently reported wealth of the board was to have a contradictory effect, adding to the resolve of board workers to make moral judgements in the distribution of welfare, following centuries old tradition, as John Barrett attests:

*The overseers charged with distributing poor relief were often guilty of tarnishing individual paupers by their use of morally judgmental language in the official parish documents. It will be further argued that it was these parish and vestry officials who, by their use of such language, imposed certain moral standards upon those paupers seeking relief and because of the terms used to describe certain paupers, the overseers were guilty of formalizing such language in order to categorize certain paupers.*

(2012:37)

Indeed, the language and actions of high-ranking figures in the board not only created a culture of suspicion as its funds grew, but significantly, one that became further distanced from workers and subsequently, the delivery of worker benefits. The remainder of this section explores how this culture and its corresponding forms of judgement revealed itself over time in my interactions with board staff.

The welfare board is located off a busy highway and housed in a large concrete building, which confusingly for outside visitors, identically matches the exteriors of its neighbouring municipal boards. At the end of the long dingy corridor, illuminated by harsh white strip lighting, a security guard faces the doorway of the inconspicuous entrance to the building, instructing guests to sign in before entering. The walls are arrayed with a scant collection of notices and posters, including one advertising the benefits of the welfare board, proclaiming; ‘From womb to tomb!’ The smell of disinfectant in the air adds to the sterile, hospital ambience. Another notice advises visitors that the offices are under CCTV surveillance.

During my first visit to the welfare board, I remember my amusement at Dr Sriramakrishnan’s office buzzer emitting the unexpected sound of birdsong as I was shown in. There is a small bank of video screens from various CCTV feeds in the building, including the corridor, by the desk. The trappings, layouts and staff members present in government officials’ offices are themselves ethnographically important; welcoming one kind of person while intimidating another, in this instance, instilling a sense of constant surveillance. As Matthew S. Hull postulates in his own research of government officials in Pakistan; ‘Face-to-face meetings, the paragon within social science of the unmediated encounter, are shaped by the layouts of offices, chairs, desks, buzzers, and teacups, the things that form the material infrastructure of the social

relationships in the bureaucratic arena' (Hull, 2012:66). the visual language of bureaucracy encoded within such spaces, may be readable to only a few members of the visiting public depending on one's level of social capital (2012:70).

*'Why don't we just pay for them to go to Switzerland?': Conflicting narratives of welfare*

Within his wood-panelled inner sanctum, Dr Sriramakrishnan openly expressed his thoughts on workers and welfare, which initially caught me off guard following the more formal manner of my initial telephone interview with him. Although Dr Sriramakrishnan claimed to be pro workers' rights, I noticed early into our relationship the (glaring) inconsistencies revealed during our conversations - ones which appeared in stark opposition to his self-declared values.

Huang notes that; 'Aid elites are often committed to moral universals, such as equal rights and women's empowerment, in discursive acts of "moral selving" (2016:64). Indeed, Dr Sriramakrishnan on the surface, presented such commitment; speaking at international events on worker welfare delivery and often emphasising his views on gender equality with me. However, as Huang observes, such acts are discursive, and Dr Srimakrishnan did not appear to notice, or at least seemed to have no issue with the overt disjuncture between his opinions of workers and his role in facilitating the distribution of welfare. Perhaps, he believed that in applying his own moral framework through the praxis of welfare delivery, he was in fact providing the state and the greater populace of workers a service by deterring those he deemed to be frauds, as this chapter explores.

Dr Sriramakrishnan also found fault with several areas of the act itself which the board was meant to be delivering. One such instance revealed itself when we were discussing the marriage allowance for workers – something which I knew from stories of informants, was incredibly difficult to obtain – even years after the respective wedding had taken place and all of the requisite documents had been submitted. 'We might as well send them to Switzerland!' He exclaimed, echoing global forms of discourse concerning the undeserving poor which regularly feature at the centre of neoliberal politics and press stories across the world (see Centre for Global Education; Ehrenreich, 2001; Gilens, 1999; Goldberg, 2007; Shildrick and MacDonald, 2013). Similar rhetoric followed concerning Dr Sriramakrishnan's views on welfare delivery, which he often indicated had to be worked for by would-be recipients, even though technically speaking, it already was; 'We might as well dump money into the street. People want to get money for free' Dr Sriramakrishnan informed me concerning worker welfare. This offhand comment highlights the underlying conflict between what the workers of the board believed welfare

recipients should be getting money for (which was not, as I have stressed, state money), versus the stipulations of the act itself.

Jaya, Dr Sriramakrishnan's deputy, expressed frustration at the ambiguity that came with the interpretation of the act, something which, as was the case of her boss, coloured by her own moral perspective, too. Indeed, what really stood out during my interactions with board staff was the extent to which Dr Sriramakrishnan, Jaya, and their colleagues, used the phrase 'contingencies of life', in lieu of 'welfare'. This discourse and Dr Sriramakrishnan's comparison of wedding allowance with sending workers to Switzerland, suggested that while the board acknowledged responsibility for costs created from the dangers of construction work; they were less willing to pay towards the life expenses workers were unable to meet as a result of insufficient wages. Indeed, for Jaya, the responsibility for workers' welfare lay with their employer: 'Now if I'm a single owner or I'm a builder or I'm a contractor, what is my responsibility as a contractor? I am supposed to take care of my person who is working for me... *then* comes the board. Board is only a supplement. It is complementary to it. The board cannot take the position of the builder, which many of them [the critics of the board] don't understand', she concluded.

Later into fieldwork I learned that the board and Dr Sriramakrishnan in particular, were routinely criticised by the KKKKKV as being significantly out of touch with workers. The language used by the board certainly did not help this image. In return, Jaya was angered by what she believed to be the undue pressure placed on the board, which she associated with the rumoured amount of its funds; 'Because this is [the funds of the board], it is just an iota, it's going to grow. Because at the moment, there is a lot of money, everybody's eyes [are] on it', she concluded. Indeed, the more individuals including Dr Sriramakrishnan and Jaya were pushed to explain the board's shortcomings by outsider organisations (the KKKKKV frequently used channels including the RTI Act<sup>61</sup> and the High Court against it) the more insular they became. This was evident following the public hearing and also in our later interactions (which I discuss in the following section), as individuals such as Dr Ramakrishnan took it upon themselves to maintain fiscal discipline in tandem with their own judgement systems, within an ostensibly chaotic and confused department; something which as numerous scholars of the Indian state observe, is typically a product of its own making (A. Gupta, 2012; Mathur, 2016; Tarlo, 2001), as Gupta posits:

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<sup>61</sup> The Right to Information Act

*With-out doubt state officials who are uncaring or indifferent to extreme poverty and are interested merely in advancing their own fortunes and careers do exist. However, even if all state officials were sincerely devoted to the task of eradicating poverty, the question is whether the procedures of the bureau-cracy would end up subverting even their best intentions.* (2012:6)

Even if Dr Sriramakrishnan had held less dismissive views concerning the welfare he was partially responsible for delivering, the on-the-ground implementation of the act, which varied in its efficacy and progress from state to state, remained a considerable issue. Indeed, despite Dr Sriramakrishnan's sentiments towards the working poor, there were often good intentions at the board, many of which were undone by miscommunication between the central and state boards as illustrated in the example of the pension scheme in the opening vignette and the following section. Moreover, the result of the board's good intentions further fuelled the mistrust and confusion amongst would-be pension recipients; and yet had it won its appeal against the central government, workers such as Shambhulingappa, who I discuss below, would have received retirement five years earlier. As Nayanika Mathur observes in her study of the delivery of welfare in Himalayan India; 'The bureaucratic practices that go into composing the Indian state are charged with contingency, uncertainty, coercion, and affect; there is a precarious nature to their unfolding' (2016:5). The ambiguity produced by these bureaucratic spaces generates mistrust and hostility between parties and yet conversely requires them to navigate the system together, as I now examine.

### **'You are cheating the people!': workers and the welfare board**

Following the prior section's historical and present-day contextualisation of state conceptions of the working poor vis-à-vis board workers' present-day sentiments, this section attends to how they subsequently inform interactions between the welfare board staff, construction workers, and the NGOs attempting to lobby it. It does so by using the events and aftermath of the workers' welfare forum as an analytical lens with which to interrogate the nature of these relations of mistrust and their consequences. While the hearing will highlight the efficacy of unifying NGOs across a common purpose, it is also worth bringing to attention the transience created by project-driven foci, and thus the further precarity experienced by those who must continually rely on such organisations to make their claims. It describes the events of the welfare forum, its aftermath, and the continuing breakdown in relations between the welfare board and its erstwhile civic partners.



## *The public forum*

Although they had been provided with lunch, many of the audience of the public forum for construction workers' welfare who had taken time off work or busy home routines, were growing restless. The source of the crowd's irritation was revealed in the opening address:

This platform has come together to conduct this programme for the welfare of the workers. We were all here yesterday as well [when the welfare board representation had failed to attend]. The Labour Minister had said he would be attending this meeting but he was unable to. He informed us last night, so the programme has been disrupted a little. But you have all come to the programme, so thank you.

Following a film screening with interviews from some of the workers present, all of whom have travelled across the city from the localities of the KKKKKV member organisations. The co-founder of CSA, Tripathi, a stern-faced slim man in his mid-fifties, chimes in; 'You've seen the film, now what do you think about it? It has mentioned pension, the problems that workers face and the trouble in getting that pension and other benefits. What is your opinion on that?' Most of the audience is armed with questions they have now had an additional day to mull over and no further invitation is required as the room erupts. Women from various slum boards stand up and walk to the table of representatives where they ask their questions, some carrying various papers and medical files with them. Many are turned away. Among this group I notice women from the Yadgir colony, too, though no one I recognised from the sangha was present<sup>62</sup>.

Doctor Sriramakrishnan arrives late, though he is greeted with loud applause, nevertheless. Wearing a dark navy suit and black shoes polished to a mirror sheen, he commences his speech in English, and is swiftly reprimanded by Kathyayini Chamraj of CIVIC, who urges him to speak in Kannada. Dr Sriramakrishnan duly switches, discussing the board's plans for digitising the application to tackle fraudulent claims:

Now what we have learned is that a large number of construction workers are interested in applying for these social security schemes, there is a rising awareness about these schemes. There are workers who have put blood and sweat into the work that they do and get these benefits. And there are also some people who take the benefits they are not entitled to. To solve these issues, with the workers have to come to the officers or we have to go to the workers. We have spent a lot of time discussing these issues and solving problems. The customised tablets will be given to the registration officers.

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<sup>62</sup> As discussed, the women of Yellamma's sangha were often chided by Kauveri and Shanthi for their apparent apathy when it came to attending NGO events such as this one.

There is an air of quiet disbelief amongst those that have not fallen asleep. Tripathi wears an impish grin, while Kathyayini rolls her eyes at various intervals. The remainder of the crowd appear torn between indignation and barely disguised laughter. Dr Sriramakrishnan is interrupted by a woman with a heavily bandaged finger; ‘You said that you will take the finger prints of the workers for the biometric data, but most times the finger prints of the workers is [sic] damaged during work’<sup>63</sup>. ‘We can’t accept that argument. Out of the ten fingers, any finger can be taken’, Dr Sriramakrishnan replies.

Various questions follow, primarily regarding confusion over the ambiguity of the board’s pledge to provide worker housing, the non-arrival of scholarship applications, and the lack of reimbursement delivered for hospitalisation following work-related injuries. The frustration was summed up by one exasperated audience member; ‘Some three to four applications we have put, if one comes the other doesn’t. When we go ask they say, ‘it has been delayed’ or ‘the file is not here’ and a few other excuses. Only if we go to higher officers like Seema ma’am and Satish Sir [the former is present at the hearing] does the work get done. Or else, the others in the office keep giving excuses like, ‘file has been lost’.

Amidst the volleys of questions, Dr Sriramakrishnan becomes impatient, and Seema, the Assistant Labour Commissioner and Assistant Secretary from the board steps in. Her answers are meant to sound reassuring but betray the lack of consistency and uncertainty surrounding the very nature of the benefits themselves as well as their delivery. A dominant issue raised by the audience concerned the age of eligibility for the pension. The board had promoted the eligibility as five years younger than the central government, which, it subsequently had to repeal. This inevitably caused a huge amount of frustration for the board and pension applicants and their various advocates. ‘We’re working towards fulfilling all the claims, and the pensions will get paid quickly’, Seema tried to reassure the audience.

This was however, not the answer the audience wanted to hear – particularly those present who knew from their own encounters with the board, the true reality belying the term ‘quickly’. At this point Shambhulingappa, who introduced himself in the opening vignette, angrily interjects; ‘If the law says sixty years then why is the department saying fifty-five years? When you know it says sixty years in the law, why did you make this mistake? You are cheating the people! Did you do this because you thought the innocent people would listen to whatever was told to them?’ ‘No it is nothing like that’, answered

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<sup>63</sup> This is also one of the well-publicised criticisms of the Aadhaar card, whereby workers’ finger prints are often unreadable.

Seema. 'It is like that!' He replied angrily. At this point, Manmohan Das, another invited speaker and member of the Karnataka Legal Services organisation, wades in:

M.D: Listen to me! They have increased it from fifty-five to sixty. If you think this is injustice, then you can question the government in the court regarding these changes. As an authority figure, she can't answer you by bypassing the law. Hire a lawyer, I will help you.

S (faltering): But sir...we don't have that many resources.

M.D: That is why there is Legal Services Authority, wherever there is a court, there is a Legal Services Authority. It has four aims: to make people who are unaware of the law become more aware. To help people who can't afford legal support by appointing lawyers for free, paying for the court procedures and they will fight the case on your behalf in the court. In case some owner has filed a case against you, the Legal Services Authority will appoint a lawyer, pay the fees and look after the court expenses. Thirdly, in all these procedures, if anyone is unable to come to take the matter to court, the Legal Services Authority have been known to conduct meetings and find out of court settlements.

Following this response, a member of the KKKKKV who I do not recognise, comes to Shambhulingappa's defence:

NGO worker: What they are asking is, the kind of physical work that a construction worker does is much more than an official sitting in an office. By the age of 55, the construction worker finds it more difficult to work...

M.D: That is what I said...

NGO worker: Sir, let me finish. Secondly, when there is an amendment, the authorities should inform the public.

M.D: I have understood their question; I don't need you to elaborate. This sort of question can't be answered by a government employee. In case someone finds that there has been injustice, or the organisations present here feel like there has been injustice, or any individual who feels like this rule is wrong, can go to court and question the law. There is scope for that. Secondly [he turns to Shambhulingappa], you said 'we are poor and don't have the resources'. I have answered that also for you! Legal Services Authority, where lakhs of rupees is being spent, and thousands of people are making use of its services... why not take their help? In this way, there is a way to find solutions to the problem. It is important to know what problem can be solved in which way by which authority.

This interaction provides a prime example of the top-down structures of information exchange which the poor must find intermediaries to navigate; but also how relations of mistrust and miscommunication come to inform interactions between state officials, NGOs, and workers. Moreover, it illustrates how, as Gupta notes; 'bureaucratic action repeatedly and systematically produces arbitrary outcomes in its provision of care. While indifference does indeed play an important role in this story, the indifference to arbitrary outcomes is central' (2012:6). It is the confusion that remains endemic at the heart of Indian bureaucracy, but also the lack of concern by state figures concerning the

results of this confusion, that prevent the delivery of state sanctioned forms of care; leading workers such as Shambulingappa to feel not only overlooked, but as this vignette also highlighted, betrayed.

For many workers like Shambhulingappa, their working lifespan in construction in terms of employability and concomitantly health, is short. The prospect of struggling to find work for an even longer span of time in the absence of alternatives was thus something Shambulingappa found distressing, a reaction judge Manmohan Das displayed little response to in his answer, instead dispensing impractical advice, as the interceding NGO worker attempted to point out. While few workers that day would receive any information or advice of actual impactful benefit, perhaps knowing this, they decided to use the time to air their grievances in front of an ineffective and distant institution they would not otherwise have had access to; significantly, also responding to Dr Ramakrishnan's implied accusation of fraud. Indeed, at the close of the question session, Tripathi responded to Dr Sriramakrishnan's earlier speech, chiding the board for their perceived lack of trust in claimants:

Please don't feel bad that I am saying this, but the general feeling amongst the officers and others is that most of the people [workers] are actually frauds. They don't trust the workers. We're not saying; 'don't have the digital way of registering', but just that this attitude needs to change. Most people [from the board] believe that 90% of the people who are registered in the list are not actually workers. I request that this belief and attitude change because all the people registered are workers who truly need the help and support of these schemes. There should also be more attempts to actually distribute the money that is allotted; there is no point in keeping the money in some corner. And they keep saying, "some random person is coming, they keeping bringing random people." But workers only come to apply for the schemes. A lot of the unions and other people come to support the workers, so this needs to change.

This ongoing back and forth between the board and workers' organisations is indicative of the ever-present tension that remained partially shrouded beneath a thin veneer of courtesy – something both sides realised was required to meet their respective objectives. It also illustrated the culture of hostility the board adopted towards workers, including targeting their appearance, as one union worker angrily pointed out, sarcastically asking; 'Can a construction worker not look good? When the officer looks at a photo, they'll ask, "Is this person a construction worker?" To take that photo, [do] they have to come covered in cement?' What does this episode reveal about the attitudes of state actors towards the working poor and how is it indicative of the wider workings of the welfare board?

*'It's pretty lax': categorisations of workers*

Following the public hearing, Dr Sriramakrishnan voiced his dissatisfaction at the welfare forum's proceedings; 'I was not very happy in the way it was carried out', he stated. As it transpired, despite Tripathi's appeal to cease the judgement of all workers as fraudulent claimants, Dr Sriramakrishnan had serious doubts about the 'authenticity' of the audience. While he acknowledged some of the issues raised, he added that many of the complaints, rather than being the collective issues experienced by workers were in fact; 'a parroted type of thing [...] We only saw a... sort of very strong activist. Something like that'. When I asked him to elaborate, he said; 'I feel that the plans... first of all, they were all not... if they were all genuine construction workers, they cannot really attend that presentation'. 'Because they have work?' I asked. 'Who would allow that day's wage, allowing them to chat from morning until evening? If you see their faces, they were all domestic workers, domestic help [many of the audience members were women]. Something like that. They were not construction workers. Construction workers, if you feel his hand you will understand how his hand looks like...' he trailed off.

Needless to say, Dr Sriramakrishnan's reasoning women solely worked in domestic or construction work was highly flawed since many alternate between the two (see also Choudhury, 2013). Dr Sriramakrishnan's guess that women would not sacrifice available working hours was also incorrect, as evidenced through the colony women's ongoing weekly attendance of the sangha. Moreover, to assume workers had regular work was also incorrect, as this thesis has evidenced. Indeed, for the attending audience of local workers, construction work was declining and thus the need to obtain more information on welfare and chase up existing claims in person was substantial. Subsequently, the opportunity to be able to do so face-to-face with members of the welfare board who were usually inaccessible, and significantly, could not easily dismiss them in a public forum, was for some, too great to pass up.

While as Dr Ramakrishnan rightly argued, time is scarce for many women engaged in informal livelihoods, one of the contributing reasons for this was because they had to continually sacrifice their time in order to humour both the state, and as evidenced in chapter four, non-state bodies who served as intermediaries between the two. As evidenced by the women of the Yadgir colony, some of whom were present at the welfare forum, many *made* the time to attend the sangha and other external events, regardless of whether they had work or not. What Dr Ramakrishnan's evaluation also failed to acknowledge is that welfare applicants with paid work were not recompensed for time off

but were nevertheless expected to visit the welfare board to check on their status. As Auyero observes:

*If the state really wants to include beneficiaries as active citizens, as “full fledged participants in society,” it does not make much sense to make them wait in this zone of uncertainty. If, however, the state is actually creating subordinate subjects who do not raise their voice, who “know” (because they learn in practice) that they have to be patient, then the uncertainty and arbitrariness of the welfare office is a very effective route for doing so.*  
(2003:25)

Though the state certainly does make welfare applicants wait, this may not necessarily produce the kinds of disempowerment Auyero notes. As I will explore in further depth in the next chapter, waiting need not be conceived of as docile act (Appadurai, 2013; Bendixsen and Hyllans Eriksen, 2018; Harms, 2013; Reinhardt, 2018; Zigon, 2018), even if it is something demanded by the state (Auyero, 2003; Ozolina-Fitzgerald, 2016; Procupez, 2016).

Dr Sriramakrishna’s judgement that the audience’s ‘availability’ delegitimised its position as worthy recipients of welfare does however, iterate the highly arbitrary and out-of-touch conceptions of workers by upper class, upper caste members of state bodies (Caplan, 1985; Gupta, 2012; Mathur, 2016 Roberts, 2016). As Shambulingappa’s outburst revealed, when workers fail to perform their expected caste and class positions with due deference to those further up in the hierarchy than them, their arguments are dismissed as ignorant or irrational. To Dr Sriramakrishnan, this lack of deference was further evidence that the audience members were too vocal to conform to his construct of informal labourers.

What was happening was ‘simple’, he informed me. The public hearing had been an ambush by the KKKKKV, planted full of activists, or at the very least opportunists; ‘because the board has huge funds, so easy to take up the benefits, everyone wants to claim the pie and the cake’, he declared. The suggestion that workers could not simultaneously be activists, or indeed, voice their frustration in the way the audience had done, discredits the agency of the workers in attendance; evidently angered by the state’s inability to recognise them. And yet, it was both their refusal and inability to adhere to Dr Sriramakrishnan’s ideals of ‘genuine’ workers which denied them of the welfare and humane treatment that they were seeking in the first place. Indeed, as Valaria Procupez states in relation to informants waiting for housing benefits in Buenos Aires:

*Public programs delineate a “beneficiary population,” imposing very specific, strict requirements for people demanding access to resources. They define the identities of potential recipients as both in need and deserving a subsidy while determining a category of excluded subjects. Recipients have*

*to perform the identity designated by state regulation in order to qualify (with claims that fall under those the program is designed to solve) and have access to the benefits of the programs (Biaggio and Verón 2009). (2015:S70)*

What Dr Sriramakrishnan's implication that 'real' workers were not among the audience members did highlight however, was the absent majority – those less able to demand their claim of the so-called 'pie and the cake', since they possessed none of the requisite connections that settled local workers had acquired over the years to do so. There were no migrant workers present at the welfare forum and few enrolled with the board – although, to its credit, the board was the first in the country to allow construction workers from states other than Karnataka to apply, although their engagement with migrant workers and strategies regarding this were incredibly limited. However, it was simultaneously such demographics, which may move between agriculture and construction work that bring the criteria used to define workers into conflict with individual board staff's own subjective forms of evaluation, as revealed by Jaya.

Following our discussion on how migrant workers might be registered by the board (including the potential use of NREGA records), Jaya expressed her frustration with the central government's definition of a construction worker, including those who work over ninety days a year in the industry, thus making them eligible for welfare. 'There cannot be an understanding of the definition of construction. It's pretty lax', she declared. 'Tomorrow you and I will be accepted because we are doing research on it! It's nonsensical like that'. In a manner similar to Dr Sriramakrishnan's earlier metaphor, Jaya explained what she believed to be the consequences of this, summarising; 'Whenever there is money it's like a sweet you know, and all of the flies will go inside that'. Not only did this attitude apply to workers as potentially unworthy recipients of the board's funds, but also the unions and NGOs that claimed to represent their interests too, as the final section now explores.

### **'They are making money': external bodies, distrust and mutual accusations**

As illustrated, the public hearing may have had the opposite intended effect on the welfare board than its NGO organisers desired. If anything, Dr Sriramakrishnan became more militant: increasingly defensive of the board's funds and sceptical of the workers it served. Indeed, rather than serve their intended function, such events instilled further tension between the welfare board and the city's unions and NGOs. Each side levelled accusations at the other of various forms of malpractice. With this in mind, this

final section completes the circle of welfare relations in Bengaluru by attending to the dynamics between the board and the external actors it was not only meant to work with, but also collect cess funds from. In doing so, it builds upon the relatively small corpus of anthropological and sociological research focusing on trust (Corsín Jiménez, 2013; Griffiths, 2012; C.Y Ho, 2013) – with particular reference to Yuet Cheuk Ho’s ethnography, which explores the intricacies of power relations and rumour between evictees and their would-be state evictors in China (2013).

The ambiguity of process and arbitrariness of decisions created in such environments deepens suspicion and rumour as Ho attests (2013). The guarded and formal language in public exchanges between officials and activists soon disintegrated outside of these arenas, attesting to the extent of the circulation of distrust throughout the city’s welfare-related networks. The continued operation of tripartite blame-shifting between external parties involved in the delivery of welfare, which also led to Dr Sriramakrishnan’s departure and the suspension of his deputies; conceals and simultaneously exacerbates the failure of welfare delivery, as I now examine.

#### *Circles of blame: the board, the unions and real estate developers*

The city’s unions were sponsored by the state to register construction workers with the board and mediated on behalf of worker members in matters relating to their welfare applications. As a result, union workers frequently visited the board, and I encountered informants there by chance on numerous occasions. Indeed, as many workers understood it, union membership was a requisite step in obtaining membership to the board (which was not actually untrue since the unions are paid a small fee for enrolling workers to the board), and so they saw their own numbers and capital rising as a result. In this way, poorer populaces are made continually reliant on dealings with middlemen (P. Chatterjee, 2004; Blom Hansen and Verkaaik, 2009; V. Das, 2011; V. Das and Randeria, 2015) – something which has implications given the uneven democracy of union spaces for female and migrant workers, as I attend to in the next chapter.

Despite the apparently close working relationship between the board, the unions, and the NGOs, and their relatively cordial language towards one another in public, accusations of dishonesty were double-sided. As Seema informed me; ‘They are making money’, before launching into an explanation of how unions and NGOs would charge workers extra for their registration, as well as registering phony claims. Still smarting from her grilling from Shambhulingappa at the forum, she declared; ‘NGOs are quarrelsome. They like to quarrel with us’. Moreover, Seema claimed, the actions of the



KKKKKV member organisations frequently ‘humiliated’ workers by sending them to the office to protest non-existent or incomplete claims.

It was not only the workers, unions and NGOs that the board held a strained relationship with. It had also inevitably experienced some issues with the numerous construction companies of the state, and some had even been (unsuccessfully) trying to pursue legal action, and finding ways to pay lower amounts, as Seema attested:

Some cases we are facing... contractors. Where they argue about cess... ‘why we give cess?’ [...] Total cost of construction, one percent cess amount is there to take. [The contractors] Cut up the cess amount and they send us... if he’s a big contractor, they are directly sending some local contractor, they are making it a crisis for the contractors, then they send one deduction, they deduct their bills and are sending us. One construction contractor was telling me; ‘why I should pay?’ This is for paying the one percent cess! These type of challenges we face.

The illicit nature of the relationship between construction companies and the state vis-a-vis the volatility and unreadability of the property market, which generated a fast and cost-saving approach to manifold aspects of construction; meant that real estate developers were highly sceptical and hostile towards the act. Subsequently, companies attempted to conceal the true costs of their projects, altering accounts and project plans, and invariably bribing state and bank officials in the process. Even informants that claimed to be supportive of worker welfare were evasive of various aspects of the act, as evidenced by the actions of Praveen in preventing his workers from registering.

Since the state was an entity unto which developers had to regularly pay considerable bribes to clear various stages of development, their cynicism is hardly surprising. As Virender once told me when I asked him if he knew of the act; ‘I don’t want to know about it, and I am not bothered about it’. It was impossible to deliver funds to people without addresses, he claimed. Welfare, he continued, was ‘talking for talking’s sake... not even a rupee reaches them. All of this welfare is for the urban people to feel good about themselves’. To Virender, and other industry informants, the construction workers cess was thus largely perceived as ‘an underhanded fund for the government to get richer’, rather than one that was established to benefit workers.

Given the perceived antagonisms faced by the board as a public entity, and its workers as individual civil servants, from an array of (often powerful) actors affected by the implementation of the law, their beleaguered attitude was hardly surprising. However, it undoubtedly came to have a negative impact on the relationship between those that it was after all meant to serve, and those who worked there, which created an ever-present undercurrent of tension between all respective sides that fell under the wide umbrella of

the welfare act. Indeed, following my initial period of fieldwork, the board fell under even greater scrutiny and there was a high staff turnover.

### *Epilogue*

Despite Dr Sriramakrishnan's concern about the amount of benefits offered to construction workers by the legislation, the Karnataka construction workers' board continues to face accusations of being both one of the wealthiest and simultaneously least generous of its kind in the country (see Gunjan, 2019; Kumar, 2016; Prabhu, 2017). Recent staff of the board have since promised to rectify this, although rather than admitting the existence of a hostile and incredibly difficult to negotiate terrain for applicants, the Labour Minister and board Director Santosh Lad, has blamed a low registration uptake<sup>64</sup> (See Kumar, 2016). During my time away from Bengaluru there were many substantial changes concerning the welfare board. Two labour ministers came and went and also Dr Sriramakrishnan; 'transferred', following a highly publicised period of in-fighting, which led to the suspension of Jaya and Seema. Following the criticism for severe underspending, the current labour minister has been accused by unions, NGOs and the media of attempting to syphon off substantial board funds into inappropriate projects serving as fronts (Gunjan, 2019; Kadidal, 2019; The Wire Staff, 2017). When I asked Dr Sriramakrishnan what he had hoped to achieve during his time at the welfare board he told me:

The dreams we had... keeping in the future requirements of the construction workers, maintaining the academy... everything has fell down. Nothing ever happened. The construction academy which we had planned, the transit accommodation, the residential schools for the children... mainstreaming them... all those things, all the projects that we had undertaken, everything collapsed. The digitalisation of the documents and the online transactions have got there but I was hoping to bring in a permanent staff but... again they have to take it up. A lot of things are pending.

Other than hiring additional staff for data entry purposes, there were no new developments in any of these areas. Perhaps the construction workers' academy, still the same stretch of barren land I visited over four years ago, once conceived of as a two-hundred-and-fifty crore rupee project; had been a genuine initiative that like many other of Dr Ramakrishnan's visions, became lost in a sea of red tape and shifting foci. External detractors I knew claimed it had merely been another front to siphon off funds. Given the

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<sup>64</sup> Around an estimated ten million of the state's workers remain unregistered (see Balasubramanyam, 2017).

high turnover of staff at the board and its often subjective, arbitrary forms of governance in applying the law, it is less surprising perhaps, that corruption allegations aside, things had a way of ‘falling down’, as Dr Sriramakrishnan attested.

## **Conclusion**

By illustrating the nature of interaction and subsequent reactions of the many actors involved in the delivery of the Building and Other Construction Workers’ Act, this chapter had made visible the historically formed and yet persistent obstacles faced by informal workers as they attempt to secure a sustainable income. It has further developed the themes drawn out in chapter four concerning the judgement of the working poor by middle class actors; elucidating how these inform wider state institutions. Through its examination of the scrutiny informants received from state bodies when they had to go to them, this chapter has also addressed the matter of why interlocutors working construction frequently emphasised how hard it was they worked. It has also built on the work of scholars concerning the vertical power structures that inform welfare claims across the world, including requisite performances of poverty and waiting that the state requires of the poor (Appadurai, 2013; Auyero, 2003; Han, 2012; Lazar, 2004; Ozolina-Fitzgerald, Procupez, 2015). Finally, it has framed the relations between informants, unions, NGOs and the state. The next chapter will develop this further vis-à-vis women’s spaces of collective organisation, and how workers demand the state their dues in the face of inadequate delivery mechanisms and interlinking regimes of judgement.

While acts of fraud were undoubtedly committed, as they are in state welfare schemes across the world; instilling a predetermined doubt about claimants’ authenticity before formal application procedures could be undertaken severely inhibited possibilities of welfare claims by workers. Indeed, the usage of often grossly uninformed regimes of judgement are revealed through Dr Sriramakrishnan and his staff’s suspicions of workers and, even though already determined by the act, the kinds of benefits they should receive. Moreover, although the money came from the private sector, it was jealousy guarded as a result of these subjective valuations.

The capacity to reproduce life but also what constitutes a productive livelihood, is thus embedded within a moral framework of judgment, invariably shaped by individual’s own social universes (Bourdieu, 1977). Individuals in construction and the many other positions that fall under the vast umbrella loosely referred to as ‘the informal sector’ are often viewed as being there because of a deficiency in their economic character, their gender, and their caste (Breman, 2016; Fernandes, 1997; 1998; Parry,

2014; 1999). What is thus perceived as low-value work to society, is correspondingly deemed worthy of only low-value returns. As Breman asserts; ‘In the global hegemony of late-capitalism, casual labour is considered a nuisance, a factor of production that that is more than ample supply, not needed and not wanted all the time. But in their pauperized condition this massive reserve army can be instantly hired and dismissed again without any cost at all to capital’ (2016:55). Indeed, the political parties of India simultaneously acknowledge the need for conserving cheap labour to grow the economy, but also the need to maintain the majority vote banks which come from this demographic. In this present scenario, workers are (partially) recognised, and a small fee is taken for their upkeep; albeit one which is grudgingly given and not only insufficient for its purported purpose (see also, Jebaraj, 2018b); but remains dwarfed by the profits of a sector which continues to grow wealthy from state-sanctioned low-cost labour.

CHAPTER EIGHT:  
‘WE ARE NOT BEGGING YOU, WE ARE ASKING YOU FOR WHAT’S OURS!’:  
(GENDERED) SPACES OF LABOUR MOBILITY AND COLLECTIVE  
ORGANISATION

*Sebastian, the head co-ordinator of unionisation for FEDINA, heads the crowd of predominantly older local women who constitute the retired informal workers' union. Many of the crowd, bussed in by tempos, are holding cardboard placards, wearing red ribbons or headbands emblazoned with both the union's acronyms (AIKYATA and AKKKU) in Kannada and the English phrase 'workers unite!' The police appear faintly amused by the group of pensioners who have descended upon town hall and as a result are half-heartedly attempting to stop their entry into the grounds.*

*Sebastian makes his way to the front of the crowd with a smaller, older woman wearing a red headband and pale peach sari, who I immediately recognise as Ananthamma, a retired construction worker I had visited some months prior. Ananthamma proceeds to the town hall steps, where she is handed a microphone and addresses the crowd, the police, and the mayor (watching from inside the building) about the reinstatement of the hot meals program for elderly slum residents. Her voice, cracked with both age and emotion, resonates strongly with the crowd who frequently applaud as she proceeds to berate the local government officials for being overpaid, corrupt, and failing the electorate, and finally, chides the mayor for not coming out. She ends her speech with the chant we have been hearing all morning which the crowd enthusiastically take up once more 'Bisi oota! Bisi oota! Beka beku! Beka beku!'<sup>65</sup>*

## **Introduction**

Continuing this dual chapter analysis of the terrain of claims-making, I now attend to the forms of collective organisation available to women in the numerous instances of state failure to deliver on its promises. If as Insa Koch posits regarding recipients of social housing; 'Citizens struggle to make their demands heard by authorities who are distant, if not outright illegible' (2018a:87), given the distance between bodies such as the welfare board and the workers discussed in the prior chapter; how might subaltern populations usually barred from the spaces of citizenship make their demands heard? For women workers, who remain significantly underrepresented in the masculinised spaces of unions and vastly overrepresented in illiteracy (see also, A. Sen, 1999; S. Sen, 2007), collective organisation remains an even greater challenge.

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<sup>65</sup> This roughly translates to ('Hot meals! Hot meals! Need now! Need now!').



*The bisi oota protesters gather in the town hall car park*

By observing the conceptual and physical spaces of women's participation and labour mobility, I attend to the gendered inequality within these, which I argue, continues to produce contradictory outcomes informed by the same patriarchal narratives inherent within the construction industry. However, while I concede that women's enduring association with domestic spaces continues to conceal their contributions as workers and indeed, primary breadwinners; domestic spaces in various guises may simultaneously serve as sites for collective organisation. Attending to this aspect of political life, I build upon Chandarvarkar's research (1981) on worker organisation in Mumbai *chawls* (slums), contributing to the limited body of work focusing on collective modes of organisation outside of the workplace (Agarwala, 2013; Pun and Huilin, 2010; Pun and Smith; 2006). As Chandarvarkar attests, this has received scant scholarly attention in India; 'by focusing too exclusively on the sphere of the workplace, by confining their model of social consciousness to what was reflected by trade union development [...] historians overlooked the extent to which workers were active in making their own politics' (1981:604).

To analyse the ways in which these phenomena take shape at the local level, I explore collective forms of action targeted outside of, and also at the construction

industry; as women demand their rights as both workers and citizens in lieu of adequate wages or welfare delivery. In doing so, I build upon the literary corpus concerning the gendered dynamics that invariably shape sites of collective organisation (Agarwala, 2013; Fernandes, 1997; 1998; Lindberg, 2001; Kamath and Ramanathan, 2017; Phillips, 2014; Ratnam and Jain, 2002; S. Sen, 2007). Although as I have discussed, many women did not voice alternate modes of mobility for themselves as workers, what of those that were able to find the means of doing so? What exactly did *female* worker mobility look like to labour organisations and indeed, to women themselves?

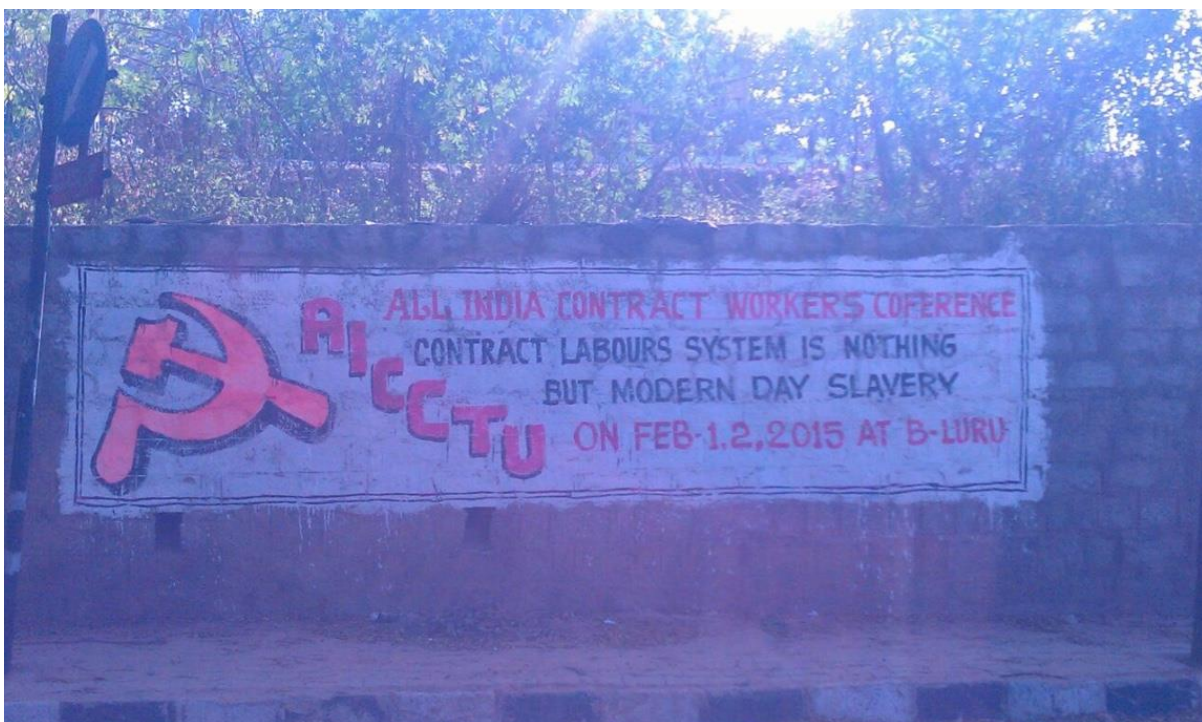
In order to explore these issues and the overall question of activism amongst low-income earning demographics, the first section of this chapter provides a snapshot of a protest for the reinstatement of meals led by retired informal construction and domestic workers. It first recounts the story of Ananthamma, a retired construction worker and activist, and how she came to co-found her own union for retired informal sector workers. In doing so, it explores the efficacy of collective action towards an ostensibly apathetic state and the kinds of arguments put forward by the newly organised ‘unorganised’ sector. While it examines the cultivation of ‘voice’ that may form over time in more horizontally formed NGO-community partnerships, it also attends to how the resilience of activists may be used against them by the state. The second section then analyses the status of women within collective organisation. It examines how hegemonies of class, caste and gender inhabit industry and union spaces, discounting women as capable or productive workers. By doing so, it elucidates how this enduring interaction impacts upon female mobilities within such terrains for potential mobility. Building upon this analysis, the third section explores the various ways unions in Bengaluru are advocating for women in construction, and yet how they simultaneously reproduce gendered inequalities.

By exploring these avenues, I examine how attempts to improve women’s workforce mobility reveal a tension in the dialogues and arguments of both genders organising for equality. Such tensions may at times, prove productive – something I attend to by analysing the strategies of AKKKU in utilising both physical and conceptual domestic spaces to mobilise women. Acknowledging the (varying) efforts of grassroots organisations and local unions in advocating for female workers, whilst duly critiquing the enduring gendered nature of these spaces; this chapter adds further nuance to the current body of literature concerning female union participation (Agarwala, 2013; Fernandes 1997; 1998, Ratnam and Jain, 2002; Lindberg, 2001; A. Shah et al., 2018).

## Challenging the state: the *bisi oota* protest

*'We must [...] learn to stand upright ourselves': the life and times of an elderly activist*

During our first meeting, Ananthamma began taking down various framed photographs from the walls; showing me the process of her house construction which had included a team of locals and foreigners. 'The land that this house currently stands on is government property. Before we lived in this very place, but it was more of a hut. We had to do the current construction by ourselves by saving money and I also hoped to raise my children in a proper house', she informed me. As it transpired, FEDINA, also one of the KKKKKV members, had assisted Ananthamma in the building of her house, providing a small amount of money and workers in the form of international volunteers. While Ananthamma's house may be an important milestone in her life, it is not guaranteed to last, something she is acutely aware of, stressing that since the government owned the land it could be cleared at any time, something already happening across the slum where she lived; 'They have started demolition in parts of the slum. We live in fear of being displaced. We are anxious. We live in complete distress', she confided.



*Wall with advertising for the All India Contract Workers conference, Bengaluru*

As Supriya RoyChowdhury confirms; 'For most slum dwellers in Bangalore the fear of eviction is an internalized hysteria, a part of their every day consciousness' (2014:14). While this may have been true for Ananthamma, for the time being, the renovation and extension of the hut had given her the chance to raise her children in a 'proper' house, as she desired. Moreover, were there to be clearances in the slum, the government may find



it more difficult to displace its populace since Ananthamma's community has an active population of union workers. Ananthamma herself is a member of AIKYATA, an organisation she and others helped found with the assistance of FEDINA, for retired informal sector workers, widows, and the differently abled.

Ananthamma worked for over thirty years in construction, and at her estimation, was now seventy. She retired from it some years prior, having had a similar experience to many of the older women I had spoken with; 'All these years of working as a manual labourer has worn my body down. When I would go to the site and show signs of fatigue which is common to my age. The contractor would speak rudely to me, which is why I chose to leave working on the site'. However, Ananthamma had then encountered FEDINA through her slum; 'This is the twenty third year I am working with them. They first came to provide us with training that would empower us. We bonded over that and have been together since'.

In contrast to her performance at the *bisi oota* protest, when she was passionately addressing the officials and crowd at town hall at the highest level her voice could reach, when I asked Ananthamma what she wanted from the future she replied; 'What can I ask at this age? I am content, I have clothing, food, and shelter. My children seem to be getting through thick and thin just fine [her son was a security guard and her daughter sold purses and handkerchiefs at the railway station]. All that I can hope for is to pass away in peace'. And yet, given her continued participation in protests and rallies (including a recent trip to picket the former Chief Minister of Karnataka's home, during which she was *lathi*-charged and arrested; having also lied to her husband about her whereabouts), Ananthamma was hardly spending her days sitting at home quietly, though she was partial to indulging in Hindi soaps when she had the time.

Like many women of her age and income level, Ananthamma was unlikely to retire any time soon, and as well as the various jobs she worked to contribute to the household income (watering plants, making paper bags and *beedis*, and cleaning the nearby temple), she continued to actively scrutinise the relationship of the state to the poor. Indeed, for someone who; 'used to be scared before and [...] very hesitant of stepping out of my house', the Ananthamma I knew was exceedingly vocal; critiquing the state and employers and voicing her distrust of the politicians who came visiting the slum, withholding her vote in protest at their corruption and failure to deliver on their promises. Moreover, the way in which Ananthamma spoke about such issues (drawing upon similar analogies to NGOs and unions, but making them more relatable at ground level), made her a valuable organiser within her community. Acting upon her views, she

had formed AIKYATA with likeminded retired informal sector workers in 2011, having recognised the need for their own union to be independent from FEDINA:

FEDINA also trained us to voice our plight in front of the world and told us that they were an organisation that might not be with us forever and we must therefore learn to stand upright ourselves without any support from others. So, we thought amongst ourselves to start an organisation of our own to cater to our needs. We began to contemplate on how we would go about doing the same, and in this manner AIKYATA was conceived. We have ID cards to identify the members of this organisation with our seal and sign. We charge rupees twenty-five for our memberships and after a year we charge rupees twenty. We are required to make an annual visit to the register office for our renewals during which we have to show accounts of all our expenses.

Given the ongoing battle for legitimacy and visibility the poor must undertake on a quotidian basis, AIKYATA's conception and actualisation is no small accomplishment. Its official registration legitimised the union in the eyes of the state and significantly, as a separate entity to FEDINA, something further achieved through raising its own funds from the local community and their registration fees. As this example illuminates, there are significant instances in which 'empowerment' can also be conceived of in a socio-political context rather than the economic scope through which it is often now critiqued; channelled instead towards longer term projects of (non-market reliant) mobility. Ananthamma and her community were neither beholden to FEDINA through loans or access to welfare programmes, nor completely cast aside once ostensibly 'empowered'. While the ties between FEDINA and its unions remain (leaders from each area meet in the office each month), should the NGO lose its funding or disappear entirely, organisations such as AIKYATA will continue their functioning independently.

It is subsequently important to acknowledge the role of FEDINA in Ananthamma's story, which strived to mobilise and unionise various neighbourhoods and workers across the city. The outcomes of FEDINA's capacity-building efforts, including the establishment of local unions; iterate the significance of local community connections, and how relationships between NGOs and the demographics they work with can develop more horizontally over time; adding a counter to longstanding and more recent critiques of development initiatives (See Gardner, 2012; 1996; Huang, 2016; Lazar, 2003; Mosse, 2005; A. Sharma, 2008; et al).

While FEDINA depended on international donors for its survival, it was not beholden to them in the same way as other organisations; 'We don't go in for major funds [...] It's more about what we are doing at the grassroots, if somebody supports it... together we work on it... discuss it. If they agree to what we're doing and the way we're doing it, then they extend some support. So that's how it's been done [...] It's not like they have a

project to offer and we apply and then we follow it', Sebastian informed me. FEDINA was thus freed from the constraints of project lifecycles and thus able to pursue longer-term goals with the communities they worked with, unlike CIVIC for example, which was forced to largely abandon its active role lobbying the construction workers' welfare board once the funding for that project had been exhausted. Consequently, rather than being engaged with workers on a short-term basis or encouraging them to engage in the kinds of risky and largely unsustainable ventures (Huang, 2016), FEDINA instead worked with communities' existing discontent with the informal labour paradigm over the years, harnessing it into tangible forms of action via collective organisation.

Unlike many other organisations in Bengaluru, FEDINA did not want to be gatekeepers for the welfare board or other schemes. Also hinting at the underlying corruption of organisations promising access to the welfare board, Gayathri, a FEDINA fieldworker confirmed; 'we don't stress on welfare. Because a lot of unions do that and show how many schemes they can get done for them [workers]. But our objective is that they should get the money that is due to them through their efforts'. While it lobbied the welfare board as a member of the KKKKKV, FEDINA's aim was to encourage workers to approach the board via their own unions. The organisation did however, still intervene when it had to, mainly for issues of literacy, which remained an ongoing issue for women especially; 'if there's a scholarship form to be filled, and they don't know how to fill it for whatever reason, we help them fill it out and keep the required documents ready'. However, this was where the assistance ended; 'We send them on their own to submit it. So, things like these, they are capable of doing now', Gayathri concluded.

### *The capacity of 'voice'?*

Appadurai argues that 'voice' may be used 'to debate, contest and oppose vital directions for collective social life' (2014:66). Though Ananthamma's story is by no means typical, it highlights how 'voice' (see Appadurai, 2013; Hirschman, 1970) might be cultivated over time; facilitating engagement with community needs from an insider perspective. For Ananthamma, this longstanding relationship had made her not only bolder, she believed but significantly, more willing (and able) to engage with a diverse array of interlocutors; 'Had you met me a few years ago I would have probably not spoken to you or acknowledged your presence. Now I feel happy. It is because you take my experiences along with you and I take yours with me. We both learn from each other's thoughts', she concluded. In this way, the concept of 'voice' is invariably tied to the vernacular and praxis of cosmopolitanism discussed in chapter five; a capacity that unlike

Hemavathi and Lingamma, Ananthamma was able to develop over the years due to her ever-increasing urban networks.

Although there is a lot to be said for exercising ‘voice’ to recognise, alter, and contest the terms of recognition (see Appadurai, 2013), such contestations may by no means produce salient, long-lasting benefits to overall mobility (see Gunvald–Nielsen, 2012; Krishna, 2013; A. Shah et. al, 2018) – even if they are perceived as markers of it. To be effectively utilised for instance, Appadurai posits that voice ‘must engage social, political, and economic issues in terms of ideologies, doctrines and norms that are widely shared and credible, even by the rich and powerful. Furthermore, voice must be expressed in terms of actions and performances that have local cultural force’ (2014:66-67). However, while figures such as Ananthamma do regularly engage with NGOs, union members, their neighbourhoods, and the odd visiting researcher; given the ‘illegibility’ of state actors and mechanisms (A. Gupta, 2012; Koch, 2018a) evidenced in the prior chapter, is ‘voice’, vernacular cosmopolitanism, or indeed, any other means of communication and debate something that can really succeed when directed by the poor at elite demographics? What happens when existing structures of prejudice such as caste and gender, further intersect vertical power hierarchies? How can workers be expected to frame their arguments in a way that changes the minds of state figures such as Dr Sriramakrishnan, on whom their efforts seemed to have the opposite effect?

Concerning the changing political terrain in India, however, Chatterjee has argued that; ‘it is mistaken to claim that the dominant and propertied classes any longer set the standards of morality for society; rather, in a democratic age, the moral passion of entitlement and outrage is on the side of those who have little’ (2008:91). With this shift, new arguments are also developed correspondingly. For Ananthamma, these were framed in a way that argued against the logic of the neoliberal state, stressing the working poor’s place as productive members of society and the value of their labour as co-contributors to Bengaluru’s economic growth. To further evaluate the concept and potential efficacy of ‘voice’, I now discuss the Ananthamma’s oratorical role in the *bisi oota* protest, and the foundations of her claims-making.

#### *‘Shame on them!’: the bisi oota protest*

Following the positioning of some hundred or so elderly union members outside of the town hall, Ananthamma takes her place on the steps, next to Sebastian, the head of unionisation at FEDINA, delivering a fiery speech into a microphone. Not only are her words aimed at the members of the protest, but the on-looking police and civil servants,

too. Significantly, Ananthamma reminds the Mayor of his civic duty, but also, his obligation towards workers such as herself; ‘We are not begging you, we are asking you for what’s ours! We build your buildings, we do your housework, we are the ones who grow the trees over Bangalore!’ By drawing upon her past and present occupations to remind the mayor of the vital role of informal workers to the city, Ananthamma significantly draws the attention of the listener to the otherwise invisible labour of her community (and age demographic); referring to their contributions in shaping and maintaining the city’s landscape throughout their working lives.

Following this, Ananthamma raises her voice above the clamour of protesters who had thus far, responded loudly in agreement with her as she voiced her sentiments concerning politicians both absent and present:

They only want us for their votes! Then they get the positions they just sit there. Shame on them! They are not doing anything for the people. They are getting into wrong things [an allusion to bribery]! Don’t they have any self-respect? They are sitting inside where it’s more comfortable on their chairs! Some of us don’t have a meal twice a day. We don’t eat thrice a day. Many of us don’t even have lunch!

Ananthamma emphasised respect for elders in her daily speech, but also utilised this to effect during the protest; making the policemen standing behind her shift uncomfortably during her admonishment of state officials for not taking better care of the elderly. Finally, the Mayor emerges into the midday heat, promising a reinstatement of the welfare programme of hot meals for elderly slum residents; ‘Some people used to save this meal for their dinner as well, so I know this situation. I know that it’s essential. Twenty days and we will reinstate’ he declared. The crowd voices their scepticism. ‘There will be a company-wide communication so you can be sure. All of you, please go back home, I know you have all come here, thank you for coming. But please go back home’, he pleads. The Mayor returns to the inside of the town hall, having promised to assign thirty-six lakhs (around £41,000) to the program. The protest wraps up with Sebastian’s concluding speech, in which he implores the crowd to continue with their action; warning the mayor that his promise will be closely monitored:

This kind of clear reference was needed from you earlier, this time it’s quite clear, so let’s wait. It has to be implemented and implemented correctly. We need to organise, it’s our responsibility wherever we are organised as senior citizens, through agencies. All of you should come together, wherever there are [sic] physical labour, you should organise. This is something we have to continue to fight for, our representatives will go and pursue it.

His voice rises in one final rallying cry: ‘What are fighting for? We are fighting for justice! Until when will we fight? Until we win!’

*After the event: ‘nothing seems to have happened even though they promised it’*

Some months later, I asked Satish and Anil (two members of AKKKU, the sister union of AIKYATA for active construction workers) who also attended the protest, for an update; ‘Nothing seems to have happened even though they promised it [the hot meals service to the elderly] would resume soon’. Patience, Appadurai asserts, is the poor’s ‘biggest weapon [...] as they wait for relief to come, rulers to die, bureaucrats to deliver promises, government services to be transferred, or drought to pass’ (2013:192). Indeed, this was confirmed by Sebastian’s reply to the mayor, that they would wait, albeit with a close eye on the corresponding action of the mayor’s office.

With the recognition of their very entitlement to the nourishment once offered by the hot meals scheme and thus to a more *liveable* form of life, the members of Ananthamma’s community and beyond are developing new paradigms with which to reveal the worth of their labour and thus draw attention to their role in literally building the city. As Chatterjee postulates; ‘They are not necessarily turning into republican citizens, but they are nonetheless acquiring a stake, strategical-ly and morally, in the processes of govern-mental power. And governmental power, we know, is no longer restricted to the branches of the state but extends to a host of non-state and even non-governmental agencies’ (2008:93).

This process of acquiring a stake however, takes time, and it is thus time that the state may also use against the working poor. As Auyero argues in relation to the hegemony of the neoliberal state over the poor; the process of being *made* to wait constitutes a form of political subordination (2003). Indeed, for the poor and working poor, their waiting is demanded and also relied upon by the state; as evidenced by the long waiting times experienced by workers for their benefits; the ongoing battle for the reinstatement of the *bisi oota* scheme and by numerous heterodox scholars (Auyero, 2003; Appadurai, 2013; Harms, 2013; Ozolina-Fitzgerald, 2016). While the capacity of patience and the resilience to endure are indeed a strength in their own rights, they are simultaneously something the state enforces and exploits. The forms of collective organisation such as the one described in this section, reveal the oscillation between spaces of waiting and of action.

The quotidian scarcity of time which poorer demographics frequently experience thus perpetuates itself through being made to wait. As Harms notes; ‘waiting can be either

a mechanism of domination or source of opportunity, but the structural conditions framing a person's place in the world contribute to the difference between them (2013:363). Acknowledging the intersectionality enfolded within the democracy of time, Harms notes that men often have more time to wait than women, since they are typically not tied to the same household obligations (353). It is also these perceptions however, that are frequently the given reason of unions for not attempting to organise women (Ratnam and Jain, 2002). I now examine the discourse that informs this exclusion in the next section, analysing the presence and impact of patriarchal norms within union spaces which at times, discount women as both workers and committed activists.

### **‘The primary fault lies with us women’: enduring legacies of patriarchy and class**

Although female union membership rates remain significantly lower, women are beginning to take up more prominent places within unions and non-unionised forms of informal sector activism (see Agarwala, 2013; Raj, 2018; Kamath and Ramanathan 2017). Nevertheless, union spaces remain to a large part, dominated by local, male authority figures (Fernandes, 1997; A. Roy, 2003; S. Sen, 2007; A. Shah, et al 2018, Zavella, 1987), and even in instances where this is not the case, patriarchal legacies continue to pervade the spaces of labour rights in myriad ways. This undoubtedly has repercussions for the mobility of the women that inhabit these, as this thesis has thus far attempted to illustrate regarding construction, and this section now examines vis-à-vis local unions and the conceptualisation of female workers in both these spaces.

According to Zavella and numerous scholars, unions have ‘often excluded women from training programs and generally supported protective legislation that denied women access to difficult “male” jobs’ (1987:1) (Breman, 1999; Fernandes, 1997; Hartmann, 1979; Lindberg, 2001; Milkman, 1976, 1982; A. Roy, 2003; S. Sen, 2007). Tellingly, the few notable exceptions (See for instance, Eisenberg, 1998), may produce limited and contradictory results – something I analyse in the final section. Moreover, the influence of prevailing societal and industry norms of gender have come to produce an antithetical tension within narratives of both male and female union members. Women are at times, complicit in reproducing and perpetuating the same classist and casteist gender stereotypes (Fernandes, 1997; Lindberg, 2001; Patel, 2012) responsible for hindering their own mobility. Acknowledging how these various constructs intersect and react, this section analyses the kinds of discourse that circulate about women workers, and how this often hinders their movement through various spaces of labour and labour organisation, which remain to a large extent, male and conversely, classist.

*'Such behaviour has been known to ruin lives': patriarchy from within?*

Leela Fernandes postulates that gender disparities are also reproduced within public subaltern spheres, imposing the same bourgeois gender hierarchies in the workplace (1997). For women especially, such hierarchies serve to remind them of and reinforce their rank and status as both informal labour class women and helpers or cement workers. Sexual exploitation is a further way of enforcing such boundaries, and since husbands and kin are also present on site or aware of such practices, they serve as a further means of enforcing vertical power structures through which as Parry observes; 'women are revealed as 'corrupt' and 'impure', and the men as failing in their duty to provide and protect' (2014:1251). This, Parry adds, 'is a discourse that denigrates both sexes' and thus 'it is the 'labour class' as a whole that is demeaned' (2014:ibid).

The resulting sense of shame meant few interlocutors working construction were willing to talk about the widespread sexual exploitation of women within the industry, as Ananthamma confirmed; 'there are women who might not reveal all in the fear of being embarrassed or because they feel too ashamed to recount it'. Often the information I was able to obtain came from unions, as the below conversation with M.N Mody, the president of KCWU, the largest union for construction workers in Karnataka, highlights:

This is a... an industry when it comes to men, a lot of sexual exploitation, okay? Let us talk frankly... [he lowers his voice] for us we have to work on that. Sexual exploitation, still it goes on and now we are... the workers have to make a living and... so, so much of exploitation and... once the woman worker is a little older, they don't get a job. These fellows, because the labour contractors and the masons... it's not because she becomes incapable of doing the work... the major interest is because she is not attractive any more, sexually. So, I mean. It is not... predominantly visible. It is kind of subtly accepted thing. But you know, only unions like us, very boldly, very daringly talk about it.

Mody's overview of the scenario remains one of the most candid I have heard to date, alluding to the doubly exploitative nature of the gendered labour hierarchy in construction (see also Parry, 2014; Patel and Pitroda, 2016; Action Aid, 2017). While I was initially taken aback by his openness on the subject, Ananthamma's account of women as both infantile and immoral instigators, surprised me still; highlighting that while women experience reduced mobility due to patriarchal and classist gender ideologies, they remain the bearers and reproducers of these entrenched hegemonies. Although, Mody's answer suggested men were at fault, casting them largely as exploiters of women (notably those who worked in positions above women in the labour hierarchy), whereas Ananthamma,



despite confirming, 'I am full aware of the difficulties women face', proposed the influx of migrant workers and increased mingling between men and women had led to inappropriate sexual behaviour on both sides:

Today the number of labourers has increased, people bad mouth each other, girls seem to roam around with very little care of how they carry themselves, therefore attracting unsolicited attention from men. This is the condition of a construction site today. Back then they would fear us, and we would fear them. Women seem to attract men with their promiscuous behaviour. The primary fault lies with us women. They giggle and act all flirtations and the mind of men changes. When a child goes to school and has thoughts about things other than what is being taught a child cannot do well – their behaviour changes. Likewise, when women look at men and giggle their mind is filled with thoughts that change their behaviour. Such behaviour has been known to ruin lives.

This was not inaccurate given the deaths and domestic abuse that took place on site, often triggered by affairs or rumours of them. However, the extent to which the kinds of illicit relationships Ananthamma describes were entirely consensual, is another matter entirely, on which there is too little data available to move beyond the realm of conjecture. What was evident from Ananthamma's views was the apparent need to separate herself from any association with such 'immoral' inter-gender interactions – once asking me; 'Have I sold myself?' in relation to occurrences of prostitution within the industry. As Fernandes states in relation to middle class jute mill managers and their families; 'a gendered discourse of morality' was in circulation whereby 'They would point to alcoholism, prostitution, and crime as forms of a social disease which violated middle class norms' (1998:L57). Despite being working class herself, by expressing her disapproval and her distance from such activities, Ananthamma distinguished herself from the trope of promiscuous labour class woman, while simultaneously contributing to it. The legacy of such tropes thus negates the sexually exploitative conditions faced overwhelmingly by women in construction; premising such encounters as both a woman's choice and a weakness of character, while ignoring the fact that they are also a by-product of the very same constructs.

*'They don't care about the future': The pervasive presence of classist constructs*

As examined in chapter three, while NGOs are spaces where class tensions are played out, unions also constitute sites for the maintenance and reproduction of class hierarchies. Descriptions of informal workers as uneducated and stubborn were a predominant and recurrent theme in conversations with middleclass interlocutors – from

property developers to NGO workers; but these were also present in unions, too. Indeed, senior union staff frequently spoke about the uneducated status of the workers and their perceived apathy to organise. The secretary of KCWU for instance, complained that workers ‘don’t think about their future – just what they are getting that day’, concluding; ‘They don’t *care* about the future’. The construct that both the working and non-working poor do not think about the future and are focused only on the present and instant gratuity, is rooted in historical tropes of the ‘non-deserving poor’ which invariably intersect with caste, as I have discussed. Such constructs seep into the lives of workers in their interactions with employers, non-government bodies and the state alike, as I have also evidenced.

Ananthamma was also among this demographic; ‘Before I used to be just like them’, she told me. ‘People know very little. We need to keep them informed. Some of them, despite being informed refuse to change their minds’, she concluded. While Ananthamma was able to organise her community through both her own determination and the tools developed through FEDINA’s programme, some of the language she used to describe it, was ostensibly informed by her time spent with such bodies and their middleclass members. Such discourse presented workers as stubborn, ignorant, and unwilling to plan or collectively organise; linking these perceived failings with their present scenarios.

This depiction of workers replicates present forms of state neoliberal doctrine (Allison, 2016; Ong, 2006), which also foster divisions between informal and formal labour, as Parry notes; ‘trade unions reflect and even (sometimes violently) exacerbate these structural divisions’ (Mollona, De Neve and Parry, 2009:389). Moreover, outreach efforts to organise informal workers as Kamath and Ramanathan postulate, have a history rooted in elitism; ‘The mainstream left parties in India today contain a large number of [...] traditional intellectuals, yet most of them seem to be woefully out of touch with the grass roots working class movements’ (2017:251). Construction workers are consequently subject to classism from an array of both state and non-state bodies they encounter. Because female workers are further sexualised or domesticized in classist/casteist narratives, they are often not conceived of as equal workers by unions and at times, themselves either, as I now discuss.

#### *Men as breadwinners, women as what?*

The historical construct of the husband as the main income generator within the family is one that remains prevalent and has repercussions for the ways in which unions

engage with women, as this section examines. In her study of cashew plantation workers in Kerala (2001), Anna Lindberg has claimed that women were aware of their class position as workers, but unlike their unionised husbands, were largely unable to enact a politicised class identity by engaging in strikes because their salaries were required to support their families. In this instance, the union was complicit in perpetuating gender stereotypes and inequalities by drawing upon both waged and unwaged forms of female labour to effectively fund the struggles of male members for higher wages. Consequently, not only were women omitted from negotiating a higher wage, but they were also driven to work for lower than normal wages due to the immediate urgency of supporting entire families without a male ‘breadwinner’ (2001).

Despite its status as the largest construction workers’ union in Karnataka, boasting over 35,000 active members<sup>66</sup> at the time of my fieldwork, I never met a single female member of KCWU; though women I was informed, made up ten to fifteen percent of these numbers. Moreover, what often surprised me during visits to the union and its various affiliated sites was that, though I was able to meet local (male) area leaders, I encountered few lower ranking union members. The workers I was able to talk with expressed little knowledge of the union or the welfare board, despite the fact the union had presences on their sites via their *maistri* members. Often my meetings were monitored by Darshan, the union secretary, who made a habit of interrupting mid-conversation.

Indeed, it was Darshan that I interacted with most of all of the members and staff of KCWU – usually via accounts of heroic intervention. I recall our first meeting, during which after telling me he was in a hurry, he sat down, fished a comb from his shirt pocket and styling his hair, relayed one such account:

In Bidadi, which is about two hours away from here, a worker who was around fifty–five years old fell from the second floor while working and died on the spot. When I got there the relatives of the worker had already talked to the owner and settled on a compensation amount of fifty thousand rupees [.] The relatives came to that settlement because of their selfishness. When this information reached me, I rushed there, and I stopped them from going ahead with the settlement, I was talking to the widow, when a policeman with a cigarette in hand walked up to me and asked me who I was, when I showed him the card, he immediately dropped the cigarette and asked me what I think we should do.

In this narrative, Darshan takes centre stage as the powerful masculine embodiment of union strength – swiftly travelling at a moment’s notice to far flung areas of the city and

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<sup>66</sup> The union had peaked at 77,000 members in the 1970s but many of its earlier membership had since become inactive due to migration, retirement, and death.

exerting his authority over local authorities. Women tended to feature in his stories as a supporting cast as bereaved family members or wives. Though Darshan's commitment to the union and the rights of workers was evident (he did for instance, constantly travel across Bengaluru by bus, which given the notoriety of the city's traffic, was no small undertaking); his oratory stylings somewhat lost their edge as I became increasingly exacerbated during the multiple instances in which he failed to inform me the workers we were visiting were not union members – nor did they possess any knowledge of it – as had been the case of the women workers on the Thimmaiah campus.

Considering KCWU's presence via its *maistri* members and area leaders across citywide sites, why were women workers seemingly neglected by the union? If female union membership and leadership is higher in occupations such as the garment industry, where total union membership is estimated to be as high as 70% female (Ratnam and Jain 2002), the number of women working construction (the second largest employer of women in India) is hardly reflected in the figure of female members provided by KCWU. One answer to this according to Lindberg, is that; 'active, politicized workers are automatically equated with male identities' (2001:184). This was largely confirmed by the traits Darshan listed as preferred leadership attributes; 'a little bit of education, common sense, general knowledge, and physically if they are fit [...] then we are choosing them and making them to be bold. Whenever, wherever, whatever the problem, they will go there'. Since female construction workers are seldom educated and may be restricted to the home after working hours by caregiving responsibilities, to KCWU they largely fell outside of this remit. As Lindberg also states, characteristics such as 'boldness' especially, were perceived as typically male (2001).

It was not only the association of union roles with masculinity that adversely affected women from taking up leadership positions within them, or indeed, their overall union participation. As examined in the third chapter, men are primarily perceived as the main breadwinners of joint-income families (De Neve, 2004, 2016; Vera-Sanso, 2016). According to Lindberg, this meant that in addition to male wages being prioritised, 'labouring women have failed to be identified as true workers and true radical members of the labour movement, not only by society at large, but by themselves as well' (2001:184). As well as keeping women's wages lower, and excluding them from unions, and higher-ranking jobs; entrenched gender discrimination deprived women from employment. As discussed, women's jobs are at the frontline for cuts since their incomes are perceived as supplementary (Baruah, 2012; Devi and Kiran, 2013). Moreover, their gender also hinders them from gaining initial employment, as evidenced by employers'

reluctance to hire women for fear of ‘trouble’, or simply because men were also given preference; ‘the builders and the contractors think that if a male is employed, he can earn and take care of his family’ Darshan informed me. Although conversely, it was cheaper to employ women, the way Darshan saw it was that ‘if a man is jobless and a woman is working, that man will feel inferior and he wouldn’t accept it’.

Women in turn, are at times, hesitant to join existing unions. Indeed, Fernandes asserts that women workers reject unions because they are aware of the gendered hierarchies and subsequent exclusionary politics within them (1998). On the occasions I asked female informants working construction about unionisation, it was revealed that opinions of union efficacy were low and membership correspondingly non-existent. Moreover, this was also due to the lack of information they received – including informants from the CSA affiliated self-help group, who were equally as uninformed on this matter. Indeed, Agarwala’s findings that many NGOs chose not to focus on labour issues concerning women (2013), not only iterates the rarity of cases such as Ananthamma’s, but simultaneously, the potential for greater inclusion of women in grassroots organisations and more traditional labour unions. Given these hurdles to women’s labour mobility, the next section examines what the city’s unions have done and are doing, to address them.

### **Improving women’s labour mobility?**

With these obstacles in mind, what legitimate attempts *are* made to approach women as workers by NGOs and unions beyond the abovementioned constructs? Can the same physical and conceptual spaces of the perceived domestic realm that hinders their progression even be utilised to redress the industry imbalances they perpetuate? Whenever I brought up the topic of women, most organisations I spoke with would mention the difficulty of organising them, even though arguably, their efforts to recruit them in the first place were not necessarily concerted, as the above section illustrated. Migrant women were at a greater disadvantage still. With this and the above questions in mind, this final section examines the efforts of Bengaluru’s unions to redress the stunted mobility of female construction workers and the continued undervaluation of their skills as a perceived supplementary workforce.

*‘This is how we started with house visits’: Utilising domestic spaces to organise*

Mariamamma, one of the older members present at the all-women neighbourhood meeting for AKKKU, sits by a small room at the back of her house where she is cooking food. The women are anxious to discuss the wage

dispute and Mariamma is making lunch, chipping in at various intervals. The smoke repeatedly stings our eyes while she remains focused on both her cooking and the group; becoming more animated when the topic of a pay dispute comes up. At various intervals children come in (one is given money and sent on an errand to fetch everyone a mango soda) and a teenage boy loiters by the open doorway playing music until he is shooed away. The dual responsibilities of the women as both wage earners and homemakers, was echoed in the concerns of Ambika, who lost her husband to an accident at work, and was thus the primary earner in her household; 'We want the wages to be higher, and the rations are expensive now, it was one rupee for a kilo of rice before, now it's twenty or thirty rupees. Vegetables are the same as well, we can't raise a family if we have to spend so much'.

As discussed, women's absence from union spaces is frequently presumed (see Breman 1999; Lindberg 2001; Kamath and Ramanathan 2017; Roy 2003). Trade unions remain largely inflexible in reconceiving the traditional spaces of organisation, which often do not apply to women, migrants, and informal sector workforces as a whole. Moreover, the perception that trade union membership is akin to a full-time job (Lindberg, 2001; Ratnam and Jain, 2002), means male members are more likely to be viewed as 'available' at all times, as indicated by Darshan in his list of leadership criteria. However, though KCWU had not fully utilised the spaces available to them for recruiting women workers, the efforts of FEDINA via the local communities it engaged with and the subsequent efforts of its associate unions AKKKU and AIKYATA; ensured they interacted with women on a regular basis. Utilising fieldworkers made up of local women, had also made a notable difference to FEDINA's efforts to unionise women, as well as any following engagement with them, as I now discuss.

Following the founding of AKKKU and AIKYATA, both its members and FEDINA's fieldworkers and members of the union commenced house visits, slowly growing their membership; 'When we speak to them, they start sharing what problems they have. Gradually, talking to them about how the work environment is, how many hours they work and so on... in their homes. So, this is how we started with house visits', Gayathri informed me. While houses are potential sites for various forms of class, caste and gendered judgement (Donner, 2008; Hancock, 2001; Kar, 2013; 2018; Searle-Chatterjee, 1981; Tenhunen, 2003), since the majority of FEDINA's fieldworkers were from the same communities, this was ostensibly less of an issue than it would have been in other contexts – such as CSA's relationship as 'outsiders' to the Yadgir colony. From the street meetings came the area meetings, with area leaders meeting to exchange news on a monthly basis at FEDINA's headquarters. In this instance, the unions were in fact utilising women's presence in the home after work rather than perceiving it as an

obstruction; comingling ostensibly domestic spaces and routines with union ones (see also Chandarvarkar, 1981).

Nevertheless, this did not necessarily mean all female workers were eager or able to participate, and there were undeniably challenges concerning the recruitment of younger women, who had little time, meaning a large proportion of AKKKU's female members were older workers, in addition to AIKYATA, which primarily consisted of retired workers. Some neighbourhoods, such as Ananthamma's, the Ambedkar slum, experienced few issues with female attendance; with an even ratio of male and female members. Sarita, a fieldworker attempting to organise the women of her own community, stressed the importance of all women's participation in AKKKU and AIKYATA's latest attempts to lobby for equal wages; 'Because one of our main demands is equal pay regardless of gender, but we can't really push for that without having any women with us'. Indeed, it was the ability of AKKKU and AIKYATA to engage with both women and men in an array of settings that led their members to be more receptive to the concept of equal wages, even if this was not necessarily based on the premise of equal work, something I now explore below.

#### *Equal pay for equal work?*

Although it had taken some effort, AKKKU and AIKYATA were now getting members to promote and lobby for equal wages. It was through utilising its community linkages that allowed them this conversation to develop over time, according to Gayathri; 'in the beginning when we brought it up in the meetings, all the men said 'no, the employers are right'. But gradually we visited all their houses. It took a long time to talk it over and have them understand. And later bring it to the meetings. So slowly through discussions and dialogue, it changed'. However, it was also put to male workers that 'the money will eventually end up at their house, and [they should] not [...] think about it from the perspective of who's earning how much, but how much you're able to earn as a family'; revealing the perceived and enduring need to placate men over their status and security as household heads.

Whilst the union was significantly attempting to further women's earning capacity in the workplace, this remained closely interlinked with their perceived duties within the domestic sphere. Rather than a woman should earn a higher income for herself (many men often spent their wages on consumables and forms of transport that women would forego, for instance), the discourse conformed to current understandings that hers was a supplemental income, but nevertheless, designated to the family unit. Subsequently, the argument was not necessarily framed in a way that suggested the work women undertook

was equal either – rather it was a form of compensation for their unpaid work in the home, as Ananthamma revealed; ‘Women work more than men, we toil at our work places as well as at our houses. Men on the other hand just have their jobs to take care of. We need to come back and make supper and take care of our children. Men are paid twice as much as we are paid when we work twice as much as them’.

In this way, while AKKKU and AIKYATA attempted to challenge the status quo by promoting equal wages to members, this was not by subverting it through stressing women’s roles as construction workers; rather by drawing on a traditional Engelian framework of reference; revealing their hidden work within the home. While this was nonetheless, a considerable paradigm-shift for a union, the ambivalence of female union members when it came to the subject of equal wages, further underlines the internalisation of their diminished industry mobility. This did not however, make them any less aware of it, as I have discussed, and as Vinita Shah also found during her fieldwork in Mumbai; ‘all respondents knew that technical skills, better tools and proper supervision could improve their productivity and earnings. But they were reconciled with the fact that it was not possible for them to do so at the male-dominated construction sites’ (1996:7). Indeed, when I asked Mariamma and her fellow AKKKU members about the prospect of equal wages she anticipated her employer’s response; ‘If we ask the employers for higher wages, they’ll ask us if we are carrying it all the way up or if we’re working in the sun, and why they should pay us more. We’re not men. We can’t do that.’ ‘But you do the same work, don’t you?’ I persisted. ‘Well, we don’t climb too high, because it’s scary to go so high carrying stuff, and they hold that against us.’ ‘But you work just as hard!’ I exclaim. ‘We do, but they don’t understand that’.

This interaction highlights the numerous contradictions and issues that arise from efforts to lobby for women’s increased mobility (and visibility) within construction – also borne from the contradictions inherent within the industry in its South Asian incarnation; which utilises female labour en masse but refuses to acknowledge its productivity. It may also be destined to fail, since it does not necessarily put the onus on employers but instead focuses on a woman’s work outside of *gaare* or *coolie kelsa*. Moreover, considering Shah’s assertion that levels of risk were evaluated with varying perspectives associated with skill and wage levels (1996:16), that women appeared to reject riskier work since they were also barred from any financial incentive to do so, is unsurprising. Indeed, while many women did not always work from heights, Shah attributes this to their dual roles as both caregivers and breadwinners; ‘if a man is injured, only wages may be lost. A woman



tends to ask herself who will cook, look after the house, and care for the children if she is injured' (1996:16).

While as discussed in chapter six, the risks of speculative enterprises undertaken by male informants in real estate had the potential to produce financial reward, they simultaneously increased the physical risks for workers. Subsequently, for women workers especially, there was little reward for undertaking more perilous work, which remained relative, as Shah observes and my own experiences on construction sites confirm; 'Carrying headloads to heights along narrow planks was not perceived as dangerous, while work on ladders or at heights as carpenters or painters was' (Shah, 1996:16). As Prentice and Trueba argue in their comparative ethnography of miners and garment workers; 'Labour precariousness produces precarious bodies. Precarious bodies are strategic, choosing bodies, but situated in situations of exploitation and risk' (2018:23). For men, there is a greater potential pay-off for taking higher risks, whereas for women there is not, and neither are the opportunities available.

The response of the employers was that to get paid more, women would have to do the same as male workers (which they largely were at the helper level). However, industry norms typically require women helpers to pass up items such as bricks, sand, cement, water, and tools to men, as iterated in the question of 'who'll give them the materials?' that one of the women asked me. In cases where language was an issue, male workers would literally point at what needed to be lifted and the women would do the carrying. These defined gender roles within what was essentially the same job for men and women create tensions between the work women perceive themselves to be both performing and significantly, *capable* of performing, in comparison to their fellow male helpers.

While there was evidently, a belief that they should be getting paid more, women subsequently found it hard to argue with their employers that this should be equal. Indeed, declarations such as 'We're not men. We can't do that', given by the AKKKU members prove revealing. Jean-Sebastian Marcoux's study of the performativity of gender in relation to moving house and perceptions of bodily capability, notes that 'gender roles are created and enacted in the course of physical tasks' (2004:52). Construction itself, which primarily entails the undertaking of physical tasks, has the potential to disrupt conventional understandings of these performances, at least when there is a female workforce present. It disrupts these binaries and yet still perpetuates them. Having met a number of women in construction who expressed an interest in learning but quickly

dismissed it, perhaps this was more of an acknowledgment of the lack of available options for them, rather than a doubt in ability (see also, Chowdhury, 2013; V. Shah, 1996).

Significantly, it was Satish and Anil of AKKKU (both male helpers in their twenties), that confirmed women performed practically the same work as them, stating; 'They [women] need to be paid the same wage because they do everything we do, except carry the cement bags. They work just as hard as us. The owners don't understand that'. Bearing this assertion in mind, it is also important to note the physical capability of women within construction. A recent study on women's health observed that 'Women construction workers may carry single loads of up to 51 kg, far more than the weight limit recommended by occupation safety and health standards for women. They also tend to carry heavier loads when they have to climb up a job site' (Thenguzhali and Veerachamy, 2015:288). A study by Sujata Madhok also revealed that female workers will walk up to thirteen kilometres in an eight-hour shift carrying 21000kg of mud (2005). Women in construction are thus indeed, strong, but their strength is largely underplayed and diminished by their perceived femininity. Indeed, Praveen praised the strength of the women on site as both workers and mothers; 'The women who work out here are really, really strong, you know? From nine to six they help their husbands in carrying all the stuff, giving all the stuff, and like big, big blocks of cement ... sand ... and then at the end of the night, they go home and cook, they take care of their families'. Nevertheless, this did not make them equal to men, as Praveen continued, partially contradicting his earlier assessment; 'Men are more efficient at doing that work. It's not a gender bias, it's true. So we prefer to have more men than women because it's a hard work and we don't like making women work hard, you know?'

In *Naturalizing Power* (1995), Sylvia Yanagisako and Carol Delaney scrutinise the naturalisation of gendered constructs among other forms of inequality. Social inequality, Yanagisako and Delaney posit, is naturalised and concealed, through cultural embeddedness. 'Hierarchies of difference' are thus human-made, 'and only appear to be natural' (1995:9) and based in biological fact, while being belied by unequal power relations, as Praveen's earlier sentiments reveal. Women thus remain 'defined by and confined to their reproductive role', whereas 'Men, on the other hand, have not been so confined because a man need not become a father to partake of the power assigned to male procreation; instead that power is abstracted and generalized as creativity, productivity, genius' (1995:9).

For women working construction, the results of gendered hierarchies of difference mean that they are relegated to passing tools, clearing space, carrying, sweeping, lifting,

and breaking stones. It is true that women working *gaare kelsa* will assist with the pouring of concrete into moulds, creating the slabs required for each level (usually as part of a family unit). However, they remain excluded from any industry trade that is actually considered 'skilled', such as the laying and layering of bricks, the exterior and interior plastering, the wiring, plumbing, tiling, roofing and scaffolding.

Any qualities women workers were deemed to hold are subsequently dismissed in the face of established industry hierarchies and male-led assumptions concerning their apparent lack of motivation. This is further emphasised by the contradiction implicit within the sentiments of the numerous employers, who informed me that women workers were more reliable and yet inferior in almost every other aspect. They would come to work on time, take shorter breaks, rarely absence themselves for days at a time, and did not 'drink' their wages.

Even this ostensibly positive stereotype from an employment perspective, was not beneficial in increasing women's working days or advancement in trades vis-à-vis male workers. Indeed, when I asked Praveen if he believed women could learn trades, he replied; 'Of course they can do it, but I feel they don't train themselves – they don't want to do that for themselves'. Firstly, this assumption misses the fact entirely that, as Lakshmi pointed out in the third chapter, women are in fact 'willing to learn, but there is no one to teach'. Like Praveen's prior statements, such comments reveal industrywide patriarchal views of women's overall capabilities. Moreover, they obfuscate the fact that male members of the industry simply do not and *will* not accommodate women in higher-skilled jobs, even on the rare instances, women do ask (see also, V. Shah, 1996). It is perhaps for this reason that AKKKU and AIKYATA chose to organize around women's additional contributions within the domestic sphere, even while women's contributions at work and in the home were similarly concealed. However, that is not to say that efforts were not made to upskill women workers by local organisations, as I now examine in the final section below.

### *'How can a woman do these things?': receptions and approaches to upskilling the female workforce*

Given the enduring static scenario of women in the South Asian segment of the construction sector, what are unions doing to address the exclusion of female workers from higher trades? Whilst AKKKU have been calling for equal wages, what is the likelihood that, knowing the levels of gender discrimination within the industry, it will include the skills development of women in its future demands? For organisations that

have attempted this, how substantial have their efforts been in such endeavours and what are the results? In this final section, I examine the endeavours of KCWU to deliver a project to train women as masons that was taken in partnership with ILO (the International Labour Organisation).

In addition to gendered essentialisms about the efficiency and efficacy of women's work, clothing became another reason used by industry figures to not train women for other forms of work. As evidenced earlier, such views also circulated within spaces for labour organisation, too. Mody, for instance, did not see masonry as an appropriate trade for women, telling me that 'the easiest work in construction a woman worker can do... [is] plumbing. So, we want to train women workers in plumbing. And for mason work it is harder as traditionally in our country, all women wear saris, they are standing at a height, there's a risk of... there's a danger...' he trailed off. Indeed, the dress of women in construction is often seen as a hindrance to employers on larger sites that are more likely to fall under the purview of the state. As Virender confirmed, 'I don't mind the ladies to be here but I worry about the safety. You know how ladies dress'.

While saris *do* create an increased health and safety hazard (as arguably do the near identical footwear and in some instances, *lungis*<sup>67</sup> of male workers in the south of India); as a recent scheme by Tata Steel and Dupont illustrated<sup>68</sup>, women workers may be willing to change their attire when given the opportunity to do so (see also, M. Banerjee and Miller, 2008; V. Shah, 1996). Moreover, given the lack of adequate clothing worn by any worker regardless of gender in accordance with the health and safety procedures set out by the Building and Other Construction Workers Act, this issue appears to be yet another illustration of arbitrarily enforced hindrances to women's mobility in construction, something which, instead of being challenged by unions, may also be perpetuated by them, too.

Despite Mody's misgivings about female bodily strength and attire, the masonry project proceeded and three cohorts of thirty women were provided with training and work experience on government housing projects; receiving their certificates as qualified masons at the end. The project predictably had its obstacles. First, the organisers had to consider how best to train the women to take measurements and perform the calculations

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<sup>67</sup> A *lungi* is a single piece of cloth, approximately 115x200cm which is draped around the hips and is often worn open at the front. Like a female worker's sari, it may be hitched up higher between the legs.

<sup>68</sup> To improve the health and safety of the site, women working for Tata steel were provided overalls. For more details see: <http://www.dupont.co.in/corporate-functions/our-approach/global-challenges/protection/articles/safety-subcontinent.html>

required for the job. Madhu, a former employee of the union who had taken a principal role in the project, frequently iterated how challenging this was due to illiteracy. The second obstacle I was told, was that predictably, the female apprentices were met with hostility; 'You should have done [sent] some young boys to train instead of doing all of this', Madhu was initially informed upon his first site visit. The complaints however, continued during his frequent visits to check on the progress of trainees:

I'm getting all of these complaints and stuff; 'she's not doing this, not doing this... so much of a loss for me but because you set this up I'm employing her'. All sorts of things from the employer when I pass by the sites and she will say that 'oh I don't want to talk about that. Who do they think they are?' We put them [in] and have to watch their learning process and the man who is the senior person there, he tries to come to us because she is a lady and you know there are all of these workers thinking; 'how can a woman do these things?'

Indeed, as Eisenberg (1998) has illustrated, there is often intense (sometimes violent) hostility directed at women trying to learn trades in construction. K.N. Vaid has also evidenced how this hostility is present at all levels of the industry, including for female engineers (1999:31), something also confirmed to me by a number of informants, including Virender. The extent to which higher level or 'skilled' jobs were deemed to be strictly the domain of men is perhaps best elucidated by one of Shah's informants, who, upon wanting to learn masonry was admonished; 'The Maistry did not allow me to even lay a single tile or handle tools. He rebuked me and said that if women started doing skilled jobs men would have to wear bangles and be helpers' (1996:13).

Despite these challenges, around eight to nine women from each cohort were retained on the site where the complaints had originated. While this is less than a third, it is nevertheless significant progress. What then, was the legacy of this project? Regardless of its apparent success, after two years the project was discontinued by KCWU. The union was given the opportunity to work with another foreign organisation for a further five years according to Madhu, but 'was not interested'. When I ask Darshan, since he still worked at KCWU, if he knew whether the women who had originally received training were being employed as masons, the response was mixed:

Yes, they have completed some construction projects as masons and helpers have worked under their supervision as well. But they are not getting many opportunities as the building owners and builders do not have belief in them. They are not confident enough to hire women workers for a six month or one year project. Though we have trained them, they are not getting enough opportunities to work as masons. They are still working as helpers in order to manage their expenses and so that they don't stay jobless.

Given most local women could only find around three days per week of work undertaking coolie or *gaare kelsa*; obtaining work as a mason, though a sought-after trade, would have created further difficulties as this section has illustrated. While providing women with the training to enter a trade is thus achievable as this case study iterates, without continued follow up to ensure they are able to find work in these positions, it appears that such efforts will fall by the wayside until greater industry change is demanded from within, and externally.

## **Conclusion**

Following the prior chapter's analysis of the welfare board, this chapter has laid out some of the alternative terrains of potential redress for informants working construction in the face of unresponsive and sometimes hostile, state actors and employers. Attending to the development of grassroots community organisation through the stories of Ananthamma, AKKKU, AIKYATA and FEDINA, it has illustrated how arguments relating to new and existing paradigms of labour are developed through the cultivation of voice vis-à-vis the process of collective bargaining. The recalcitrance of employers to accommodate these arguments may explain the focus of unions such as KCWU to promote welfare over women's skills training; AIKYATA to press the state for the most basic forms of care in lieu of adequate pensions; and AKKKU to emphasise women's contributions within the domestic sphere.

To effectively challenge the entrenched nature of gender discrimination within construction and collective organisation however, labour unions and grassroots movements must also look to the spaces in which these operate within their own structures. This is not to diminish the efforts of FEDINA, AIKYATA, AKKKU, or KCWU via its various initiatives to organise and advocate for women workers. For instance, the initial and continuing use of domestic space and the surrounding commons as organisation points, had certainly proved effective. The results of initiatives to upskill women by KCWU, and to advocate for equal pay by AKKKU remain to be fully seen. Both are undeniably subject to and thus arguably hindered by the proliferation in both the spaces of labour and labour organisation of gendered discourse at all levels. Indeed, the language of informants in this chapter attests to the entrenchment of patriarchal norms within spaces of collective organisation, and the construction industry; inhibiting women's advancement within these spaces. Such discourse produces at times contradictory efforts and outcomes within labour organisations, itself informed by the

contradictions inherent within the construction industry itself vis-à-vis its use and simultaneous denial of female strength and skill.

Considering the apathy and disorganisation of various state welfare initiatives, as evidenced in the prior chapter, one might wonder why protests such as the *bisi oota* rally still form one of the primary weapons in the arsenals of organisations such as FEDINA, and yet they do. Alpa Shah has discussed how certain tactics of mobilisation have led Maoists in Jharkhand to foster ‘the development of liberal notions of citizenship in their guerrilla zones and ironically create a desire for the Indian state’ (2013:93), creating an unintentional appeal to those who are systematically excluded from it. For Shah’s Maoists, making the state visible, and in doing so, the full array of potential benefits that are unavailable due to its failure to deliver; was meant to disenfranchise villagers, and yet it did not. In informal sector activism, a similarly curious paradox unfolds.

Indeed, despite their knowledge of the state’s failings regarding welfare, in Bengaluru, NGOs and unions continue to advocate and educate their member communities along the lines of pressing for civic amenities, promoting collective organisation based on Marshallian principles of citizenship-as-rights (A. Shah, 2013). However, as evidenced, such populations do not carry the same rights as the elites of Chatterjee’s civil society, something that the unions themselves acknowledge; ‘This is the inherent character of the unorganised labour groups. So, for them, though we need to educate them and make them understand... ‘this is your money, there is a legislation to protect you’’, Mody informed me. While Chatterjee notes a shift in the political environ of India, without at least initial access to mediators such as FEDINA, it remains a challenge for the working poor, particularly its women, to cultivate the capacity of voice amongst their communities.

This challenge will remain so long as the state is perceived as a more viable form of recourse than approaching employers, particularly one that at least offers equal benefits to both male and female workers, even if the means of access to them are not. As evidenced in this thesis, women and migrant workers will remain at a greater disadvantage in the absence of more localised and inclusive forms of organisation. Moreover, as unions such as KCWU become financially incentivised by the state to register construction workers with the welfare board, resources and objectives become further focused away from the ongoing issues of the construction industry itself, including improving the rights of its sizeable female workforce.

Given the omnipresence of this discourse across the industry and labour organisations, it may be that the state in reality, has become the most viable form of

recourse for collectively organised women workers (Agarwala, 2013). Moreover, as the example of AKKKU and other scholars have illustrated (Kamath and Ramanathan, 2017; Raj, 2018), innovative ways of organising and approaching the state are now emerging in the informal sector, and women are appearing at the forefront of these. For Ananthamma and her comrades from AIKYATA and AKKKU, the results remain to be seen from their ongoing struggle. Nevertheless, they will return to the steps of the town hall and the various other sites of protest across the city when they grow tired of waiting. The patience of the poor has its limits, after all.



CHAPTER NINE:  
THE DEVALUATION OF WOMEN'S LABOUR  
AND THE VALUE OF GENDERED ANALYSIS

'These people... they are not protected by the law. They have never been protected by any law. So they survive. They have the capacity to survive anything.'

– M.N Mody, KCWU

India's sizable construction sector serves as a primary site for the study of masculinised economies of speculation and exploitation par excellence. By focusing on these aspects of the industry, my thesis has made visible the pervasive gendered hierarchies that enable these forms of accumulation, and their relational spaces outside of it. Through its multi-sited analysis of the construction industry in Bengaluru, one of India's poster cities for economic growth and speculation; this thesis has illustrated how institutionalised gender, class, and caste inequalities intersect in informal labour scenarios. In doing so, it has examined how such inequalities are exploited at the local level, but significantly, become enfolded within wider global vectors of accumulation.

By actively tracing the strands which connect urban networks, my thesis has established the pathways of mobility available amidst these conditions to both settled and migrant women undertaking *gaare* and *coolie kelsa* across Bengaluru's myriad building sites. Attending to the differing forms of interaction and movement experienced in the urban milieu; it has shown how interlocutors both endure and counter the precarity generated by, and generative to their flexible labour employment. By incorporating the accounts of informants from differing positions in real estate and construction it has also attempted to bridge the realities between the precarious and the dominant. In doing so, my thesis has provided further insight into the brutally extractive nature of manual labour-based industries in South Asia and beyond; and the intersectional forms of violence that underpin them. Shedding light on the legacies and operations of masculine hierarchies of political, social and financial capital in the global economy makes visible existing forms of gender discrimination; but significantly, the processes which shape and perpetuate inequality for future generations. Indeed, for many workers in this current global epoch, permanence becomes increasingly elusive.

*What the city offers and to whom: Seeking permanence through the urban milieu*

In Bengaluru, the spaces available to women seeking amelioration for the hazardous conditions, low wages, and bodily stresses of construction work remain limited. Scholars have been divided by arguments for the capabilities versus the potential pitfalls of the social networks of the poor (Appadurai, 2013; Dunier, 1999; Davidson, 2011; Elyachar, 2002; Willis, 1977; Stack, 1974). Like the dissemination of information, which remains profoundly undemocratic, access to these bodies is largely determined by local settled status and the connectedness of social networks. For those that did have access to them, the presence of NGOs and labour unions in their lives has proven beneficial, albeit to varying degrees. Indeed, for all interlocutors working construction, making claims upon the state without the initial intervention of external bodies would not have otherwise been possible. This attests to both the enduring legacy of state bureaucracy and the moral frameworks of judgement that shape welfare spaces.

In the current scenario of inadequate wages and insufficient welfare, the working poor are increasingly expected to help themselves through loans and subsequent forms of entrepreneurship (Elyachar, 2002; Huang, 2016; Lazar, 2003; Pattenden, 2010), while generating capital for international banking institutions and derivatives markets trading (Appadurai, 2013; D. James, 2014; Kar, 2018; Palomera, 2014). Encounters in these spaces remain imbued with class and gender hierarchies; informing evaluations of working class women and their interactions with NGO workers. This included the sacrifice of time demanded for impractical 'training' in exchange for access to state and civic resources (Caplan, 1985; Guérin, 2014; Lazar, 2003; Moodie, 2013; Pappu, 2004).

As I have also illustrated, working class women are aware of the constructs that circulate about them, critiquing them in numerous ways. At the same time, while frequently being rejected by informants, idealisations of 'productive' women also filtered through, mingling with local relations and influencing resulting judgements of creditworthiness. Examining the ways in which residents of the Yadgir colony utilised its SHG and simultaneously, resisted additional forms of financial burden; this thesis has shown how development attempts to create creditworthy subjects may be disrupted by the same social relations they seek to harness. In doing so, it has added further nuance and depth to this body of research, bridging both sides of debates concerning the efficacy of microfinance and SHGs.

Outside of financial development discourse, the development of horizontal relations between women and organisations that enable them to approach the state independently by staking their own claim in labour organisation, remains imperative.

Within the informal sector, there are ‘multiple ways in which people organise collectively to challenge and improve their conditions of work’ even if these are not always reflected in research (Lazar and Sanchez, 2019:219). For female construction workers however, labour mobility proves an enduring challenge given the hostility of the industry to the skilling of women. The state thus remains the most viable option for ensuring familial permanence. Subsequently, informants sought to improve the precarious conditions generated by and generative to their work in construction primarily *outside* of the industry.

While this growing focus on the state presents a quandary for the future of informal labour organisation, further eroding employers’ responsibility of care towards workers, it also presents opportunity, too. As Julie Collins concludes in her study on unified forms of collective action which unite ostensibly heterogeneous organisations; ‘resistance to accumulation by dispossession is an ongoing aspect of labor’s struggles. This recognition implies the need for unity between groups targeting labor rights and those concerned more broadly with securing resources for social reproduction’ (2012:18). Although in India, traditional union spaces remain ill-equipped to address this shift in labour organisation, continuing to exclude women (Hill, 2009; A. Shah, et al., 2017; Ratnam and Jain, 2002), the documented rise of grassroots labour movements across the country does offer some hope. So too, does the development of rhetoric put forward by women such as Ananthamma, concerning the worth of their work to India’s growing economy. Attending to women’s collective organisation through the study of FEDINA and its associated unions has illustrated how this might be possible.

FEDINA’s ‘do it yourself’ approach to empowerment contra other local development initiatives, fostered the articulation and recognition of the worth of informal labour, leading to tangible forms of action via community-based collective organisation. Indeed, it might be through reminding the real estate sector or indeed the city in its entirety, that it cannot do without the labour of both its settled and migrant workforces, that will prove the most effective form of action. Real estate development companies in Bengaluru and beyond remain all too aware of this potential capacity, and thus continue to divide and alienate their workforces by any means possible. The maintenance of gendered and regional labour hierarchies enables this division.

Across Bengaluru, migrant workers remain overwhelmingly underrepresented within these spaces – women even more so. As elucidated, the formation of productive urban networks remains crucial to achieving familial projects of permanence over time and space. Cities offer little in the way of stability to the bulk of India’s informal

workforce, and the construction industry builds upon and perpetuates the urban precarity experienced by migrant employees. For migrant workers almost entirely dependent on dense village networks, their mobility through various aspects of the city and their subsequent capacity to realise stable futures, is hindered. Village networks may of course expand over time, merging with urban ones, as highlighted by the gradual settlement of the Yadgir colony in the last four decades; and more recently, the tentative roots put down by the workers of the Thimmaiah campus. There is however, no readily accessible pathway from the village to the city (Jatrana and Sangwan, 2004; Jain, 2016; Parry, 2003; Pun and Huilin, 2010; Solinger, 1999). The conditions that once facilitated the settlement of Yadgir colony residents are no longer present. Migrant construction workers in Bengaluru now face the erosion of patronage relations vis-à-vis the preference of employers to maintain precarious workforces; and scant availability or indeed, *liveability* in regards to housing. This erosion invariably hinders spatial forms of familial permanence in either the city or the village.

For migrant female informants especially, intersections between employment practices, accommodation conditions, and localised gender norms culminate in ongoing forms of urban ambivalence and restricted movement. This often produced significant ramifications for informants' mobility through various aspects of Bengaluru; shaping their children's subsequent experiences, too. In such instances, there are limited means of developing a vernacular of (urban) cosmopolitanism (Appadurai, 2012; 2013; Clifford, 1992; Werbner, 2006) and migrant families are thus encouraged to maintain their roots within the village, which remains the site of labour's reproduction. It is possible that younger generations of migrants including Rangamma, Eramma, Shivu and Shubha, will grow weary of this existence and harness this discontent into collective action, as Pun and Huilin have reported in China (2010). It is also however, possible that they will continue to live their lives in the same way their parents have; sustaining their villages through sheer effort, and by doing so, ensuring a consistent flow of flexible and exploitable labour for generations to come.

#### *Extractive economies: gendered currency in construction and hegemonic masculinity*

The lack of regard towards workers closely relates to the cultivation and deployment of established masculine hierarchies within construction and forms of risk-taking which are similar to those practiced in the finance industry (see Appadurai, 2013; Cassidy 2013; Maclean, 2013; Zaloom, 2018). Significantly, it is possible to track in my case how these gambles directly impact the lives and livelihoods of workers deemed low

value in the high-stakes world of real estate. The value systems that inform this overall disregard for worker welfare comprise of intersections between neoliberalism and localised hegemonies. The resulting labour regimes are shaped by practices of speculation, risk-taking and hegemonic forms of masculinity which perpetuate structural violence for both male and female workers (see also, Bear, 2015a; 2015b). Drawing on a framework of hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005), I have shown how, in the quest for profit and aspirational forms of masculinity, a ‘violence of indifference’ is facilitated by hierarchies of masculine capital.

With India’s economic liberalisation and the emergence of the real estate sector, historical paradigms of labour recruitment and retention have evolved responsively. Local and global phenomena converge to create the conditions for increased worker exploitation. Indeed, the impact of climate change on agrarian livelihoods, and the casualization of labour across the world, as well as its growing feminisation; are significant factors shaping the lives and labour experiences of a vast global demographic. The layering of these processes creates new forms of hyper-exploitative scenarios as workers are subject to pre-existing and localised forms of discrimination, and increasingly, neoliberal value systems underpinned by new technologies of capital. In these scenarios the worth of manual labour becomes increasingly concealed and devalued – women’s labour even more so.

Since the construction industry outside of South Asia continues to primarily employ men, India remains a rare exception as the industry’s principal recruiter of female labour. The foundational tenets of gender discrimination however, remain; informing a contradictory logic which accommodates the systematic utilisation of female labour, while denying its productive efficacy (see also, Biswas, 2018; Chambers and Ansari, 2018). The resulting scenario means while women are largely excluded from construction throughout the world; in the Indian industry they are excluded from skilled work under the same pretext, but with markedly different outcomes. Subsequently, while India’s construction workforce remains unique for its mass employment of women, their experiences within the industry remain anything but. Moreover, corresponding spaces of labour organisation are imbued with similarly essentialist gendered constructs. They thus remain riven with the same contradiction of the industry itself; negating women’s abilities as not only skilled workers, but their status *as workers* in the first place. It is important to note, as I have also illustrated, that women themselves participate in the maintenance of such hierarchies.

By examining the violence and lack of care exhibited towards workers, my thesis has elucidated how relations of hegemonic masculinity in construction affect the lives of all genders. In their free time, real estate developers' attempts to cultivate and meet shifting aspirations of masculinity can be witnessed in their dress, recreational activities and other forms of conspicuous consumption across Bengaluru's luxury malls, hotels, clubs and bars. At work, enactments may be similarly overt as they seek to live up to the macho imagery that is requisite of an industry where one cannot be seen, as in Praveen's words, 'soft'; instilling discipline and oppressing lesser ranking masculinities through threats, aggression, and subtler means of surveillance and control.

In contrast, as the scarcity of work increases for settled families in Bengaluru, aspirational masculinities, particularly societal constructs of the male breadwinner and household head (Cornwall et al., 2016; De Neve, 2004; 2016; Vera-Sanso, 2016) become further unattainable. For those without the material means, class, or caste status; there is little available recourse with which to rectify the failure of their ability to fulfil this ideal. The ramifications of a perceived inability to support one's family can be witnessed in the apathy of subsequent generations of Yadgir colony men. It underlays the rife alcoholism and malaise of those who have effectively removed themselves from the employment market, but also from their familial responsibilities.

While the women of the colony attempt to fulfil numerous roles as caregivers and providers, this both subverts and reinforces patriarchal archetypes, as witnessed in the marital troubles of Durgamma and Basamma. In such instances, men and women are simultaneously the bearers and subjects of patriarchal norms. Husbands may attempt to recover their masculinity by exerting their authority over the household in extractive and at times, violent ways. However, wives in their attempts at times, to shame husbands into working, further entrench these ideals. As Bird notes; 'Violations of norms of hegemonic masculinity typically fail to produce alterations in the order; instead, they result in penalties to violators (1996:130). Subsequently, while women engage in relations of hegemonic masculinity themselves, as the case of Durgamma illustrates, this does not necessarily work in their favour.

Indeed, patriarchal biases were exhibited by informants in their judgements of other women which were reproduced though gossip in the sangha, or at union level, as Ananthamma's opinions confirmed. Moreover, with the enduring scenario of inadequate finances, many informants continued to prioritise the upbringing, education and nourishment of male over female children. While there was some change in the colony in respect to the education of girls, this was only when the material means were available to

facilitate it. In this way; ‘The presumption that hegemonic masculinity meanings are the only mutually accepted and legitimate masculinity meanings helps to reify hegemonic norms while suppressing meanings that might otherwise create a foundation for the subversion of the existing hegemony’ (Bird, 1995:122)

The continued enactment of this form of gender valuation subsequently built high expectations on sons to perform well and secure *naukri* – a feat which many low-caste educated men without the social and financial capital to do so (De Neve, 2004; Jeffrey at al., 2008; Parry, 1999; 2009), are unable to achieve. Internalised norms of masculine currency thus proved detrimental to both men and women. Indeed, the inevitable frustration and dismay when colony men were unable to exhibit their worth within such idioms, did little to alleviate the widespread alcoholism and domestic violence that though seldom spoken about, took place within the colony daily.

#### *Making (more than) ends meet? The ethic of pragmatism*

This thesis has elucidated how an ethic of pragmatism allows women to both envision and achieve projects of permanence. This ethic, as I have illustrated, informs not only daily efforts to sustain the immediate permanence of one’s family and one’s village, but also longer-term permanence for future generations. It has attended to how pragmatism facilitates the quotidian reflexivity and practicality required by women to support their families. Pragmatism enabled informants to conceive of differing fields of action and possibility, adhering to multiple belief systems, while adjusting expectations and aspirations by the immediacy of need and the availability of resources.

Women did not lack imagination or motivation when it came to their own lives. However, they acknowledged that vocational mobility within construction was unattainable due to its outright discrimination of their gender. While informants knew that learning a trade or receiving a formal education was impossible for themselves, when they were able to, they saved their aspirations and their money, towards alternative pathways for their children. Indeed, the story of Durgamma, who inserted herself into wider webs of social relations; supplementing her income through differently sourced assemblages, highlights how women may achieve projects of permanence through skilful manoeuvre through the city. Following a lifetime in construction, Ananthamma similarly utilised sociality, cultivating ‘voice’ (Appadurai, 2012; 2013) over time to engage with and confront authority figures; while maintaining a vernacular accessible and most importantly, central to organising her own community. While crucial to mobility, voice is not necessarily lacking amongst the poor as this thesis has highlighted – rather it may

take time and certain conditions to develop. For families such as Hemavathi and Lingamma's and to a lesser extent, Shubha and Shivu's, such engagement with the city was largely unavailable to them. However, it was their recognition of these facts that facilitated their endeavours to ease their precarious existence. Their efforts in doing so, including the self-organisation of a chit fund, participation in worksite strikes, and in some instances, a rejection of the city itself; thus remain significant as pragmatic, agentic acts.

By showing how fatalistic sentiments may belie aspirations for permanence; I have challenged economic theorisations of poverty and accompanying narratives of fatalism as 'an aspiration trap' (Bernard, et al., 2012; Forster, 1965; Fletcher, 2014; Heifitz and Minelli, 2004; Ray, 2003). When plans did not work out, informants may have turned to narratives concerning their (and their children's) destinies of hard labour, but this does not make such deterministic sentiments an all-encompassing part of their life worlds and imaginations. It is thus the same 'pragmatic openness of mind' (W. James, 1978), that allows aspirations, expressions of fatalism, and the belief of reward in the next life for one's earthly endeavours for permanence; to co-exist within this ethical framework.

*Concluding remarks: gender inequality and not-so-neo neoliberal landscapes of labour*

The absorption of Bengaluru's burgeoning real estate industry into global financial markets harnesses pre-existing inequalities including caste, class and gender; while the need to ensure fast profit lest speculation fail, erodes prior bonds of obligation between employers and their workers (see also Breman, 1996; 2016). Traditional linkages of patronage are subsequently exchanged for newer and even more extractive forms. Middlemen obfuscate chains of accountability, while professed regional biases against local workers are belied by a preference for more exploitable workforces.

This concealment of labours' worth maintains profits and facilitates violence. Simultaneously, the obfuscation of profit and onsite conditions by property developers enables the avoidance of state regulation and taxation; rendering government efforts to curb corruption, including demonetisation, and more recently, GST ineffective and, even open to exploitation for further profit (Prasad, 2019). Construction workers subsequently bear the full brunt of this extractive economy; physically, financially and emotionally, absorbing the burden of risk generated by the rise of India's vast real estate industry. As long as state actors continue to profit from the real estate industry, and the state itself



continues to practice near identical methods on its own construction projects, regulation will remain unenforced.

Outside of construction, what can these specific forms of labour inequality reveal about the wider status and conceivable future of women's work in the neoliberal era? By elucidating the enduring nature and outcomes of gendered constructs, my thesis illuminates a significant but often neglected caveat; the future is by no means an upward linear trajectory for women's rights. Rather than material avenues of women's mobility, including financial autonomy, equal pay, stable employment and state safety nets increasing, they are in many cases, decreasing (Hegewisch, et al., 2019; Howard, 2019; World Economic Forum, 2018). Indeed, reports claim that with advancing automation of industrial work, women stand to be disproportionately affected (Hegewisch, et al., 2019; Office of National Statistics, 2019; Roberts, et al., 2019): a phenomenon that can already be witnessed in the Indian construction industry (Baruah, 2010; Patil, 2015).

While the devaluation of both migrant and women's labour is rooted in history (De Haan, 1999; Engels, 1884; Fudge, 2018; Ortner, 1972; Sacks, 1973; Yanagisako and Delaney, 1995), such relations have evolved with the eroding status of workers' rights and the rising demand for flexible labour. As I have evidenced, these relations operate, intersect, and crystallise at ground level. Amidst this scenario, the financialisation of affordable housing and recent attempts in South Asia and beyond to integrate the working poor into formal avenues of credit, monetise and thus exploit this demographic further (Appadurai, 2013; Elychiar, 2002; Kar, 2018; Palomera, 2014). As scholars including Harriss-White, Olden and Vera-Sanso confirm, it is such demographics that experience significant shocks they are ill-equipped to absorb from slumps in global financial markets that they otherwise had little knowledge of (2013). Moreover, should the government's policy of informal housing and its concomitant debt be rolled out en masse, in the event of a real estate slump, workers may not only stand to lose their livelihoods, but potentially their homes, too.

The normalisation and obfuscation of these relations in quotidian life and the enormity of space that waged (and unwaged) labour occupies within it, means foregrounding them in our research is of ever-increasing importance. This undertaking remains crucial if we are to fully comprehend and subsequently, scrutinise the growing price and primacy of profit at local and global scales. Gender discrimination is but one aspect within the shifting global landscape of labour relations and regimes. However, it is through observing intersectional forms of inequality at ground level that researchers and activists can trace the connections between global webs of mass exploitation and

historical forms of prejudice. As this thesis has illustrated, women workers attempt to skilfully navigate the precarity they experience as a result of the convergence between these multiple prejudices and processes. It is through attending to how such pragmatic manoeuvres create the tools and requisite paradigms of collective organisation, that heterodox researchers can assist and co-ordinate in wider efforts to challenge and ameliorate labour precarity.

## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

*Akke roti* rice-based flat bread

*Amāvāsya* The first day of the new lunar cycle

*Anganwadi* crèche for pre-school children

*Arrack* A locally produced strong form of alcohol often sold illegally

*Bisi oota* hot food/hot meals

*Chappals* sandals, usually plastic

*Chapattis* Flat bread – also known as a roti

*Churidars* a type of women's trousers

*Chennagadeera* a Kannada greeting/asking how someone is

*Chik* Small

*Chowka bara* 'Twelve squares' a game similar to Ludo

*Coolie kelsa* helper work in construction

*Durga puja* a major Hindu festival celebrated in West Bengal

*Gaare kelsa* cement setting and moulding in construction

*Gowri Habba* a Hindu festival celebrating Ganesh's mother, the goddess Gowri. It primarily acknowledges women and their role as wives

*Holi* a Hindu spring festival primarily celebrated across the north of India and Nepal. The most famous form this celebration takes is the throwing of water and brightly coloured powders at each other, or 'playing holi'

*Holige* sweet coconut roti, usually eaten on Ugadi

*Kannada* language of Karnataka state

*Kannadiga* person/people from Karnataka state

*Kelsa* work (usually applying to labour)

*Lathi* a wooden baton used typically by the police

*Lungi* a single piece of cloth worn by men draped around the hips. Sometimes worn open at the front

*Maistri* labour contractor

*Nasta* breakfast

*Naukri* formal employment

*Obbattu* sweet coconut roti, usually eaten on Ugadi

*Oota* food

*Pallu* the end fold of a sari. Sometimes used also as a head covering or cloth

*Puja* An act of worship/prayer

*Pukka* (in relation to a dwelling) concrete, permanent

*Ragi mudde* a ball made out of millet - a popular dish in Karnataka and some of the regions of Andhra Pradesh

*Roti* flat bread

*Shivraatri* a Hindu festival

*Ugadi* a Hindu festival that celebrates the new year in Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and to a lesser extent, Maharashtra

*Vishwakarma Jayanti* a celebration of the Hindu deity Vishwakarma, also known as the 'divine architect' due to his design of cities and weapons for the gods. This is celebrated with a puja undertaken by workers in their respective workplaces. Workers are meant to be acknowledged by their employer for their labour, while they in turn, acknowledge the role of their tools/machines in production

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