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In memory of Mahindra Upadhyay and Sahud Khan

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the politics of labor and livelihood in India's modernizing construction industry. It focuses on the daily working lives of workers, subcontractors and engineers on a self-described "modern" construction site in Delhi marked by its use of innovative building technologies and piece-rate forms of contract and accounting. As construction work has become a central mode of economic development in the country, contributing 8% of the GDP in 2011-12, these "modern" sites have come to embody the hopes and anxieties of development. Industry discourses claim that construction work can build not only the nation's material infrastructure, but also its human infrastructure by employing poor rural citizens in a growing industry. At the same time, academic and journalistic reports note the abysmal conditions of labor on India's construction sites and the persistence of "traditional" subcontractors (*thekedar*) who exploit workers through networks of caste, kin and village residence. This contradiction is generally taken up as a sign that India is in a process of transition to a modern future that has not yet been fully implemented. Indeed this is in part why construction sites function as such poignant metaphors for modern India.

Yet there is more than just metaphor here; rather I argue that "modern" construction sites in India actively produce this sense of transition through a particular staging of tensions endemic to capitalist production. In making this argument I introduce the concept of *ideologies of labor* to describe the implicit models of what labor was that actors appealed to in making sense of their own and others' productive actions on the site. They were expressed in reflexive comments on work, jokes, and commands but also in labor reports, account books and forms of remuneration. For example, in speaking of their habituation (*adat*) to a particular trade, workers construed labor as a transformative process produced by repeated contact with specific materials. Stonemasons became particularly

capable of breathing the stone dust kicked up by their saws whereas welders developed eyes capable of withstanding the light of the welding torch.

In this framework production always depends on a process of translation (and transformation) across divergent ideologies of labor, which is precisely what the *thekedar* did. The dissertation explores this process by tracing the circulation of paperwork and wages through the production process. With workers, *thekedar* assigned and remunerated tasks in accordance with their workers' habits (*adat*). With engineers, *thekedar* presented the labor of their men as a homogeneous substance that could be measured and remunerated in accordance with piece-rate contracts and accounting practices. This translation was never smooth as when workers refused to do tasks assigned by engineers because it was not their habit. Without the mediation of the *thekedar*, the tensions between ideologies of labor came to the surface. Engineers interpreted these tensions as signs of the "backward" or "traditional" character of workers and their *thekedar*. From the perspective of the piece-rate contract and forms of accounting that marked the site as "modern" the tensions endemic to capitalist production appeared as signs of an incomplete process of transition. This staging maintains a structure of production in which both "modern" buildings and "traditional" workers emerge simultaneously.

Introduction: India Under Construction

Seeing Sites

In opening their impressive history of modern architecture in India, Peter Scriver and Amit Srivastava begin with the "equivocal clichés" that frame the notion of 'modern India' (2015, 7). They go on to describe these clichés, many of which will be familiar from popular representations of India. Here India is "a world of contrasts and contradictions, rich and poor, extravagance and destitution, space-age know-how but medieval means—an incomplete project. It is construction sites in this case, more so than finished buildings, that furnish some of the most telling imagery" (ibid.). Yet within these contradictions and contrasts there are crucial differences. Indian commentators both inside and outside the construction industry regularly made distinctions between construction sites, companies and personalities whose dynamic qualities signaled progress and development for the nation and those that signaled the persistence of a sub-par status quo. Construction sites might be apt metaphors for modern India but it was those sites that people designated with terms like 'good' (*accha*), 'modern,' and 'cutting edge' that suggested the unfinished present was moving toward a brighter future. These 'modern' sites were opposed to the 'typical,' 'small' (*chota*), or 'subcontractorish' (*thekedari*) sites that crowded Indian cities.[1]

To get a sense of this distinction consider the following descriptions of two construction sites. There are many signs by which to tell that one has arrived on a 'modern' construction site. It begins with the imposing figure of a construction crane standing high above a protective fence that divides the site from the space surrounding it even if that space happens to be other construction

[1] Terms that I have not offered glosses for were always used in English. For more detail on the term 'subcontractorish' see chapter 1.

sites. As you pass through one of the security gates, operated by a security guard, you will, if you have passed through the main gate, almost always come across a 'safety pavilion'. Adorned with posters in English and Hindi reminding you to 'work safe', it is here that new arrivals receive demonstrations of various safety procedures and equipment on the site. As you move across the site you may even notice a sign making sense of the different colored hard hats worn by men bustling about the site. Yellow helmets denote all trade workers and general laborers, blue helmets are worn by supervisors, foremen and subcontractors, white helmets are worn by engineers and project managers (and the occasional materials salesperson) and green helmets designate safety officers. The building materials themselves are often innovative as are the technologies.[2] The management offices are well lit and appointed with air conditioning. Here files of paperwork document a precise accounting system in which work is checked and re-checked before piece-rate payment is made to subcontractors. These forms are used to keep track of the timely completion of the project within the agreed budget and to exacting quality standards.

In contrast, as you enter a 'typical' site you might have to weave your way through piles of building materials that spill out onto surrounding streets. You will not find tall cranes smoothly lifting materials into place but long lines of workers passing materials from person to person, or perhaps hauled on a small pulley system. You will inevitably see children roaming more or less freely across the site, playing with bits of brick, stone, and whatever else they can find. Helmets are rarely seen, and only the supervisors wear black safety shoes, while most workers pick their way across the site in cheap flip-flops. The management office is usually an unfinished room of building and often doubles as sleeping quarters for lower-level supervisors. It is here that the site-in-charge

[2] Innovative building materials included 'green' materials like fly ash bricks and concrete. Here fly ash, an industrial waste product, is mixed into bricks and concrete respectively reducing the amount of other materials used. Other innovative materials included aluminum doorframes, drywall ceiling panels and prefabricated building elements. Innovative building technologies could be everything from mechanized bar bending machines, concrete batching plants, and total stations, to 'cutting edge' technologies like modular concrete forms, and laser levels.

distributes payments to workers and subcontractors twice a month. Everyone, including the site-in-charge, is paid in cash and the amounts, which almost always include some amount of credit, are recorded by hand in a worn out registers. These sites will not give way to glittering townships, office buildings or malls. Rather they are the sites at which modest (eight story) apartment towers emerge. The design is repetitive and, after the first floor, the additional floors unfurl quickly.

These descriptions, based loosely on two construction sites in the greater Delhi region where I conducted twenty four months of ethnographic fieldwork, encapsulate many of the material and aesthetic elements that construction workers, engineers and news media used to draw distinctions between construction sites and by extension companies, practices and people. The salience of one or another dimension of a project in making such distinctions shifted widely with context, but again and again I heard friends, interlocutors and news media, focus on materials, precision, orderliness, efficiency and vigilance as frames with which to measure, critique or praise India's ever growing number of construction projects. This dissertation provides a ethnographic analysis of the 'modern' construction site not as an empirical entity, for it is often hard to tell which sites are 'modern' and which aren't, but as a salient ethnographic distinction that had palpable effects on the ways in which production was structured and transformed the growing numbers of workers drawn together on construction sites.

It may be that the very lack of distinction between 'modern' and 'typical' sites is part of why it was constantly invoked both my interlocutors but the local and international news media. While the two sites described above may appear distinct in their use of mechanized production techniques, building materials, safety precautions and modes of payment, in other ways they were quite similar. On the 'modern site' workers slept in shacks made of corrugated tin panels with doors built out of leftover construction materials. Especially in the summer months these shelters may have seemed inferior to the other site where workers were housed in shacks of brick held together with mud

instead of mortar.[3] Personal connections between subcontractors and project managers were less obvious on the 'modern site' but were no less important. Production was more mechanized on the 'modern site' but the workers were still supplied by 'traditional' subcontractors known as *thekedar* who recruited workers through networks of caste, kinship and village residence (see chapter 1). As I spent more time on these construction sites the distinctions became blurred. Not only were there ample similarities between the self-described 'modern' site and the other one, I found that within 'modern' sites there were also distinctions. Workers and even engineers remembered sites that were more 'cutting-edge', more 'professional' than the one they were currently on. Often this came up when interlocutors would urge me to study those sites since they were 'better' or more 'hi-fi'.

In boasting of their work on such sites, workers and engineers drew implicit connections between the qualities of 'modern' construction sites and their own qualities as workers or engineers. As I elaborate below, the material dimensions of 'modern' construction sites in India—the innovative building materials and machines, the extensive safety procedures and inspections, the auditable paperwork—point to qualities of the developed nation that these sites materially manifest—progress, standardization, precision and transparency. This link between 'modern' construction sites and the development of the nation is drawn and redrawn in news reportage, by industry actors and by political figures. As the second largest employer in the country, the construction industry is described by industry advocates as providing both the material infrastructures necessary for a modern nation while also providing its human infrastructure in the form of productive workers (Rodrigues 2000). At the same time, the news media also depict the construction site as a space where vulnerable migrant workers are exploited under out dated modes of labor control and organization(Majumder 2010). In these accounts construction sites lay bare the

[3] This method allowed the huts to be easily knocked down and reused in other construction projects. This type of construction is known as 'raw' (*kaccha*) as opposed to 'ripe/cooked' (*pakka*) construction, which uses mortar and concrete with the result that the structure is more durable.

'failures' or 'gaps' in India's development. The distinction of the 'modern' construction site takes on a particular importance as industry actors from real estate developers, to construction firms attempt to represent themselves as part of the bright and profitable future of India rather than as an embarrassing element of its past.

This tension takes on a particular weight in the National Capital Region of Delhi where this study is based. Since the colonial period, and specifically since the construction of the nation's capital in New Delhi, stretching from 1910 to the 1930s, Delhi's modernity has been intimately tied to the modernity of India as a nation. Engineers and project managers described the site that I focus on in this study, an educational facility for a public university in Delhi, to me as a crucial piece of infrastructure for the nation. Given these stakes it is not surprising that workers, engineers, newspapers and politicians so often invoked the image of the 'modern' site despite its delicate connection to empirical sites. As mentioned above 'modern' and 'typical' sites shared many of the same characteristics and depending on which ones a speaker foregrounded, construction sites could become exemplars for a developing India or signs of its recalcitrant traditions.

As we will see in the following section the success or failure of framing a project as a modern construction site can be caught up with the conjuring of investment capital (Searle 2016; Tsing 2005) and moments of national shame respectively. Despite, or rather because of, the empirical slippages around what makes a site modern, the stakes of this distinction were important for my informants, if not always as dramatic as the cases discussed below. The image of the modern site was often invoked but its definitional edges crumbled in the face of investigation.

This dissertation focuses on the modern construction site as an ethnographic object. That is, it links the discursive frame of a modern site to particular practices of production. In this way, the modern construction site becomes a lens for studying transformations in labor and economic growth in India. At an analytical level, I argue that the distinction of the modern construction site is

ultimately grounded in a particular mode of construing, organizing and representing the heterogeneous labors that make up construction. The focus here is not the various emblems of a modern site themselves; the machines, materials, accounting and safety practices, but the ways in which these emblems are mobilized in producing a particular image of production. The point is not only that modern construction sites are seen through a particular frame, indeed non-modern sites are evaluated in the same terms, if negatively. Rather, the form of production on modern construction sites generates a tension between modern and traditional forms of labor and in so doing creates the very divide that it is supposed to overcome. The following chapters track the ways in which this process necessitates contestation, negotiation and transformation over the meanings of acts of labor. Here I draw on recent theorists of labor who have pointed to the ways in which people's productive actions in the world come to be construed as recognizable forms of labor, even as they transform the actors (Bear 2015; Besky 2013; Hankins 2014; Salzinger 2003).

I argue that the modern construction site in India stages a tension that is central to all capitalist production. Capitalism operates through capturing and construing the diverse productive capacities of human actors in order to fit them into a process of value creation (Marx 1976). As I elaborate in later sections many theorists of capitalist production have argued that this process is an always unfinished one (Chakrabarty 2000; Mazzarella 2003; Yanagisako 2002; Tsing 2015). My argument is that the modern construction site frames productive activity on the site in such a way that the tensions endemic to capitalist practice appear as a problem of transition between 'modern' and 'traditional' forms of production. This happens through elements of the production process that are not used, or not emphasized in the same way, on non-modern construction sites. Chapters 4 and 5 trace this process through the medium of work orders and remuneration respectively. On the one hand these forms coordinate the labors of workers into the complex acts of production recognizable as construction. Yet these forms of coordination rely on people (*thekedar*) and practices

(patronage) that appear as 'traditional' from the perspective of 'modern' construction practices. Thus, when confronted with tensions that are endemic to capitalist production site managers often understood these incidents as signs of the 'backward' or 'traditional' character of workers and their subcontractors. The modern construction site then becomes another space that reproduces a narrative about the apparent partiality of modernity in the Indian construction industry, and by extension the nation at large. As I argue this should be seen as the result of the dynamics and semiotics of production on the country's ever proliferating modern construction sites.

A Fraught Industry

To see modern construction sites as producing the very partial modernity that they purport to surpass requires that we understand both the particularly fraught nature of the construction industry with respect to the discursive construction of modernity in India and the politics of labor and production more generally. This section lays out the media and scholarly narratives that locate the Indian construction industry within the hopes and anxieties of development in India. These narratives provide a crucial context for understanding the concept and stakes of what I am calling the modern Indian construction site. It is against the backdrop of such narratives that the everyday negotiations and struggles over the meaning of labor come to take on larger stakes as signs of a partial, but ongoing, project of modernization.

In taking the modern Indian construction site as my object of analysis this dissertation builds on a long tradition of 'shop-floor' ethnography in studies of work and capitalist production (Applebaum 1981; Burawoy 1979; Nash 1993; Ong 2010; L. Fernandes 1997; Salzinger 2003; DeNeve 2005). Yet, as I have suggested above, the modern construction site does not only designate particular 'shop-floors', rather it also refers to a form, assemblage, or image of coordinated

labors.[4] I call this form a chronotope of production. In using Bakhtin's terminology (1981) I mean to draw attention to the spatio-temporal envelope of the construction site in two ways.

Most immediately, construction sites have precise physical locations in space and time. They appear in 'empty' spaces, busy streets or crumbling buildings. Even the most minor of sites is cordoned off from the surrounding landscape, if only by the wary movements of passersby as they go out of their way to avoid falling detritus, shooting sparks or rising plumes of dust. More often these spaces are marked off with fences, temporary walls or cautionary devices. Yet these spaces are equally delimited in time. The construction site disappears, replaced by new buildings, improved roadways or rehabilitated structures. The pages that follow dwell in these fleeting space-times of the construction site.

These transient space-times of production exist within another spatio-temporal imaginary. Especially in India, construction sites are emplotted in a story of progress and struggle through which a new India is being produced. This new nation will take a different place in a globalized world by virtue of the fact that its infrastructure and forms of production will finally have caught up with those of the developed world. In this sense, then, India's construction sites, especially those that are self-consciously modern, negotiate a site-based chronotope of production whose end point is a material structure and a larger chronotope whose end point is a developed nation. The chronotope of the site sustains the larger one by being performed over and over again bringing about the larger social world of which it is a constituent part (cf. Stasch 2003). As envisioned through this chronotope the material emblems of a modern site point to particular qualities of the developed nation that they are bringing about. The multiple checks and stringent paperwork deployed on the site enact accountability and transparency, while the robust safety procedures and

[4] In this sense I treat the modern construction site in a similar way that Alex Blanchette (2013) has approached the 'factory' in the factory farm. Here the factory operates as an image of production around which agrarian work is reorganized.

mechanized production point toward values of precision and high quality production. The new building materials and 'cutting-edge' features of the building act project the new, technologically advanced, nation that these sites both produce and are products of.

The construction industry stands doubly at the center of India's impressive economic growth over the last twenty years. It produces the material infrastructure of this change while also providing employment and training for massive numbers of Indian workers. Indeed, the construction industry is the second largest employer in India, after agriculture.[5] It is for this reason that the secretary of the Department of Heavy Industry held up the construction industry as a motor of growth since it "gets the economy into a virtuous cycle where more investment in the industry leads to more jobs and growth of GDP thus growing the economy which then leads to more investment in the sector" (Tembhekar 2013). At the same time, academic and professional commentators stress that the industry must improve if it is to meet the challenges that such growth brings (Rodrigues 2000; Laskar and Murty 2010; Mallick and Mahalik 2010). They argue that currently the industry stands on the edge of realizing its full potential as it remains mired in traditional labor relations (see chapter 1) and bogged down in unnecessary bureaucracy (Vaid 2003; Tabish and Jha 2011; Vaid and Gurdial 1966). In this narrative framing the construction industry, and by extension India itself, is figured as being in a transitional phase in which modernization has not yet been fully realized. In this sense the discourse of modern construction temporalizes the distinctions and tensions between modern and typical construction sites, rendering them as signs of India's larger shift to being a modern, developed, nation. This discourse is told in two keys that I demonstrate bellow. The first is the vision of Indian construction found in trade publications, investment group reports and government documents. It focuses on the vast potential of India and

[5] While I have not been able to find information on how this statistic was calculated it is repeated and cited in many academic treatments of the Indian construction industry (Ravi Srivastava and Jha 2016; Pattanaik 2009; Mallick and Mahalik 2010).

its construction sector while framing current setbacks as the result of outdated regulation. The second key focuses on moments of spectacular failure as signs that India and its construction sector are still not modern and need government intervention to realize a more equitable development. In both keys the present becomes a transitional moment; the result of an unfinished project of capitalist modernity.

The India Story

The narrative of progress in the construction industry, from both companies and industry advocates, should be understood in the context of what Llerena Searle calls the "India story." The term was shorthand, used by the developers Searle worked with, for "stories about growth…growth of consumer demand, of the Indian workforce, of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), of incomes, of foreign investment, of the real estate industry, of infrastructure, of IT. These stories appeared in newspaper articles, industry reports, investor presentations, Government of India publications, brochures and conversations" (Searle 2016: 51). A prime example of the "India story" is the website for Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "Make in India" campaign.[6] The webpage for the construction sector provides a number of statistics emphasizing growth. It notes that the construction sector has become the second largest employer in the country (with 35 million people),[7] that there will be increased demand for real estate and infrastructure, and that significant funds have been set aside for government spending on infrastructure, enabling private firms to compete for profitable contracts (http://www.makeinindia.com/sector/construction).

[6] http://www.makeinindia.com/home

[7] It is not clear where this number comes from and estimates do vary considerably (Ravi Srivastava and Jha 2016), nevertheless the construction industry is clearly a crucial form of employment for large sections of the Indian population. This becomes more the case as rural land is appropriated by large capital projects(Sanyal 2007; Rogaly and Thieme 2012).

As Searle demonstrates these pronouncements are part of a larger process of rebranding India that began in the 1980s when banker Antoine van Agtmael coined the term "emerging markets" to help sell equity funds focused in the third-world (2016: 59). This move was accelerated by Goldman Sachs researchers who, beginning in 2001, grouped India with Brazil, Russia and China (the BRICs) as emerging economies that could one day outpace the economies of the developed world (ibid.). In this framing India's development is no longer a humanitarian project to be undertaken by international NGOs or benevolent foreign governments, rather it is a lucrative financial opportunity for international investors to grab a piece of India's economic dynamism. The elements of this narrative spread far beyond construction itself to predictions about the massive numbers of India's working age citizens, referred to as the demographic dividend. It includes narratives about a burgeoning middle-class whose desire for high-quality residences made to global standards will ensure strong demand for the construction sector's products.[8] Indeed a recent McKinsey report noted that the growing urban population of India accounts for an estimated annual demand of 700-900 million square meters (or the equivalent of one Chicago) of commercial and residential space(McKinsey & Company 2010).

Yet these predictions of the future do not guarantee prosperity. The demographic dividend, growing cities and increased demand are all merely possibilities for India's growth. The often fantastical images and speculations about India's potential operate as models for action in the present (Searle 2016; Ghertner 2015). The imagined futures of McKinsey reports or Government of India websites will not simply happen; they require investment and transformation. Thus there are negative predictions as well. India's demographic dividend is simultaneously an impending nightmare of disaffected, unemployed youth (cf. Jeffrey 2010). Similarly a McKinsey report entitled

[8] Asher Ghertner has insightfully analyzed McKinsey report statistics that track the continued explosion of India's middle class. His analysis demonstrates that these reports have constructed a burgeoning middle class in large part by expanding the definition of middle-class rather than registering actual increases in income (Ghertner 2015).

Building India: Accelerating Infrastructure Projects notes that if significant changes are not made to India's infrastructure provision practices, the country could "suffer a loss of 200 billion in fiscal year 2017" (P. Gupta et al. 2009, 10). The report goes on to call for the elimination of cumbersome regulation of the infrastructure industry and for the adoption of professional practices (e.g. new forms of contract, expedited dispute resolution, training). In these narratives the Indian government must adopt increasingly neoliberal tenets that allow for more flexible employment relations, faster approval processes, and easier access to financing.

Trade publications and industry actors reproduce this image of an industry that is at once on a progressive trajectory and yet is also in danger of having its dynamism stifled by restrictive regulations. In a series of short interviews with the managing directors of top Indian construction firms published in *Construction Week,* Avinash Bhosale, chairman of ABIL (a leading construction firm), said that when he began in 1979 "the construction industry was a very local business. It was one of the most unorganised businesses during those days. The construction industry was stable with a handful of developers around. There was less competition" (Kurdekar 2016). Similarly, Dilip Suryavanshi of Dilip Buildcon noted that they started "in the 80s when the infrastructure industry was non-existent. ….we hardly saw any modern equipment being employed for construction. It was all mostly manual labour, so it was a time consuming affair, without any focus on quality" (ibid.). These descriptions of the pre-liberalization construction industry frame it in negative terms. It was unorganized and, while it may have been 'stable', was ultimately static due to lack of competition. By contrast the contemporary industry, it is implied, uses 'modern equipment', has higher quality standards and is more innovative due to increased competition. As the chairman of Al' Fara group put it, "with the passage of time and introduction of more mechanised equipment, and with the advent of technology, the construction industry has improved by leaps and bounds" (ibid.).

Scholars associated with industry development organizations echo this narrative of progress in the construction industry. K.N. Vaid, founder of the National Institute of Construction Management and Research (NICMAR), narrates the history of production as successive periods of improvement spurred first by the British colonial regime (more on this below) and most recently by the liberalization of India's economy in the 90s. As he notes, "the Indian construction industry, till recent years had neither the compulsion nor the incentive to change and modernize itself. …However, the situation began to change following the liberalization of the Indian economy and the move toward privatization of infrastructure development projects" (Vaid 2003, 205). Not only did liberalization make space for private construction firms in India, it also led to a situation in which Indian construction firms were increasingly bidding projects against international competitors which led to the adoption of global best practices and other professionalizing moves (ibid., 20). Indeed, the Construction Training Center, which I will discuss in detail in chapter 2, was formed as an offshoot of NICMAR.

In the "India story," the growth of the industry, and by extension the nation, depends on the motor of increased, fair competition to encourage companies to produce higher quality products with greater efficiency. The deficiencies of the current moment are seen as the last lingering effects of old ways of doing things. The state often becomes a target of critique here to the extent that it maintains restrictive bureaucratic regulations on the free innovation of construction which will naturally increase the quality and efficiency of built product but also the lives of construction workers through an increased demand for skilled workers, who will in turn be able to command a higher salary on the labor market (Vaid 2003; Rodrigues 2000).

Spectacular Failures

The claims of industry innovation and progress articulated by industry actors seem to sit awkwardly against the regular, if sporadic, reports of spectacular failures of Indian construction. These narratives, circulated across local and international news reports, uncover an industry riddled with labor law violations, shoddy craftsmanship and corruption. These 'revelations' of course usually only confirm what Indians already know to be the case, that the construction industry is a dirty business, yet the airing of this public secret in international venues still causes shame. The most recent example was in the stories following Delhi's preparations to host the 2010 Commonwealth Games. From 2003 when Delhi won the right to host the 2010 Commonwealth Games, the event was billed to the Indian public as a chance to announce that India had finally become developed.[9] As then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh put it the "successful organization of Commonwealth Games would be another signal to the world that India is rapidly marching ahead with confidence" (*India Review* 2010, 3). The preparations for the Games went well beyond the construction of numerous sports facilities and included the building of a new international airport, the repaving and widening of a number of roads and the leveling of a number of urban slums. When I spoke to Delhites months after the games were over, many felt that the city had improved markedly. The preparations for the Commonwealth Games had brought the promise of developing the city, something many politicians and news outlets referred to as making Delhi a "world-class" city.

Yet as the date for the games drew near, more and more troubling stories began to emerge. Work seemed to be lagging far behind schedule, costs were suspiciously high and reports of labor violations on Common Wealth Games sites had begun to surface. An official report ordered by the high court, at the urging of an activist group, turned up evidence of workers not receiving payments

[9] As potential, but ultimately ambiguous, sign of India's development, the 2010 Commonwealth Games bore a striking resemblance to the 1982 Asian Games, which were also hosted in Delhi. In fact many of the labor law violations ultimately uncovered on Commonwealth Games construction sites were violations of laws put in place as a result of similar organizing around the 1982 Asian Games (W. Fernandes 1986).

on time, or being paid well below the minimum wage, a general lack of safety precautions and no provisions for the children of the largely migrant workers.

Even the official report of the investigation committee formed by the Delhi High court broke from its generally even tone in describing the living situation of the workers at a CWG construction site. Describing the state of the shacks (*jhuggi*) used to house workers at the work site for the new Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium, the author writes:

> The room sizes are 16'x8' where on an average 4 to 5 persons live; they represent hovels where human beings have literally to crawl like animals which remind a visitor what Rabindranath Tagore had written 100 years ago in 'Ebar Phirao More':-
>
> This is a deep dark world// Poor, empty, tiny, caged and cabined, dark cells.
>
> (RD Srivastava et al. 2010, 62)

These conditions are far from unusual on construction sites around the country. If anything what was unusual was the seeming shock with which the monitoring committee reports their findings. The image of inhuman working and living conditions pervades realist reportage on the Indian construction industry. Here the construction site itself, as opposed to the glittering building, belies a cruel truth about India's attempts to become 'world class.'[10]

In September (a month before the event) national and international media coverage of the scandal of the games preparation reached a fever pitch when a bridge connecting a parking structure to the Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium complex, a central venue for the Games, collapsed, injuring 27 workers. Soon after, CWG officials discovered that many of the buildings had leaking roofs and that others were in unsanitary conditions. Aided by the popularity of internet news sources, photos quickly circulated across national and international media showing overflowing toilets and rooms with standing water. Many nations threatened to pull out of the Games, citing concerns over the health and safety of their athletes.

[10] This trope has a long history going back at least as far as Engel's reportage in 1845 in *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1993).

If the successful organizing of the games was supposed to be a 'signal' to the world that India was marching ahead with confidence, the actual preparations for the games could be seen as a communicational misfire. As one news source summed up, rather than "showcasing one of the world's largest and most technologically adept states, the Delhi Commonwealth Games have exposed the gaps in India's emerging powerhouse story" (Davison 2010). It was the construction process itself, as much as the unstable buildings produced, that exposed an uncomfortable truth about India's development. In moments of spectacular failure like this, the "India story" is shown up as just that, a fiction that glosses over the chaos and corruption of realities "on the ground."

Taken together these spectacles of 'success' and 'failure' frame the popular imagination of construction, and particularly construction sites, in India (cf. Scriver and Srivastava 2016). Indian construction companies appear to be caught between the global pretensions and potentialities of a professionalizing practice, and the realities of labor exploitation, corruption, and shoddy construction. The new, 'world-class,' India seems to be forever on the edge of being realized. Trade magazines, officials, construction professionals and acquaintances I spoke to during my fieldwork expressed a sense that in the near future India would 'catch up' with the rest of the world. Events like the Commonwealth Games were simply proof of that this lag had not yet been taken care of and more vigilance was needed. The failures of the construction industry are chalked up to the prevalence of corruption or, as we will see in chapter 1, the persistence of traditional modes of organizing labor that are said to encourage shoddy craftsmanship and exploitation of workers.

The relatively quotidian construction projects that I deal with in this dissertation may seem a far cry from these spectacular projects. Indeed academic studies of the construction sector in India tend to avoid any discussion of the narratives surrounding such construction spectacles (although

see W. Fernandes 1986).[11] Instead academic work has largely focused on structures of employment (Shivkumar et al. 1991, Subramanian et al. 1982, Vaid 1997, van der Loop 1996), differential wages based on gender, caste, and skill level (Barnabas, Anbarasu D., and S. 2009; Suri 2000) and general conditions of work (Patel et al. 2012; Pattanaik 2009). These have elucidated, among other things, crucial dynamics in the construction industry such as the prevalence of systems of subcontracting (see chapter 1) that make the industry recalcitrant to legal regulation and suppress wages.

This project builds on these studies of the industry but parts ways with them in making a case for the relevance of these larger discourses to understanding the labor politics of modern construction sites. As we will see, actors on construction sites invoked the images of 'traditional' workers or 'corrupt' subcontractors as thwarting the smooth functioning of the site. At a deeper level it is precisely this sense of a stalled modernity, a 'not yet' but 'almost' developed nation, that I argue is produced on modern construction sites. Instead of showing up the disconnects between these depictions of the construction industry, and by extension development and growth in India, my analysis will show that the seeming contradiction of an industry, and a country, constantly on the precipice of development, is neither a result of an incomplete process of development, nor a ruse in the interests of the elite and powerful. Rather it is an effect that is produced, and reproduced, out of a particular staging of the tensions of production.

Ideologies of Labor

[11] In part this tendency probably has to do with the time-scale of academic research. It is also likely connected to the fact that much of the academic work on construction work in India is, directly or indirectly, linked to industry or policy debates. As such, most work is oriented toward establishing general trends in the industry.

I noted earlier that the modern construction site, as a chronotope of production, stages tensions that are inherent to capitalist production in a particular way. To elucidate these tensions this dissertation attends to the ways in which forms of human productive action come to be seen as labor. That is, I am concerned with how material action in the world becomes recognizable by an actor as well as others as a particular sort of action. I argue that this process has crucial effects for the way in which labor transforms the laborer (chapter 3) and the way in which production is organized (chapters 4 and 5). This position requires us to view labor not as a bounded category of political economy but as a heterogeneously productive process of relation in which laboring subject and object are transformed in various ways. One of the central concerns of the dissertation is the ways in which productive activity is multiply and variously construed in the space of production. That is, the dissertation argues that the construal and regimentation of human action is a process that must be worked out anew in the course of production, be it capitalist or otherwise. In this analysis capitalism turns on a particularly powerful mode of construing human action, but one that is always in tense and productive relations with alternate construals of human action. I call these construals 'ideologies of labor' a term that draws on semiotic and linguistic anthropology to bring renewed attention to the semiotic dimensions of labor.

In recent years there has been much work in linguistic anthropology (Irvine 1989; Gal 1989; Manning 2006; Graan 2016; Bourdieu 1992) and in other disciplines(Baudrillard 1981; Rossi-Landi 1983) to re-introduce the study of language or signs into political economy. This work seeks to undo the retreat of signs from the world as crystalized in Saussure's distinction between *langue*—language and the proper object of study for semiotics—and *parole*—speaking (2011). Despite the structural similarities that Saussure posited between linguistic and economic value, his structuralist approach treats the semiotic value of a sign as ultimately detachable and unrelated to its material manifestation in a signifier. Drawing on a tradition rooted in the work of C.S. Peirce, scholars have

argued that signs themselves are always material objects in the world.[12] Even language, as Marx noted, is made up of puffs of air (Marx and Engels 2007; see also Williams 1977). In a hugely influential article on language and political economy Judith Irvine (1989) laid out a number of ways in which language and political economy were linked. While she notes the role that language and communication play in organizing divisions of labor and even fixing the value of commodities,[13] the bulk of the article is devoted to the ways in which language itself, in the form of genred performances, circulates as commodities in a political economy of praise singing in Senegal. This argument was crucial for a materialist approach to semiotic practice. The point here is that language, *qua* discourse, is material and, by virtue of being structured in particular ways, can be circulated as a commodity (see also Silverstein names piece). Indeed the focus of most linguistic anthropological approaches to political economy since has been on the ways that language, or other communicative forms, can be made into durable objects and circulated as a commodity (Shankar and Cavanaugh 2012; Manning 2006; Cameron 2000). Drawing from this work my project suggests that we turn our attention to other ways in which language and semiotics may mediate political economic practice. Specifically it suggests that the very constitution of material actions, as commodities, labor, is mediated by linguistic and other sorts of semiotic practice. If the main theme of linguistic anthropological work on political economy has been that language, and other semiotic media, are material objects and can be made into commodities, this project aims to uncover the ways in which even the most unassailably commodified object of political economy, labor, is semiotically

[12] In Peircean terminology the sign is actually composed of three parts: 1) a representamen which is the perceptible element that stands for 2) an object in such a way as to produce 3) an interpretant. The interpretant is some further action or mental representation. Thus the sight of smoke (representamen) creates in our mind the image of fire (interpretant) because we know smoke to be a byproduct of fire (object)

[13] Here Irvine draws on Hillary Putnam's work (Putnam 1975) on reference to argue that we know for example that an object is made of gold not through personal verification but rather through chains of reference. In this way language circulates with objects in political economy and fixes their monetary value.

construed. Rather than stress the political economy of signs, which is certainly important, this analysis of labor stresses the consequentiality of semiotic determinations of political economy.

While relatively few Marxist analyses of labor describe themselves as semiotic—many opposing a materialist stance that looks at relations of production to an idealist stance that puts too much importance on discourse—Marx's own writing stresses the importance of "semiotic representations in mediating and shaping material activity" (Turner 2008, 44; cf. Marx 1978). Marx understands practical activity as a dialectical process in which human subjects realize themselves through working on nature (1978, 115). Despite the negative valence that it has taken on in other works, objectification, the externalization of human capacities in modified objects, is crucial to this process (cf. Mazzarella 2004). For Marx humans necessarily exist outside themselves in the sense that we are compelled to interact with, transform and augment nature (including other people) in order to survive. In Hegelian fashion this process produces a distinction between subject and object, while ultimately revealing this distinction as a moment in the larger productive process. At the center of Marx's dialectic is material action in the world that transforms the actor and the acted upon alike. This material activity, the famous metabolism with nature, also includes the social relations produced around the distinctive form of human activity. While transformative action on the natural world is something humans share with other animals, humans take this action and its transformative potentials as objects of reflection and contemplation. This is what Marx means when he speaks of animals producing in a closed way. The honeybee produces its hive by virtue of instinct. The activity of hive construction is given in the very form of the creature. Humans by contrast produce in an open way. Humans may act materially in the world (procuring food, shelter, comfort) in any number of ways. Moreover, human activity—as Marx notes of even the worst architect—is oriented by the self-conscious end of the actor.

> A spider conducts operations which resemble those of the weaver, and a bee would put many a human architect to shame by the construction of its honeycomb

> cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that he architect builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax. (Marx 1976: 284)

In this famous passage Marx lays out what is arguably the single most important quality of human material activity. Marx is not simply saying that the defining feature of human production is the ability to impose an ideational form on inert matter (contra Ingold 2002). Rather we can read this passage as being about the role of semiotic representation in human productive activity. In Marx's analysis there is no gap between the bee and its productive activity. The making of the hive is a direct fulfillment of its nature as a bee. The animal is isomorphic with the productive activity that reproduces its particular form of life, what Marx calls life-activity. Yet human life-activity, for Marx, is precisely defined by its free and conscious nature (1978, 76). It is not that we make clear decisions through mental work and then 'execute' it in practice; rather Marx's point is that the productive acts that humans engage in exist in a dialectical movement between our representations of them and our experience of them. Human action is ultimately indeterminate in the sense that we can act in any number of ways and reflexively take our action as an object of action.

It is precisely this openness of human productive activity that capitalism exploits. It allows for the alienation of the worker from their productive activity. In its estranged form productive activity "is therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a *means* to satisfy needs external to it" (ibid. 74). Capitalism turns on a particular construal of human productive activity as consisting of abstract and concrete labor. Thus brick-laying is a particular, concrete process that produces a certain object (brick structures) yet this specificity is abstracted when brick laying becomes a means of social mediation through which others' commodities are acquired. It is this dual-character, at once particular activity and social mediation, which defines labor under capitalism.

As many scholars have argued (Postone 1993, Weeks 2011, Chakrabarty 2000), the key element of capitalism for Marx is that it is a system of social interdependence in which our access to the objects we need to live is mediated by labor either directly through forms of force, which is

common to many modes of production, or indirectly through the wage, which is particular to capitalism. In this situation labor takes on a dual character, just like the commodities that it produces. Marx's analysis in *Capital* seeks to explain how it is that human productive activity has taken this shape under capitalism. Marx's concept of value, then, should be understood as referring to the way in which labors, as abstract social mediations, are related in a totality as various proportions of a homogenous whole. Marx is not arguing that labor *is* the content of value, but rather analyzing the historical process through which (abstract) labor comes to appear as value. As Diane Elson (1979) puts it, Marx's theory of value is designed to explain the phenomena of labor under capitalism. In this sense he has a value theory of labor.

So far, then, it would seem that Marx's analysis of capital, at least through these interpretations, is eminently semiotic. Capitalism appears to turn on a powerful construal of human productive activity, embodied in the commodity form of the capacity to labor, or labor-power. Yet it is precisely here that there has been a recurrent tension in analyses of capitalism especially those that claim to attend to culture. In approaches such as Postone's (1993), capital's construal of labor appears to be final. It occurs through contingent historical processes but once it has begun it systematically replaces social relations and shifts the deep structures of society. This approach grounds a number of analyses of capitalist development (D. Harvey 1990; Hardt and Negri 2000; Wolf 1982) and labor (Braverman 1998; Burawoy 1979; van der Loop 1996). In anthropology this model has been critiqued for failing to recognize the systems of meaning that render even the most basic human experiences, as of, say, hunger, into culturally specific needs, as for this or that object based on a meaningful structure of edibility (Sahlins 1976, 2013). Accounts of capitalist practice, especially in 'exotic' parts of the world, oscillate between these two poles of the determining or determined character of the commodity form and its attendant political economic relations. This has lead to famous debates (M. Taussig 1989; Mintz and Wolf 2012; see also Sahlins 1988) that seem

to repeat themselves in various guises (see for example Chibber 2013; and critiques Murthy 2014; Sewell 2014).

The semiotic reading of labor that this project engages in draws on recent attempts to think about this tension differently. It draws inspiration from a number of diverse works which, despite crucial differences, approach this tension between the culturally determining or determined character of the commodity form as an internal characteristic of capitalist practice (Chakrabarty 2000; Mazzarella 2003; Sanyal 2007; Chu 2010). These approaches reframe the analysis of capitalism away from a debate over the universality or cultural determination of capital's construal of labor once and for all, by arguing that this tension is built into and constitutive of capital. In many ways this work refigures what is often depicted as a historical occurrence, the emergence of abstract labor, as a structural and always unfinished feature of capitalism. There is a dialectical relation here but it does not have a historical trajectory, rather it is a tension that is built into capital itself. Accounts that follow this model have called attention to the ways in which the constituent elements that capital must stitch together are always exceeding the limits of the economic, narrowly defined, (Bear et al. 2015; Gibson-Graham 2006) in part because they are shot through with multiple value projects of which capital accumulation is but one (on "value projects" see Cattelino 2008; Gidwani 2008; Nakassis and Searle 2013). In light of these analyses the question for an anthropological account of labor in contemporary capitalism seems to be how to understand these excesses and the work of orchestration and translation that, however briefly, creates capitalist value out of the heterogeneous productive powers of human and even non-human actors.[14]

[14] The term 'productive powers' is taken from Yanagisako (2002) and follows its usage by the Gens collective (Bear et al. 2015) as a way to highlight the many, non-economic, ways in which human economic action is productive. On the work of non-human actors, and the work of corralling them into capitalist projects of value production see among others Blanchete (2015), Besky (2014) and Tsing (2015). I take up issues of non-human, non-animate, actors in chapter 3.

It is here that the tools of linguistic anthropology, and a notion of ideologies of labor, can be most useful. The key insight for this work is the way in which language can be used to regiment and construe language itself (Silverstein 2003a). That is, we are capable of signaling when something we are saying is to be taken as a joke by virtue of deploying certain kinds of language (including features such as prosody, tone, facial expression). This is not to say that our attempts at signaling will necessarily result in the message being taken as such, a fact that would itself be signaled through meta-discursive cues. Linguistic anthropology refers to these cues and practices as 'metapragmatics' to denote that they are designed to regulate the social meanings of what was said or done (i.e. the pragmatics). Metapragmatic cues in turn rely on ideologies of how language ought to operate as well as connections between language and other social entities (Irvine and Gal 2000; Gal and Woolard 2001; Silverstein 2006). Thus, speaking standard English slowly to a person from the southeast of the United Sates turns on a language ideology that links the perceived 'slowness' of southern drawls to a slowness of thought. The metapragmatic cue, speaking slowly, implies this language ideology by presuming that the addressee will not be quick to understand. There are of course a myriad of complications that could be introduced into this thin hypothetical example but the point is that the metapragmatic regimentation of speech works through appeal to language ideologies.

Ideology, in the sense of language ideology, does not carry the stigma of 'delusion' or 'false consciousness' that it sometimes has in other analyses. Rather, ideology is part and parcel of the semiotic process through which signs become recognizable as such.[15] In a similar way I argue that

[15] Following Susan Gal (2016) we should note that ideology, in this sense, is built in to the very notion of the Peircean sign. The interpretant, the relation between sign and object presented in a further sign, opens up a space for ideology. This is what lies behind Peirce's taxonomy of signs that present themselves as having different relations to their objects than they functionally do (e.g. rhemes, dicents and arguments) (Parmentier 1994). Thus in the example given above, the causal relation between a speaker and the dialect they speak is interpreted as the result of a similarity in character ('slow' speech, 'slow' thinking) in a particular response. The crucial point for this study is that this notion of ideology sees it as embedded in actions (particular kinds of response) and not

actors use linguistic and other semiotic means to construe and regiment, often unsuccessfully, the meanings of their productive activities. I call the schema that they appeal to, often implicitly, ideologies of labor. I have explicitly not used the term labor ideologies to flag the fact that the medium of these construals is, at least in my experience, not labor itself.[16] I should also add that I intend the labor of 'ideologies of labor' to be understood as interchangeable with productive activity. Here I follow Marx's usage in *Capital* in which the unqualified term 'labor' refers to the qualitatively complex material activity in all its complexity, whereas 'work' would refer to a regimented form of labor (e.g. Carpentry, brick-laying). I will still use the term 'productive activity' to emphasize the difference between the forces mobilized and their representation (as work).

The chapters that follow focus on ideologies of labor as they are articulated in the flow of action or in direct reflexive commentaries on labor. It may be helpful then to offer a slightly different example of ideologies of labor here to highlight the larger applicability of the term. John Kelly's work on Fiji Indians (Kelly 1992) offers a useful description of what I am calling ideologies of labor. Kelly notes a strong division between descendents of indentured laborers, locally known as 'Indians,' and descendants of freely immigrated Gujaratis, locally distinguished as 'Gujaratis.' While Indians predominate in labor intensive and service-oriented fields Gujaratis avoid selling their labor as a commodity for others and instead excel in family owned shops selling commodities with limited commitments (e.g. groceries). Kelly traces these differences in the various ways in which *bhakti* devotionalism was historically integrated with capitalist labor forms in each community. Kelly notes that in the context of political organizing against the European planters after indenture Indians took

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necessarily as the property of individuals. As we will see actors can and do appeal to different ideologies of labor in making sense of their own and others' actions (see chapters 3 and 4).

[16] I do not mean to completely rule out such capacities of labor, only to specify that the phenomena that I analyze here has to do with the multimodal construal of labor through speech, action, paper documents. For labor to be the medium of these construals would necessitate that the act of labor be able to provide a metacommentary on itself in some way. While this might be possible in certain circumstances the situations analyzed here (and indeed most situations of production) involve the construal of labor through other semiotic forms.

up the labor ideology espoused by Gandhi. Here, drawing on the Bhagavad Gita, labor was figured as a form of sacrifice appropriate to the devotee; as a mode of selfless action and service that constituted an investment in the enterprise (ibid. 109). The Gujaratis, in contrast, adhere to a labor ideology, informed by Gujarati *bania* (merchant) devotionalism, which sees the commodification of one's labor as rendering one impure and incapable of accepting divine grace. Instead, divine grace is thought to manifest itself in capital and thus the increase of capital is rendered as a form of religious practice.

In making sense of, and engaging in, particular kinds of labor then Indians and Gujratis appealed to divergent ideologies of labor. The point here is that manual labor is not a purely practical category of political economy rather it is shot through with quite specific valuations. For Indo-Fijians what sort of labor one does is not only about the remuneration one receives but also the relationship that one has to the divine grace. These construals of productive activity are consequential in that they determine what sorts of work a person will engage in and what sorts of transformations that work might bring about. As Kelly's work suggests ideologies of labor are always multiple and situations of production can become quite complicated when actors attempt to construe the same activities through different ideologies of labor (cf. Povinelli 1993).

Situating the Site

With the thematic and theoretical issues of the dissertation introduced, I will provide a brief note on my methodology and the fieldwork on which the dissertation draws. The goal here is not only to give the reader an idea of the fieldwork activities that form the basis of the dissertation but also to introduce the sites and their organization. For the sake of clarity these details are reiterated in later sections of the dissertation but an initial description will be useful both for understanding the outline of the chapters as well as my focus on my primary site. The dissertation is based on twenty-

four months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2011 and 2013. The research was mainly conducted on three construction sites but included trips to many more, interviews with retired construction professionals, attendance at industry conferences and interactions with non-governmental organizations related to the construction industry.

The first site was a construction skill training center that was itself under construction at the time of my field work.[17] For six months I lived and took classes at the center, which gave me a chance to meet a number of different students and instructors as they circulated through the center. Located in the industrial satellite city of Faridabad, the center would become the main headquarters of an organization I call the Construction Training Council (CTC). The CTC billed itself as producing much-needed 'professional' workers for the construction industry. In addition to their training programs, the CTC was involved with a number of other initiatives to 'develop' the industry. Among other things, my time at the CTC provided me with a number of contacts in the industry that, combined with the limitless good will of key gatekeepers, allowed me to conduct eighteen months of fieldwork on two different construction sites. The first was an eight story, thirty two unit, condominium building in Gurgaon, a prosperous satellite city associated with business process outsourcing. The other was a self-described 'modern' construction site. It was an educational facility located on the Delhi campus of a prominent educational institution.[18] The project was overseen by the Central Public Works Department (CPWD), a government organization that primarily oversees the construction and maintenance of government buildings.

Given the timing of my fieldwork, officials at the Central Public Works Department were especially wary of granting more or less unrestricted access to a foreign researcher. As one official

[17] As will become clear in Chapter 2 the fact that the center was itself a construction site was seen as an asset by the administrators at the center as it offered students a real sense of what life on the site would be like.

[18] Throughout the dissertation I remain intentionally vague about the building and the owners in an attempt to maintain anonymity.

put it to me, 'there are people out there who only want to malign us'. While the official did not say so explicitly, he was almost certainly referring to the negative press the department had taken in the wake of the Commonwealth Games. The reason that I was referred to the CPWD in the first place was that my contact had remembered that he knew someone who was in charge of an 'exemplary' project. Indeed when I finally met with the executive engineer on the site I was informed that an international research team had been to the site months before to see how India's new construction sites were conforming to 'green' building standards. The finished structure has a certified four-star environmental rating from Green Rating for Indian Habitat Assessment (GRIHA). The structure had been designed by a well known architectural firm and the educational spaces, mostly lecture halls and laboratories, were outfitted with 'state-of-the-art' amenities according to a promotional video the CPWD created about this particular building. In addition to the credentials of the structure itself, the exacting standards of the CPWD for quality, transparency and safety helped make this site "a very modern site" in the words of the executive engineer.

While the CPWD was in charge of the site, a private construction firm managed day-to-day production that I call Prakash Limited. This company was publicly traded and had completed a number of prestigious projects across India, including a number of projects for state and federal governments. The CPWD then operated as a 'client-side consultant' meaning that they represented the building owner, the University, in dealing with the various groups responsible for different parts of the project. Thus the CPWD had consulted with the architectural firm that designed the building, organized biding for the construction job and selected Prakash Limited. The CPWD was also responsible for paying Prakash Limited which they did on a piece-rate basis as laid out in the contract (see Chapter 5). The CPWD keeps a list of approved construction companies, which it ranks based on the size, measured by cost, of project that they are authorized to undertake. According to the contract the CPWD also reserved the right to approve any subcontractors that

Prakash Limited hired. In addition to this the CPWD engineers made regular site visits to 'check' the progress of the project and enforce any one of a number of CPWD regulations on construction practice which were catalogued in the CPWD manual and Specifications. Indeed the CPWD was known as a source for standard practice in the construction industry.

In practice the CPWD's control over the site was in no way complete. While CPWD engineers made regular visits to the site, higher officers made far less frequent visits, spending most of their time in the CPWD site office located at the north edge of the site. Most Prakash Limited employees, with the exception of the site-in-charge, spent large parts of their days on the construction site itself. Under the site-in-charge were a small number of project managers, a larger number of engineers, foremen and supervisors. The physical tasks of construction were carried out by workers who had been recruited through independent subcontractors, or *ṭhekedār*.[19] These *thekedar* were hired under a variety of contracts for various lengths of time (see Chapter 1). The effect of these, often quite complicated, relations of subcontracting was that there was often a great deal of mutual misunderstanding between what workers thought was going on, even what it was they were building, and what engineers or project managers thought to be the case.

Despite my focus on a site run by a government organization, I do not wish to make too much of the difference between state-run and private construction for two reasons. First, the CPWD no longer directly oversees any actual construction. Rather they operate as client-side consultants. That is, the CPWD represented the interests of the client, the building owner, through the construction process. The CPWD contracted with an architectural firm to get the plans, organized the bidding process to select a private contracting company, and was responsible for checking and paying the contracting company. The construction firm that was selected, a company

[19] Since this term will be used with great frequency in the dissertation I omit diacritic markers in later uses.

I call Prakash Limited, was publicly traded and had completed a number of prestigious projects across India, including a number of projects for state and federal governments. The level of scrutiny that Prakash Limited was under may well have been greater than it would have been on a fully private project, indeed some Prakash Limited employees chafed at what they saw as the CPWD's overly strict rules, yet the necessity of accounting for work done was not significantly different. Moreover, many building owners use client-side consultants, which can sometimes be private companies. A second reason that I do not wish to overstate the difference between government-run and private construction projects is that private-public contracts such as the one I describe here are increasingly common and lucrative in the construction industry, especially as the private real estate market slows.

The contemporary operation of the CPWD then illustrates a larger point about the shape and effects of market liberalization in India. Beginning in the 1980s under Rajiv Gandhi a series of economic reforms were made that reflected a commitment to private business as a motor of economic growth (as opposed to the more centrally administered development regime of the 1950s and 1960s). In 1991 and economic crisis led India (then headed by Prime Minister Narasimha Rao and Manmohan Singh as Finance Minister) to seek out financial assistance from the International Monetary Fund which necessitated the formal opening up of Indian markets to foreign goods. This narrative of liberalization is often is often told as the increasing rise of private firms and the decreasing relevance of state-run corporations that dominated the planned economy in the 1970s. There is of course some truth in this and the effects of the explosion of foreign commodities, emergence of privatized media, and loosening regulations around foreign investment should not be underestimated. On the other hand, recent work has shown that these shifts have not displaced state-run concerns which remain important in many sectors of the economy (Kohli 2006). Rather than a narrative of decline, what we see is a transformation in which many state actors have

redesigned their operations to match private firms (E. Chatterjee 2017). The role of the private sector in infrastructure development has grown significantly with the rise of public-private partnership contracts (PPP) from 2002-2012 (Pratap 2014). In this context we should understand the CPWD site not as a last stand of state capitalism but rather as part of a larger transformation in state-lead capitalist practice. Indeed collaborations on government projects such as those offered by the CPWD have become increasingly important as the private real estate sector has slowed (Searle 2016).

Working on the Site

Before continuing we should note the social make up of the workers on the construction site I focus on. In many ways the site was quite similar to other construction sites in that workers came to it from across India. The vast majority of the workers on this site, like most new construction projects in India, were migrants from other states.[20] The majority of workers on the CPWD site came from the state of Bihar, although there were significant numbers from Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Haryana. Perhaps the most visible group of workers on the site was the general laborers and brick masons who came from West Bengal. Unlike their coworkers from the Hindi speaking states mentioned above, many of the West Bengali workers spoke little to no Hindi (while engineers, foremen and supervisors spoke no Bangla). Yet even among the workers from Hindi speaking states local dialects created and maintained divisions between workers brought by different *thekedar*. The plethora of dialects on the site meant that production, which always required

[20] There were a small number of skilled workers (stonemasons, electricians) who lived on the outskirts of Delhi and commuted to the site on a daily basis. Many of these workers were usually employed on smaller renovation projects around the city and had come to work on the site to provide temporary support to particular *thekedar* who were in need of more workers.

coordinating across trades was often as much an issue of linguistic translation as well as translation between ideologies of labor.

A key difference between the CPWD site and the site I studied in Gurgaon is that the CPWD site employed only men. While there are certainly modern construction sites that employ women, the lack of women on the CPWD site should be understood as an attempt to make the site modern. While I was unable to formally confirm the origin of this decision during my fieldwork, CPWD and Prakash Limited engineers told me that the policy was a personal decision by the Prakash Limited site-in-charge, a man named Prajit. Visits to other Parakash Limited sites, on which Prajit was not site-in-charge, confirmed that this policy was likely more widespread (although not necessarily company-wide). What is more important for our purposes is the rationale that engineers I asked gave me for the exclusion of women. I was told that if women were allowed to work on the site then male construction workers would bring their wives, who would then bring children. While some engineers I talked to mentioned that this would 'distract' workers, this rationale must be understood in the context of media portrayals of construction in India. The unsupervised, unwashed child playing with construction materials is a stock image of exposé accounts of the Indian construction industry (Wax 2008; Creches 2011). By excluding women from the site then Prakash Limited ensured a particular aesthetic of the workplace.

Yet construction work is gendered in another way that is crucial for this study. Women who are employed in the construction industry are generally relegated to the status of 'general laborer' or 'helper' usually assisting their husband or a male relative. As we will see the position of general laborer is a particularly low status position (see Chapter 2) with no real opportunities for upward mobility. For male workers becoming a 'helper' holds out the promise of learning a particular trade and becoming a *mīstrī* or skilled worker; this process is inaccessible to women because the work is considered to be too dangerous, or too strenuous for them to do (Suri 2000). In addition to the

gendering of labor the construction site as a space is gendered as a masculine space. The transience of the construction site and its relative anonymity allowed for the more or less regular indulgence of masculine excesses in the form of drinking sessions, trade in sexually explicit songs and illicit trips to Delhi's red-light district.[21] Many of my male informants mentioned that the construction site was not an appropriate place for a woman, and most of the women construction workers that I met were either accompanying their husband or a male relative. Despite this protection the construction site, with its lack of private spaces, especially for bathing, meant that women were often subjected to unwanted male attention. More generally the fact that one would let one's sister, daughter or wife work in such a way was seen as a sign of either extreme financial duress or lack of moral character by many male construction workers.

The gendered nature of construction work and the construction site itself is crucial for understanding the ways in which labor on the site transformed workers. The sorts of selves that emerged from this labor (see chapter 3) were masculine, based on gendered qualities such as being 'rough,' or 'hard.' Yet this should not be taken to mean that construction work was not transformative for women as well. Indeed, the discourses on 'habit' that I discuss in chapter 3 are quite similar to narratives told by North Indian women about moving to one's in-law's house after marriage (Kowalski 2016). On the other hand, because the overwhelming majority of my informants were men, I cannot provide a nuanced account of how female construction workers encountered the site or their work (for studies that address women in the Indian construction industry see Barnabas et al. 2009; Suri 2000; Karhad 2014).

Outline of Chapters

[21] In my experience this was something that was much more talked about and insinuated than actually practiced, however other scholars have noted that workers on especially urban construction sites purchase transactional sex (CITE). On the other hand, as Jonathan Parry has noted (2014), construction sites can also provide a context for pre-marital romances.

The chapters of the dissertation build an account of capitalist practice that develops the notion of ideologies of labor and uses this concept to rethink production. The first chapter, which builds on the historical and ethnographic context, developed in the introduction to provide an account of subcontracting in the construction industry. Subcontractors, or *thekedar*, are persistently characterized as stumbling blocks to the development of a truly modern construction industry. In media and scholarly accounts *thekedar* are depicted as immoral figures using ties of kinship, caste and village residence to bind workers to them while taking advantage of their relative lack of education and options. The chapter demonstrates how this image of the *thekedar* sits uneasily with the industry's near total reliance on *thekedar* to supply workers to even the most modern of construction sites. In image and practice then, the *thekedar* condenses precisely the tensions of modern construction outlined in this introduction. Rather than reiterate the charges of exploitation at the hands of *thekedar* the chapter seeks to nuance our understanding of the *thekedar*-worker relation through careful attention to the ways in which workers and *thekedar* negotiate this relationship. I argue that the *thekedar* not only provides construction firms with cheap labor but also provides workers with certain forms of recognition and remuneration that privilege long-term, if asymmetrical, relations of reciprocity. This is particularly valuable in the context of an industry in which formal employment does not guarantee a regular paycheck. Moreover, this relationship allows for a translation between understandings of labor developed between the *thekedar* and his workers and those developed between the *thekedar* and his construction firms. In this sense the chapter sets the stage for the analysis of translation and contestation between ideologies of labor provided in the final part of the dissertation.

Part I of the dissertation (Chapters 2 and 3) turns to the analysis of ideologies of labor. Chapter 2 focuses on a construction skill training program and argues that the very same actions—carrying bricks, digging, mixing concrete—are construed in radically different ways—as 'training' or

'*labour*'. At stake in this distinction are the different selves that will result from engaging in these activities. The students construed the activities as *labour*, a term that blurred the lines between a set of activities and the devalued persons who perform them, and worried that engaging in these activities would turn them into laborers themselves. On the other hand the training program administrators construed the very same actions as crucial elements of training that would transform the students from rural 'boys' into hardened 'men'. In both cases the meanings and effects of productive action were mediated through ideologies of labor. Chapter 2 also introduces a key theme across the dissertation, which is the contestation between ideologies of labor. As we see over the remaining chapters of the dissertation multiple ideologies of labor are sutured together in a single production process. Ideologies of labor, however, are not tied to persons rather they are part of complex stance taking practices.

Chapter 3 argues that ideologies of labor play a crucial role in shaping the ways the transformative effects of labor are oriented to and experienced. I do this by analyzing worker discourses about the ways in which the materials of their work (dust, heat, noise and speech) transform their bodies and selves. I focus on the ways workers claim that the material exposures of their trade have become their habit (*adat*). This habituation is marked by a certain fit between the body of the worker and the particular work done. In many cases this fit is ensured through self-medicating practices that including the consumption of alcohol, fruit and other substances. I argue that these comments and practices are part of an ideology of labor which construes the mundane material encounters that accompany particular trades as productive of particular worker selves e.g. bar-benders, stonemasons or welders. Once a particular trade becomes one's *adat* one is particularly fit to this sort of work and to engage in other sorts of work could lead to injury or, if pursued, a transformation in one's self. The chapter demonstrates that ideologies of labor are not bound to

particular actors as engineers presented and *adat*-based understanding of their own labor, while imposing a quite different ideology of labor in their supervising practices.

Part II the dissertation (Chapters 4 and 5) focuses on the translations and contestations between ideologies of in the production process. These tensions give rise to the claims of engineers and project managers that workers are 'backward' or 'traditional'. As I demonstrate in these chapters the tensions go much deeper than this and have to do with the way in which modern production on the site depends on certain structures of labor, such as the *thekedar*, while simultaneously figuring those forms of labor as 'traditional' or 'backward'. Chapter 4 illustrates this by tracing the use of paperwork across the different levels of subcontracting on the site. Here ideologies of labor emerge through the different uses and forms of documentation that guide production. This analysis focuses on the translational role of the *thekedar* who not only translates the architectural plan into actionable work orders but also the general need for 'labor' into the specific productive activities of particular workers. Yet, on the modern site, the translational work of *thekedar* is occluded by the forms of paperwork that engineers and project managers use to account for the progress of the site. Here the specificities of the *thekedar*-worker relationship are replaced by a calculation of pieces of material transformed by a homogenous labor.

Chapter 5 retraces the same structure of subcontracted production from the perspective of the wage. It draws particular attention to the different forms of remuneration—piece-rate, day-rate, loans—that exist at each level of subcontracting. For construction workers, *thekedar* and engineers, the mode of remuneration was just as important as the amount remunerated. Here too *thekedar* do crucial translation work, providing their workers with an augmented day-wage while collecting a piece-rate from the construction firm (itself remunerated through piece-rates). The chapter argues that forms and practices of remuneration make implicit claims about what labor is. That is, they enunciate ideologies of labor by actively recognizing and recompensing particular aspects of

productive activity. For example the mode of remuneration *thekedar* use to pay their workers turns on a division between 'money for food' (*karcha*) and the wage (refered to as 'payment'). While these payments are linked in *thekedar* account books they are distributed independently of each other, such that one's access to 'money for food' does not depend on wages earned. In addition to framing labor in particular way, e.g. as a form of service in a patronage relation, forms of remuneration have their own expectations of the obligations between givers and doers of work. I call these expectations moral economies of remuneration, and the chapter traces how a moral economy of the day-wage and the piece-rate come into tension through the production process. The result is that the very means of remuneration that allow *thekedar* to aggregate and mobilize workers come to mark them as 'greedy' or 'backward' according to the moral economy of the piece-rate.

The conclusion steps back from this 'shop-floor' analysis of the modern construction site to consider the consequences of this analysis. Attending to the contestation and translation between ideologies of labor on the modern construction site provides an account of the ways in which the most modern forms of production unwittingly produce the very partiality they seek to overcome. The very media of modern construction—such as the labor report and the piece-rate contract—depend upon even as they deny the translational work of the *thekedar*. The tensions that emerge in production over the meaning and value of productive activities are framed as the result of 'unprofessional,' 'greedy' or 'backward' workers thus lending material 'proof' to a notion of an 'almost' but 'not yet' achieved modernity. The result is that the way forward appears to be through increased attempts at modernization, attempts that target the 'corrupt' practices of *thekedar* and others. As a chronotope of production, the modern construction site then produces the very traditional categories and types of person that it purports to distinguish itself from. The modern construction site with all its contradictions is not a sign that Indian workers are being 'left behind' by the 'new India' that they are building. Rather, the modern construction site is a space of differential

incorporation that transforms heterogeneous labors into a form of production that simultaneously creates modern buildings and 'traditional' workers.

The modern construction site, then, is a very particular form of production yet the processes it manifests have a much boarder scope. The analysis of ideologies of labor, and the translational work of production, offers a vantage point on capitalist labor of all sorts. It insists that we begin from the material experiences of particular forms of productive activity; that we attend to the tools, materials, and actions that make up work. It reads Marx's insights about the excessive, open and creative dimension of human action on the world back into capitalist labor (Marx 1978; Hankins 2014; Bear, n.d.). Ideologies of labor draw attention to the ways in which actors construe these heterogeneous encounters as having particular effects, demanding certain forms of recognition, and as signs of an actor's character. Ideologies of labor do not emerge directly from one's position in relations of production but from the socio-material experience of labor be it one's own or another's. Furthermore, the contestations and translations between ideologies of labor shape all forms of capitalist labor as forms of embodied action are incorporated into capitalist projects of value creation. This approach to labor and production grounds both the abstract and particular dimensions of capitalist work as tentative achievements accomplished through everyday actions and interactions. Capitalist labor does not mark either the victory of a unitary logic of capital over local cultural forms or the reassertion of these forms in the face of capital. Rather it is precisely this tension itself that is generated through the process of production. The unevenness of capitalist development, this dissertation suggests, is built into the very semiotic forms of capitalist production.

Chapter 1
Being Someone's Man: The Persistent Problem of the Thekedar

We give everything to the thekedar…..we can even give our lives
—Stonemason's apprentice
If there were no thekedar then who would give us money?
—bar-bender

On the small plot in Gurgaon where an eight-story, 32-unit housing colony was being built, the end of the month brought with it a certain sense of excitement and anticipation. It was at this time that the civil engineer in charge of the day-to-day operation of the site would receive a massive stack of rupee notes from his boss, one of the owners of Singular Construction Limited, the main contracting company (see fig. 1). With this money in hand the engineer, Niraj, would begin to calculate and distribute the 'payment'[1] to the different sub-contractors on the site.[2] The sub-contractors, or *thekedar* as I will refer to them here, distributed the money to their workers which lead to a general influx of much needed cash on the site. The real excitement, however, began in the evening. The sudden influx of cash was the perfect excuse to have a party, which consisted of eating some kind of meat and getting a bottle or two of local alcohol (*desi*). As had become my custom, I accompanied the bar-benders on the site as they finished work for the day, washed the rust and dirt off their hands and feet, changed out of their dirty work clothes and prepared to head to the local outdoor market to procure the supplies for the night's festivities.

[1] The English term was always used.
[2] Wage payments will be discussed in detail in the following chapter.

Mitlesh, the bar-bending *thekedar,* would pay for the alcohol although the food costs would be split equally amongst the five bar benders that worked for Mitlesh.[3] When the bar-benders returned from the market we all piled into the low roofed hut that Mitlesh shared with Mama[4] and Mama's son. As we crouched around the edges of the hut Nakule, Mitlesh's brother-in-law (*sālā,* wife's younger brother), poured the alcohol into small tea glasses borrowed from a friend who ran a small shop on the construction site. Approximately one shot was poured into each glass followed by water to the drinker's specification. The mixture, known as a 'peg,' was slightly more palatable than the alcohol on its own would have been. Even so, the bar-benders didn't drink for the taste and pegs were downed in quick gulps. The night wore on as round followed round and we all became quite drunk. At one point, an argument erupted between Nakule and Mitlesh. Mitlesh, it seemed, had taken issue with something that Nakule had said, specifically its wording. Nakule had been ribbing Mitlesh, who had only just recently become a *thekedar*. While this group had worked together before this was the first time that they had worked under Mitlesh, and indeed Mitlesh continued to work alongside his men despite his changed status. Nakule began by drawing attention to this status by using the honorific form of the second person pronoun (*ap*). He said 'You're (*ap*) the *thekedar* and we're your *bande."*[5] Before Nakule could proceed, Mitlesh interjected 'You're my *aadmi*.'[6] But Nakule repeated himself emphasizing the *bande*. Mitlesh again countered with *aadmi*. As they continued like this things seemed to move from good-natured ribbing to anger. Finally, Mama announced that it was late and they should let their guest, me, go home to bed. This seemed to

[3] This number fluctuated as the work on the site increased and decreased in intensity. At its most intense Mtilesh had nine men working for him. These men were sent back to the village if and when the pace of work on the site slackened.
[4] *Mama* is the Hindi word for maternal uncle. The bar-benders did actually call this man mama, a name which I think he was given because he was Mitlesh's *mama* (maternal uncle). This pattern was repeated when Mitlesh recruited a man everyone referred to as Saḍhu, a term for one's sister-in-law's husband. The man was, in fact, Mitlesh's *saḍhu*.
[5] *App thekedar hain aur ham aapke bande hain.*
[6] Aap mere aadmi hain.

defuse the situation. When I asked them about it the next day everyone agreed that it had been 'nothing' (*kuchh nahin*) or 'nonsense' (*bakhwaas*).

On the surface this drunken argument would indeed seem to be nonsense, not least because *aadmi* and *bande* were often used interchangeably for 'man' on the construction site and in other spaces where 'rough' or informal speech was acceptable. Yet while the words can be used interchangeably, and often were on the construction site, they have quite different connotations. *Banda* is a 'rough' way of referring to men and would imply either extreme informality (as on the construction site) or disrespect. Combining this disrespectful reference term with the honorific pronoun *ap* heightens the hierarchical distance between Nakule and Mitlesh. Nakule's comment tropes on the asymmetrical usage of honorific terms that mark status hierarchies by addressing Mitlesh with a respectful form (*ap*) while selecting a common form (*bande*) for referring to himself and his fellow workers (Irvine 1985; Agha 1994, on "troping" see Agha 2007, 160). But the term *banda* also has specific resonances that made the implicit critique in Nakule's comment even stronger. Whereas '*aadmi*' is simply 'a man' or 'an adult,' the dictionary definition of *'banda'* includes glosses such "servant; slave" or "your servant (self-deprecatory term used in addressing a superior)" (McGregor 1993, 692). This argument over terminology then turns on the sort of relationship that exists between a *thekedar* and his men. By asserting that he and his fellow workers are Mitlesh's *bande*, Nakule calls attention to the power differentials between them. In asserting that they are his *admi*, Mitlesh insists on the reciprocal nature of the relationship.

Par of what made this argument so intractable is that Nakule and Mitlesh were pointing to different dimensions of the *thekedar*-worker relationship. On the one hand it is one of hierarchy and exploitation; Nakule works for Mitlesh who presumably turns a profit on Nakule's efforts. On the other hand the relationship is one of support and care; as *thekedar* Mitlesh guarantees some amount of labor and provides for food, lodging and other necessities. One's *thekedar* is also likely to provide

interest free loans for often quite significant sums, depending on the relationship. It is this intertwining of support and exploitation, inclusion and hierarchy, closeness and differentiation, that I thematize in this chapter.

The men in Mitlesh's group all knew each other from working together at different sites, and most were related to Mitlesh through kinship. In addition to this Mitlesh often worked alongside the men in his gang. In terms of his skill the only thing that set Mitlesh apart from his workers was his (limited) ability to read an architectural plan. This allowed him to determine the number, length and diameter of rebar needed which provided the technical basis for giving work orders (see chapter 4). Mitlesh had become the *thekedar* of the group when their previous *thekedar*, unable to make ends meet, had fled the last job that this group had worked on (also for Singular). Nakule's ribbing drew attention to this recent change in status by overstating the case. His comments hyperbolically frame the relationship between Mishra and his men. In this sense, Nakule's comments could be taken as a friendly jab at the status of his *thekedar*. Larger *thekedar* wouldn't even come to the site, yet Mitlesh regularly worked alongside his workers. But Nakule's insistence on *bande* in this instance was also meant as a critique of Mitlesh as a *thekedar*. Nakule's insistence that they are Mitlesh's *bande* implies that Mitlesh treats them not as men (*aadmi*) but as slaves. This was the hard edge of Nakule's joke that Mitlesh increasingly took umbrage with. Times had been tough for this work group. As Mitlesh had told me, 'work had become loose'[7] on the site. The shuttering[8] carpenters had not been keeping up with their work and as such there simply was not enough work for Mitlesh and his men.

[7] *Kaam dhila ho gaya*

[8] Shuttering refers to the construction of wooden forms into which concrete is poured. To make a reinforced concrete floor first the shuttering must be constructed which gives the floor its shape. After the shuttering is built the bar-benders install the rebar to reinforce the structure. After the rebar is in place the whole structure is submerged in concrete. Once the concrete has cured the shuttering material (usually wood or metal) is pried off. The support columns of a structure must be made out of rebar first. The shuttering carpenters then surround the rebar column so that concrete can be poured in from the top. As such the bar-benders and shuttering carpenters are continually waiting for each other. Similar situations, however, are constantly arising between different trades on the site.

Because Mitlesh, like many *thekedar*, was remunerated on a piece-rate but paid his workers by the day, it was possible for him to actually lose money when the work became loose (see chapter 5). In order to cut costs Mitlesh had been forced to institute rolling off days where one member of the group would take a day off without pay. Nakule's comment then also operated as a challenge or a critique pointing out that they were more like Mitlesh's servants than his men in that they were not being properly taken care of.

This chapter explores the ambiguous and dynamic relationships that bind construction workers and their *thekedar* together. To do this the chapter situates the ethnographic account of *thekedar*-worker relationships within larger discourses on the figure of the *thekedar* and of labor mediation more generally. While colonial and post-colonial discourse on labor middlemen has cast the practice as 'archaic,' historians of South Asia have argued that figures like the *thekedar* emerged only in response to large-scale colonial production projects (tea plantations, cotton mills and public works projects). Rather than oppose modern capitalist industry, the *thekedar* emerges out of and enabled its operation on the sub-continent. The 'problem' of the *thekedar* then turns on a productive tension between the sorts of social relations that capitalist accumulation depends on and the sorts of social relations that construction firms, investors and journalists recognized as appropriate to it, namely 'free' market exchange. With this framework, the chapter turns to an ethnographic analysis of *thekedar* relationships. The analysis moves beyond simple characterizations of patronage relations to illuminate the ways in which kinship, credit and trust are woven together in the ways that complicate the ideal wage-labor form even as they mobilize labor within it.

Images of the Thekedar

This section outlines the contours of the *thekedar* as a social figure through an analysis of different invocations of this figure in characterizations of the construction industry and beyond. In

addition to being an occupational position, the *thekedar* is a morally charged figure. From the Hindi term for 'contract' (*theka*), *thekedar* is one who contracts or a contractor. Yet the contract relationship is only half of the story. The *thekedar* is a morally ambiguous figure precisely because he combines the economic self-interest and calculation of the contract with the non-market forms of domination and control over his subordinates. As such he occupies a crucial 'hinge' or 'translating' position in this political economy. The *thekedar*, in popular formulations, is motivated primarily by greed and is willing to sell out those under his influence in order to gain an extra dollar.

These characteristic features of the *thekedar* are clearly illustrated in the use of the term in the political sphere. A recent headline in *The Indian Express* read "Mayawati 'thekedar' of Dalit votes, but silent on Dalit killings: Ram Shankar Katheria" (2016). The article details an accusation leveled by Ram Shankar Katheria—a dalit[9] politician with the ruling party (BJP)[10]—against Mayawati—a prominent dalit member of an opposition party (BSP).[11] Katheria is quoted as saying "people have become aware of the way in which Mayawati has become 'thekedar' (contractor) of Dalits for selling their votes" (ibid.). The implication was that Mayawati has control over the voters and is willing to deliver these votes to the highest bidder. As in the case of labor to be a *thekedar* is to hold a suspect amount of power over a vulnerable population, in this case ignorant voters. Note that Katheria's

[9] 'Dalit' is a self-ascribed term for the groups of people at the bottom end of the caste system. Bureaucratically these groups are referred to as 'scheduled caste'. The term 'dalit' was popularized by B.R. Ambedkar who was an important political leader for dalit communities and a key figure in the struggle against castism.

[10] The Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power in a landslide victory in 2014. The party is part of a larger set of political and social organizations with deep ties to Hindu nationalism. Importantly for this skirmish, there have been a number of incidents of caste-motivated violence under the current regime. Indeed Katheria had recently made some controversial statements at a condolence meeting for a local dalit political leader who had been murdered. Mayawati had criticized Katheria's remarks but, so Katheria claimed, remained silent on the killings. An additional dimension here is that the murder had taken place in Agra which was Katheria's constituency but within the state (Uttar Pradesh) for which Mayawati was the Chief Minister.

[11] The Bahujan Samaaj Party (BSP) is a national political party oriented toward Scheduled Castes (dalits), Scheduled Tribes (indigenous populations) and Other Backward Castes (lower caste Hindus). The party has had strong support in Uttar Pradesh where Mayawati was, until 2012, the Chief Minister.

accusation also highlighted the inordinate profit that the *thekedar*, in this case Mayawati, accrues to herself as the broker of various forms of labor.

Rather than the idealized relationship between elected official and the public in which a candidate's internal qualities determine voter choice, the epithet of *thekedar* suggests the immoral use of influence for monetary gain . This is precisely the image that Prime Minister Modi conjured in an election rally address in Jharkhand. He entreated the public to "give a decisive mandate to BJP for a strong and stable government in the state and not opt for a coalition as "thekedars" (contractors) will then enjoy all power" (PTI 2014). In a situation of coalition, Modi suggests, the BJP would have to answer to those politicians who can supply votes. Modi's plea then was a for a direct relationship between the people and the party as opposed to one in which unsavory thekedar mediated political decisions through supplying or withholding votes. In both cases the figure of the *thekedar* emerges as a sign of degenerate, or improper, mediation in which a vulnerable population (dalits or 'the people') is taken advantage of. These examples also illustrate how the characterization of one's opponents as *thekedar* erases the more widespread processes of mediation in which one's own party might also be implicated. Indeed the figure of the 'fixer' is ubiquitous in South Asian politics (Corbridge et al. 2005, Ram et al. 2012). References to *thekedar*, then, serve as much to purify the speaker's position as to 'uncover' an existing network of untoward relations.

In reporting on the Indian construction industry itself the term '*thekedar*' is less frequent due, in part, to the wide variety of contracting relationships and terms in the industry (a topic I elaborate on below). Yet the figure of the *thekedar* is still invoked and critiqued in articles that uncover the injustices of the 'contractor' or 'labor contractor.' Especially in international publications these narratives tend to employ the genre of exposé, 'revealing' the agony of a developmental struggle whose effects are still uneven. The following piece that ran in *The Guardian* is a good example.

> Labourers who have built the circuit for Formula One's inaugural Indian Grand Prix this weekend are living in destitution at their workplace, without shelter, sanitation or, they claim, the pay they were promised.
> Within sight of the undulating roof of the grandstand at the £130m Buddh International Circuit in Greater Noida, Uttar Pradesh, 13-year-old Raj Kumari, who has carried stones to make approach roads, is living with her parents in a tent made of salvaged plastic sheets.
> "Working here and living here is difficult," she said.
> The Guardian found nearly 50 labourers and their young children on Friday at the makeshift camp where they have been living for the last two months. The dozen or so shelters are only a few hundred metres from the main gates. Almost all are illiterate migrant workers from poor rural communities in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh. (Burke 2011)

This article employs a common trope of reporting on the construction industry in India: the juxtaposition. Indeed, I used a version of this in the introduction to introduce popular understandings of the 'modern' construction site in India. The second paragraph of the article opens by marking the spatial proximity, "within sight," of the luxurious race circuit and the "destitution" in which workers live. This move is repeated as the author notes that the "salvaged plastic sheets" are "only a few hundred metres" from the main gate of the track. This strategy of juxtaposition is often deployed in construction photography as well (see fig. 1).[12] These photographs and descriptions frame a key tension of construction work in India. It simultaneously brings about a developed, modern nation and marks the very exclusions of that project. In this way construction work condenses larger tensions around India's development more generally. The shimmering buildings and racetracks stand in for the promise of modern India while the dirty, destitute and suffering workers mark the limits of this promise.

We should note that these images and reports are not wrong. There is a striking juxtaposition of poverty and wealth in India's development processes and the construction site, as a space of production, brings these dynamics into especially poignant focus. When 93 workers have died in the course of building the Delhi Metro (Mathur 2009) and construction workers register

[12] There will be a photo here from a spread that LIFE magazine did during the run-up to the Commonwealth Games. I don't have a good version of the image yet but it's basically a construction worker on a rickety ladder, covered in plaster. Behind him you can see a large poster for a clothing company featuring a very dapper Indian model.

significantly higher morbidity rates than the rest of India's population it is not quite metaphorical to say that the structures of a modern Delhi are being built on the bodies of poor migrant workers.

The question then is not if, but how exploitation is occurring, and this is where we must nuance the account of news reportage. The article in *The Guardian* goes on to put the responsibility for these conditions squarely at the feet of the *thekedar*.

> The workers said that contractors who supplied the Jaypee Group, the circuit's owner, with labour to build the circuit – where 120,000 spectators are to watch the event on Sunday – have only paid them enough to cover basic living expenses for six months. They claim they were promised 120 rupees (£1.53) a day when they were hired.
> "Whenever we ask, we are given another date and told to wait," said Ratiyah Manapyare, who lives with his three children, aged one, five and eight, in a tent. "Of course we'd like to send the children to school but how can we?"` (Burke 2011)

While the term 'contractors' is somewhat vague since it could potentially refer to the construction firms that would have contracted with Jaypee Group, the fact that the contractors are described as having provided the labor for the project identifies them as *thekedar*.[13] As in other reports the *thekedar*, and the system of contracting of which he is a part, becomes the locus of the structural unevenness of development. The theme of under or non- payment of wages is a recurring one in reporting on the construction industry. What the article describes, the payment of only basic living expenses for six months, is surely a tactic on the part of the *thekedar* to keep workers bound to the site (D. Fernandes and Paul 2011; Akhtar 2011; Bellwinkel 1973). Yet, as I will elaborate more fully in chapter 5, it is not simply a result of the greed of the *thekedar*. The separation of payment for necessities (*kharcha*) from the payment of wages is a common practice among *thekedar* on construction sites and was expected by workers whether or not *thekedar* received money from their employers. Over my two years of fieldwork there were at least two occasions where the construction firm didn't pay any workers or *thekedar* for four months. Often this is the result of the construction firm, or the developer that employed the firm, being overextended. I do not know if

[13] As a rule construction firms (often referred to as 'contractors,' or 'main contractor') do not hire their own labor directly but rely on *thekedar* to supply them.

this was the case on the site described above but often *thekedar* dealt with such situations by reverting to only paying *kharcha*.

Just as the term *thekedar* condensed and occluded the wider connections of patronage in the political sphere, this news reportage has a tendency to condense the negative aspects of the construction industry into the figure of the *thekedar*. This opposition is often temporalized, with *thekedar*, and the contract labor they mobilize, being figured as a holdover and stumbling block for a modern construction industry capable of realizing the promise of development.

We can see this clearly in an article written in *The Hindu* in the wake of a scandal involving the gross violation of labor laws during the construction of a structure for the Army Welfare Housing Organization in Bangalore. "[T]he company concerned was found paying migrant workers Rs.50 per week as wages, as against the promised Rs.157 per day" (Basu 2011). Note, again, the theme of under-payment of wages. Although the article does not differentiate between the company and the *thekedar* here it is clear from the rest of the article that the laborers were provided by a *thekedar*. The article goes on to point out that such flagrant violations of labor laws, and promises, have been and remain quite common in the construction industry.

> The construction industry — even in its globalised avatar — relies on archaic systems of operation, such as the use of contractors for the supply of labour. The Contractor Raj, if one may call it, was a prevalent feature of the colonial mode of labour recruitment and production. The Royal Commission on Labour in 1929 actually recommended the abolition of the institution of the contractor….While there is little doubt that globalisation has contributed to increased business opportunities for the construction industry, things have not improved for the workers, who constitute the life and soul of the industry. The Bangalore episode has once again shown the extent of exploitation that still exists.
>
> (Ibid)

By citing the recommendation to abolish contracting in the colonial period the article frames the *thekedari* system as a persistent hold over from a dark past. In so doing it also figures the construction industry as stuck between two worlds. Despite its 'globalised avatar' the industry still relies on 'archaic' practices that remain obstinately in the way of a truly inclusive form of development.

In conversations with people involved in the construction industry I heard a slightly different version of this narrative. While employees of construction firms were generally silent on the issue of *thekedar*, or insisted that they only used the best ones and enforced safe, sanitary and comfortable living conditions, those working within industry development organizations were more forthcoming. The head of the placement department at the Construction Training Center (CTC), Mr. Sarangapani, associated *thekedar* and the use of contract labor with the abysmal conditions of work on the sites of even some of the most well respected construction firms. Mr. Sarangapani told me that the problem of poor working conditions was very widespread. This was because even relatively big companies like Ansal[14] will use *thekedar*. 'If you talk to Mr. Ansal, and you go to the office everything will be very professional, but he hasn't left the office for 10 years. The company is being run by people lower down.' He added that these people have all worked their way up from being laborers. Thus 'they are high up but they still think like down there [pointing to the ground].' This was why, he concluded, they 'squeeze all they can out of the laborers.' Mr. Sarangapani is right that often the construction firm (or main contractor) does not know, or chooses not to know, about the labor practices of the *thekedar* they use. Indeed, the representative of Jaypee Group contacted for the story in *The Guardian* claimed to have no idea that any labor laws had been broken and further stated that all sub-contractors were instructed to follow labor laws (Burke 2011). This kind of distancing of responsibility is a hallmark of the systems of subcontracting in other industries as well and is characteristic of supply chain capitalism (DeNeve 2014; Tsing 2009).

Mr. Sarangapani drew a clear distinction between the 'lower level' and the 'professional' office where everything 'might seem fine.' Yet, due to the contracted nature of construction, the people running the actual construction site were not the professional workers found in Ansal's head office but rather those managed by lower level supervisors and *thekedar*. Indeed, *thekedar* generally

[14] A famous construction and development firm responsible for building one of the first malls in Delhi.

played the most active role in the supervision of labor on the site; with a few exceptions I will address below. The problem, in Mr. Sarangapani's account, is that *thekedar* have a low mindset even though they have attained a higher level within the labor hierarchy. Note how these comments bring out one of the key tensions in the figure of the *thekedar*. On the one hand they are "high up" dealing in the modern legal form of the contract, while on the other hand they still "think like down there" as they perpetuate 'traditional' forms of exploitation on workers.

In Mr. Sarangapani's comments the problematic of development is recast as one of professionalism. The *thekedar*, and the contract labor system he is a part of, is ruled by a 'low' mind-set in which the immediate goal is to simply extract as much as possible from workers, with no thought for the long term goals of quality construction that institutions like the CTC were trying to instill. In this respect, Mr. S's sentiments echo those of scholars, like Fernandes (1986) who find that *thekadar*, driven by their 'lower level' mindset, are prone to cheating laborers out of pay, providing squalid living conditions and generally exploiting the laborers (but also cheating the company) at every turn[15]. Mr. Sarangapani astutely identifies a tension between the self-presentation of construction companies like Ansal and what occurs on their construction sites. I will return to this tension in chapter 5, but what I want to focus on here is the way that Mr. Sarangapani's comments locate the source of this tension in what we might call the *thekedari* mind-set. As in the larger media discourses on construction there is a move to condense structural tensions into the figure of the *thekedar* and the system of subcontracting he operates within.

The figure of the *thekedar* then does a lot of useful work in condensing and separating negative aspects of construction work from those potentially liberatory and triumphalist ones. Indeed, the term could even function to describe whole construction sites. For example, one afternoon I went with Rajan, the shuttering *thekedar* from the site I described at the beginning of this

[15] Chakrabarty (1989) notes the prevalence of 'corruption' in colonial accounts of labor middle-men in the Jute factories of Calcutta.

chapter, to visit a nearby site where he had recently secured a contract. He had assured me that it would be a useful comparison because the other site, a large housing colony for retired pilots with the Indian Air Force, was a very 'good' site. Rajan explained that the Airforce site was not like 'this sub-contractor-ish site' (*yeh thekedari site*). When I asked what made the site *thekedari* Rajan mentioned the size of the site (relatively small at one eight-story, 32 unit building), the size of the company (a small family run operation) as well as the lack of large machinery (cranes, etc.). That Rajan was himself a *thekedar* did not exclude him from invoking the figure of the *thekedar*. In referring to the site as *thekedari* Rajan implied that it was beneath his own personal standards and expectations for work since he was indeed capable of supplying large government construction projects with necessary labor.[16]

In these ways, then, the figure of the *thekedar* condenses a number of undesirable qualities—tradition, lack of professionalism, greed—with a power to exert undue influence on people. In media discourses the *thekedar* and the *thekedari* system, or contractor Raj, came to mark the recalcitrance of 'traditional' forms of labor organizing. Not surprisingly most legislation that was passed to ensure construction worker welfare was framed as abolishing or controlling *thekedar*.[17] Yet, as I have demonstrated in this section, invoking the figure of the *thekedar* was an all too convenient way of compartmentalizing the structural effects of uneven development. It figured them as the lack of development marked by the persistence of the *thekedar* rather than as the result of development. This later position is one that I argue for in the dissertation as a whole but a useful first step can be

[16] Ironically, it was Rajan's obsession with the Airforce project that had caused Mitlesh's work to become loose. Rajan had been moving his men to work on the Airforce site in order to keep up with the demands of the project manager there. The result was that he had very few workers left over to work on the smaller site and thus the shuttering work was not getting done on time. This ultimately resulted in Rajan being fired from the first site and moving all of his men to the Airforce site, while a new shuttering *thekedar* was brought in to take his place.

[17] A prime example of this would be the Contract Labour (Regulation and Abolition) Act of 1970. The act stipulates a number of regulatory procedures including licensing of contractors with a central government body. The act also calls for the establishment of a central advisory board capable of making the use of contract labor illegal in certain contexts.

taken by historicizing the *thekedar*. To do this we must place him in the larger context of labor mediation in South Asia.

Thekedar in History and Historiography

This framing of the *thekedar* as an 'archaic' holdover has a distinctly colonial origin. The article in *The Hindu* correctly notes that the 1931 report of the Royal Commission on Labour in India characterizes the contract labor system in construction as old, noting that it is a system of "very old standing" (GOI 1931: 193). Yet the news article takes the report at its word, characterizing the *thekedari* system as already 'old' in 1931 (i.e. implicitly precolonial), and thus intolerably 'archaic' in contemporary India. By contrast this section will put the *thekedar* and discourses about them in the larger historical context of modes of labor mediation and the colonial and historiographical discourses that surround them. The discourse on the 'archaic' nature of labor middlemen emerges alongside them in the colonial period. While these middlemen transformed and perhaps grew out of older relations and figures of authority, they were very much transformed by their role in mediating the encounter between colonial capital and Indian labor. Following Chakrabarty's formulation of History 1 and History 2 (2000), I argue that the *thekedar* emerged and persists as a problem because of the way that the *thekedar* embodies an inherent tension in capitalist production between abstract labor and the social bodies from which it must be extracted. The *thekedar* carries out the social work necessary to produce labor as a commodity, yet in so doing he himself becomes a figure of 'tradition,' an impediment to properly capitalist production. This is especially the case in the eyes of those wishing to associate themselves with 'modern' practices such as colonial administrators, contemporary construction firms, journalists or even some *thekedar*.

As we will see below the category of *thekedar* encompassed a number of different relationships of labor mediation. Yet, for the most part, *thekedar* fulfilled functions similar to the

historical figures of *sardar* (Chakrabarty 1989), jobbers (Chandavarkar 1994) or *maistry* as they are known in South India (DeNeve 2014; Picherit 2012). In his review of this literature Roy usefully groups these figures, from different times, industries and regions, under the category of 'labor agent' (T. Roy 2008). In Roy's usage this term refers to people who recruited and supervised labor, as well as translating between capital and labor (ibid.). Labor mediation through figures like a labor agent existed well before the colonial encounter in India and continues to exist in numerous industries across the globe (Bosma et al. 2012). Yet the labor agent, and particularly his 'archaic' character, emerged with the rise of colonial projects of accumulation. As Roy (2008) points out these "labor agents" first emerged in Indian historical accounts in the context of the trade in indentured labor to work on the plantations of Mauritius and Guiana. In the early and mid nineteenth century groups of migrant workers from Chota Nagpur (spanning current day Bihar and Uttar Pradesh) left their villages during famines in search of work. Labor contractors, who had agreements with particular plantation owners, found these migrant groups and convinced them to sign agreements that amounted to bonded labor conditions on sugar plantations (Kelly 1992). These labor contractors preferred to deal with one member of a migrating group and it is out of this position that the figure of the labor agent appeared. He would usually travel with his gang to the plantations where he was often transformed into a foreman.

The origins of labor mediation and the labor agent are unclear and, especially in the case of construction, probably impossible to pinpoint. The groups of migrant workers that traveled out of Chota Nagpur in search of work came from areas where a headman oversaw the village unit. In many cases the headman accompanied traveling workers and negotiated on behalf of the group (Roy 2008: 980). In the case of construction, Kerr (2006) points out that pre-colonial projects such as the Taj Mahal drew large numbers of workers from across the country. Particular caste groups came to be known as well suited for certain kinds of construction work and appear to have been relatively

mobile, following work from site to site (ibid.). Colonialism then should not be seen as creating the labor agent out of nothing. Studies of pre-colonial and early colonial labor relations (Moosvi 2011; Kerr 2006) remind us that colonial capital did not find a blank slate but rather found footholds and points of attachment in an already complex landscape of labor. The emergence of the labor agent in the colonial period drew on preexisting forms of labor organization and sources of social authority. Yet it also marked a significant transformation in these relationships as they were fit into a new regime of labor.

What was new about the labor agent, besides the forms of production and capital for which they provided labor, is the framing of this figure as traditional. However, this is not only an issue of representation since the framing of the *thekedar* as traditional continues to have real effects on the ways in which labor mediation is practiced and organized. Seemingly from the moment of his emergence, the labor agent appeared as a mark of India's transitional position between a traditional past and a modern industrial future. Historical analyses of the labor agent in India have had to contend with this framing of the labor agent, and labor contacting, as marking a transition from a local and pre-capitalist regime of labor to a capitalist one. Historians of labor in India have approached this question in one of two ways, seeing the labor agent as a response to the needs of capital or the needs of labor. There are of course crucial differences within these accounts as well. For example, within accounts that stress the needs of capital there remain quite important differences between the relatively economically deterministic explanation offered by M.D. Morris (1965) in which the labor agent was necessary to mobilize scarce labor and the more nuanced account of Chandavarkar (1994) in which the labor agent is a local form that was turned to the purpose of labor discipline by colonial capital. Unlike Morris, Chandavarkar points out that the labor agents mobilized power not only on the factory floor but also within the neighborhood through kinship connections. Likewise accounts that stress the needs of labor differ from some

sources arguing that labor agents were needed to translate between colonial capital and rural labor (Mazumdar 1973) or that the labor agent was part of the pre-capitalist culture of the workers who demanded it as a particular mode of authority (Chakrabarty 1989).

What is most important for our purposes is not so much the specificities of each of these explanations but rather the different ways in which these approaches handle the 'archaic' nature of the labor agent. As Chandavarkar argues in his account of the jobber system in the Mumbai cotton factories, colonial discourse framed Indian workers as stuck in a rigid system of tradition (2008, 124). The question for colonial historians and commentators was whether, and how, Indian workers could be pried loose from their moorings in the village and its traditional caste system and put to work in an industrial context. The Indian worker was seen as being, at heart, a peasant who could never fully convert to industrial labor discipline.

Interestingly this image of the recalcitrant peasant-worker was reflective of a mode of mobility that was in many ways imposed by the colonial regime. Kerr (2006: 100) notes that colonial ideologies pathologized and criminalized the movements of local groups deemed *too* mobile and in this way enforced a type of labor mobility approaching migrant labor, in which there is a return to a home village. At the same time, this movement back to the village was read as a sign of the peasant core of Indian workers. As Chandavarkar notes:

> It was taken for granted in this discourse that the problems of labour recruitment and control in these conditions required specially devised methods and institutions, suitably adapted to the peculiarities of Indian culture. In this way, colonial discourse came increasingly to represent the jobber [labor agent] *as a traditional institution* not only within the labour market but also as an integral feature of workers' culture. The institutionalisation of the jobber within colonial discourse also served to homogenise his role and his power. (emphasis added 2008: 125)

Like contemporary discourses around the *thekedar*, the colonial discourse on the labor agent occluded the connections between industrial production and the labor agent, preferring to see it as a

product of traditional culture at odds with modern forms of production. The jobber, like the *thekedar*, is a figure that is painted as traditional at the very historical moment of its emergence.

In Chandavarkar's analysis this representation of the labor agent as 'traditional' is to be understood as part of the colonial discourse of labor management. Colonial documents on labor should be understood, in this analysis, as elements in a complex strategy of capital to control Indian labor. Indeed, in his account, it is one of the mistakes of the 'needs of labor' historians that they take at face value the self-interested ideological representations of colonialists, that labor agents are traditional. This is precisely the logic behind Chandavarkar's critique of Chakrabarty's history of the jute mill workers in West Bengal (1989). In this analysis, Chakrabarty argues that the labor agent (in this case the *sardar*) should be understood as a form of traditional authority that was transposed onto the factory floor. While he was a functionary in the capitalist mode of production, he also embodied a form of authority that blended traditional figures of authority drawn from a shared pre-capitalist culture with workers (ibid. 113). Chandravarkar depicted this position as 'orientalist' for attributing to Indian workers the very same traditional mentality that colonial reports did. While Chakrabarty himself has critiqued his depiction as relying too heavily on a narrative of transition from pre-capitalism to capitalism (2000), even his history of jute mill workers argues for a more nuanced approach to capitalist practice than a "needs of capital" argument can provide.

Understanding the persistence of the labor agent as a result of the needs of capital presumes that the labor agent continues to exist because capital allows it. The role of the labor agent is simply to aid in the extraction of surplus labor, a task that is accomplished through 'cultural' means. Yet, such an explanation presumes that this function exhausts the labor agent's activities. As Chakrabarty argues, this glosses over the specific character of the labor agent's authority (1989: 107). Indeed, in a later reformulation Chakrabarty argues that this tension is inherent to the social dynamics of capitalist labor more generally (2000). Chakrabarty's analysis focuses on the way in

which capitalist production must create abstract labor, as a homogenous force, out of the embodied labor-power of workers (ibid.: 54). Repurposing a distinction in Marx (1976), Chakrabarty notes that capitalism divides historical experience into those events and actions that lead to the abstraction of a general category of labor from its social tissues, History 1, and those that remain outside the logic of capital, History 2 (2000, 64). What is important for our discussion here is the way in which this analysis reads a tension into the heart of capitalism itself: capital expands and progresses precisely through the repeated tension between History1 and History2 that it produces and reproduces (see also Mazzarella 2003). The labor agent comes to express this tension by uniting, in one figure, forms of belonging such as kinship and forms of commerce. In doing so, the *thekedar* brings to the fore tensions within wage labor—between History 1, which depicts wage labor as a simple market exchange and History 2, which relies on ties of kinship—that are normally elided in popular accounts of capitalist development in Idia.

In this regard it is telling to note the 'problem' of the *thekedar* and contract labor more generally recurs throughout the colonial and post-colonial period. The 1931 Report on Labor noted the ancient nature of the contract system and went on to argue that "with the great changes in conditions in recent years, we are by no means satisfied that its advantages are as great as they were in the past" (Government of India 1931, 193). One of the key problems was that the system did not ensure the timely and proper payment of workers. While the *thekedar* is a financially expedient solution in that he provides cheap labor, the system cannot ensure quality or humane conditions for workers. We should remember here that the concern for conditions of the working class was always ultimately caught up in concerns for the efficiency of production and the quality of the product (cf. Chakrabarty 1989). We can see this in the positive view the report gives toward direct employment as used in the construction of reservoirs at Bilaspur. "It was stated by the department [Public Works Department] that the work had been carried out much more expeditiously at a lower cost and that

labour was getting a bigger return than it would receive from contractors" (Government of India 1931, 193). *Thekedar* cannot be trusted to pay their workers well, which results in poor conditions and ultimately inefficient construction.

The commentators mistrust of the *thekedar* runs through the report and requires that special adjustments be made to account for the particular character of *thekedar*.

> So far as wages are concerned, no control is exercised at present, and the supervision of contractors is limited to the settlement of disputes regarding payment. We recommend that, in all cases where contractors are employed by the Public Works Department, the contract should contain definite provisions regarding the wages to be paid. We do not think the method adopted elsewhere of "fair wage clauses" can be applied without modifications in India, and in its place we suggest that the actual wages to be paid for different kinds of work should be specified in the contract.
>
> (ibid. 192)

The problem of the *thekedar* is framed through concerns for the wage of workers, which the colonial government frames itself as ensuring. *Thekedar* are depicted as in need of intense 'supervision' to ensure the proper payment of workers. Indeed, the mistrust of the *thekedar* demands a modification to the contract form, which was supposedly good enough to ensure the use of only properly capitalist forms of labor extraction. In the face of the untrustworthy *thekedar* the contract form itself must be altered to ensure that appropriate wages are paid.

The call for stricter and more exacting contracts would be familiar from contemporary accounts of the construction industry (Karhad 2014; Pattanaik 2009; Prosperi 2013). Yet this report also prefigures a 1946 report on labor conditions in the Central Public Works Department (CPWD) in which it is noted that the "most serious problem of labour under the C.P.W.D. is the prevalence of contract system of labour" (Adarkar 1946, 3). Moreover the problem is again that "contractors sometimes pay a smaller sum than is due" according to the Workmen's Compensation Act and Minimum Wage Act (ibid.). The report calls for action on the part of the government to abolish the system or "at least endeavor to put that system on a proper basis" (ibid.). The problem, as in the Royal Commission's 1931 report, is the unregulated nature of contract labor system, which fractures

the employment relationship by filtering work through multiple middlemen. In doing so it forecloses the promise of the wage relation to enact discipline and efficiency, to render the work expeditious. The 1946 report seems to echo colonial discourses on the cultural necessity of these labor agents, in this case figuring it as a result of the 'illiterate' and rural character of workers who therefore remain ignorant of their rights.

Similar critiques continue through the post-colonial period with a National Commission on Labour report in 1968 on the conditions of labor claiming that the "unregulated entry of contractors into the industry has been one of the main causes of the chaotic labour conditions, as also of much sub-standard and slipshod work" (National Comission on Labour 1968, 6). The report goes on to call for a system of identity cards to be issued along with written contracts. The so-called informal employment relations that the *thekedar* thrives on are always figured as an impediment to the realization of modern industrial relations of production in the construction industry. This problematic marks contemporary accounts of the construction industry that bemoan the persistence of contract labor in the industry (Vaid and Gurdial 1966; Vaid 1997) either due to the cultural factors (Dhongde 1999) or the fact that *thekedar* are understood as delivering cheap, pliable, labor (van der Loop 1996; Ravi Srivastava and Jha 2016).

One way of reading the continued recurrence of this critique of the informality of labor contracting in the construction industry would be to follow Chandavarkar in seeing the critiques as ideological representations. Written by government agencies, or non-governmental institutions representing industry in the case of Vaid (1997), the reports suggest that we might understand the persistent problem of informality as a sign that the *thekedar* actually performed valuable labor disciplining work despite being morally unsavory. Here the appeal to the illiteracy and migrancy of workers function to absolve the government of responsibility for a system that ultimately serves the interests of capital. This account is reasonable but it leaves the impulse to reform somewhat

untheorized. That is, if we understand these reports as only ideological tools for the further exploitation of labor, we are left without a strong account of why these reports constantly call for reform. Rather than presume that the reports are insincere in some way, Chakrabarty's analysis suggests that there might be something more enduring happening in the repeated call for stricter contracts and more fully enforced labor laws.

At stake in the reports, and in many of the contemporary accounts of contract labor in the construction industry, is the unruly sociality of the contract labor system. The problem is that *thekedar* engage in a contractual exchange with employers but then enforce a different sort of relationship with workers. In this sense the *thekedar* perpetuates a 'formal subsumption' of labor by maintaining a production system that does not try to alter the labor process itself (i.e. workers' productivity is not strictly monitored) but rather subsumes various labor processes under the wage relation via the figure of the *thekedar* (Marx 1976, 1019). The impulse to regularize construction labor can be read, using Chakrabarty's terms, as an impulse to expand the sphere of History 1, to more fully encompass the working relationship under the logic of capital in which abstract labor is extracted from the particular social relations that produce it, in this case the kinship, caste and residence networks that linked workers and their *thekedar*. The reports then reflect a tension of capitalist production in which an idealized image of production (History 1) constantly runs into tension with the social relations.

As Chakrabarty notes of History 2, these relations are neither pre-capitalist nor necessarily anti-capitalist. Rather they exist "in intimate and plural relationships to capital," but this means that any moment of capitalist production is always a tense compromise of History 1 and Hisotry 2 (Chakrabarty 2000: 66). Chakrabarty gives the example of machinery in the factory, which on the one hand performs the work of abstraction (this would fall under History 1) by rendering workers into mere living labor *qua* bundles of nerves and muscle. Yet this work is never complete as labor is

always encased in laborers who have developed in ways that while not necessarily oppositional to capital, exceed the logic of abstraction (History 2). Capitalist production does not effect an abstraction of human powers but rather creates, and recreates, a distinction between an image of abstract labor and a host of other embodied capacities, such as memory (Ibid. 67), that may interrupt the value creation process. The persistent problem of the *thekedar* then is rooted in this tension. The repeated claim of the reports—that the problem comes from informality and its answer lies in increased contractual regulation—is not an insincere ideological representation for the benefit of capitalists, but rather the expression of an underlying tension within the capitalist production of the built environment in India.

Ways of Being Someone's Man

The persistence of the *thekedar*, then, should be understood as part of the dynamic of capital accumulation in India, rather than its failure. Yet this argument does not as yet tell us about the particular content of *thekedar* relationships. The goal of this section is not to elaborate the specificities of *thekedar*/worker relationships for their own sake but rather to characterize the forms of sociality that the *thekedar* embodies. Here I join recent work on labor mediation and labor middlemen in South Asia (Picherit 2009; Osella 2014; DeNeve 2014) that attempts to further nuance characterizations of these relationships as patronage. This work focuses on the complex and conflicted situation of the labor agent (DeNeve 2014) as well as challenging the presumption that 'free' unencumbered labor on an open labor market is a beneficial or hoped for goal (Osella 2014; see also Ferguson (2013) for a case in South Africa). While the language of patron-client usefully points to certain aspects of these relationships that surpass the wage-labor relation, this terminology tends to gloss over important differences in forms of labor mediation. More importantly, it also tends to leave the ongoing maintenance of these positions undertheorized (Picherit 2009). In what

follows I begin by characterizing the variety of *thekedar* relations before moving on to a consideration of the relational forms through which labor is mediated on the site.

Forms of Thekedar

Throughout the dissertation I use the term *thekedar* to refer to individuals who supplied trade-specific workers to construction sites, generally recruiting workers through networks of kin, caste and shared village residence. One reason for doing so is to maximally distinguish *thekedar* from the organizations, or individuals, who managed the overall construction process on the site. These organizations or individuals are often referred to as 'contractors' since they sign contracts with the building owners for construction. On small residential sites these 'contractors' may even be referred to as *thekedar*. This is the usage that Rajan, the shuttering *thekedar*, was drawing on in calling the Gurgaon site '*thekedari*.' The people who were called *thekedar* on the sites where this research took place correspond to figures that are termed *mukkadam* using a Marathi word for 'foreman' (see Mosse et al. 2005) or *jamadar* (foreman) (Pandey and Johri 1969; Creches 2011).[18] What seems to hold true across different cases is that the structure of production involves a separation between the building owners, the institution responsible for overall construction, and the providers of both general and trade-specific labor. Yet unlike the jute and cotton mills dealt with above, the construction site often involved a variety of relationships between construction firms and the different *thekedar* that supplied labor for the site. Understanding the differences in these forms will help to create a nuanced account of the particular ways in which *thekedar* mediate construction labor. Additionally, the very heterogeneity of forms of labor mediation itself characterized construction

[18] In south India a similar figure is referred to as a *maistry* who supplies general laborers to *peddamaistry* which have entered into written contracts with construction firms or government bodies (Picherit 2009).

sites as spaces of production that were particularly recalcitrant to state and other forms of standardizing intervention.

Some scholars have made a distinction between 'labor contractors' and 'job contractors,' depending on whether the contract specifies payment on a per day, per worker rate or on the basis of measurement (i.e. a piece-rate) (Vaid 1997). Labor contracts are frequently found among *thekedar* who provide general laborers and brick masons to the site. These *thekedar* work almost exclusively on 'labor contracts,' making a small margin on each worker provided (cf. Bose 1975). The *thekedar*, especially if he has a large operation, will appoint a *munshī* (clerk, writer) to keep an attendance register of which workers worked on what days. More specialized trades such as bar bending, shuttering, stone masonry, plumbing and electrical work are almost always provided through 'job contracts' with *thekedar* being paid an agreed upon piece-rate (more on this in chapter 5). One engineer suggested that the reason for this distinction, between labor and masonry on the one hand and trades on the other, was the massive amounts of brick masonry work on any given construction site. Because of the sheer amount of work to be done one simply has to add more workers in order to complete it more quickly. Trades like bar bending or electrical work, on the other hand, are more sporadic. As such adding men is not necessarily the best way of getting the work done more quickly. The use of piece-rates gives the *thekedar* an incentive to ensure that each of his workers is as productive as possible while ensuring that the construction company doesn't have to pay for idle workers.

In addition to labor or job contracts, Shivkumar et al. (1991) make a further distinction between what they call "inside contracting" where the *thekedar* includes supervision and "labor only contracting" where the main contractor is responsible for supervision. *Thekedar* who supplied labor and brick masons often did so through labor only contracts. Construction firms usually consisted of upper-levels of management (project managers and engineers) and lower levels (foremen and

supervisors). Supervisors or foremen were often put in charge of particular groups of laborers or brick masons depending on the task at hand. *Thekedar* supplying other trade workers generally deployed inside contracting. If the *thekedar* was relatively small this might mean that the *thekedar* himself would work with, and direct, his men. In larger operations this usually meant that the *thekedar* would employ a 'foreman' to organize the day-to-day activities of his workers. Trade workers often policed these levels of mediation by deflecting direct orders given by the main contractor until they were authorized by their foreman or *thekedar*.

Crosscutting these distinctions are differences in the relations of payment. On the *thekedari* site in Gurgaon the laborers and brick masons were supplied by a labor *thekedar* on a labor only contract. However, their wages were paid by the site-in-charge[19], Niraj, who employed a method of payment used by many *thekedar* in which workers are given an advance for expenses (*kharcha*) in the middle of the month and then a wage ('payment) at the end (more on this in chapter 5). Although the *thekedar's* portion was paid separately, these workers spoke of their wages in terms of how much they earned and how much the *thekedar* 'cut'. The CPWD site, like many large-scale construction sites, employed 'Malda labour.' Malda is a district in West Bengal and Malda labour had become well known as cheap workers (Dharia 2014; se also Picherit (2009) on 'Palimpur labour'). These workers were also supplied on a labor only contract but were paid by the *thekedar*. In fact, the workers' families were given an advance of Rs. 4,000 ($80) before the worker came to the site. In return the worker would work on the site for 50 days, at the end of which he would receive another Rs. 1,000 ($20). The *munshi* provided food and also gave workers advances for expenses like cigarettes, chewing tobacco and chai. At the end of the 50 days workers returned to their village with the Rs. 1,000 less any advances they had taken from the *munshi*.

[19] As will have been explained in the introduction, 'site-in-charge' was a term used to distinguish the highest-ranking manager who was regularly on the site. This person was the one in charge of the day-to-day work of construction.

There are three larger points to draw from these different relations of labor mediation. First, *thekedar* wove together wage relations with relations of care; this could either render the whole site *thekedari* or insulated the upper levels of management from the messy sociality of labor. On the *thekedari* site Niraj, the engineer and site-in-charge, acted as a *thekedar* and offered advances for necessary expenses. On the CPWD site, by contrast, the labor *thekedar* received a check at monthly intervals for the labor employed. Thus the Malda labour *thekedar* separated the contracting company (Prakash Limited) from the relations of care (covering necessary expenses) and relations of credit/debt (offering advances) involved in catalyzing labor on the site. As we will see, this work appears in the accounting practices of Prakash Limited and the CPWD as so many man-days of abstract labor. The second point is that the modes of relation and exploitation in each case are different. On the *thekedari* site, workers are tied to the site, and the *thekedar*, through debt, arguably constituting a relationship of debt bondage given that workers were hard pressed to end a month without significant debts to Niraj. In contrast, the Malda labour worked under a more explicit form of unfreedom. This was essentially a form of indentured servitude in that they were working off a debt incurred as the result of a lump sum payment. The wage here is a lump sum for 50 days during which the demands made on a workers time were highly underspecified. Finally, that the construction site was characterized by so many different forms of labor mediation both reinforced the need for multiple levels of subcontracting, since construction company officials did not usually fully understand the arrangements made between different *thekedar* and their workers, and also rendered the site recalcitrant to many of the legal forms of aid created to ensure worker welfare. As discussed above these forms of aid focused on regulating the sorts of contracts that formal companies engaged in. Thus while Prakash Limited operated under contracts that ensured minimum wage payments and other labor standards, the *thekedar* who supplied labor to the site often

operated under less formal contracts. [20] This was not so much due to self-conscious strategy as it was a fundamental misunderstanding of the ways in which labor mediation operates in the construction industry.

Maintaining Mediation

Studies of labor contracting and other forms of patronage tend to end their analyses with assertions that the patron-client, or labor mediation, relation is based on ties of kinship or familiarity (in South Asia this is often caste). Yet the existence of kinship, caste, or other forms of connection does not in itself explain the relations of labor mediation that mobilize and direct workers and *thekedar* (Picherit 2009). To that end this section takes up the ways in which forms of connection actually functioned within the labor mediation relationship on the construction site. It is true that workers who were recruited to the site through *thekedar* tended to be linked to the *thekedar* through caste, kinship or village residence, but this does not tell us anything about what these connections meant and how they were mobilized on the site.

These forms of connection are mobilized on the site to undergird and structure the 'informal' contracts that characterize the *thekedar*/worker relationship. None of the workers that I met who were employed by *thekedar* had signed written contracts with them.[21] Rather workers would agree to verbally stated working conditions in the village and then travel to the site on the trust of a particular *thekedar*. Perhaps the most heavily articulated form of connection on the site

[20] Indeed even in cases where Prakash Limited had contracted with formal companies, as for the steel girders and false ceilings, the actual labor was provided by a *thekedar*. While the CPWD withheld the right to review any contractors selected by Prakash Limited, in this case these checks only extended to the company itself. The result was that the *thekedar* who provided labor for jobs such as installing steel girders or false ceilings were under even less scrutiny than those directly employed through Prakash Limited.

[21] This is in contrast to construction workers who searched for employment at urban intersections known as *labour chowk* (labor intersection). In the event that a worker was hired for longer than the day he might occasionally receive a handwritten contract, although most did not.

was spatial. A *thekedar* almost always recruited the vast majority of his workers from the particular district (*jila*) in which he and his family lived.

In the case of the main bar-bending *thekedar* at the CPWD site the district was Purnea in Bihar. This place was particularly important since the area had a strong cultural and linguistic identity due to the fact that a particular dialect of Hindi called Surjapuri was spoken there. As Sahud, one of the *thekedar's* foremen, explained to me these connections allowed the workers to have extremely flexible contracts. Workers could come to the site for ten days or a year depending on what they wanted. When I asked how they could make sure that workers wouldn't just take their advance and run I was told that the *thekedar* would 'catch' the workers at their houses. This prompted the foreman to reflect on marriage practices in his district. As he described the marriage practices in the primarily Muslim district, he mentioned that people did not generally marry anyone who lived in their village but married those from a nearby village. The result was that the chances of having affines (or the affines of relatives and friends) in surrounding villages were quite high. It was through these networks that pressure could be exerted on workers in order to settle debts.

Rahim, the bar-bending *thekedar*, made this link between the kinship network and the flow of work even more explicit. In his opinion *thekedar* didn't like to hire what he called *bahar ka admi* (lit. outside men). The use of the phrase illustrates the lamination of social and spatial connection that Sahud's comments on marriage practices suggested. To be 'outside' meant that the potential worker was not connected to the *thekedar* by any social relation but also not from the same area as the *thekedar*. When I asked Rahim why he didn't like to hire outside men, he replied that they were likely to 'take the money and run' (*paise leke bhag jaega*). This fear was not completely unfounded, and indeed I heard of numerous cases of workers and *thekedar* taking money and disappearing. Because *thekedar* were expected to provide interest free loans to workers, but could also delay payment indefinitely (as long as they paid *kharcha* or expenses) the amounts of money that could potentially

be lost were significant. Rahim went on to tell me that he had once hired a man from outside of Bihar but that, for the first six months, he had only paid him by the month and not given him any advances. Trusted workers could, and regularly did, take advances on their earnings to help with daily expenses but also occasionally for larger costs. Rahim had given one worker 100,000 Rs for the wedding of his daughter. The money was to be paid back in increments counted against the workers earnings. This was quite a large commitment given that the worker's daily wage was only 300 Rs.

Village residence and kinship are not so much primordial ties then as they are the infrastructure for the circulation of debt and credit relations. Yet it was not only workers who were bound by these social networks. A stonemason named Dhiraj told me that he was not afraid of the *thekedar* leaving without paying him because they were from the same village. He added that 'the *thekedar's* place is there so he can't flee' (*unka jagah wahan hai to nahin bhagh sakte*). Even if the *thekedar* were to flee the site Dhiraj could find him in the village. The construction site was a space of transience and uncertainty for both the worker and the *thekedar*. Within this context the village or the district became a stable site through which relations of trust and recognition could be fostered. Indeed, these relational qualities were in some ways more important than the 'primordial ties'. As Osella (2014) notes kin relations were just as likely to cheat one for personal gain as others.

What was more important, although much more fragile, was relations of recognition and trust. As Dhiraj put it, 'if you are known [to each other] then you wont flee' (*jaan pahechaan ho to nahin bhagoge*). Being recognized or known (*jaan pahechaan*) could refer to connections built through a shared village, kinship or caste identity but it could also refer to a history of working together or simply friendship. Dhiraj went on to explain that a worker could also watch the *thekedar* to see if he ran or ask other workers (as workers often did when thinking of switching *thekedar*). If not, Dhiraj

concluded, 'then you have to believe/trust. You can work on belief'. [22] Dhiraj's framing makes trust or belief (*vishwas*) appear to be a last resort something that doesn't quite offer the same certainty as knowing or sharing a village with a *thkeedar*. Rahim, and other *thekedar* that I knew, stressed the importance of trust but, like Pricherit's middle-men (2009), they often complained that workers no longer trusted them.

Trust, and its lack, was the logic behind the widespread practice among *thekedar* of issuing attendance cards to their workers. The *thekedar* (or his foreman) kept an attendance register in order to keep track of how many days each worker had worked. In addition to this register, however, the *thekedar* would also keep an attendance card[23] for each worker. Every few days (or at least once a week) the *thekedar* would update each workers card with the number of days worked and any advances taken and show them to the workers. One day I came across Dushrat while he was filling out the attendance cards for his stonemasons. When I asked what he was doing he told me that he had to show the workers their attendance cards otherwise they wouldn't work. The workers wanted to see how much they had earned. In a semi-joking tone he added that there was no trust (*bharosa*) anymore. While some workers kept their attendance cards with them, the only one who ever entered information on them was the *thekedar*. In this sense the card did not offer a check on the *thekedar's* accounting thereby implying a lack of trust on the part of the workers. Rather, the insistence on an attendance card made the accounting of the attendance register readily visible to the workers. It was this move toward transparency—embodied in the attendance cards—that Dushrat was decrying as a sign of the lack of trust between workers and *thekedar*.

[22] *phir vishwaas karna padta. Vishwaas pe kam kar sakte.*
[23] I'm not sure how familiar this term is. Attendance cards are index cards that have a grid on them and are especially designed for marking attendance. They are widely available in stationary shops across India.

Working for Someone: Belonging as Relation

One afternoon in August Rahim, the bar-bending *thekedar* and I, tried to catch any breeze we could as we sat out on a wooden platform nestled between the tin shacks that his workers lived in. He had not been on the site for a while as he had been attending to business on his other sites. For whatever reason though he did not seem particularly rushed to attend to any business and we talked for some time while the workers all returned to the construction site after lunch. At some point the conversation turned to the value of *thekedar*. Rahim was telling me that it was a very profitable business, claiming that he could make up to Rs. 400,000 ($8,000) a month when the work was good. When I asked about his workers he told me that they too liked it since he would pay his skilled workers (*mistri*) Rs. 300 and unskilled workers (*helpers*) Rs. 210 a day. If they were employed directly through a company like Prakash Limited, he claimed, they would only make Rs. 260 and Rs. 180 respectively. The *thekedar* paid workers better.

For the most part Prakash Limited, the construction company on the site, did not directly hire any workers. The majority of their staff consisted of various levels of managers (engineers, foremen and supervisors) who were paid monthly salaries. Yet they did have a small number of carpenters and welders that they directly employed at day rates. One such carpenter happened to be listening to the conversation Rahim and I were having and at this point he chimed in. He announced that he didn't even make Rs. 260. Instead he was only paid Rs. 300 for a day-and-a-half of work (12 hours). To make matters even worse, he was not allowed to take advances from Prakash Limited. Rahim nodded and, explained that the reason that workers don't get paid well in companies is because the ones that the company needs are the *thekedar*. As Rahim put it to me 'They [the company] get work done through us right…so they have to keep us.'[24] If the company

[24] *'Ham se kam karwate hain na…to ham ko rakhna hai.' Karwate* here is the double causative of *karna* (to do). While the single causative (*karana*) and the double causative (*karwana*) are often used

lost a worker, Rahim went on, it was not a big deal because they could always get another, but for the *thekedar* things were different. 'For us the worker is important. We must keep [them] so we give [wages] on time.'[25]

The reference to paying wages on time is generally taken to be the sign of a good *thekedar*, just as we saw non-payment is a sign of a bad one. The comment took on even more significance given the fact that at the time of our conversation Prakash Limited had not paid out any wages in three months. This time the nonpayment would continue for another month and there was another instance of nonpayment during my yearlong stint of fieldwork. [26] Prakash Limited was not alone in this practice and I heard accounts of instances of nonpayment in other construction companies and in other industries as well. For employees making larger sums these irregularities were perhaps only annoyances, but for the lower-level managers and workers employed by Prakash Limited these gaps in wages constituted serious dangers. Because Prakash Limited would not provide advances to employees, Prakash Limited supervisors that I knew were often forced to borrow money from friends on the site (often *thekedar*), or create credit relations with shopkeepers in the market in order to buy food and other necessities. Rahim's comments suggest that, for many workers, to be 'kept' by a *thekedar* was preferable to the 'freedom' of the market. Indeed this seems, at times, to be the case for company employees as well.

To be someone's man, as Rahim framed it, is to be connected to a *thekedar* but also to have the *thekedar* connected to you. Many of the *thekedar* that I met used a metaphor of family to describe

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interchangeably to mean something like 'to cause to do', Rahim's use of the double causative—along with *ham se* (with us)—emphasizes the crucial role of the *thekedar*. The double causative suggests something like 'to tell someone to cause to do'.

[25] *Ham ke liye worker jaroori hai. Hame rakhna hai is liye samay pe dete hain.*

[26] Each instance was associated with rampant rumors as the to the cause (usually some form of corruption at the highest levels of the company). During the second period of non-payment (which was company wide) Prakash Limited workers on a site in Jaipur went on strike. On the CPWD site the workers did not officially go on strike but there was significant foot dragging. Many employees told me that they could not work more quickly until they were paid.

the care that they provided for their workers. It would be tempting to dismiss these comments as self-aggrandizing obfuscations of the 'real' relations of exploitation at work in the *thekedar*/worker relationship. Yet in doing this we would miss the particular character of the employment relation produced between *thekedar* and their men. The relation, or some version of it, becomes necessary when construction companies refuse to undertake responsibility for workers, yet the idioms in which these relationships were articulated are also consequential. Aabir characterized this relation in explicitly familial terms. 'Just as a father takes care (*dekh bal*) of his children I have to take care of my men.'[27] The term that Aabir used, *dekh bal,* was used by other *thekedar* to describe their duties and specifically connotes the care of children. The idiom of familial care was not so much a way of obscuring exploitation as a way of characterizing a set of hierarchical yet reciprocal obligations that existed between a *thekedar* and his workers. The idiom of familial care, and the imperative to 'keep' workers tell us something about what being someone's man is as a particular type of social relation. They point to the particular social obligations and networks that the labor relation evoked for workers and *thekedar* obligations that often went beyond the notion of market exchange embedded in the wage form.[28]

The key medium of this social relation is cash, or perhaps—more specifically—borrowing rights. The literature on *thekedar* and contracting in the construction industry in India focuses much critical attention on the system of 'advances' (*peshgi*) (Vaid 1997, Shivkumar et al. 1991, Subrahmanian et al. 1982). Often a *thekedar* is given an 'advance' by the main contracting company in order to cover the costs of bringing workers to the site, which may include giving the workers themselves advances. The advance is counted against the future earnings of the worker. In some

[27] *jaise bāp apne bacchon ko dekh bāl karnā hai waise hamare ādmī ko dekh bāl karnā*

[28] Marx himself points to the social nature of the labor relation that exceeds the wage relation when he notes that unlike other commodities "the determination of the value of labour-power contains a historical and moral element" (Marx 1976, 275). This is because labor-power requires the whole person of the laborer who, in turn, has historically and socially specific needs.

cases the amount of money given to workers is so great that the working relationship borders on debt-bondage (as we saw above). Here I want to push a little further into the acts of borrowing that characterize the *thekedar*/worker relationship. These acts simultaneously bind the worker to the thekedar but also provide a certain amount of support for the worker. Furthermore, these acts are evaluated in moral terms.

All of the *thekedar* that I met—with the exception of the Malda labour *thekedar* who provided food as part of the contract—divided the wages paid to workers into two categories. In the middle of the month workers received an advance for living expenses called *kharcha* (expenses). At the end of the month they would receive what was called '*payment*' which consisted of the wages owed for however many days were worked that month less the *kharcha*. In practice the 'payment' often included extra money given out on the basis of need.[29] In addition to this, the *thekedar* is expected to provide interest free loans (*udhaar*[30]) to the workers for large expenses such as weddings or the construction of a house in the village. These payments, and their appropriate disbursal, are not only figured as moral forms of relation by *thekedar*—as forms of filial care—they are also figured this way by workers.

The moral nature of the *thekedar*/worker relationship was perhaps most visible in the provision of *kharcha* which was spoken of by workers as being primarily for food. Providing good *kharcha* meant paying the money out on time and keeping up with the often significant fluctuations in vegetable prices. The payment of, or nonpayment, of *kharcha* directly reflected a *thekedar's* moral character. One afternoon I was with a group of stonemasons when they struck up a conversation with the two electricians who were working in the same room. Since one of the electricians was

[29] It was often the case that, after the subtraction of the *kharcha*, workers would not have any, or enough, left over to make it to the next payment.

[30] The word *udhaar* does not specify an interest free loan. Although only one of my interlocutors made an explicit distinction between 'loans' (with interest) and *udhaar* (without interest), it was generally known that loans from *thekedar* would be counted against future earnings without any interest.

Nepali, the conversation quickly turned to the differences between the two countries including the price of vegetables. Someone remarked that vegetables were very expensive in Delhi to which everyone nodded. This got the Nepali electrician complaining about their *thekedar*. 'He doesn't even give us money for food he's that kind of man.'[31] To which the other electrician added 'he says after toiling you will get money…if you don't eat then how are you supposed to work.'[32] 'First a man eats then he can work'[33] concluded the Nepali electrician. In his first comment the Nepali electrician explicitly links the nonpayment of *kharcha* to the moral character of the *thekedar*, his failure carry out a particular action in the appropriate way (i.e. before the work is done) is framed as a sign of the type of person that he is. The electrician goes on to frame this action as going against the general rules of the world (first a man eats then he can work). In this way, the payment of *kharcha* is placed within a moral universe in which it stands as the necessary antecedent to productive activity.

Likewise, the correct payment of *kharcha* was seen as a mark of a good *thekedar*. Indeed this payment was often referred to as 'food money' (*khane ka paisa*). To be provided food, and other necessities, as an advance on one's productive activity was an expected benefit of being someone's man. Recall that even the *thekedar* of the destitute workers on the F1 racetrack was giving his workers *kharcha*. Of course the non or delayed payment of wages is testament to the asymmetrical nature of these relationships yet, as an alternative to the free market, the moral relations of dependence entailed in being someone's man may have seemed the lesser of two evils.

This was highlighted in a conversation I had with one of the workers who was installing the 'drop ceiling' at the CPWD site. The conversation had turned, as it often did, to the differences in employment in India and the US. I was explaining that in the US you only received wages and nothing else, meaning no *kharcha* and no *udhar*. The worker immediately responded that this meant

[31] *kane ke liye bhi nahin dete aise aadmi hai'*
[32] *'woh bolta hai ki mazdoori karne ke bad paise milenge….agar khaenge nahin to kaise kam karenge.'*
[33] *'pahle aadmi khata phir kam kar sakhta'*

that in the US you were 'on your own' (*akela*). He went on to explain that that, in India, if you were on your way back home and the train broke down in a village near yours you could simply stop in to anyone's house and explain what was happening. The stranger would surely take you in for the night and let you leave freely in morning. In the US, he concluded, this wouldn't happen. The worker's immediate connection between a lack of informal credit and a lack of social connection and neighborliness is telling. In a world where you cannot even expect an interest free loan from your employer, how could you expect kindness from a stranger? Here *kharcha* and *udhaar*, and their lack, are indexical of the existence of larger networks of social care. Note the way that social proximity grounds these social networks. It is a village that is near one's own where one can expect generosity just as it is the *thekedar's* proximity, both socially and spatially, that grounds the flow of credit and support (coercive as it may be). *Kharcha* and *udhaar* come to stand metonymically for a whole host of other social relations of care that both support workers while also keeping them rooted to spatial networks controlled by *thekedar*.

Conclusion: Ambiguous Mediations

The comments in the epigraph of this chapter illustrate both the asymmetry—'We can give everything to the *thekedar*…we can even give our lives'—and the centrality—'If there were no *thekedar* who would give us money'—of labor mediation for construction workers. Interestingly, it was Nakule who uttered the second phrase. Despite his complaint that he and his fellow bar-benders were *bande* (slaves) of the *thekedar*, he himself recognized the institution as central. Indeed he made this quip when I foolishly asked why he wouldn't simply work directly for the construction company. His response is not simply about money per se, but rather about receiving money in appropriate ways. The *thekedar* provides money but in ways that, ideally, create an asymmetrical relationship of care where food and social forms of reproduction are taken care of in ways that

exceed the wage-labor relation. As the first comment points out, this relationship is necessarily equal. Workers can, and regularly do, give their lives to *thekedar* by working long hours in deleterious or dangerous conditions. Both of these elements, the asymmetry and the reciprocity, combine in the form of mediation that *thekedar* create.

It is precisely this combination that made Mitlesh and Nakule's argument so intractable. The bar-benders were both the *thekedar's* men and his *bande* (slaves), if we understand these terms to refer to the reciprocity and asymmetry of that relationship. To be someone's man is to be cared for in particular ways while to be someone's *banda* is to be exploited. It is this complex play of reciprocity and asymmetry that is glossed over in classifications of labor mediation as the simple persistence of 'archaic' patron-client relations in contemporary industry. These claims, emerging alongside 'modern' construction,[34] mark the *thekedar* as a container of the messy sociality of the labor relation.

The *thekedar* appears as 'archaic' against the ideal of the market exchange of labor. These are the relations appropriate to capitalism, in which labor is sold as a commodity like any other. On the one hand, the *thekedar* supports this image of labor by supplying workers on a contract basis. Yet, at the same time, the relationships through which the *thekedar* is able to supply labor in this way rely on the ambiguous space of belonging characterized in Mtilesh and Nakule's conversation. To be a *thekedar's* man is to be constantly negotiating the tension of *aadami* and *banda.* Here producing and maintaining recognition (*jaan pahehan*), trust (*bharosa, vishwas*) or familial care, are crucial. These relational effects are material, they depend on the appropriate distribution of money, the filling out of attendance cards, not to mention the long hours of toil on the site. This is the messy sociality of the employment relation that crosses and re-crosses neat boundaries between economic and other forms of social relation.

[34] This is a reference to the theme of the first chapter of the dissertation, which takes up a comment made by an industry development proponent that construction 'in the modern sense' in India only began in the 1850s, around the time that the CPWD was established.

As we will see in later chapters, *thekedar* use this space to mobilize the productive powers of workers in ways that are tractable to capitalist production. In so doing they mark a point of tension in capitalist production itself where productive power, that is the capacities of embodied and historically formed social actors, is captured as abstract labor, the universal force necessary to create value. The *thekedar* then functions as a *cordon sainitaire*, containing the messy sociality required to mobilize labor within the so-called patron-client relationship, while engaging in the piece-rate contracts of the construction company. At the same time, the *thekedar* himself appears as a stumbling block, holding back the progressive development of more rationalized forms of capitalist production. The persistence of the *thekedar* as a problem, then, is rooted in the forms of ambiguous mediation actual *thekedar* perform on the construction site. As we have begun to see in this chapter these mediations form a space of translation between very different understandings of what labor is and how it should be organized and remunerated.

Part I: Ideologies of Labor

This part of the dissertation puts forward a semiotic analysis of labor based around what I call ideologies of labor. The chapters argue that we cannot assume that labor is neutral category referring to purely technical—means-ends—activities of production. Rather, as chapter 2 demonstrates, the very same activities can be construed in drastically different ways. The contestations between ideological construals of labor at the training center were central in shaping the overall effects of the training program. Ideologies of labor, then, have material effects in the world. As chapter 3 demonstrates, the very socio-material transformations that labor brings about are shaped by particular ideologies of labor. A focus on ideologies of labor draws our analytical attention to the ways in which actors construe the heterogeneous experience of productive action. This orientation toward labor brings together semiotics and political economy not by attending to the political economy of semiotic practices (although for influential examples see Irvine 1989; Shankar and Cavanaugh 2012; Keane 2003), but by focusing on the semiotic constitution and contestation of one of the most material elements of political economy: labor. The following chapters explore this dynamic through a recurrent tension that emerged at a construction skill training center (chapter 2) and in the reflexive comments of workers on their chosen trades (chapter 3).

As described in the introduction, the term derives from the literature on language ideologies in linguistic anthropology (Kroskrity 2000; B. B. Schieffelin et al. 1998). In this literature the term ideology does not have the pejorative sense of being a distorted image of reality that the term takes on in some critical theories (Marx and Engels 2007; Althusser 1971). Rather the premise of this

literature is that all signification, and thus all communication, is ideological. The goal of analysis then is not to reveal phenomena as ideological but to understand how ideologies come to shape the phenomena in question. This position is crucial for understanding language ideologies, and ideologies of labor, but it is not unique to linguistic anthropology. Scholars in other realms of anthropology and in critical social theory have taken a similar approach to ideology as a constitutive element in social life (Latour 2004; Markus 1995; Žižek 1989; 1994).

The literature on language ideology (or 'linguistic ideology,' or even 'ideologies of language') contains many important internal differences (Woolard 1998), but this analysis draws on two stands of language ideology. The first is that language ideologies constitute implicit models of language use that account for perceived language structures and patterns of use (Silverstein 1979). It is in this sense that language ideology is linked to metapragmatics, those cues that actors communicate to each other about how their talk should be understood (see Introduction). As Silverstein argues, language ideologies are central to communication in that they constitute the very metapragmatics that allow us to construe moments of talk as actions of a particular sort (e.g. asking directions, ordering a meal) (Silverstein 1998, 2003a). The second strand I adapt from work on language ideology is the way in which language ideologies make connections between linguistic forms and social phenomena, specifically types of people. Thus in a their work on language ideologies and linguistic differentiation, Judith Irvine and Susan Gal analyze "the ideas with which participants and observers frame their understanding of linguistic varieties and map those understandings onto people, events, and activities that are significant to them" (2000, 35). Through the mediation of ideologies, pragmatic acts (e.g. speaking, or working in particular ways) may become emblematic of certain of types of person.

In the following chapters I adapt this work on language ideologies in approaching the semiotic dimensions of labor. In chapter 2 I demonstrate that labor cannot be understood as a

neutral category of political economy. An activity as seemingly simple as carrying bricks only became understandable when it was construed by actors who appealed to very different ideologies of labor. The arguments and tensions that broke out at the training center also demonstrate the contestation among ideologies that construe the very same activity in drastically different ways (Gal 1998). At stake in these different construals are the very selves that different forms of action will create. While administrators saw carrying bricks as part of developing professional workers, students saw it as potentially transforming them into laborers. Chapter 3 takes up similar issues in arguing that the transformative experience of labor is fundamentally shaped by metapragmatic reflections on labor. In speaking about how the habitual exposure to the materials of their work had transformed them workers attempted to regiment the ways in which their labor transformed them into different types of people. Taken together the following chapters bring attention to the generative dialectic between material acts of labor and their construal. This sets the stage for the analysis of capitalist production in the second part of the dissertation.

Chapter 2
"We Are Not Labour": The Hazards of Training

The Strike

Halfway through their second day of their "General Work Supervisor" training the students from Assam had had enough. The hot sun, bland food and hard labor had driven them past the point of grumbling; it was time for action. They had come to the Construction Training Council[1] headquarters in Faridabad to learn how to be good supervisors. But since their arrival they had been instructed to clear construction debris off the site and carry construction materials across the site. In their view, if they were supposed to be learning how to be general work supervisors (GWS) then they were students and should not be treated as construction laborers. After the lunch break all 30 students went on strike. They marched out of the basement dormitory and headed for the ground floor offices of the senior administrators. In their dark blue coverall uniforms with matching blue hard hats and black safety shoes, the students looked quite imposing. When I asked one marcher what they were doing he told me that they were not going to do any more activities until their demands were met. It was, he informed me, called a 'strike' (*bandh).* Someone must have alerted the head of the training program because he and a few other senior administrators were waiting for the students. Before the head of the program could say anything the self-appointed leader of the students loudly proclaimed ' 'Sir, We feel that you think of us as laborers, we are not labor we are students."[2] The other students almost immediately joined in, voicing their agreement and adding grievances ranging from drainage problems in the dormitories, which had caused waste water to back up into the bathrooms, to the lack of non-vegetarian food options in the mess hall.

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[1] "Construction Training Center," hereafter CTC, is a pseudonym as are all names of persons unless otherwise noted.

[2] *Sir, hamko lagta hai ki aap log hame labour samajhte hain, ham labour nahin hain ham students hain.*'

Confronted with the cacophony of complaints the head of the training program at the time, Dinesh Mukherjee, insisted that everyone be silent for one moment. He then told the students that they would have to voice their complaints one at a time. The initial enthusiasm quickly subsided as students nervously voiced grievances directly to Mr. Mukherjee. When the students began to repeat each other, Mr. Mukherjee and another senior administrator assured the students that the sewage problem was being fixed before immediately launched into a long lecture warning the students of the dangers and difficulties of 'this line of work'. 'A doctor works with his hands, do you call him a laborer?'[3] How, they asked, were the students supposed to effectively command workers if they had not done the work with their own hands first? The administrators implied that what the students thought to be labor was actually valuable practical training that would prepare them for the hardships of work in the construction industry. Perhaps a shrewd strategy on the part of the administrators, the students all eventually headed back to their assigned stations to continue their training.

Yet Mr. Mukherjee was not a manager and the students, who had come on government scholarships, were far from unionized workers. That students would strike is not surprising but it is curious that they would do so precisely to contend that they were *not* laborers. Stranger still is that a mere three weeks after this incident another protest was lodged by a new batch of students from Assam. This time it was in the form of a letter, signed by the vast majority of the students and written in English. It was addressed to the director general of the CTC, Dr. Prakash. It opened with the claim that the students felt that they were being treated like laborers rather than students. The letter went on to outline a series of demands aimed at reducing the amount of physical labor, altering the food and making work in the hot climate more tolerable. Dr. Prakash responded to these demands personally, instituting some of them but also reiterating

[3] '*Doctor hath se kam karta hai, usko labour bolte hain kya?*'

that the jobs that they were training for would be tough and they would need to learn to tolerate different climates.[4] The students returned to work but with each new batch of students the same complaints seemed to resurface. In fact this drama, turning on anxieties of doing and being recognized as labor, was played out almost constantly during my six months at the CTC.

This chapter explores why these tensions recurred with such frequency at the CTC. I argue that this tension is the result of the structure of training provided at the CTC. At their core, these skirmishes were rooted in a divergence between the way students and administrators construed labor. These construals included implicit models of how certain actions would transform the self of the actor. I call these construals ideologies of labor and the chapter traces how students and administrators appealed to different ideologies of labor in construing training activities. Framed in particular ways, students and administrators experienced the activities of the training center in radically different ways. Ultimately these tensions illuminate the ways in which attempts to modernize the construction industry have ambiguous effects as they must negotiate the divergent significances of labor.

The training center provides a particularly good example for investigating ideologies of labor because the contestation between ideologies turned on the difference between two named categories of action; 'labour' and 'practical'. According to senior administrators clearing construction debris was 'practical' a form of action that grounded theoretical knowledge in experience and was invaluable in transforming student subjectivities. Administrators often described the training process as turning 'raw' 'boys' into hard working employees that could meet the requirements of modern construction companies. In this discourse 'practical' stood as a sign of experience and future utility within the industry. Students, on the other hand, saw clearing construction debris as

[4] Dr. Prakash drew the students' attention to me as he explained that I had come from a very cold climate, Chicago. But I had managed to adjust to the heat and dust of Faridabad. This was a technique that many people at the CTC drew on in exhorting students to work and not complain.

labour kam (labor work), or just *labour*, a type of action that was only appropriate for laborers and had the potential to transform the actor into a laborer. Importantly students did not see trade work (e.g. masonry, carpentry) as *labour*, rather the term was reserved for tasks that done by those who would be called 'general laborers' in the U.S. or '*labour*' in India.[5] The repeated clashes between the administrators and students then had to do with the fact that the very same physical activities were oriented to in radically different ways. As 'practical' training held out the promise of becoming a professional, yet as *labour* training threatened to make one into a laborer.

In teasing apart this tension it is helpful to view training at the CTC as a ritual practice (Silverstein 2004). In the training program students engaged in activities that looked like work except that they were designed to draw attention to the very form of the action itself. Students were exhorted to ask questions, write down terms and do calculations while engaging in various activities. In this way the actions—stacking bricks, applying plaster, sanding walls—were framed not as pragmatic acts of labor but rather as dynamic representations of labor that would ensure student learning. According to CTC administrators, engaging in these controlled figurations of work would effect an internal transformation in students making them into better supervisory workers. Yet, as Keane (1997, 24) points out in drawing attention to their own form, ritual frames dramatize their own possibility for failure. There is always the chance that the ritual practice will not effect the intended transformation that the activities will remain *labour* and not become 'practical.'

As we will see it seems that the ritual of training does and perhaps cannot but fail at the CTC. This chapter explores the hazards of failure that are brought about by the very materiality of the signs mobilized in the ritual. The acts of labor that the training program consisted of were not

[5] In construction these tasks included digging, carrying construction materials, and mixing cement or mortar.

neutral objects. Rather they were forms of action that were associated with particular sorts of actors. Student complaints made these connections between action and actor when they framed training activities as *labour*. Administrators, in contrast, rejected these connections and asserted others by framing training activities as 'practical.' Drawing from linguistic anthropological insights, I argue that the productive act, like discourse, retains the associations "of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life" (Bakhtin 1981, 293). The hazards of training at the CTC turned on the ability to separate or connect productive actions from various contexts.

This approach to the cultural valuation of actions brings the tools of linguistic anthropology to bear on an older literature that stresses the cultural determination of seemingly technical practices such as labor. Marshall Sahlins argues that productive activity doesn't emerge from an unmediated relationship to human needs (1976, 128). Rather, productive activity always occurs in a "world already symbolized" (ibid., 123) by "virtue of a meaningful constitution of the objectivity of objects" (ibid., 142). For Sahlins this cultural order fundamentally shapes such seemingly objective forces as capitalist exchange (Sahlins 1988; cf. Taussig 1980). Yet, as we will see by looking more closely at what unfolded at the CTC, practical actions do not have predetermined cultural significances. Sahlins' analysis tends to stress the importance of the local cultural system the reworks global capitalist forces in its own image. While cultural systems are not left unchanged in this process the analysis often proceeds as though the encounter is between two, more or less, fixed logics. My analysis in this dissertation suggests that the significance of practical action is itself an arena of struggle in which the meaning and consequences of productive actions are constructed, contested and constantly threatening to collapse.

The CTC in Faridabad

An Apex Organization

The Construction Training Council is a national organization that has been dedicated to the modernization of the construction industry since its inception. In fact, it is the CTC's focus on 'practical' training that, it claimed, set it apart from other training programs. They currently operate centers and offices across the country. On my first day of fieldwork at the new headquarters in Faridabad, Haryana, I was told about the origin of the CTC. The CTC had come in to existence when its founding members (most of who came from the construction industry or various parts of government) approached the Planning Commission of the Government of India about creating a Ministry of Construction. Construction, they had argued, was absolutely crucial to the development of the nation. Not only did all development require the construction of various infrastructures (ports, roads, factories, etc.) but the construction industry itself is the second largest employer after the agricultural sector. Yet, unlike agriculture, construction had no ministry. The resultant lack of standardization and regulation was the reason that the construction industry could not keep up with the changing needs of a modern nation and remained a stronghold of 'backward' and exploitative labor practices (cf. Vaid 2003). At the time there was not enough money to build another ministry so the Planning Commission told the founding members to create a council that would do similar work. According the CTC website, in 1996 the CTC was created with the stated goal of "for the first time in the country, provid[ing] the impetus and the organisational infrastructure to raise quality levels across the industry."

Training is only one, albeit a major, activity in which the CTC engages. They also conduct quality assessments of construction projects and training programs as well as hold conferences on industry issues and develop standardized techniques for project bidding, contracts and dispute resolution. The Director General, Dr. Prakash, is the highest authority within the organization. Directly under him are a number of people that I refer to as senior administrators. While most of the

senior administrators had their own areas of focus there was a large amount of movement and individuals were constantly being reassigned to different projects despite the fact that their titles would remain the same. Senior administrators as well as higher-level office workers (e.g. accountants) ate lunch with each other in an air-conditioned area that was separated from the area where all other employees ate. While the senior administrators decided general training objectives it was the instructors who were responsible for supervising the students on a day-to-day level. There were usually two or three senior instructors who were supported by anywhere from five to ten other instructors. All instructors ate lunch in the same cafeteria that the students ate in. Many of the instructors had worked in construction for some amount of time although a number had been placed as instructors immediately after completing a CTC training program. Like the senior administrators, instructors were constantly being reassigned to different centers and projects. This constant circulation of staff leant a sense of confusion to the center since routines and relationships often changed with new staff members.

The CTC's various activities center on the notion that the construction industry will not only provide the physical infrastructure of a modern nation but can also provide its human infrastructure in the form of capable workers.[6] The construction industry draws labor from rural areas where people are often only employed in the agricultural sector. These people come to cities through labor contractors and are often taken up in the construction sector. By providing training to these individuals the CTC sees itself as answering one of the pressing problems of the nation, which is precisely the lack of skilled manpower in construction(Mitchell 2008). Specifically, the CTC sees itself as intervening in and rationalizing the typical 'on the job' training that construction workers receive by apprenticing

[6] Training programs existed for all major construction trades, surveying and even site accounting. My use of the term 'worker' is meant to capture these levels as opposed to say engineers and foremen who were at a higher level of management and *labour* who did tasks that were deemed to require no skill.

themselves to more skilled workers (*mistri*).[7] Many of the training programs designed by the CTC are commissioned by state governments and specifically target dispossessed populations. For example, the CTC developed a program in combination with the Madhya Pradesh state government entitled "Lawbreaker to Nation Builder." The CTC's website described the program as a "rehabilitation and skill empowerment program for jail inmates in the state." In this way, the CTC is active in a larger discourse that construes training as the primary way to develop India's human resources (Rodrigues 2000; Vaid 2003; Srinivas 2008).

It is the focus on 'practical' that CTC officials see as setting their training programs apart especially from the older system of training carried out in the Industrial Training Institute (ITI) system. The Director General of the CTC, Dr. Prakash, told me on many occasions that the ITI system was ineffective because it wasn't in tune with the needs of contemporary business. By contrast, the CTC was constantly in touch with industry players through organizing conferences, employment fairs and awards ceremonies. In addition they tailored training programs to specific companies and projects. Indeed almost all CTC literature states that the organization was the result of a public-private partnership between the Government of India *and* the construction industry. 'Practical' training on actual construction sites, or close simulations thereof, ensured that their graduates had the skills necessary to perform in India's ever expanding and developing construction industry. To this end the placement department at the CTC, headed by Mr. Sarangapani, organizes monthly *Rozgar Mela* (employment fairs) in which construction companies are invited to come to the headquarters and interview recent CTC graduates. As Mr. Sarangapani put it to me the goal was to make "these boys" into men so they could "produce" for the companies in which they were placed.

[7] Most of the workers that I met during my fieldwork told me that they had learned their trade through first apprenticing themselves by becoming a 'helper' to a skilled worker (*mistri*) in their chosen trade. Often helpers would give some portion of their wages to their *mistri* in return for informal lessons in the trade.

It was a daunting task but one that, I was assured, was absolutely crucial to the development of the industry and by extension the nation.

A "Different Situation"

Given the grandiose goals of the CTC at the national scale it was somewhat jarring to see the actual headquarters of the organization as it existed in 2011-12. During this time the headquarters were under construction. The plot was situated just off of National Highway Two about an hour south of New Delhi. This section of the highway was littered with commercial trucks stopped at one of many repair shops, transport company offices or loading/unloading areas. To get to the site one had to pass between two almost completely empty malls that abutted the highway and then travel down a dirt road past a number construction sites in various stages of completion. All the construction work combined with the hot, dry winds of early summer meant that the landscape was coated in layers of dust, giving the false patina of age to a landscape that was still very much in becoming. At the beginning of my six months only two of the basement levels of the headquarters had been completed.[8] CTC officials and office workers carried out their daily tasks on the upper basement level in the midst of brick laying, concrete pouring and other construction activities.

The CTC had its own head contractor, architect and supervisors, some of whom were CTC graduates, in charge of the paid workers that were brought in from a nearby labor *chowk*[9] and paid a daily wage. Not unlike construction workers on other sites, the students were housed on the site along with the instructors and lower-level staff. The students lived in large, sex-segregated rooms[10]

[8] By the time I left the ground floor and two other floors had been finished in addition to some landscaping.

[9] The Hindi word *chowk* means intersection. The term labor chowk refers to an intersection where those willing to work gather and wait for employers. Work of this sort is often, as in this case, paid for at a negotiated daily rate.

[10] The CTC and the government programs they worked with were dedicated to training women for employment in the construction industry. This had to do with the fact that women were considered a vulnerable population in India but were also underrepresented in the construction industry in

with rows of cots and communal bathing facilities. Vegetarian food was provided at set meal times during the day and was prepared in a communal kitchen by paid staff. Students varied in age from 16 to mid-thirties. Some had finished only high school while others had completed their bachelor's degrees.

For many of the students this was the first time they had spent any significant amount of time away from family or even their place of birth. Adjusting to the climate, food, and work schedules of the training program was often quite difficult for students. Students who came from other parts of the country commented on how different Faridabad was from their homes. Situated along the highway the area surrounding the CTC was not particularly inviting. In fact, many young students had understood that their training was to take place in Delhi itself.

Yet the CTC saw opportunity in this same landscape. Faridabad, we were told at a CTC sponsored event, was poised at the edge of rapid development. Faridabad's present was compared to the satellite city of Gurgaon in the late 1980s just before its meteoric rise to its current status as a hub of modern, transnational business. This potential was marked in Faridabad by rising land prices and would be hastened by the extension of the Delhi metro into Faridabad. Similarly, the unconstructed nature of the training site was to be seen as an opportunity. The half built perimeter walls and unplastered hallways were perfect opportunities to engage in 'practical' lessons, allowing students to gain both the embodied experience of construction work as well as a conceptual understanding of its tools and techniques. Ideally the environment mimicked the environment of an actual construction site, while still being a training center. Part of what the students must learn is how to work in all conditions, to adapt to new food and different living situations. As Mr. Mukherjee told the striking students, this was a different situation (*vibhann stitz*) but this is what it would be like

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general. Indeed, women in the Indian construction industry are most often laborers or office workers (architects, designers). Occasionally they also work as site engineers. The women trained at the CTC were presumably expected to get jobs as General Work Supervisors. This was problematic since construction companies refused to hire women as General Work Supervisors, arguing the workers would not respect and heed women on the site.

when they arrived on a new construction site. A good supervisor had to be ready to work anywhere at anytime and under all sorts of conditions.

The most popular training course during my fieldwork at the CTC center in Faridabad was a training course for becoming a General Work Supervisor (GWS). As such this paper will focus almost exclusively on students involved in this training program. Students trained as GWS often got jobs with construction companies where they worked as the lowest level of management. This meant that they had the most direct contact with laborers and, to a lesser extent, skilled workers (see chapters 4 and 5). They would often be provided rudimentary lodging on the site near to, but separate from, the other workers huts. In addition to the GWS program the CTC headquarters also offered training courses for work as a land surveyor, site accountant or as a quality lab technician. All three-month courses are approximately Rs. 15,000 ($270), which included meals, a uniform and a bed in one of the dormitory rooms. This amount of money was a significant sum as students came from families in which the parents worked as low-level government employees, shop owners and in some cases farmers.

The Program

During my fieldwork the majority of students at the CTC were being trained as part of a government scheme to develop the Northeast region of India.[11] These students' tuition was covered by the scheme and had been paid to the CTC in advance. By contrast most of the students from other areas relied on their parents to cover the tuition and travel expenses associated with the training

[11] The 'Northeast region' refers to a group of seven states locate just north and spreading east of Bangladesh. This area is seen as remote and many of the states have significant indigenous populations. The Indian state has a complicated relationship to these areas, one of which, Nagaland, has made multiple and sometimes violent attempts to secede from India. Assam is largest, most developed of these states and thus most of the students on this program came from there.

program. The vast majority of these students were from the Hindi-speaking states (especially Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan) and Hindi predominated in both formal and informal settings on the site.

All of the training programs at the CTC lasted for three months. Upon arrival at the CTC students were issued hard hats, coveralls (*dhangri*), gloves and usually safety shoes. In addition each student was given a packet containing a note-pad, pencil and the General Works Supervisor Manual (other trades received specialized manuals in addition the GWS one). During the training program students were expected to work six days a week with Sundays off. Training days were divided between 'practical' and 'theory' with most of the day being spent on 'practical'. The day would usually start at 8:00 in the morning, immediately after breakfast. Students would be split up into work groups. These groups were often different from day to day, despite the best efforts of administrators to turn these groups into teams with leaders that would cohere across the entire program. Once divided the groups of students were assigned to an instructor and given a task. The task would be some piece of construction work that was currently being undertaken at the headquarters. Common tasks included brick laying, building scaffolding, earthwork, concrete work and general cleaning. This practical training section went on for about four hours with a tea break at around 10:00 am.

After lunch GWS students attended a 'theory' section, which most often consisted of a lecture given by one of the more senior instructors or occasionally a senior CTC administrator.[12] The lectures were supposed to focus on a certain portion of the GWS manual that was given to all the students. In practice they would often go off-topic. Some of this may have been the result of the fact that the manuals were all written in an extremely formal register of Hindi that borrowed heavily from Sanskrit. This language was alienating for all of the students especially those students from Assam and other northeastern regions in which the Hindi was not the medium of education. The

[12] Students in other programs had their own 'theory' sections, which were usually lead by one of the instructors who specialized in the particular program (e.g. land surveying).

result was that students almost never read the manuals and even the instructors tended not to use them in their teaching. After the lecture students would resume practical training but this time would be split up according to their particular specialization. Work would end at around 6:00 in the evening. Dinner was served from 8:30 to10:00 and the gates, which were guarded, would be closed soon after.

In general the CTC made an effort to tightly control the students' movements. Their explicit concern was student safety especially given widespread reports of women from the Northeast being the targets of sexual violence in Delhi. Almost all of the female students at the CTC had come as part of the government scheme to develop the northeast. Many of them were not used to such restraint on their movement and this was a constant source of tension. Occasionally these students were able to convince one or more of the male staff members to accompany them on day trips to Delhi or to night outings to the local markets. For the male students, being away from family offered a space to engage in a variety of illicit social behaviors such as experimenting with *pan*[13] as well as other chewing tobacco products and in frequenting the local bars (*theka*) that were set up on the other side of the railroad tracks. Indeed, there was an unspoken rule of avoidance and silence when, as often happened, students and instructors would stumble upon each other at the bar.

I should note before moving to specific events on the site that despite the foregoing description there was a high degree of variability in the training programs at the CTC. Indeed it often seemed that the structure of the GWS program was in a state of constant flux. The daily schedule outlined above was only instituted after a petition was sent to the DG. In addition to, and possibly because of, the constant changing of senior administrators and instructors, students frequently would be divided up into different groups as part of new plans for circulating the students through different 'practical' stations. The result was that students and instructors would

[13] *Pan* is made by mixing lime, betel nut and other ingredients inside a betel leaf. Most varieties include tobacco and many use mass produced varieties that can be mixed with tobacco.

engage in daily negotiations over where students should go, what they should do and under which instructor's supervision. While self-funded students arrived at the training center at a more on a more or less rolling basis, those on government scholarships would arrive in batches of thirty or so that were spaced about two weeks apart from each other. Yet all the students carried out the same 'practical' activities and attended the same 'theory' classes. The result was that it was almost impossible to track the progress of a student since topics were learned in a nonlinear fashion.

This confusion was not so much the result of the lack of a plan but rather the result of the profusion of plans emanating from senior administrators, senior instructors and instructors. At one point there were three instructors who had taken it upon themselves to take attendance and monitor which students were with which instructors. Each of them dutifully filled out an attendance sheet with the names of instructors doing 'practical' and the students that were with them. The intention was to use this information to split the students up into groups and make sure that every student group worked with each instructor, who were based at different stations on the site. The problem was that these three instructors each produced only partial charts that contained conflicting information. The students would use this to their advantage to get out of working at 'practical' stations that they didn't like or to work with an instructor that they especially liked. In lieu of a master attendance sheet there was an almost daily negotiation between students and instructors about where they should be and what they should be doing.

Among students, and to some extent among instructors, time spent at the CTC became the only reliable index of a student's skill level. Students would seek advice from and look up to those students who had been at the CTC longer. By virtue of being at the CTC for a prolonged period of time, a student would absorb five or six different perspectives on any given task (e.g. brickwork) from

different instructors.[14] The information was gleaned through the students' own questioning of instructors. Indeed senior administrators would often exhort students to ask questions and write down what they learned. They would often ask to see students' notebooks to make sure that they were writing down valuable information. In this way, training was the result of didactic interactions in which knowledge was produced, disseminated and transcribed rather than the result of following of a particular syllabus or structure. Such didactic interactions were just as likely to occur between students (often through copying a friend's notebook) as they were to occur between an instructor and a student.

Doing Work, Getting Information

According to the CTC students at the headquarters engage in a form of training that is based around an activity known as 'practical'. The English term was used by CTC officials to designate a type of activity (e.g. *abhi practical karenge* (now we're going to do practical) and a valuable form of knowledge (e.g. *ajkal practical jaruri hai* (these days practical is important)) which implied a self who had 'practical'. 'Practical' was opposed to *labour* which could be used to describe forms of action (often in the construction *labour kam* (labor work)) and a type of person (e.g. *labour aya* (the laborer came)). This slippage between actor and action is important for understanding the stakes of disagreements about whether a particular task was *labour* or 'practical.' I use 'labor' in the American spelling as a way to neutrally refer to these activities. Thus 'labor' should be understood as referring to the general construction activities undertaken as part of training

[14] Indeed, there were quite a few points on which the instructors seemed to disagree with each other and students would have to change their answers and style of working to fit the current instructor. I was once with a group of students who were learning to build scaffolding using pipes and connectors. Originally the students were told that the connectors were called "couplers." Some time later another instructor came by and, on testing them, corrected this saying they were called "joint clamps." This was subsequently corrected by another instructor who told the same group that they were called "joint locks." Each time the instructor insisted on the importance of getting the term right.

while *labour* and 'practical' are particular construals of those activities. Making these distinctions will help us attend to the fact that often what was at stake at the CTC was precisely which framework should be used to understand labor and its effects. The very same activity is at once seen as 'practical' or *labour* by different actors and at different times. These distinctions have serious effects for the actors and, as we shall see, the possibility of their slipping from one to the other is an endless source of anxiety. I argue that it is precisely this inherently hazardous quality of action—that it relies, as a source of meaning and stability, on metapragmatic framing— that lies at the heart of student complaints of being treated as *labour*.

According to the senior administrators, student complaints about being treated like labor were not to be taken seriously. The students simply wanted to avoid working hard because they were lazy. On this reading the complaints of being treated as laborers were seen as being of a piece with the claims of stomach aches that students made or the foot dragging that other students engaged in to avoid hard work. As we will see this interpretation of the complaints doesn't account for their specificity. It cannot explain why students were much more likely to lay bricks, a hard physical task, than they were to carry them. At issue here was not the work ethic of students, as administrators alleged, Rather, what was at stake were the values attached to certain forms of labor and the imagined selves and futures that they were linked to. For students, the training at the CTC blurred the lines between learning and *labour*. I take up this issue through an analysis of the joking practices employed by some of the students in which the implications of doing certain forms of work are presented and commented on.

When I first arrived at the CTC I was embedded with a group of students from Amethi, Uttar Pradesh. They had completed two of their three-month training program to become general work supervisors (GWS) at the CTC center in Amethi and had been transferred to Faridabad to get practical experience on a fully functioning construction site. The students never formally protested

against the CTC for being treated as laborers. However they voiced their anxieties about becoming *labour* through jokes (*mazak*) (cf. Ramaswami 2006). An incident that occurred early on in my time with the students from Amethi nicely illustrates the contours of these worries.

> Vijay and Rahul were working on scaffold set up against one of the boundary walls. They were laying bricks but had run out of *masala* (mortar). Vijay called to one of the other students to bring masala. His requests quickly dropped down the respect register '*Aur masala chahiye…..jao jao masala leke ao…..are ja masala la*' (We need more mortar…..go, go take some masala and come back, go bring masala!). While they were waiting the instructor overseeing them came by and lightly chastised them for not doing anything. At this moment the student who had been assigned to look after the *masala* arrived carrying a bowl of *masala* and pushed it in their direction. In a loud voice Vijay announced '*Deko, labour a gaya*' (Look the laborer has arrived). The student protested slightly but was directed to go and get more *masala.* Later in the day Harish, who had been assigned to the earthwork station came over to take a look at the brickwork and to get some reprieve from digging. He tried to ask Vijay something but instead Vijay said in a stylized voice and using English 'Get away from here you dirty labour.' Harish turned his attention to the wall and pointed out that Vijay and Rahul had laid one of the bricks incorrectly. They had laid the brick perpendicular to the wall (as a header) in a layer where the rest were parallel to the direction of the wall (stretcher). In a similarly stylized voice and in English Rahul responded, 'It is not our problem…boss told us is OK'. When Harish continued to question him, Rahul broke frame and switched to Hindi as he tried to explain why he had placed the brick as he did.
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For all the students that I knew at the CTC, brickwork was one of the more preferred 'practical' assignments and was seen as being more legitimate than, for example, digging or debris collection. Yet brickwork was contentious. While students were willing to spend long hours building up the boundary walls around the CTC headquarters they were reticent to mix the *masala* or carry bricks. Those assigned to mix and carry *masala* had to transport it to the work area in the very same *tusla* (bowls) used by the laborers on the site. Students assigned to this task often didn't get a chance to actually place the bricks. That is, they had to act as laborers would act. The students laying the bricks, on the other hand, acted as *mistri* (masons) on a construction site would. Vijay and Rahul's comments play on this slippage between training and labor. Yet it's not just that certain students act *as* a *mistri* or *as* a *labour*, they in fact do exactly the same work (if with far less skill and efficiency). Indeed, at the CTC students often worked side by side with paid *mistri* and *labour* with only their uniform to distinguish them. Moreover, in

brickwork especially (because there are necessarily two roles) the students take up superordinate and subordinate positions to each other. Indeed, the form of Vijay's cries for *masala*, especially in their most impolite form (*ja masala la*) mimic the 'rough' forms of speech found across hierarchical positions on a construction site.[15]

While this inhabiting of different worker positions (*mistri*, *labour*) was not explicitly part of what the CTC considers 'practical', the enactment of various types of work was. That is, the special form of learning that the CTC purports to give the students comes from a series of indexical-iconic actions. The students mimic the actions of workers who they are in fact, often, working with. Training at the CTC then could be seen as a sort of ritual process where a transformation of self, from a 'raw' 'boy' to a hardened supervisor, is effected through repeatedly producing dynamic figurations of construction work (Silverstein 2004). Through the dynamic figuration of construction work the lessons of experience are congealed and the students emerge as the bearers of 'practical'. Yet the students' comments point to the possibility of failure. Effective ritual operates through "its property to seemingly self-entextualize" so as to project in the moment of interaction what it dynamically figurates (ibid. 626). CTC administrators saw the training program as a place in which work experience was figurated. Students engaged in activities that were like construction work but, by virtue of being conducted with instructors and in conjunction with theory courses, they offered a reflexive perspective on the action that ultimately allowed students to master it in short amount of time and in a systematic fashion.

Yet, as the comments of the students suggest, what is being figurated is not necessarily construction work as a neutral bearer of experiential knowledge. The student comments suggest instead that what was being figurated at the training center was particularly valued forms of

[15] Indeed, construction sites in India (as in the U.S.) are widely known for their 'rough', immoral character. This is exemplified in impolite verb forms (e.g. *ja, la*) as well as the wide use of profanities.

action (e.g. brick laying, digging). Vijay's joking uses of "*labour*" are only targeted at students doing tasks that a laborer would do (I.e. carrying *masala* and earthwork). Moreover, Rahul's comment enacts a skilled worker identity by invoking a 'boss'. The particular activities through which construction work is figurated threaten to bring their own interdiscursive resonances into the training ritual. These resonances mark the activities of training not as techniques for gaining knowledge (or at least not uniformly so), but as variously valued forms of labor. On the one hand this is a general tension. By virtue of being material objects (or in this case actions) signs are bundles of qualia, which allow for the possibility of divergent interpretations (Keane 2003). On the other hand, as Keane notes (1997), the ritual frame brings attention to this possibility. It is because of the reflexive attention to action inherent in training that the tensions between the ideological construals of students and administrators emerge in such explicit ways.

The fact that activities that could be seen as *labour* were the activities that were put forward as the foundation for 'practical' knowledge was especially incendiary because of the particularly strong associations that *labour* has in India. As such it is extremely difficult to decontextualize these activities in order to recontextualize them as the basis of 'practical'. Rather, as the comments suggest, the students saw training not as figurating construction work, as administrators had hoped, but particular forms of activity on the site and their associated personae. Thus the instructor becomes a supervisor ('boss'), the students laying the bricks become *mistri* and the students carrying *masala* become *labour*. Calling a student who mixes *masala* or digs "*labour*" construes what is an indexical connection between action and actor as an iconic one. Under this ideological construal the fact of doing labor, action that would be done by laborers, is presented as a sign of an essentialized self namely a *labour* (Irvine and Gal 2000). In this way 'practical' training runs the risk of figuring the students as *labour*, and not simply as doing labor, thus effecting a transformation of a very different kind. It is the anxiety surrounding this possibility that is captured in the humor. As humor the attributions of being a *labour* are not to be taken seriously; rather they are a way of voicing the fear

that they could possibly be slipping into becoming a *labour*. The comment "dirty labour" should be understood as an exaggerated performance of the felt stigma of being *labour*, to which, CTC students under the guise of 'practical', were repeatedly subject.

It is not so much labor then that the students are opposed to as it is a specific form of labor namely *labour kam*. As was mentioned above Harish had been assigned to earthwork. The work consisted of using a hoe-like tool called a *phauda* to level the numerous and large mounds of dirt that clogged what was to become the main entrance to the headquarters. Given the heat and the physically demanding nature of the work none of the students were very happy about their assignment. Harish was especially determined to eschew this work and spent most of the day avoiding his instructor and deflecting accusations of being a *kam chor* (lazy person) from his fellow students. After one such encounter he turned away from the group and stepped toward me saying 'this is labor work.'[16] When I asked him what made it *labour kam* he moved to a rhetorical style. 'What will we get from doing this? Nothing. No knowledge/information will come from this.[17] The next day Harish was assigned to brickwork. When I asked him if he would get *jankari* (information or knowledge) from this work he said that he would. Somewhat puzzled I asked him if he would do this work when he got a job on the construction site. He responded that he wouldn't but that with this *jankari* he would be able to 'cause those below me to do [work].[18] When I pushed him on how exactly doing brickwork would make him better at getting his future subordinates to work he finally said that he would have "confidence."[19] Indeed, *jankari* was seen by many students, along with

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[16] *Yeh to labour kam.*

[17] '*is karne mein kya milega? Kucch nahin. Is kam mein koi jankari nahin milegi.*' Harish uses the verb *milna* (literally, to be available, to find, to meet) in the future tense to speak about what will become available by virtue of doing the work.

[18] '*mere niche karwaenge.*' A popular gloss on the job of a GWS was that he was supposed to *kam karwana* (to cause work to be done).

[19] 'Confidence' seemed to imply a certain charismatic authority embodied in an attitude of intimate familiarity with and mastery of a given body of knowledge, techniques or procedures. In my experience the term is widely used and comes up often especially in job interview situations.

certification, as the most valuable part of training at the CTC. *Jankari* seemed to come from forms of work that included tools, especially motorized ones, but was also to be found in the theory courses, especially in various formulas. Indeed, students would quiz each other, and often me, until they had memorized the ratios of the different materials in the various grades of concrete.

What is important for the moment is that students viewed only work that was carried out by skilled workers as potential sources of *jankari* and thus part of effecting a positive transformation in subjectivity marked by 'confidence.' In contrast they viewed those forms of work carried out by laborers not only as a waste of time but as potentially dragging them into the status of a laborer. This felt threat often became the basis for a critique of the CTC as exploitative. One group of students told me that they were building a new dormitory at the Amtethi center where they had come from. When work started there, they suggested, all the practical training would take place in Amethi so that the CTC could make money and have free labor too. Later at the bar (*theka*) one of these students made the point more forcefully. He told me that he had come to the CTC for *jankari* but had been made into *labour* instead. All he had wanted was to be able to recognize (*pahchanna*) the tools and understand the terms. He often reiterated that '*mere future ke liye aya*' (I came for my future) but that now he was worried about falling (*girna*) back into the poverty, which this program was supposed to help him escape. His comments also highlight the way in which the training program allowed people to imagine two, interrelated trajectories. On the one hand it was part of a narrative of national development through modernizing the construction industry, while on the other it appealed to the class aspirations of individual students.

The CTC is figured as part of the students' plans and dreams of upward mobility. The construction industry in India is booming as the nation transforms itself and, it is hoped, with the training that the CTC provides students can gain access to a middle-class life. This came out clearly in a conversation I had with the students from Amethi. I had been explaining my research by saying that I wanted to know about their situation (*stiti*). When I asked why they had chosen to come to the

CTC and to work in construction Vijay, who had been elected by the group to speak for them, responded.

> Vijay said it was mainly because you can earn a good wage and the program doesn't last very long. He said that the program costs 15,000 rupees and only lasts three months after which you can get a job that will let you earn 6-8,000 (a month), and even more after six months. When I tried to ask about why they wanted to do the formal training program as opposed to working their way up Vijay responded by laying out the class structure. He asked me to imagine what would happen if there were no poor people. It was because they were poor that they had to do this work. 'A poor person will do any kind of work, for money'. Rakesh supported Vijay saying that '*pet bharne ke liye admi kahin bhi ja sakta hai*' (A man can go anywhere to fill his stomach) and '*garib log kucch bhi kar sakte hain*' (the poor can do anything). Vijay said that what I had described (working first as a laborer and then as a *mistri*) was the *labour* way, this was a mode appropriate to the 'labour class'. He said 'we can't do this work' (using *nahin kar sakte* for can't). He also mentioned that I also couldn't do it. He said that there were three classes low, middle and high. Each had appropriate forms of work. The lower classes did *chota kam* (small work) which would include *labour kam*, and the middle classes did other work 'like running a shop' Rahul suggested. Vijay said '*ham sab middle class hain*' (we are all middle-class). He then told me that they didn't go the worker route because this was the way of the lower classes and therefore not appropriate to their station.
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Vijay's claim that 'we are all middle-class' is aspirational in the sense that he is articulating a move toward middle-class membership that his investment in education will allow. The CTC here appears as a mode of jumping over the long and arduous process of working one's way up from laborer to *mistri* to foreman and beyond. The construction line is the fastest way to turn the investment in training into returns in the form of a good paying job that will guarantee enough upward mobility to achieve a middle-class lifestyle. The initial salary that Vijay mentions is not much higher, and in some cases is lower, than what a *mistri* would make.[20] The crucial point here is a supervisor does not labor. As other CTC students told me, they were not here to learn to *kam karna* (to work) but rather to learn to *kam karwana* (to cause work to be done). Being at this node in causal chain of actions was imminently more respectable than being the one who has to follow direct and constantly changing orders. Vijay implies that he and his fellow

[20] *Mistri* working on the CTC site made about 9,000 rs. a month (~180 USD).

students are actually incapable of doing this sort of work. Note that when Vijay claimed that 'we can't do this work' he uses the Hindi verb *sakna*. In negative usages, *sakna*, as opposed to *pana*, implies that one is physically incapable of doing an action, whereas *pana* would imply that one didn't manage to do something. By using *sakna* Vijay implies that the *labour* way is not simply too hard for them but that it is somehow incongruous with their personhood. For the students then the appeal of the CTC is that it offers them an avenue to a high paying job after six months but that it does so in a way consistent with their own self image as 'middle-class'.

The Figure of Labour

To fully understand Vijay's comments and the students' aversion to being misunderstood as *labour* it will be helpful to understand something of the popular understandings of laborers both on and off the construction sites. As my fieldwork progressed I started to notice a patterned response from middle-class people that I was introduced to. When they asked what I was doing in India I would describe my work as being about construction and construction workers. Even this short phrase was often enough to elicit long and sometimes forceful monologues on the plight of the migrant laborers on construction sites. It was always stressed how poor they were, that they had no choice but to leave the village in order to find work, bringing their families with them. They would tell me how these people would make nothing even though the whole family had to work long hours with no breaks. They lived in hovels and had to bathe in public just to make enough money to eat. There was a sense of horror with which this information was recounted to me. It was a sad truth of modern India that for people in the "labour class" life was toil. What is remarkable here is not the content of what was said, most of which was accurate if somewhat hyperbolic, but rather the way in

which these comments seemed to shift the source of abjection to the person of the *labour* even as they rendered them merely abject objects (Sethi 2012).[21]

It was this mixture of abjection and complete heteronomy that Vijay and his friends were pointing to when they said that *labour* 'can do anything'. Indeed, the being of a *labour* seemed to be conditioned by the doing of *labour*. On construction sites *labour kam*, unlike all other named forms of work, referred to a remarkably wide variety of tasks from mixing *masala,* to digging ditches, to moving re- bar. The element that seemed to unify all these tasks was their lack of specialization. One was not recognized as a particularly good digger or *masala* mixer. These skills I was told could be learned in a matter of days. While being brought to the site and paid by a labor contractor (*thekedar*) laborers were supervised by the building company's managerial workers (engineers, foremen, supervisors).[22] As we shall see this is an important fact as trade workers such as bar-benders or carpenters are all directly supervised by their *thekedar*. In this case the company managerial workers only deal with the *thekedar* who himself decides how many hours the crew will work and who will do what.

We can see the importance of complete heteronomy in the conception of a *labour* clearly in the reactions of employers when laborers attempt to assert some control over what sort of work they will and wont do. This is illustrated by an event that occurred on a construction site in Gurgaon where I was conducting fieldwork. The foreman had asked an older female laborer to stop the digging work that she had been doing and to start moving cement bags. This work is very hard as the bags can weigh up to 25 kilograms and since the bags are carried on the head of the worker, the worker's body ends up covered in cement dust. The woman that the foreman chose for the work refused, saying she could not do the work. Irritated, the foreman got the site

[21] Many laborers who I talked to were using their time on the construction sites to build toward their own various goals. Often work in this sector provided a way to move to the cities, mediate familial obligations and possibly learn a new trade.

[22] On construction sites the position of General Work Supervisor was usually simply called 'supervisor.'

engineer, but every time the engineer asked if she would do the work (*karoege? Karoege?* (Will you do it? Will you do it?)) she replied 'if I can do it then I'll do it if I can't do it then I wont.[23] The engineer pushed her to tell him whether she could do it or not and ultimately the woman admitted that she had never learned to do the work. The engineer seemed to get very angry at this shouting 'when will you learn?'[24] and demanding that in this line she would have to learn to do all sorts of work. As she mentioned something about learning in the future he told her to go home that she was done working for the day. Then turning to the foreman and I but speaking loud enough for her to hear he told us that the only reason she didn't want to do the work is because she didn't want to get her face dirty. He went on to suggest that she would be better off being a prostitute because then she would be paid to be pretty. If you came to work then you should work he argued, he didn't need laborers that weren't willing to do all kinds of work.

The anger and insult that this laborer was subjected to for not acting like an appropriate *labour* is paralleled by the anger of workers when they feel that they are being wrongly treated as laborers. This incident occurred on a much larger construction site in southern Delhi where I was also conducting fieldwork.[25] A dispute broke out between one of the engineers and a foreman for the bar-bending contractor. The engineer was yelling at the foreman for not removing a piece of wood in the form for one of the beams before installing in the re-bar structure. As a result the beam could not be poured until the piece of wood was removed. At one point the engineer called the foreman *bahan chodh* (sister fucker). A crowd had already gathered due to the shouting but at this point all eyes were fixed on the two. The foreman started screaming at the engineer, coming toward him in a menacing manner. Standing face-to-face the foreman kept repeating 'don't say

[23] '*agar sakenge to karenge nahin sakenge to nahin karenge.*'
[24] '*kab sikhoge?*'
[25] After my time at the CTC my fieldwork was split between this site in south Delhi and the one mentioned above in Grugaon.

sister fucker to me, don't say sister fucker to me…I'm not labor.'[26] To this the engineer yelled 'what will you do, what will you do.'[27] Despite this many men, mostly bar-benders, murmured their agreement with the foreman. After they had both left one of the bar-benders told me that it wasn't right to speak that way. He said they weren't laborers and you had to treat them differently.

Through their transgression these examples show up some of the implicit notions about how *labour* should operate on the construction site. The foreman's comments imply that only *labour* can be talked to this way. Laborers on that site were subjected to such verbal abuse. This, I was told by some supervisors, was the only way to get them to work. The comments of the site engineer in Gurgaon are perhaps a more extreme form of this in that the woman, by virtue of being a *labour*, must endure these degrading comments. Impugning her moral character by suggesting she work as a prostitute is a particularly ruthless attack given that women on the site are already viewed as having loose sexual morals by virtue of spending so much time in public.[28] She was subjected to this despite the fact that her refusal to do the work was couched in extremely distancing terms. Again using the verb *sakna* she suggests that her hesitation is due to her own uncertainty about her physical ability to do the task. When pushed she states this more explicitly arguing that she has never learned how to do this task. Yet this comment cannot stand because the task by virtue of being *labour kam* is not considered learned. It is simply a matter of physical exertion. These encounters of being subjected to the control of another by virtue of one's subjection to economic necessity that loom large in the minds of the students at the CTC as guard the slippage between doing labor and being *labour*. The flip side

[26] '*mujhe bahan chodh mat bolo, mujhe bahan chodh mat bolo…main labour nahin hun*'
[27] '*tum kya karoge, tum kya karoge*'
[28] Working on the construction site is considered especially inappropriate for married women (Kakad 2002, cf. Blomqvist 2004). The culturally appropriate place for a married woman is in the home. Thus for wives to work is doubly stigmatized in the sense that it is a sign of ones destitution but it also subjects the woman to the gaze of strange men. Indeed, many of my informants regularly commented that certain women on the sites were also prostitutes. Note how this unites the themes of economic necessity and moral laxity.

of Vijay's comment that the poor can do anything seems to be that they must endure everything in order to fill their stomachs.

Doing Practical

If the problem for the students was that in doing what they experienced as labor they were at risk of becoming *labour*, then the problem for the CTC was how to distinguish 'practical' training from labor. While this was never the explicit concern of senior administrators at the CTC both senior administrators and instructors instituted various practices that distinguished 'practical' from labor. As the distribution of time during the day might suggest 'practical' was considered the most important part of the CTC training program. The sentiment was nicely summarized in a poster that hung on a wall outside of one of the classrooms. In large block letters it announced: "I read, I forget. I write, I remember. I do, I understand." Yet understanding, or at least the right sort of understanding, doesn't seem to come directly out of doing. Thus 'practical' at the CTC cannot simply remain at the level of doing but needs to be augmented in particular ways. However, this has to be done without taking away from the inherent value of doing the work by one's own hand (*apne hath se*).

As Mr. Sarangapani, the head of the placement cell, explained to me, companies wanted experienced workers. So the CTC program was designed to produce recruits that had a little bit of knowledge paired with experience of the site. The result, he told me, was that when trainees gained new knowledge on the site they would be able to put it "to use in a period which is much shorter than an unskilled worker."[29] It was here that 'practical' was important especially for a supervisor. Satendra, a senior instructor, explained that "a supervisor should have a multi- oriented mind, a broad mind, he comes to the site and he will find many activities shuttering work, bar bender work,

[29] Mr. Sarangapani answered my interview questions almost entirely in English.

concrete work….so many things that just can't be explained in theory."[30] It is the practical knowledge gained from experience at the CTC that allows the supervisor to orient himself to the broad range of activities on a construction site. 'Practical' training was supposed to act as a proxy for experience such that when the CTC-trained supervisor arrived on the site he would be able to orient himself to all the different activities on the site and manage the workers. This would happen through the practice of actually laboring but only if it was done with the correct attitude.

The tension within 'practical' was illustrated to me on my first day at the CTC. I happened to arrive on the site the same day as the batch of students from Amethi mentioned above. The DG felt that being a student would be the best way for me to learn about what the CTC was doing. We were all brought down to the storeroom where we were each given a *dhangri (*jumpsuit), gloves, safety goggles and a helmet. We were then assembled into smaller groups and each assigned the task of stacking bricks that would eventually be used to build a perimeter wall. The combination of the heat, the jumpsuits and gloves as well as the manual labor had us all sweating within moments. My group seemed to spontaneously form itself into an assembly line each of us passing bricks to the other two at a time. Even the allure of being able to speak to a foreigner wasn't enough to keep my group-mates from complaining about the work. What were we to learn from carrying bricks back and forth? This was truly *labor kam*. After about three hours half a dozen neat piles of bricks lay in the sun and we were told to take a break and assemble in the large classroom in the basement of the headquarters.

Once we had assembled a senior administrator introduced the Director General of the CTC. The DG offered a few words of welcome and then asked us what we did that day. The students answered that we had carried bricks. Another student added that this seemed like just work. The DG smiled as though this was precisely the reaction he had expected. He then simply asked, '*Kitne int*

[30] "*supervisor ko multi-oriented mind hona chahiye broad mind hona chahiye site par aata usko kai sare activities milti hain shuttering ka kaam, bar bender ka hai, concreting ka hai….bahut sare chizen ese hote hain jo theory mein batai nahin ja sakte*"

utaï? (How many bricks did you carry?). The students sat silently looking at each other. No one had bothered to count the bricks as we had been stacking. The DG went on to tell us that the most important thing to learn in construction was to always count how much work had been done. The DG pointed out that if the students knew the amount of work done and the time it was done in they would be able to calculate the productivity. Moreover, having done the work oneself would allow one to tell when workers were not working hard enough and what was possible. You could now tell, the DG continued, whether it was possible to carry twenty bricks on your head or not. Once again we went back to stacking bricks only this time the instructors told us how the bricks could be stacked so as to ensure a uniform number of bricks in each row. After stacking more bricks for another hour or so we were all directed to write down the number of bricks stacked and divide this by the amount of people working and the time it had taken. The students all seemed to take this calculation very seriously, performing the calculations with mobile phones and writing down relevant numbers in notebooks provided by the CTC.

This act of calculation and especially its recording in writing framed our activity that day and the instructors attempted to get students to frame all of their 'practical' in this way. It is, in part, this act of calculation and report that differentiated the work of the students from that of a laborer. Crucially, construction workers, be they skilled or not, very rarely measure the quantity of their own work and are even less likely to record these amounts. Rather, on the sites that I observed this action is supervisor's job (see chapter 4). Measurement and reporting serves at least two functions on the construction site. For many trades (e.g. bar-bending, carpentry) the contractor is paid by the unit of material that is transformed (e.g. metric tons of rebar bent or square feet of wood frames constructed). The measurement of work then functions as a way of determining payment (see chapters 4 and 5). Furthermore, it also functions as a tool of workplace discipline. In the case of workers who are paid a daily rate, the measurement of work done allows the company to set and

enforce production targets. Indeed, the one time that I noticed masons voluntarily measuring their own work it was to gauge how quickly they would need to work to meet the daily quota.

By incorporating the measurement into the action the CTC attempted to render the work as a practical exercise. In recording their work and productivity the students acted as their own supervisors. Yet they were also *labour* in that experiencing *labour kam* was a crucial part of the program. This, among other things, was a great equalizer. As the DG was fond of saying, 'It all starts with carrying bricks.' Everyone should start at the very beginning since in the CTC ideology there was no *chota kam* (small work) and, as Mr. Mukherjee often reminded students 'no shame should come from work.'[31] Indeed, in this regard the senior administrators were extremely pleased that a PhD student from America would be willing to work side-by-side with their students in order to learn about construction. The point of carrying bricks or clearing debris was not only to learn to calculate productivity but to experience the act of laboring. In general students were not taught any particular technique for doing the work involved in 'practical'. Rather the focus was on maximizing the amount of time spent doing the work. At the same time, and somewhat contradictorily, students were constantly exhorted to ask questions and to write down the answers so that they didn't forget them.

If, as we noted above, the students' anxieties around doing *labour kam* were rooted in their aims towards upward class mobility, the comments of the DG and other senior administrators could be seen to be rooted in their relatively more stable class position. In Bourdieu's language the students, being much closer to the working class, are driven ever more strongly to appropriate the symbolic accouterments of distinction as a means of "usurpation of social identity which consists in anticipating 'being' by 'seeming'" (Bourdieu 1984, 253). The senior administrators on the other hand, like Bourdieu's privileged classes, are so distant from *labour* that they run no risk of being misrecognized. Senior administrators would regularly tell the students about their struggles working in

[31] *'kam se koi sharam nahin ana chahiye.'*

this line. The DG was particularly fond of retelling the story of his time working (as an assistant engineer) in Canada and enduring the extreme climate. Here hard work (*mahanat*) done by one's own hand (*apne h□ th se*) became a source of value and authority. The senior administrators could legitimately tell the students what to do because they had already worked hard. There was never any danger that the senior administrators would be seen as anything but upper middle-class and as such they could take up an orientation to labor as merely an issue of physical exertion.

Promoting this particular stance toward labor (both skilled and unskilled) was not only an issue of class. Given the historical salience of caste ideologies that marked certain persons as fit for certain kinds of work, the senior administrators' attitudes should also be seen as an attempt to impose a self-consciously modern notion of labor. Indeed, Vijay's comment that he and his friends could not progress the *labour* way (*nahin kar sakte*) seems to posit an almost ontological difference between those in the middle-class and those in the *labour* class. Dayabati Roy finds a similar dynamic in West Bengal where the distinction between the educated *bhadrlok* (big people) and the *chotolok* (little people) is defined "in terms of attitude toward manual labor rather than in terms of caste itself" (D. Roy 2012, 953). Yet it has taken on a caste dimension to the extent that these terms are commonly taken as synonyms for high-caste and low-caste respectively. The association can work in the opposite direction as well where physical labor can bring on caste-like sorts of stigma (Channa 2010, 20).[32] In this light, the senior administrators' stress on 'practical' was part of a more general attitude that sees caste, and those people and spheres influenced by it, as inherently pre-modern (Ganguly 2005: 5). The CTC thus attempts to decontextualize those activities that students considered *labour* and recontextualize them as simply instances of labor, seen as a purely pragmatic activity. As such these activities can become elements in the creation of 'practical' knowledge.

[32] My claim here is not that construction work is a source of ritual pollution but rather that the stigma attached to being a *labour* is read through these sorts of stigma. Moreover the ideological construction of *labour* as a form of action that will stick to the actor, marking him/her in various ways has links to caste that I elaborate on in chapter three.

Some of the instructors also attempted to recontextualize *labour* in order to render it 'practical', yet the results were always ambiguous. This is illustrated in the instructional techniques used by Girish for which he was ultimately chastised by the senior administrators.

> I came across Girish while he was instructing the students in plastering. There was a group of students standing around him with their notepads. He began with a rhetorical question '*kisi bhi kam sikhne mein kya chiz jaruri hain?*' (In learning any work what things are important?). He directed the students to write down what he was about to say. He then told them that there were four things that were necessary for learning any trade in construction. 1-General knowledge of the work, 2-knowledge of the different tools (i.e. their names), 3-knowledge of the uses of these tools and 4-practical. After making this sort of metacommentary on how one should teach the trades he continued to impart short descriptions of the tools used in plastering along with how they are used.
>
> fieldnotes 5-3-2011

Girish frames the 'practical' with a commentary on what is needed to teach any trade. He did this for each new batch that he taught plastering to. Note that Girish's commentary constitutes an explicit metapragmatic discourse on learning, and implicitly teaching (Silverstein 1993). Here Girish's metapragmatic discourse constructs a context for the 'practical' and explicitly marks it out as the final step in a process of learning. In so doing he attempts to regiment the semiotic potential of the actions to be carried out. The discourse on learning in general provides a schema, which Girish then follows. To the extent that the activities that the students do (writing down names and uses of tools and doing 'practical') correspond to this schema, they are learning instead of laboring. Girish's framing maximally differentiates 'practical' from *labour* by recontextualizing the work. That is to say, Girish suppresses the iconic interdiscursive connections between what is done at the CTC and *labour* by explicitly stating what the training will figurate. His comments produce a diagram that serves to orient the actions of the students. In this way Girish's comments make the ritual of training explicit, attempting to guard against the hazards of representation by explicitly fixing what will be dynamically figurated.

Yet Girish was chastised for engaging in this form of instruction precisely because it wasn't work-like enough.

> Mr. Jain, a senior administrator, on coming by said that this was not an area for discussion it was to emulate "on-the-job training." Indeed, when Mr. Mukherjee came by he scolded Girish for not having already started work saying that it was 10:30 in the morning and his students weren't doing anything. After this Girish started getting the students ready to apply the plaster. When a friend of his came by and asked how the training was going Girish said '*sikhana nahin khali kam karana*' (I'm not supposed to teach I'm only supposed to cause work to be done [supervise]).
>
> fieldnotes 5-5-2011

For the senior administrators a crucial part of 'practical' was its emulation of an actual worksite. From their perspective, to be trained on an actual construction site was an opportunity because it would more fully prepare the students for life in the construction industry. Girish's tactics looked too much like 'textbook knowledge' with the students simply standing around him listening and writing down information. Indeed, it was around the time of this incident that the CTC made all the instructors fill out daily reports. The main items collected in the reports were the amount of work done, measured in units of material transformed divided by the number of students, and number of questions answered. The instructors were to fill out a report every day that would be turned in to the senior administrators so that the progress of the students could be tracked and the quality of the training program ensured. Students would gain experience through becoming efficient at various work tasks while at the same time gaining knowledge through asking questions.

Asking questions was presented as a way that students should acquire knowledge that wouldn't take away from the indexical-iconic aspect of 'practical' training with working on a construction site. Senior administrators expected that students would be naturally incited into asking pertinent questions by simply doing the work. Girish's quip to his friend points to exactly this tension. He, like the students, saw the CTC's 'practical' training as too close to labor, making him into nothing but a supervisor. But the exhortation to ask questions was also aimed at transforming CTC graduates into the sorts of workers who would ask questions and remember the answers—that is, into the sorts of workers that would actively learn and conform to company requirements. Indeed it was precisely this quality that the CTC was advertising to potential

employers. As Mr. Sarangapan told me the benefit of a CTC trained employee was not that they already knew exactly what to do. There was only so much you could do in three months and "with the raw material [the students]" coming "from the rural areas" they had to start at a very low level. The value of the CTC was that a graduate would learn exponentially faster than a traditional supervisor who would have come from a background as a skilled worker.

Thus for the senior administrators the emulation of the conditions of an actual worksite were a crucial part of the training program. Doing construction work by one's own hand was part of transforming the rural 'raw material' into a hardened supervisor capable of actively accommodating to company goals. Yet is was precisely this approach to training that made the students experience it as labor and feel that the CTC was treating them as *labour.* Despite the exhortations to ask questions and write down information the students seemed to experience 'practical' as labor. At one point I was speaking with a different group of students from Amethi and the topic turned to what they would do after the program. When I asked if they would work (*kam karenge?*) one of the students responded by correcting me. 'We wont work we will train.'[33] They started laughing and another parodied Mr. Mukherjee's voice, saying 'you haven't come for work you've come for training.'[34] The joke here was that while Mr. Mukherjee had been insisting on distinguishing the practical training at the CTC from *kam* it was in fact the same thing. Thus the students would get jobs 'training' with construction companies. For these students the distinction that Mr. Mukherjee was insisting on appeared as just another ruse of the CTC.

Conclusion: Frustrations and Interviews

[33] '*kam karenge nahin training karenge*'
[34] '*kam karne ke liye nahin aye ho training ke liye aye ho*'

Given these comments and the general tensions that I witnessed among the students' day-to-day lives at the CTC I was shocked and annoyed when, the moment I turned on my voice recorder, all these tensions evaporated. The very same students who weeks or even days before had been complaining to me of being treated like *labour* would state with conviction that the training program at the CTC was very good and there were 'no problems' (*koi dikkat nahin*). When I pushed a few of the students who had been involved in the strike and the letter writing campaigns they immediately picked up the senior administrator's narrative. They had not known what to expect when they got here. They had thought they would only do a little 'practical' but when they arrived they realized it was almost all 'practical'. It had been hard at first but now they realized it was good for them, they were hardened and could face life on a construction site.

It would be tempting to read this as a reaction to the formality of an interview format and the knowledge that what they were saying was being recorded. This is no doubt part of what is going on but I would argue that these comments were just as much a reaction to the formality of another interview. I tended to interview students when they were nearing the end of their programs as we had had time to build a relationship. Yet this also meant that the students were preparing for the next *Rozgar Mela* (Employment Fair). Here they would have to appear in front of representatives from a number of different construction companies to do an interview. The interviews consisted of an interrogation of the information provided on the student's resume and then a series of often quite pointed questions about their training and issues of general construction knowledge (how to estimate materials, the ratios of sand, cement and aggregate in different grades of concrete, etc.). The employers were explicitly looking for 'confidence,' which seemed to consist of a certain level of fluency with various formulas and procedures demonstrated through fast and calm answers to the questions.

In this context there was a clear value in presenting 'practical', however terrible it may have been, as the source of a confident worker subject capable of quickly picking up new knowledge and putting it to productive use. Indeed this was the students' chance to transform their lives and move up to a better station in life. The sudden change in my informants then was due to the interview but only in as much as the interview was an invitation to narrate a self to an evaluating audience. Moreover, at this stage it was possible to narrate one's self as having already labored. The iconic relationship between 'practical' and labor could, by virtue of being calibrated, be recuperated as a positive aspect making the speaker experienced and hardened to life in the construction industry. Things, it would seem, had come full circle. Yet ultimately the discourse that the students had picked up about the value of 'practical' was oriented toward presenting the applicant as an ideal worker. In this sense it was supposed to show that the students would pro-actively adapt to company goals regardless of what they might be. Thus, while the CTC had a reasonable amount of success in getting graduates short-listed by construction companies, many never made it past the second interview and even more quit after two months on the job. Indeed, almost all of the informants that I tracked were back at home or working in another industry within six months after the training program. The students expect, and the CTC does not dissuade them, that becoming a supervisor is the first step to massive upward mobility in opportunity in what they know to be a quickly growing industry. Yet supervisors' pay is comparable to skilled workers, they live on the site and spend their days with skilled workers and laborers. Becoming a supervisor is not so much an escape from the tensions of falling into the *labour* class as it is an intensification of it.[35]

As we noted at the beginning with Sahlins, practical activity is always simultaneously meaningful action. Treatments of labor that presume its fixity, as in many accounts both radical and conservative, run the risk of taking for granted precisely what is at stake in these sorts of interactions. Sahlins critiques Marxism on the grounds that at "critical theoretical moments, man appears in essence: as a

[35] The position of the supervisor will be explored more fully in chapter six.

creature of *needs* and under the self-evident necessity of acting *purposively* in nature" this naturalizes a notion of production that "at once escapes a symbolic determination and dialectically overcomes it, to itself determine the symbolic system." (1976: 128; cf. Kelly 1992). But it is not enough to simply argue that productive action is always already conditioned by systems of meaning. It is clearly the case that students' fears of *labour kam* are interdiscursively linked to representations of *labour*. *Labour kam* is culturally meaningful action, but this misses the point that experiencing a particular action as *labour kam* or 'practical' or something else is itself an emergent outcome of interaction.

Practical action and cultural meaning are constituted, challenged and renegotiated in the course of the unfolding of this activity and its later representations. As I have shown, carrying *masala* can be detested and feared as *labour kam*, praised as an opportunity for 'practical' training, or the past basis of present experience and character. The point is that these valuations of the action are not given as part of a cultural system of beliefs. Sahlins' analysis tends in this direction; labor is located in a particular cultural system of meaning that changes over time but in any given moment appears as a more of less stable whole. In contrast a linguistic anthropological approach locates the meanings and valuations of labor as effects of interactions in which actors attempt to metapragmatically regiment the very meaningfulness of their action. The outcomes directly implicate not only the meaning of the action but also the self of the actor.

As students that I knew left the CTC and got jobs I would occasionally receive phone calls from them. When I would ask about the job they would often say that the hours were too long or that the pay was too low, but just as often they would tell me that the environment didn't 'suit' them or the food wasn't good. At first I found these later answers puzzling: why would they give up so easily when they had spent so much time and money getting the job in the first place? Yet, on closer analysis, it became clear that these reasons all point back to the hazards of 'practical'. Being overworked, underpaid or insufficiently provisioned for the environment all point to the disconnect between what the CTC tells companies they will get and what CTC graduates believe they have earned.

In claiming to have done, 'practical' the students present themselves as having had experience with struggle and hardship, which is the basis for access to upwardly mobile and managerial jobs on the site. Yet, as the CTC presents it to the companies 'practical' is the sign of the ability to quickly and efficiently conform to ever changing company needs. The CTC students are the ultimate workers because they are capable of working in any conditions for long hours; they have been hardened on an actual construction site. When the two-faces of 'practical' are united in employment, labor, viz. a resource to be tapped in production, is experienced as *labour*, viz. being forced to endure degrading conditions that are inappropriate to ones sense of self.

Chapter 3
Matters of Habit

The Argument

This chapter argues that ideologies of labor are crucial in shaping the ways in which different kinds of work transform worker selves. I do this through an analysis of worker comments on the effects of labor on their bodies and selves. Whereas the students at the training center were anxious that engaging in *labour kam* (labor work) might end up transforming them into laborers, this chapter focuses on workers who have already been transformed by their productive actions. While the previous chapter located ideologies of labor in the ways actors framed their productive activities in the moment of action, joking about being laborers or *mistri* (skilled workers), this chapter analyzes explicit commentaries on the ways in which labor has transformed worker bodies and selves. Ideologies of labor figure not only in the way that actors regiment the significance of their actions in the moment, they are also at stake in comments about work, explicit metapragmatic discourse (Silverstein 1993). A central argument of this chapter is that in speaking about their work, my interlocutors were in fact shapingthe ways in which labor transformed them. Despite their efforts however the transformations that labor brought about were always ambiguous.

This argument makes two related interventions. First, it engages recent theorizations that have stressed the often overlooked but consequential effects of matter and materiality (Bennett 2010; Ingold 2012; Latour 1996; Coole and Frost 2010). This literature has usefully focused attention on the way in which social life is produced and transformed through everyday entanglements with matter. The effectiveness of an act is not the result of the execution of a plan but rather of a collusion between humans and the material world. Matter is not an inert and maleable backdrop for human intentions but rather actively shapes the effects of our action in the world. I engage this approach by comparing it with insights from a seemingly outdated

ethnosociological literature on Hindu notions of personhood in South Asia (Marriott 1991; Daniel 1984). What appears in this liteatrue as a culturally specific, and more or less static, ideology reappears in the new materialism literature as an analytical insight. I argue for an analysis that treats the effects of material exposure neither as an analytical truth or as the result of a cultural logic but rather focuses on the ways in which situated actors struggle to construe the effects of materials on their bodies and selves. In this view materials matter through, rather than in opposition to, language.

This argument contributes to discussions within linguistic anthropology on the linkages between language and political economy. This work has countered approaches that separate language use from material practice by insisting on the materiality of the language itself (Gal 2012; Keane 2003; Shankar and Cavanaugh 2012; Manning 2006). Focusing on the materiality of language, authors have established the multiple ways in which language, and discursive perfromances, circulate as commodified objects. This chapter takes these insights in a different direction by focusing attention on the ways that language in conjunction with material experience forms the very objects of political economy, namely laborers.

In this the chapter extends a focus on refelexivity as a constituitive element in the social transformations that labor brings about. The anthropology of work has long beeen concerned with the ways in which the particular forms of labor that people engage in transform their social selves (Nash 1993; Salzinger 2003; Dunn 2004a; Hankins 2014; Gidwani 2004; Finkelstein 2015). I argue that the transformations that labor brings about are shaped by talk about that labor. In this it is concerned not only with the qualities of productive actions, the innumerable material constituents of any action, but with the *qualia* of actions, those qualities that are picked out and focused on in reflexive acts of evaluation (for an insightful review of this concept see Harkness 2015).

I begin by contextualizing worker ideologies of labor within more widely circulating discourses about construction work and workers in India. I focus on the ways in which news reportage and sociological accounts figure the material dimensions of construction work in India. In different ways these narratives construe construction work as a uniformly degradding activity that destroys worker bodies (even as it is uniquely suited to them in some accounts). I contrast these accounts to the narratives of construction workers in which labor is figured as enacting an ambiguous transformation of the body. This process was spoken of in terms of habituation using the Hindi term *adat*. Workers often took action to shape the transformative effects of labor by ingesting particular substances. The end result of these practices was an attunement between the embodied self of a worker and his particular trade. When a particular form of work became one's *adat* it meant that the working self had become attuned to this form of work and shift to other forms of work could be dangerous. The chapter goes on to consider the ambiguity of these transformations by focusing on the case of a new engineer as he, seemingly uncontrollably, became both fit for construction and unfit for civilized society. These transformations are both pleasurable and painful, they transform 'soft' persons into 'hard' workers while simultaneously locking subjects into particular class positions.

Strong Eyes

I first met Gurmeet on the fourth floor of what would one day be an apartment building in one of the ever multiplying sectors of Gurgaon, a prosperous sattelite city south of Delhi. By trade Gurmeet was a shuttering carpenter which meant that he helped to build the temporary forms used to hold concrete while it set. Gurmeet's specialization was as a welder. To begin creating the forms for a new level of the building, as Gurmeet and his colleagues were doing when I happened upon them, two helpers would attach a long metal beam to two wooden poles (*balli*) and lift the beam up

to the required height. Gurmeet, squatting at the far edge of the forms that had just been built, would then weld the beam to the existing structure. Once enough beams were in place plywood or metal plates could be laid down to form the bottom of the form.

When I cam across Gurmeet he was perched precariously at the far edge of the floor. Holding the bar steady with on flip-flop covered foot, he hunched over his knees as he brought the arc welder down to the spot where the two metal beams met. The moment the tip of the welding rod touched the metal sparks began to fly and I, following instructions I had been given by a foreman, turned my eyes away from the intense light. Gurmeet had no such luxury. As sparks sprayed across his feet, legs and pants, already adorned with the small burn holes from previous work, he sat steady staring into the intense light of the welding torch. When he had finished the seam he lifted what I assumed were welding glasses from his face but when I came forward I realized that they were simply knock-off Ray-Ban sunglasses probably purchased at the nearby market. Shocked, I asked Gumeet if his eyes didn't hurt from this work. He responded 'It's my habit (*adat*). My eyes have become strong, you would feel pain.'[1]

At the time I did not think much of this comment except that it struck me as a poignant reminder of the ways in which the new India was being built on the destroyed bodies of migrant workers like Gurmeet. I understood Gurmeet's comment as a misrecognition in which he had mistaken the lessening of pain, a sign of the destruction of his eyes, for strength. Construction workers in India face a number of work related ailments by virtue of the fact that they are not supplied with safety equipment, work long hours and are forced to live in often unsanitary conditions (Jindal 2013; Agrawal et al. 2014; Parida and Ray 2012). In this sense Gurmeet's situation could be read as a sign of the underdeveloped nature of the Indian construction industry. Indeed, the physical hardships of life and labor on India's construction sites figure prominently in the

[1] *adat ban gai. meri ankh takhat ho gaya, apko dard lagenge*

journalistic exposé genre I described in the Introduction.

These reports, often prompted by fatal accidents (Bhattacharya 2009; Wax 2008), focus attention on the dangerous work, unsanitary living conditions and financial exploitation of construction work. Forms of exposure figure prominently here; construction sites are places of intense heat, dust, debris and unclean water. As Nalme Nachiyar notes in one of her many articles on the plight of construction workers in Bangalore—entitled "Brick by Brick They Build Others' Dreams"— "men and women, both young and old, toil here every day from morning to night under varying weather conditions" (Nachiyar 2013). The New Indian Express summarizes the condition of construction workers at Rourkela. "Unaware of their rights, they continue to lead poverty-stricken and cursed life without reaping the statutory benefits of the social security meant for them" (Sarkar 2012).[2] Some pieces take on an exposé genre, as in a CNN piece that quotes investigators at Common Wealth Games construction sites in Delhi. ""The conditions are sub-human and that's really the only word I can apply," Kara said……They live in the dirt, they go to the toilet behind bushes and trees""(Han 2012).

It should be noted that depictions of the deplorable conditions of work sites are often accurate. Water and electricity are only intermittently available and workers may be forced to live in and amongst piles of refuse that attract mosquitoes and make the threat of malaria, dengue and other diseases a constant problem. All of these problems are only exacerbated during the summer months when temperatures can rise to over 100 °F, making the interiors of the corrugated tin *jhugi* (shack) intolerable during the day. Yet these media narratives, as I hope to demonstrate, tend to figure construction workers as passive, abject objects, too ignorant to demand the rights they are

[2] The reference to statutory benefits and social security refers to the Construction and Other Building Workers Welfare act. The act dictates that each state levy a tax on all construction projects over a certain amount and that the money be used to provide social benefits. Execution of the act has been slow and largely ineffective due to states failure to comply and also to ineffective strategies for registering workers.

due.[3] Framed in this way, media narratives about the conditions of construction workers have a tendency to transform into allegories of development. Indeed, part of the abjection of the figure of the construction worker seems to be her role in the material production of the signs of India's prosperity, high-rises, roads, etc. Immediately after describing the "toil" of construction workers in Bangalore, Nachiyar writes that these construction workers "are one of the many pieces that fit into this puzzle of a city that is developing at a rapid pace" (2013). Dust, dirt and hardship, it would seem, are necessary if objectionable side-effects of development and, so the implication goes, will disappear once India becomes fully developed. Indeed, as many of my middle-class acquaintances told me in five years Delhi will look just like America. The spectacle of suffering then becomes a sign of India's still unfinished development that will, like other signs of backwardness, disappear with renewed efforts at development.[4]

Read through this genre of reporting then, Gurmeet's comments display ignorance of both the biophysical damage that his work is doing to his eyes but also of his rights to a safe work environment. Yet this ignorance and lack of development, often shaded into claims about the quasi-ontological difference of construction workers. Here depictions of the deplorable conditions on the site slipped into depictions of workers themselves as the source of these conditions. Middle-class discourse on construction workers then seemed to slip back and forth between claims that construction workers were just ignorant and needed to be educated and that they were fundamentally different from middle-class commenters. This slippage comes out clearly in what we might call "nuisance talk", following Ghertner (2011) who coined the term to describe middle-class residents' comments about nearby slums. I use the term to refer to similar middle-class homeowner

[3] See Aman Sethi (2012) for an argument against this representational practice as well as an attempted alternative to it.
[4] Thus the relatively high prevalence of articles dealing with the Construction and Other Building Workers Welfare act, which itself seems to be in something of an unfinished state (Lewis 2012; Singh 2011; discussion in Agarwala 2006).

discourses about the noise and material pollution that accompanies construction work, specifically in pre-existing communities. One such resident posted the following to a forum under the thread "civic problems in India."

> Not just that construction work creates a lot of noise. Not just that our lane is always dusty. My biggest concern is the construction workers. These workers have just spread filth all over. They keep playing loud music all through the day. They spit chewed gutka[5] and betel leaf juice on people's cars. They urinate absolutely anywhere they feel like. The entire area is now dirty and stinky! (N. Gupta 2013)

Note, here, how at least two of the conditions of construction work mentioned above—namely dirt and public elimination—become attributes of the workers themselves. It is not just that construction workers live in filth they in fact spread filth as well. As Ghertner notes, nuisance talk "attributes the esthetic annoyances and daily hassles of urban life to a particular "outside" subject—the slum dweller, the migrant, the street vendor" (2011, 8). In the case of slums Ghertner goes on to demonstrate how these modes of talk circulate, gaining wider acceptance, and are eventually codified into legal discourse.[6] My interest here is not so much the legal effects of this sort of discourse but rather the way that "nuisance talk" takes the deplorable conditions of workers as iconic of the workers themselves to the point that the workers themselves are seen as the agents of the "esthetic annoyances" of construction. Indeed, some residents of a middle-class colony in Chennai allegedly locked construction workers in their *juggi* in protest over the noise and air pollution caused by construction activities in the area (Madhvan 2012).

Yet many of the middle-class people that I met in Delhi seemed to have a great deal of compassion for the plight of construction workers. During my fieldwork in and around Delhi, it was not uncommon for a middle-class acquaintance of mine, on learning that I worked with construction workers, to launch into a tirade condemning the horrid conditions of the work sites

[5] Gutka is a preparation of crushed areca nut, tobacco, catechu, paraffin, slaked lime, and sweet or savory flavorings. Gutka is often marketed as a mass-produced alternative to paan (made using betel leaf). When chewed both produce a semi-addictive high as well as a bright red liquid that stains.
[6] In Ghertner's case, nuisance talk is part of a larger shift in legal discourse where aesthetic impropriety becomes the basis for slum demolition in Delhi.

and the almost inhuman exertion necessary for this work. 'They just have nothing,' one of my close friends commented. He went on to tell me about how the construction workers came from very 'backward' areas and, due to economic pressures, had to work from before sunrise until after sunset for seven days a week. Then, pausing, he said 'you see, Adam, we cannot do this kind of work.' Here he used the Hindi verb *sakna*, implying the physical inability or definite impossibility (as opposed to circumstantial impossibility noted by the use of '*pana*') of the 'we' middle-class bodies in distinction to 'those' construction worker ones. Thus, while sympathetic, these narratives, like nuisance talk, maintain a quasi-ontological distinction between middle-class and working-class bodies. The conditions that construction workers live in are read, implicitly or explicitly, as reflections of the qualities of the workers themselves. The conditions of labor in the industry are deleterious and yet somehow connected to a rough or 'backward' character of construction workers. In these comments the material exposures of construction work turn construction workers into different sorts of people who are, more or less permanently, fit to this degrading work.

In contrast to these accounts the sociological literature on construction work in India (see chapter 1) has stressed that the current state of work in the construction industry serves the interests of capital (Shivakumar et al. 1991; van der Loop 1996; Ravi Srivastava and Jha 2016; Prosperi 2013). Poor working conditions are not simply due to a lack of development but are rather the human costs of providing cheap, pliable labor to India's construction firms. The lack of development in the construction industry then is a result of the interests of capitalists in preserving sources of cheap labor. Here construction labor is not peculiarly fit to certain sorts of people rather it is a sign of the exploitative structure of capitalist accumulation.

Yet despite this critique, the sociological literature and journalistic reports both construe construction labor in terms of degradation and toil, although with different causes and effects. In their study of the construction labor market in Ahmedabad Subrahmanian et al. (1982) argue that

the structure of subcontracting results in massive labor reserves, which can drive the cost of labor to near subsistence levels despite the arduous nature of the work. This is because individual laborers can be easily replaced as their bodies are depleted through the work process. Indeed, one construction worker told me that his work (attaching sandstone tiles to the exterior of buildings) was only for young men and that by the time he was old he would have ruined his body. His goal was to simply earn as much as possible and rely on his children to take care of him when his body inevitably gave out.[7]

In journalist, sociological, and even some worker accounts labor appears as a negative force, wearing down the bodies and characters of those who engage in it. This is a hallmark of labor under capitalism. While I acknowledge this aspect of labor, Gurmeet's eyes are being destroyed by long hours spent staring at the welding torch, the remainder of the chapter seeks to take worker comments like Gurmeet's seriously. That Gurmeet says his eyes have become strong by becoming habituated to the weld torch is only in part a misrecognition of solar retinopathy. In what follows I take worker comments on their work, especially processes of habituation, as manifestations of an ideology of labor through which workers attempt to come to terms with and regiment the socio-material effects of particular forms of labor on their embodied selves.

Adat and the Experience of Labor

There is a long tradition in the anthropology and sociology of work of researchers learning and working alongside their interlocutors.[8] Michael Burawoy used the technique to discover the

[7] This worker's position was relatively uncommon in my experience. I include it here to illustrate both the ambiguity of the transformations that labor brings about, but also to help illustrate the view of labor as depletion. This worker told me this story on first meeting me which, as I came to realize, was often an occasion during which workers would negatively construe their work or positions in life, often by reanimating wider discourses on construction work.

[8] Piya Chatterjee astutely notes that this method is not always possible or useful especially in postcolonial situations(2001).

insidious logic of incentive wage structures in a Chicago parts factory (1979). Elizabeth Dunn worked alongside workers at a Polish baby food company both to see how new managerial strategies played out on the ground but also to gain insight and rapport with her interlocutors (2004b). Using one's own bodily experience, in some senses always the grounds of ethnographic knowledge, seems to be especially useful in studies of labor (Holmes 2013; Hankins 2014). With these models in mind I began my fieldwork thinking that I would myself learn construction trades and, as much as possible, help my interlocutors with their work. For reasons that began to emerge in the previous chapter most of the construction workers I met felt varying degrees of discomfort and almost uniformly discouraged me from attempting to do their work, or even lend a helping hand.

Determined to experience construction work first-hand, I persisted in asking my interlocutors if I might partake in their work, stressing that I had come to India to learn about their work and that I wouldn't be able to do that unless I worked with my own hands. While no one every denied my claims they countered with what often seemed like minor worries. Some claimed that '[your] hands will get dirty'[9] or that it was 'very hot, you will get a fever.'[10] Despite these concerns I persisted in asking and finally I managed to convince the bar-benders at the site overseen by the Central Public Works Department (CPWD) to allow me to work with them.

It was a typical June day in Delhi and I joined the bar benders after lunch so it was about 100ºF. Our task was to build the steel reinforcements for what would eventually be the second floor of the building. At the time the floor consisted of the plywood forms that made a mold in which to pour the concrete. The steel reinforcements would be built on top of the forms and then the whole structure would be covered with concrete ensuring the floor had the requisite strength and rigidity. Pieces of eight millimeter rebar crisscrossed the floor making a large crosshatched pattern. One of the bar benders handed me a hooked tool called a *kundi* and a handful of bailing wire. He then

[9] *Hath ganda ho jaega*
[10] *bahut garmi hai bukhar ho jaega*

explained that every time two pieces of rebar crossed I should bind them together. To do this one had to slip a piece of wire under the intersecting rebar, hook it with *kundi*, pull to other end of the wire over through the hook, and then tighten the wires together by twisting the *kundi*.

The five bar benders and I spread out across the area and squatted down to begin tying the rebar together. Sweat, which had been plentiful even in the shade, began pouring off of my face as I fumbled with the bailing wire and tried to twist the wire tight but not so tight that the wire broke. My legs burned as I squatted and shuffled across the floor. Rust from the bailing wire and the rebar mixed with the sweat on my hands and arms and left dark orange-brown stains. The bar benders seemed to be amused by my attempts and joked about how slow I was. I managed to tie one piece for every five that they did. Every once in a while when I got close to one of the other bar benders they would try to help me by demonstrating the technique. 'Like this' they would say as they took the wire in one hand and in a single fluid motion tied it neatly around the rebar.

After about forty minutes or so the bar benders' amusement turned to concern when one of them realized that I had cut my finger. I had been holding the *kundi* in my right hand while using my left to index finger to hold the wires tight against the tool. I had picked up this method from watching the bar benders as they demonstrated for me, but my relatively soft hands proved no match for the bailing wire. The metal wire had rubbed through the first couple of layers of skin on my finger, which had begun to bleed. I actually hadn't noticed until one of the bar benders pointed it out.

Feeling a bit embarrassed, but ultimately thankful for a legitimate excuse to stretch my legs and get into the shade, I walked over to where the bar bending foreman, a man I call Aabir, was sitting supervising the work. Looking at my hands, now almost black in from the dirt and rust, Aabir said 'Look how dirty your hands got.'[11] Offering me a bottle of water he told me to wash my

[11] *Dekho aapke hath kitne gande ho gaya*

hands he added, motioning to the cut on my finger, 'this isn't your habit.'[12] All of the workers in earshot agreed, some nodding their heads. As I sat down near Aabir he stretched his own hands out so I could see his calloused palms. He explained that he had been doing this line of work for 10 years 'its become my habit.'[13]

The term that I have glossed above as 'habit' is *adat*. This term came up again and again as I asked workers about their work. Yet unlike the English 'habit,' *adat* emphasized a connection between materials, environments and bodies. Habit tends to draw our attention to an automatic physical response built up over a period of repetition. *Adat,* at least as my interlocutors used it, focused on the way that repeated actions brought the body into contact with certain materials.[14] *Adat* then was about becoming habituated to particular conditions in ways that changed ones body, physical capacities and sense of self. The result—when something has 'become habit' as Aabir said—is a particular way of acting and being in the world that is especially fit to a type of work.

Many of these elements of *adat* came together in a conversation I had with a stonemason I call Satish. He was explaining *adat* to me through the example of welding, which was being done near us at the time.

jaise ke āp hai na?…..ab wo// jaise kī wo welding kar rahā hai… to āp kar loge to āp ko current mār degā lekin un logon ko ādat ho jatā hai to nahīn hotā phark hī nahīn paḍtā….aur jaise āp, ek din welding māroge ānkh kharāb ho jaegā pure din āpke ānkh se ānsū bahatā rahegā phir ādat ho jaegā phir koī dikkat hī nahīn paḍegā

Like you for example right?….Now he// like he is welding…..if you do it you will get shocked by the current but for those people it's become adat so this doesn't happen, it doesn't even make a difference….and like if one day you did welding then your eyes will go bad, the whole day tears will keep coming out of your eyes then it will become your adat and there wont be any problem

[12] *yeh apki adat nahin*
[13] *hamari adat ban gayi*
[14] Discourses of *adat*, while relatively absent from the ethnographic literature (although see Pinto 2008), are prevalent across many contexts in North India. For example, *adat* is used to discuss the ways in which new brides become habituated to their in-laws' household (Julia Kowalski, personal communication).

Welding machines draw substantial electrical currents and thus are liable to shock the user. Yet Satish implies that the welders' bodies have become immune to the electrical currents in a way that my body, for example is not. Satish's focus is on one of the identifying aspects of a welder's work. In the next phrase he notes that my eyes could not withstand the intensity of light until this work became my habit. Adat consists of specific bodily modes of interacting with the material environment. Notice that Satish doesn't seem to be saying simply that welders don't shock themselves because they know how to operate their equipment so as not to shock themselves, although this is no doubt also part of what he is referring to. He says both that they don't get shocked ('it doesn't happen) but also that "it doesn't even make a difference" which suggests that the welder's body has become immune to electrical shock. This focus on material exposures is amplified in the next phrase where Satish turns to the intense light of the welding torch. Echoing Gurmeet's comments, who also used the term *adat*, Satish notes that my eyes are not attuned to the intense light of the welding torch, hence my tears. *Adat* is achieved through repeated exposure to the materials of one's trade and is depicted in the movement from a state of bodily rupture, tearing eyes, to one of compatibility 'there wont be any problem' (*koi dikkat hi nahin).*

In this view, my experience bar bending was not dissimilar to the process that unskilled workers go through in learning a trade, if a bit more ungracious. Many of the workers I talked to mentioned that they had problems with their bodies when they began working in a particular line as helpers assisting skilled workers (*mistri*). Stonemason helpers showed me their hands rubbed raw by the heavy marble slabs they had to carry, or they complained of coughing from stone dust. All of these phenomena were physical signs of an improper negotiation of the material influences of this new line of work. One stonemason helper, on demonstrating to me how the heavy slabs of stone were cutting his hands, commented that his hands were still soft but eventually they would become

'tight'. On becoming full stonemasons helpers would remark how 'now habit has been made.'[15] Note how bodily ruptures (blisters, tears) are seen as signs that the work has not yet become *adat*. When it does come, *adat leaves* physical signs on the body in the form of callouses, strong eyes and an ability to interact with the materials of one's trade.

This process made specific workers and revolved around characteristic materials of a trade. Thus, Satish had begun the conversation I quoted from above by telling me about how unskilled workers (*helpers)* became *mistri*.[16] Satish told me that, for a *mistri*, the stone dust wasn't a problem because it had become their *adat*. Helpers, he noted, started out standing next to the *mistri* as they worked thus they breathed in stone dust but less than the *mistri*. Indeed, the *mistri* usually operates the circular saws that cut the edges of stone tiles while the *helper* holds a straight edge on the tile with his feet. As such the *mistri* is much closer to the dust and, arguably, breathes in more. For Satish, this was a key factor of apprenticeship. One started out furthest from the dust, carrying stone tiles to where the *mistri* was, more advanced *helpers* would assist the *mistri* in placing the tiles. In this way, Satish noted, a worker is slowly habituated to the stone dust, which is a sine qua non of the trade.

Discourses on *adat* drew on an ideology of labor that framed productive activity as transforming the embodied self of the worker through regular exposure to particular materials. This meant that labor could have performative effects and to allow oneself to do a form of work that was not one's habit was to court injury or possibly a transformation of one's self.[17] Indeed skilled workers, *mistri*, would regularly refuse to do certain tasks by claiming that it was not their *adat* and thus they would likely be unable to do it or hurt themselves in the process. While the explicit refusal on the grounds of one's *adat* often relied on danger—the increased chance of hurting oneself—the *implicit* danger was that doing work that was not one's *adat*, if carried out repeatedly, could transform

[15] *Abhi adat ban gayi*
[16] Unfortunately this part of the conversation was not recorded.
[17] In this the workers I knew were quite similar to the students I describe in chapter 2.

the worker. *Mistri* of different trades would often incur the wrath of site engineers by refusing to do certain tasks especially when they were those usually done by *helpers*. In this ideology of labor, to allow oneself to do work that was not one's habit was ultimately to risk a negative transformation of the self.

Balancing Substances

The concern with the tuning of one's body to the material exposures brought on by particular forms of work implies an understanding of the body as produced and reproduced through the confluence of particular material flows. In analyzing this dimension of my informants comments I find it helpful to draw on the work of McKim Marriott and others on Hindu notions of personhood. My aim here is not to reify a uniquely "Hindu" or "Indian" form of personhood but rather to use this line of thinking in understanding the ways in which my informants attempted to frame their work and its effects on them. That is, what is useful to me about this line of theorizing is not that it is a particularly Indian phenomenon but that it provides an analytical framework for thinking about an aspect of subjectivity and action that my informants use to frame their experiences of work.[18]

Marriott (1976; 1977) argues that Hindu thought doesn't make a strong distinction between action and actor. Rather actions are seen as entangling the actor in the flow of substances and materials that constitute the outside world. These may come from persons but also food and even metals and minerals. Thus, as Cecilia Busby notes, the person in India has a "fluid and permeable body boundary" (1997: 269). Interactions of all sorts from eating, to sexual relations, to

[18] I am indebted to William Mazzarella for pointing out that the literature inspired by Marriott isn't wrong in that it only ever applied to village India but rather that what it culturalizes as Hindu personhood is present in similar forms in the way we, in the West and elsewhere, treat selves and actions in practice if not in formal philosophy.

conversation and cohabitation can and do fundamentally transform the person through exchanges of substance (Trawick 1990; Pinto 2008). As Daniel demonstrates, people are inevitably brought in to intersubstantial relations not only with other persons but also with places (1984). He argues that much of Tamil village life is oriented around attaining states of "intersubstantial equilibrium" most commonly marked by compatibility between the self and the outside world (Ibid.:8).

More recent work has built in more nuances to this approach arguing against sharp distinctions between "Western" and "Indian" forms of personhood, but also for the internal variation. For example, Sarah Lamb notes that Brahmin women in West Bengal are seen as more having a more flexible body boundary than men, a belief that grounds restrictions of women's movement (2000; see also Staples 2011). The image of fluid self whose nature is transformed through interaction with the world is not then a rigid cultural logic but rather a frame that actors mobilize in making sense of particular situations. In speaking of ones *adat*, and refusing to engage in activities outside it, workers then were attempting to control the ways in which their work transformed them.

It is in these terms that we should understand worker practices of medication as well. Workers had a number of regimens for bringing their bodies into intersubstantial equilibrium with the materials of their work. For example, a stonemanson named Niraj told me that he was very careful about what he ate. Every evening he would eat his dinner of roti and vegetable curry but he always followed it, after some time, with a glass of milk and fruit, usually a banana. Moreover, this routine had to be calibrated to the weather by drinking hot milk in the winters and cold milk in the summers. By doing this', he boasted, 'it's been six years in Delhi and I haven't gotten sick.'[19] When

[19] *Dilli ke andar che sal ho gaya aur kabhi bimar nahin hua.*

I asked him what would happen if he didn't drink milk, he told me that 'the next day exhaustion will come.'[20] Interestingly, this would also happen if he ate the fruit before drinking the milk.

For other workers the chosen substances had a more direct relation to the materials of the trade. On a different site another stonemason told me that he had to drink at least half a bottle of whiskey a night in order to 'clean' (*saf karna*) the stone dust from his lungs. Interestingly when I told another worker about this practice he scoffed telling me that this was simply something people who like to drink say. Yet he immediately followed this with a claim that *gud* (a form of unprocessed sugar) would actually clean stone dust from one's lungs. His complaint then was not with the general logic but the particular substance. Indeed, even the air could be considered 'medicine' (*dawai*), as I discovered when I came across a group of bar-benders sitting outside their shacks (*jhuggi*). One bar-bender said 'for us this air is medicine. If you sit inside under a fan this air isn't good, it's hot air. You become lazy you will not feel like doing anything. But if you sit in this air you will feel good you will become strong.'[21]

As in comments about *adat* workers seek a form of intersubstantial equilibration that is marked by a lack of bodily rupture (blisters, tears, sickness, exhaustion) that signals the strength of the body and its capacities to handle the material exposures of one's trade. Voluntarily taking substances as medicine, then, should be seen as a practice through which workers attempt to control and account for the transformational potentials of work. Stonemasons brought into regular contact with stone dust become habituated to it either through positive transformations brought on by the work itself or with the aid of medicinal substances. In both cases workers oriented toward labor as an activity with the potential to transform the body and self through repeated exposure to particular materials.

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[20] *agle din thakan ayega*

[21] *hamare liye yah hava davai hai. Agar aap panka ke niche ander baitenge to iska hava accha nahin hai garam hava hai. Aapko susti lagta hai kuch karne ka man nahin hoga. Lekin is hava mein agar toda samay baitenge to accha lagega takat ho jaega*

This approach to the person as constituted through shifting material flows, while somewhat outdated in South Asian Studies, has strong similarities with an emergent body of literature around New Materialisms (cf. Coole and Frost 2010). A key figure here is Jane Bennet (2010) who calls for an analysis that deconstructs subjectivity by treating humans as more or less stable assemblages of matter. Bennett calls for increased analytical attention to the vibrancy of matter by which she means the ways that matter is not simply the inert and malleable object of human action but rather has an agency of its own that is always working back on human actors. In this her approach is quite similar to recent calls from Timothy Ingold to attend to the flux of materials encountered in action as against the seemingly unified and stable surfaces of materiality (2012). In both approaches the intentional, agentive actor is decentered through an analytical lens that focuses on the play of materials and actions across and beyond the body.

A key difference with the classic Indian ethnosociological literature is that what in Marriott and Daniel appears as a culturally specific belief system is, appears in the new materialisms literature as an analytical lens on the world, one that we often miss due to our preconceptions about the separation of subjects and objects. While the ethnosociogical literature tends to overly stress the systemic order and cultural particularity of beliefs about the body, the new materialisms literature tends to frame its interventions as in opposition to discourse or cultural logics focusing instead on the materiality of objects. The result is that these accounts often rely on uncritical appropriations of scientific studies (as in Benett's discussion of fish oils)[22] or claims to be representing dimensions of a universal reality. As such these approaches tell us much about the complex interactions between materials and bodies but tend to gloss over issues of who these interactions come to matter in particular social situations.

[22] I am indebted to Ella Butler for this point.

Rather than seeing worker discourses of *adat* as reflecting a cultural ideology of personhood or as recognizing if imperfectly the actual vibrant dimensions of material reality, I argue that we should recognize that comments, complaints and medicating practices of workers are themselves consequential in that they mediate between the heterogeneous materials encountered through labor and the particular worker selves so created. In complaining of one's lack of *adat* or seeking out particular medicinal substances stonemasons were simultaneously picking out particular aspects of the experience of stone masonry as significant. Stone dust is only one of myriads of material substances that workers are exposed too. A stonemason, and his helper, must handle cement (a mild caustic), water and sand not mention maintain a squatting posture for long periods of time, and endure the grinding sound of the stone saw. These qualities of stonemasonry as a productive activity were generally not commented on in worker discourses of *adat* and medication.

Discourses of *adat* and medication then should be seen as communicative frames through which workers attempted to make sense of the heterogeneous materials experienced in work. Labor on the site was seen as what Nicholas Harkness has called "qualic tuning" (Harkness 2014, 18) in which qualia of the body come to fit the particular qualia of ones work. The crucial point here though is that bodies transform through exposure to the qualia of labor, that is to those qualities of the materials of work that are recognized in particular objects. As such the effects of labor are constantly being worked out in an interplay between the vast material experiences of productive action and worker attempts to recognize and regiment these experiences. For example, one bar bender remarked to me 'in this line [of work] you should be a little hot.'[23] Being 'hot,' or angry, was necessary because as another bar bender put it to me 'the steel doesn't understand love.'[24] The smooth soft movements that would be described as 'loving' (*pyar se*) were not enough to mold the steel reinforcements and as such bar benders had to become a little hot. It is the qualia, here the

[23] *Is line mein toda garam hona chahiye.*
[24] *Sariya pyar nahin samjhta hai.*

stiff, springy rebar, of the materials of work that transform workers. Worker comments and practices of medication pick out the salient qualia of their work as they construe the transformative effects of labor on their persons.

This is of course not say that the material exposures of work are not deleterious. Gurmeet's eyes will still give out and Satish may still suffer from silicosis. What I am arguing is that, along with these deteriorations, there is a more generative process in which worker selves are formed and transformed by becoming tuned to particular forms of work. Talk, as I have argued, is crucial in this process as it is through talk that workers regiment the effects of labor on their persons and attempt to make sense of the social transformations that different forms of productive action entail. This process is never perfect and my informants often found themselves transformed in ways they had not intended. As we will see the transformations that work brought about were always ambiguous (strength was paired with dirtiness) and sometimes appeared as something of a fall from grace. It is to one such case that I now turn.

Haggard Tongues: Transforming Managers

'Here men are treated like dogs,' Advay said as we watched the laborers, young men no older than eighteen, stack bricks onto the concrete floor of an area of the site called C-Block. They came up the stairs one at a time with loads of 8-10 bricks on their heads and would drop them unceremoniously in a pile to be put into a neat stack by another laborer. 'You should put that in your report. In India men can be treated like dogs.' I had spent enough time with Advay to know that this was the beginning of what had become his near daily tirades about the horrible conditions on the site and the inhumane business practices of Prakash Limited. A native of Shimla in Himachal Pradesh, Advay had been hired by the main contractors Prakash Limited with a newly minted Bachelor's Degree in civil engineering. Advay took an immediate interest in me, as I did in him,

and, aided by his extremely fluent English, often engaged me in long conversations on wide ranging topics. Indeed, often I felt as though our conversations were reflections on my fieldwork, as when we discussed whether the laborers on the site were getting paid the government mandated minimum wage. Indeed, Advay's daily critiques of Prakash Limited reproduced many of the aspects of the sociological critiques of construction work mentioned above. Yet, as we will see, Advay too was subject to the transformative power of *adat*, although in a different register than the workers dealt with above.

The case of engineers makes the morally ambivalent nature of the transformations brought about by labor especially clear since engineers find themselves somewhere between workers and upper-level management.[25] In the case of Advay this transformation seemed to be something that he in no way wanted. As he told me often the Prakash Limited site was 'hell…it's just hell'. These sentiments were echoed in comments that Sanjay, another engineer, made to me. He was joking around with some of the other Prakash Limited employees during the afternoon tea break, and when I came near he turned to me saying, 'you should end your book with this "Please avoid this line [of work]."' He went on to say that he would tell his children to 'do whatever you want just avoid civil.' When I asked what was so bad about this line he said that you have to deal with so much 'pressure' from bosses and all you do is sweat and get dirty. 'Look at my *rumal ..halat kharab hai,'* (Look at my handkerchief it's in a bad condition) he said, showing me his handkerchief damp with sweat and browned with dirt. 'In this line' he concluded 'you become a dog.'

The image of becoming a dog is telling. The process of working in civil engineering, of working on the site day-in and day-out, causes a transformation of one's self. To become a dog is to

[25] While the CPWD engineers spent most of their time in the CPWD site office, Prakash Limited engineers spent most of their time on the site. Thus while they were not engaged in physical labor they were closer to it than their superiors or, as we will see, their counterparts in other professions (e.g. IT engineers).

lose one's humanity but also to be reduced to brute instincts. Crucially this is a transformation that is brought on, or at least marked by, forms of exposure to dirt, heat and the discipline of one's bosses. This sentiment of the degraded nature of 'this line' was a common one among engineers. It is likely that Advay was not only referring to the laborers performing back-breaking work in front of us when he told me that a man can be treated as a dog in India. Indeed, the crux of Advay's unease at his new job seemed to be that he wasn't being treated like an engineer.[26] After a meeting with the site-in-charge, Advay told me that Baba, as he jokingly called him,[27] had said 'I don't need engineers. All I need is someone to put a crowbar in their [the laborers'] ass'. At the meeting Advay had shown his superior the labor reports that he had been asked to maintain. To make the report Advay had to count the number of bricks stacked by the laborers under his supervision each day. He would further note how many laborers had done the work and calculate the daily productivity of each laborer. According to Advay, this was not work appropriate to engineers but should rather be delegated to supervisors.[28] To do the work of supervision, which included making sure that the laborers were working as fast as possible, was not only degrading, it put one's very self at risk. To be forced to act as a supervisor, to make a habit of doing this disciplinary work, put one's status as an educated certificate holder at risk. Note also that the worry and unease that engineers expressed about this process parallels the concerns of the students as discussed in the previous chapter. In general engineers' worry over the transformation of their substance included a perception of a loss

[26] In this way Advay's situation bears similarities to Bourdieu's description of middle-class consumers who are, in fact, more invested in class distinctions than the elites precisely because of the instability of their position (1984).

[27] Baba means 'father' in Hindi and is generally used as a respectful term of address but it also implies a certain familial affection (e.g. it's often used to affectionately refer to children). Here the informality and emotional closeness of a father undercuts the formality of being the head of a construction site.

[28] On most Indian construction sites engineers are arranged hierarchically from junior site engineers to more senior project managers. At this site foremen worked under engineers and supervisors worked under foremen. The supervisors, then, were supposed to have the most direct contact with workers. Indeed, as I demonstrate in the next chapter, foremen were usually responsible for creating labor reports.

of prestige. The rough life of the construction site made the substantial transformations brought about by civil engineering inappropriate for a self-consciously middle-class person. In contrast, the relatively positive valuations given to worker transformations (e.g. strength, ease of work) are definitely connected to the ways in which *adat* in this case was part of an upward shift in prestige (from general laborer, to unskilled worker, to *mistri*).

For the first three months Advay held out against his new work environment. Almost every day he would tell me of his plans to return to the academy, get his PhD in engineering and become a professor and settle down with his girlfriend back in Shimla. As a step towards a job as a university professor, the current degradation was not a new life position but merely a temporary sacrifice for a larger gain. In this way Advay attempted to avoid the degrading qualities of working on the site by metapragmatically reframing his actions. As part of a trajectory that ended as a professor, his current actions became not labor but rather 'practical'. Advay would comment often on how many more months he would have to work in order to have accrued the requisite year of practical experience necessary to re-enter the academy. The tension between labor and 'practical' here was precisely the one dealt with in the last chapter. The metapragmatic label 'practical' defines the current action, which may seem degrading, as a chance to gain valuable experience that will become useful in one's career. Yet, just as at the CTC, this distinction was fragile and always in danger of collapsing.

This tension was acutely felt by Advay and was made evident in a practice that he adopted early on in his time at the site. He would take loose pages of his engineering textbook, which was slowly falling apart, and come to the site with them tucked into a pocket or between the pages of his reporting notebook. Once at his post he would pull them out, carefully unfold them, and read and reread the equations. Formulas for calculating the various stresses on structural columns, or the chemical make-up of bricks, the content didn't seem to matter. Rather it was the act of reading, or

perhaps even just having the pages on his person, that was important. Advay told me that he could feel himself forgetting the equations that he had learned because he never used them on the site. The loose pages, then, were an attempt to remember as a material reminder of his longer trajectory. They also performed a distancing from the site as he held them in front of his face, obscuring the construction site. By using company time, when he should have been watching the laborers, to read his engineering textbook, Advay resisted the pull of the actions he found himself engaged with. The act of reading formed a sort of barrier between himself and the activity of the site even as it reasserted the privileged knowledge that constituted him as a person of a certain sort, an engineer.

Ultimately however, Advay's reading practice could not stave off the transformative effects of habitual actions. I hadn't been at the site for a few days and, on my return I found Advay radically transformed.

> When I went by Advay he told me that now he thought that he wanted to work for himself as a *ṭhekedār*. I was shocked because up until this point he had always told me that he was only doing the work until he had had accumulated enough experience to go for a higher degree. But then he said (and continued to tell me after this) that he loved 'this line'. He told me that soon he wouldn't be able to associate with the outside world, with civilized people. 'Do you see these people, Adam?' he said, sweeping his hand across the view of the site from where we sat at C-block, 'they spend all their time with people in this line because they can't talk to anyone else'. I asked him why this was and he said that 'this [the site] is a dirty place.' I had heard him say this before, yet this time when I pushed him on the subject he turned to language. He said that his language had become so dirty he could no longer talk to outsiders….. When I asked how his language had become dirty he recounted a story to me. A week ago, after work, he had been at the metro station getting ready to take a train back to his uncle's house where he lived. There was a crowd on the platform and someone had bumped into him somewhat harder than normal. Without really seeing who it was he called out *'Are bahen chod!'* (hey sister fucker!). His voice was loud and his intonation was exactly the same as on the site [the first syllable of ***bah****en* is drawn out with a falling and then rising tone]. He made it clear that this was simply the way that you would address someone in that situation on the site. The person turned around and Advay realized, to his horror, that it was an Aunty [a term used for married women over forty]. She was totally shocked and appalled, which Advay demonstrated, pantomiming the look on her face. He told me that the way you talk to people here just isn't appropriate off the site. The

> problem, as he told me, was that as you stay and work on the site you become habituated to it. More than that, and Advay came back to this again and again, you come to actually like it.
>
> From Fieldnotes 3-23-2012

While I am not sure why, Advay left Prakash Limited a few months after he made these comments.[29] In that time he never again mentioned becoming a professor. A transformation had occurred marked by the degradation of his speech. At first glance Advay's case may seem separate from those of the workers discussed above, a shift that is a linguistic as opposed to a bodily transformation. Yet, note how Advay's comments play on a similar trope of transformation brought about through the prolonged exposures that accompany habitual action. As in the examples above, it was the habitual nature of the practice—specifically the way that the practice brings the actor into repeated contact with certain aspects of the material environment—that caused the transformation. The site is a dirty place in which a particular form of 'rough' discourse dominates. By repeatedly interacting with people in this space Advay has reached a state of "intersubstantial equilibrium" by himself becoming rough and thereby unfit for interactions outside the site. Indeed, one of the advantages of the theories of substance in South Asia (Marriott 1977, Daniel 1984, Lamb 2000) is that the term is not limited to physical entities. By coming into contact with, and indeed enacting, particular forms of speech, the self of the engineer is transformed, and degraded. I am not arguing, however, that the ways in which engineers experience the transformative power of work and the ways in which other workers do are identical. Indeed, that Advay's transformation occurred in the medium of language, and especially its tone, is not coincidental. It is rather, due to the fact that for engineers, especially when treated as supervisors, language is the medium of their work, as the body is for the stonemasons.

Many engineers, foremen and supervisors told me that a key part of their job was to 'to

[29] Advay left while I was on a trip that took me away from the site. He hadn't mentioned leaving before I left and I was unable to contact him upon my return.

maintain the laborers.'[30] 'Maintain' here seemed to mean that they caused the appropriate work to be done in the right way and within the appropriate time frame. One supervisor told me that this was impossible unless you 'pressurize the labor.'[31] The presumption is that laborers will only work when put under pressure by the supervisor. Note here that Sanjay listed 'pressure' from bosses as one of the degrading aspects of the job. It is this pressure that makes one work past the limits of comfort. The primary medium of producing this pressure is language, but language of a particular type. All of the engineers, foremen and supervisors that I talked to about this pointed to an appropriate mix between 'love' (*pyar*) and 'anger' (*gussa*). In general one should speak to laborers 'nicely' (*pyar se*, lit. with love) but if you only speak this way than laborers won't listen to you. One engineer explained: if you only speak 'nicely' then 'laborers think they can do anything.'[32] For this reason it's often necessary to *gussa karta* (be angry, lit. do anger). Here the Hindi phrase nicely blurs the line between acting and being angry. This tension was made even more salient by the comments of some foremen that it was often necessary 'to do drama' (*naṭak karta*). Language that was rough and peppered with abuse terms was part of learning to produce 'anger' and, when done strategically was part of doing drama. Thus a supervisor might adopt the loud, fast paced, abuse term-infused, speech of 'anger' when he was not in fact angry, in order to make the workers under him feel a sense of urgency about the job at hand. Interestingly, the term *bahen chod* occupies an ambiguous space here as it can be used both as an element to make speech more informal among friends or as an epithet to be used as an expression of anger. Thus the phrase is used widely across the site both within and across hierarchical differences. Amongst members of the same work group, *bahen chod* marked an informal intimacy and egalitarian ethos. Across hierarchical differences the term was a

[30] *Labour ko maintain karta.*
[31] *Labour ko pressurize karna.*
[32] *Labour yah sochte ki kucch bhi kar sakte.*

key element in performing 'anger' and often had explosive effects.[33] Yet, whether used with affection or anger, the term belonged to a 'rough' form of masculine speech that was inappropriate for polite society.

In the same way that the stonemasons' bodies had become accustomed to the strains of their work so too had Advay's tongue become accustomed to the demands of his own work. Speaking in this 'rough' way had become Advay's *adat*. Here it is the interactional styles of laborers and the way that managerial work repeatedly brought him into contact with these styles and demanded his own use of them that made Advay's speech 'dirty'. But this change, like the changes undergone by the stonemasons, is not something that stops at the end of the workday. Rather, the transformation makes Advay unfit to communicate with those outside the construction line. The self of the worker is transformed through the work to be uniquely compatible with the sorts of substances they encounter there. It is precisely those aspects of one's person that are most actively engaged in the work process that become the focus of this transformation. Whether it is one's hands, lungs or speech, exposure through habitual action transforms the worker. In the case of engineers this shift is experienced as morally negative, becoming a dog. Yet it is not completely negative. As we will see engineers become 'hard' in their whole person relative to outsiders.

Here again Advay's comments to me that day are instructive. After telling me about the incident at the metro station Advay went on to speak more generally about the decline of his language and person. At one point he began musing about his former classmates who had decided to pursue engineering degrees in information technology (IT) instead of in civil. He imagined what would happen if one of these colleagues were to come to the site. Firstly, they wouldn't be able to bear the harsh heat of the site, which in March was already quite considerable. They were used to

[33] Note the incident between a bar-bending foreman and an engineer that I recounted in the previous chapter where the fight was about what hierarchical differences might allow for the legitimate us of abuse terms.

the temperature-controlled conditions of the office and had become 'soft'. But Advay quickly added that the main thing would be that no one would understand them. Their language and hand gestures wouldn't make sense. They would 'seem gay,' Advay told me. He added that people on the site would say 'hey *bahen chod* are you a faggot or what?'[34] The soft language and bodies of the IT engineers would make them seem 'like women'.

Here Advay valorizes the gendered effects of the transformation wrought by his labor in the construction line. The men who work at the site may be crass and unfit to converse in polite society but this is because they are exemplars of a hyper-masculine form of power. They, unlike the 'soft' IT engineers, are tough enough to withstand adverse conditions. Their language may be rough but it is undeniably male. There are strains of this discourse in the comments of the stoneworkers as well. Remember that women workers were excluded from these opportunities by virtue of remaining as general laborers (see Introduction). One's hands become hard through lifting stones; one's body becomes powerful through the consumption of fruit and milk. Here it is their ability to withstand adversity without falling ill or succumbing to exhaustion that marks them as particularly skilled sorts of workers. Likewise it is the ability of the engineers to engage in such rough discourse that marks them as being able to get work done and thus as powerful men. It may be dusty dirty work that drives one to drink but it also marks one's body as powerful.

This is what Advay meant when he spoke of enjoying his degraded status. The transformations wrought by work are extremely ambivalent. Engineers know, and feel acutely, that construction is viewed as dirty work in India. Many of the skilled workers and laborers that I knew also highlighted this view. Indeed the stonemason who insisted that it was eating *gud* not drinking alcohol that cleaned one's lungs also admitted to drinking daily. When I asked why he grinned and

[34] *Are bahen chod gandu hai kya*? *Gandu* is a derogatory term for gay people but, much like *bahen chod*, is relatively unmarked as an abuse term on the site.

said 'what can I do sir it's dusty dirty work.'[35] Construction work fits people, workers and engineers alike, into particular social spaces that are marginal in many respects, and yet they also afford certain, often transgressive, pleasures and powers. Labor, understood as habitual exposures of particular sorts, was the catalyst for an intersubstantial process of transformation that resulted in a compatibility between the acting (including speaking) self and the context of action. Far from being a deterioration of the body or self of the working subject, the act of labor—and specifically the substances and materials it exposed one to—was seen to *create* the body.

Conclusion: To Sit in Air Conditioning

The similarities between worker and engineer orientations to their own labor, as a transformative force, should not overshadow the crucial differences between engineers and workers. Civil engineering may be considered dirty work in India but civil engineers are still engineers, which is a prestigious position from which one can claim to be 'building India' in a way that workers cannot (see chapter 4). Moreover as an engineer it is possible to move up the managerial rungs and further into India's burgeoning middle-class.[36] This hierarchy came in to stark relief in the summer months when temperatures regularly topped 100ºF. The offices of project managers and other upper level management were outfitted with air-conditioners while the shared office that the Prakash Limited engineers used only had an air cooler.[37] Yet this was much more comfortable than the workers who were completely exposed to the elements. Indeed, the workers would refer to CPWD

[35] *Kya karein sahab dhul miti ka kam hai.*
[36] On a return trip to India in 2015 I found that most of the engineers I knew had moved to higher positions although most had switched companies in order to make these moves.
[37] This consisted of a box with a fan on one side and hay panels on the others. Water would trickle down the hay from nozzles and the evaporation cooled the air so that the fan was able to blow cool air.

officials who would make occasional trips to the sites, high-level managers in Prakash Limited and other apparently wealthy persons with the title *ACwalle* (air-conditioning ones).

Being an *ACwalla* myself, many workers were surprised that I would decide to spend long days with them in the heat. Engineers on the site tended, as much as possible, to disappear into their office during the summer months. As many workers explained to me, those who had become used to sleeping and living in air-conditioning could not stand to be out in the heat for that long. For workers however, this was their habit and some claimed to not be able to sleep in air-conditioning or that it was injurious to their bodies. Yet despite these claims air-conditioning remained a key image of aspiration.

It was a bar bender named Mantu who made clear to me the multiple significances of air-conditioning as desiderata of class aspiration. Mantu was a bar-bending *mistri* from eastern Bihar. Among his work group he had a reputation for being 'crazy' (*pagal*). He had earned this term through his penchant for intoxication not only through alcohol but also, it was rumored, by eating a hallucinogenic plant called datura (Hind. *dhatura* Eng. Jimsonweed) which grew on the site. In addition to this Mantu was known for being something of a clown, slow to work but quick to make jokes. It was in this semi-playful mood that Mantu had broached the topic of coming back to the U.S. with me when I left the site. His request in itself was not unusual. I was asked on a daily basis about the intricacies of getting to he U.S. Mantu's questioning had begun in much the same way. He wanted to know if needed bar benders in the U.S., how much their wages were, and how much it would cost to get there. Yet while most of my interlocutors stopped after finding out how much a ticket to the U.S. cost, Mantu was undeterred.

Over my time at the site Mantu continued to make references to our future trip to the U.S. It became something of a show for the amusement of the other bar benders. When we saw each other he would loudly reconfirm that I was going to take him with me when I left. Turning to his

colleagues he would then loudly boast about how he was going to move to the U.S. This routine always seemed to elicit laughs from the other workers. Part of the humor plaid on the shared knowledge that had spread through the bar benders of just how exorbitantly expensive a travel to the U.S. would be. Mantu was from a particularly poor family and so Mantu's persistent claims to be going to the U.S. were particularly humorous to his co-workers. Yet, at times this joking appeared more as a cover for aspirations that even Mantu was too embarrassed to fully commit to.

On a hot June day Mantu broke with his usual jocular style and addressed me in a more serious tone. Looking directly at me he said 'Sir I'm also going to America, I'm going to earn dollars and dollars…I'm also going to sit in a room, I'm also going to sit in the AC.'[38] The poetic repetition ('I'm also…I'm also') added a significant element to the comments. The phrase *ham bhi* (I'm also)[39] focuses on the inclusion of the speaker by attaching the enclitic '*bhi*' (also) to the subject (*ham*). The effect is something like saying 'I too will sit in a room, I too will sit in the AC.' In this way the structure of Mantu's comment highlights his desire for inclusion in a better life despite its improbability.

While the form of Mantu's comment frames the class divide that he hopes to cross, even he will enjoy the fruits of wealth, the content is also telling with respect to the classed transformations that construction work brings about. While he begins by noting the extreme wealth he will gain ('dollars and dollars'), this is immediately followed by a vision of entry into a new environment. To sit in a room here juxtaposes a proper domicile with the corrugated tin shacks that Indian construction workers inhabit. The aspirational image is crowned with Mantu's dream of sitting, that is relaxing, in an air-conditioned space, just as the project managers do on the construction site.

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[38] *Sahab ham bhi America jaenge, dollar ke dollar kamaenge…ham bhi kamre mein baiṭenge, ham bhi AC mein baiṭenge.*

[39] *Ham* is the first person plural (we) but is often used interchangeably with the first person singular in colloquial Hindi.

Mantu's comment articulated a dream of control over the material flows that would form and reform one's body. To sit in air-conditioning, in a proper room, was to be protected from the potentially deleterious effects of one's work. To be able to adjust the temperature of a room, not to mention have the free time to relax in it, was a powerful sign of control over one's environment and hence the material flows that transformed bodily selves. With AC one no longer needed to be hardened and rough to be capable of withstanding harsh environments. Mantu's aspiration then links upward class mobility with a desire to un-roughen the bodily self made and remade over the course of construction.

I conclude with Mantu's comments because they highlight the ambiguity of the transformations that labor brought about. On the one hand workers took pride in their *adat* by claiming it had made their bodies strong or hard, and refusing to do tasks that were outside their habit (see chapter 4). On the other hand, as comments like Mantu's demonstrate, when work becomes *adat* the worker is fixed into a particular class position. For engineers this process initially appears as loss of prestige even as it may be the first step in upward class trajectory (e.g. to becoming a project manager). In both cases the transformations brought on by repeated exposure to the substances of one's work bring an ambiguous set of pleasures (e.g. the rough, masculine sociality and illicit substances) and pains (e.g. loss of prestige, or physical hardship).

These transformations are irreducibly material, turning on the effects of specific materials on the body, yet they only operate in conjunction with talk, specifically reflexive construals of activity. The matter of habit is not the result of the unmediated interface between the body and the world. Rather it is the result of a constant interplay between the sensual experiences of work and actors, always partial, attempts to render them meaningful. This means that to understand the ways in which labor transforms laboring selves we must understand how laborers talk about their experiences. As I have argued these discursive acts are not separable reflections on work but rather

constituent elements of the socio-material transformations that particular forms of labor bring about. It is from this analytical frame that we can see how workers, and engineers, appealed to an ideology of labor in which labor was understood as transforming the laboring subject through repeatedly exposing the body to particular kinds of materials be they the particulate stone dust kicked up by a saw or the rough tones of barked orders. In this ideology of labor, productive actions tuned the body to one's work by shaping and reshaping one's *adat*.

Part II: Ideologies in Production

While the previous chapters dealt with ideologies of labor that produced persons—students or administrators, workers or engineers—the next two chapters demonstrate how an approach to ideologies of labor sheds light on the dynamics of production itself. We will see that ideologies of labor, in addition to being articulated in language, are also embedded in documentary representations of labor (chapter 4) as well as wages (chapter 5). Production requires the coordination of diverse forms of labor. These chapters take up the problem of the coordination of labors as not only a technical problem but also a semiotic one. Marx's account of capitalist production notes the centrality of various forms of cooperation whereby the individual labor process is not only multiplied but fundamentally reformed into a collective one (1976). Coordination, then, is not only a technical but a semiotic problem. Bringing labors together in a larger process of production necessarily involves translations across divergent media, temporalities ideologies of labor (see chapter 4).

Construction makes these tensions particularly evident for two reasons. First the very nature of the object being produced requires a particular kind of cooperation. The size and complexity of buildings, bridges and other built objects requires a large and diversely skilled workforce (cf. Marx 1976, 446). Moreover, because construction must necessarily take place *in situ* the form of cooperation must be constantly created and recreated as the project unfolds.[1] Modes of cooperation

[1]On the construction site this problem was talked about through the term *chal*. While the term has many meanings, including 'motion,' or 'gate,' in the construction industry its sense as 'procedure,' or 'scheme' was emphasized. When a *thekedar* was asked to do a certain task, for example build a particular wall, he would often ask '*wahan pe koi chal hai*?' (is there any *chal* there). Finding *chal* was crucial because each trade depended on and set up others. Finding *chal* meant finding spaces on the construction site that had been adequately prepped for one's trade. *Chal* connected each trade as step in the coordinated process of building but it had to be constantly negotiated as the project unfolded.

are not made durable in the architecture of the space of work as is the case in the factory (Foucault 1995; Salzinger 2003). Rather the interrelations between different forms of labor on the site are created and transformed through interactions like those that I analyze here.

The second factor that makes the tensions between labors and production particularly visible in construction is the structure of subcontracting. As previously mentioned the site that I focus on here, like construction sites more generally, was characterized by a high degree of subcontracting (figure 4.1). The Central Public Works Department (CPWD) had contracted with a private company called Prakash Limited to manage the overall construction of the building. Prakash Limited in turn employed a number of *thekedar* to supply the trade specific workers necessary as well as general laborers. Yet in many cases there was further subcontracting. Prakash Limited would contract particular types of work such as stone masonry, drywalling or Heating Ventilation and Air Conditioning (HVAC) work, to companies that would supply materials and labor. Often these companies would turn to their own *thekedar* to supply the particular labor that they required.

In the following two chapters I approach this subcontracted structure of production as an inverted supply chain. In doing this I am inspired by Anna Tsing's analysis of supply chain capitalism (2009). A key feature of the supply chain, according to Tsing, is the move away from disciplining labor directly to a focus on disciplining inventory (2013). Production is no longer located conducted in a central factory but is rather disbursed across independent contractors whose work supplies the lead firm with objects whose specifications are defined in a contract. In this model, the lead firm is not only unconcerned with the conditions under which the inventory is made, they are often actively ignorant of these conditions (Barrientos 2013). This is a strategy designed to reduce labor costs and absolve the lead firm of any responsibility for labor law

violations, accidents or social security payments.[2] Yet it also allows, and in some cases even encourages, non- or quasi- capitalist forms of production (cf. DeNeve 2014; Picherit 2009). By focusing on inventory and actively obscuring labor processes, the supply chain creates capitalist value through, rather than in opposition to, heterogeneous modes of labor.

I characterize the construction site as an *inverted* supply chain because, unlike the chains that enable the global production and circulation of commodities, in construction it is the supply chain that moves around a stationary product. This is the case both at the level of projects—workers move around the country to work on different sites—but also within the project, as different trades add to the products of other trades. Yet, like other supply chains, production was coordinated through a focus not on the direct disciplining of labor but rather on its product. This is not to say that workers were not disciplined (see chapter 3) but rather that the form of this discipline rarely focused on the productivity of labor. Managers, especially at the level of the CPWD or Prakash Limited, were not concerned with the efficiency of individual workers but rather with the timely delivery of finished building components. This focus on the completed product, as opposed to the productivity of the labor process itself, allowed the construction site to use a number of disparate forms of labor. Labor was often entangled in relations that shaded into debt-bondage (see chapter 1) or were construed as personal habit (chapter 3). It was through the efforts of *thekedar*, and others, that these heterogeneous forms of labor were coordinated into a unified production process (chapter 4) that could be accounted for according to piece-rate forms of contract (chapter 5).

[2] It was in response to such concerns that the central government passed the Building and Other Construction Workers' Welfare Cess Act in 1996. The act called for creation of state welfare boards, which would levy a tax on all construction projects in the state (up to a maximum of 2% of the value of the project). The funds from this cess were to be used to provide various forms of support for construction workers (e.g. heavily subsidized loans, funding the education of workers' children). The roll-out of this plan has been notoriously slow and uneven (Basu 2012; Agarwala 2006).

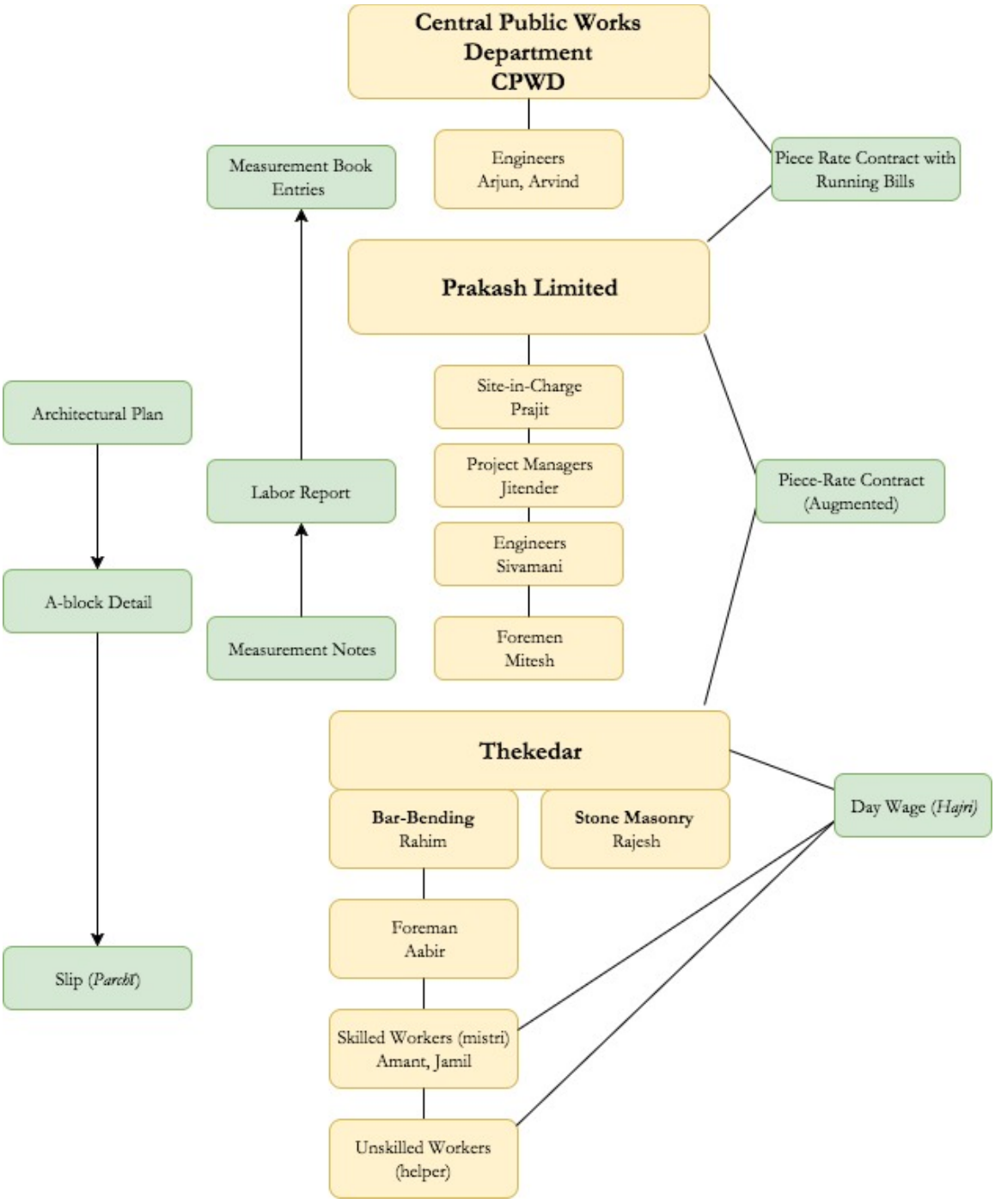

Figure 4.1 Organizational Diagram: A diagram of the subcontracted structure of production on the site. Occupational titles have been provided along with the names of characters referenced in the following chapters. Along the left side I have charted the circulation of paper work discussed in chapter 4. Along the right side I have given the forms of remuneration that link different actors (this is dealt with in chapter 5).

Chapter 4
Paper Modulations

Introduction: 'Zero Zero' Construction

According to a promotional video produced by the Central Public Works Department (CPWD)—the government agency that oversaw construction—the site that I focus on in this dissertation has become a 'state-of-the-art' building. Located on the campus of a prominent institution of higher education in Delhi, it features a number of lecture halls and classrooms all built with innovative materials and a four star environmental rating.[1] Indeed when I first arrived on the construction site I was told by a CPWD engineer that this was a 'more modern site.' His comment referred not only to the use of innovative building materials and heavy machinery on the site but also to the precision and rigorous checking that the CPWD was known for. On the site, this ethos was capture in the phrase 'zero zero' (always in English). As one CPWD engineer was fond of saying, 'everything should be zero zero.'[2] In it's most literal sense the term meant that everything should be exactly in the correct position with respect to the architectural plan, neither a millimeter too high nor a millimeter too low. Yet the term also captured a more general sense that the built structure and the construction process itself should conform to the CPWD's exacting standards, codified in CPWD manuals.

Enacting 'zero zero' construction on the site meant coordinating multiple actors across multiple levels of subcontracting (see fig. 4.1). This chapter analyzes this process of coordination by attending to the forms of documentation and paperwork that translated and transformed the complex acts of labor that created the building into an apparently smooth, transparent process of

[1] As mentioned in the introduction, the building received this rating from Green Rating for Integrated Habitat Assessment (GRIHA) for its use of fly ash construction and offsetting the carbon footprint of the construction process.
[2] *Sab kuch zero zero hona chahiye.*

production. This was not simply an instrumental problem but had a number of, largely unnoticed, social effects. Specifically I argue that the documentary forms that enacted 'zero zero' construction and thus marked the site as 'modern' turned on an, always partial, disentangling of the building from the acts of labor that created it. Here I take up Hannah Appel's notion of modularity to capture the way in which the documentary regime enforced by the CPWD was oriented toward the creation of an image of transparent, precise construction that could be easily detached from the realities of the site (2012a). Here the documents of the CPWD enact an ideology of labor in which productive activity appears as a uniform, calculable substance that can be distributed in accordance with the architectural plan. On the one hand this framing of labor erases the particular contributions of workers, but it also makes the unavoidable tensions in this process appear to be signs of the 'traditional' or 'backward' character of workers (this chapter) and their *thekedar* (chapter 5). In this way the forms of production that mark the site as 'modern' reproduce the very categories they purport to overcome.

In one sense then this chapter traces the effects of abstraction by taking it not as a force in itself but as the result of situated social practices. This approach, I argue, illuminates the way in which 'modern' construction sites become generative of the supposedly unfinished process of modernization that they are meant to resolve. The chapter begins by situating the notion of 'zero zero' construction in a discourse that frames the actions of workers as somehow separate from the process of building, which is linked to managerial action. I then contextualize this distinction, a hallmark of 'modern' construction, in the colonial history of the CPWD to show the central importance of paperwork and documentation in creating this image of 'modern' construction work. With this context I engage in a close analysis of the papers and documentary practices through which labor is coordinated, translated and transformed on the site. I loosely trace the fabrication and documentation of the steel reinforcements for a beam to organize the different moments of the

production process. As work orders travel down the levels of subcontracting they must be translated into forms capable of mobilizing workers. This meant that *thekedar* created documents that would fit into worker understandings of their labor as a specific, habituated capacity (see chapter 3). As completed work was recorded and checked Prakash Limited foremen created documents, often in collusion with *thekedar*, that allowed labor to reframed as a homogenous substance. This ultimately supported the documentary forms of the CPWD, which depicted construction as an orderly exchange of quantities of built materials for amounts of money. In this representations labor disappeared into the material constituents of the building. In so doing the CPWD could remain disentangled from the complex negotiations necessary to organize and remunerate labor on the site. I conclude by demonstrating how the tensions in this process came to reaffirm and reproduce notions of workers, and their *thekedar,* as 'traditional' and somehow unfit for 'modern' construction.

Building and Toil

Workers tended to dismiss their activities on the site as 'just to fill the stomach' and as 'nothing special.' Here actions that materially produced the building were dismissed as simple toil whose main end was to allow the actor to eat. As I have noted, these initial expressions of alienation were complicated by worker discourses of *adat* or habit (see chapter 3), but what I want to focus on here is the contrast of this position to that of the engineers and project mangers on the site. Both CPWD and Prakash Limited engineers and project managers made what at times seemed like quite grand claims for their actions on the site. For example a Prakash Limited project manager named Jitender introduced me to the site by explaining that in India, as in America, there was a labor shortage. The shortage was not of manual workers but was rather of intellectual ones. In order to remedy this situation the educational infrastructure needed to be augmented. Jitender noted that the

present building, a new classroom complex for a well-known university in Delhi, would include two large lecture amphitheaters that would accommodate in one room all the students who needed to take required courses. In this way Jitender presented the current building as a crucial piece of infrastructure in the development of India's human capital. It was he who drew my attention to the way in which the very design of the building would help to transform the nation—through the training of its future professionals.[3]

Jitender took great pride in producing this and other crucial pieces of national infrastructure. He told me that he was filled with a strong sense of purpose because, as when he built a bridge, he had to think about all of the people who would one day use the structure that he had built. These future inhabitants were his responsibility (*zimmedari*). Jitender framed the building in the trajectory of Indian progress. Yet in so doing he presented himself as the sort of person capable of directing, and playing an important role in, such progress. Jitender was not alone in framing his actions on the site in this way. Many engineers and project managers both within the CPWD and Prakash Limited described their work on the site in similar terms. In these discourses, the building, and its planned function, points to the actions of the speaker; Jitender is responsible for the lives of those who pass through the building. Yet this relation operates at another level in which the indexical connection between the building and progress, that is, the building as infrastructure, reflects back on Jitender, the producer of this index, as himself modern and developed.

The stark difference in the self-characterization of work activities, as necessary toil on the one hand and national contribution on the other, should perhaps not have been surprising. The comments of the workers seem to reflect their position of alienation in a mode of production that reduces their creative powers to a mere means of existence. Moreover, the division between mental and manual labor, along with the devaluation of the later, has long been noted as a hallmark of

[3] In an attempt to maintain anonymity for the project I have been purposely vague about the sorts of students to be taught.

capitalist production (Marx 1976; Braverman 1998; Sohn-Rethel 1978). My concern here is not so much with the empirical veracity of this claim but with its perceived legitimacy for my informants. The chapter traces the semiotic practices that made these divergent self-characterizations seem natural. In doing so the chapter builds on the concept of ideologies of labor to analyze the complex effects of production itself. I argue that paperwork was a key modality through which these divergent characterizations were produced. It was through forms of documentation that the process of building came to appear as something separate from the labors that produced the structure. Specifically I focus on those forms of paperwork that mark the site as 'modern' through checking, documenting and otherwise frame construction as the execution of a plan. Before delving into the ethnographic analysis we should contextualize and historicize this notion of 'modern' construction as it was enacted by the CPWD. To do this we must look to the colonial history of this agency and to the peculiar role that paper played in its actions.

Paper Patterns

From its inception in the second half of the nineteenth century, the Public Works Department (PWD) was described, by supporters and detractors, as dedicated to the modernization of the built environment of the Raj.[4] Under colonial rule, the PWD was founded as a way to rationalize, standardize and render more efficient the growing infrastructural projects of the British administration, most notably the Ganges Canal Irrigation project which eventually gave rise to India's first technical college at Roorkee. Arthur Cotton, an early supporter of the PWD, described the establishment of a separate department for undertaking infrastructure and government construction projects through the use of military metaphors. Likening the final steps toward this

[4] The Public Works Department would later be reorganized into the CPWD, which operated at the federal level, and various state-level PWDs.

end to "the last general advance at Waterloo," he noted that "[t]he tide of Indian improvement has now fairly set in, and woe be to him who attempts to stem it" (Cotton 1854, VII). For our purposes it is crucial that Cotton's text links the tide of improvement to a particular type of construction practice. It should be carried out under the supervision of professional specialists (i.e. engineers), be the result of a process of deliberation and design, make efficient use of materials and labor, and be part of a systematic plan (ibid. 4). These were key elements of modern construction as enacted by the PWD. In this sense the PWD, and its postcolonial successor the Central Public Works Department (CPWD), were deeply tied to modern construction from their inception.

Indeed, even the detractors of the colonial Public Works Department confirmed its credentials as an institution of modern construction. This is nowhere more true than in the vehement and sometimes poetic critiques of Ernest Binfield Havell. Havell came to India as the superintendent for the Madras School of Art and later of the Government School of Art in Calcutta. He quickly became enamored with Indian artistic forms and became a vocal proponent for their support. His work on Indian Architecture is a sustained effort to argue for local building practices as part of a living tradition of Indian art. This art was being systematically destroyed by the British administration and their insistence on European styles and materials. As Havell argued "the Indian craftsman when left to follow his own instinct has succeeded in putting life into the dead styles of Europe by grafting them on to his own living tradition" (1913, 215). Unfortunately the colonial administration, through the auspices of the Public Works Department, "made an official monopoly of State buildings in British India, applying to them its own dry as dust formularies culled from Macaulay's bookshelf,[5] and the products of this system loom so large in the life of Anglo-India that

[5] The reference here is to Lord Macaulay who served on the Supreme Council of India between 1834 and 1838. In 1835 he wrote his famous *Minute on Education* in which he argued that English should replace Sanskrit and Persian as the medium of education in Indian schools as it would, among other things, aide colonial subjects in learning from Western civilization. His suggestions were largely taken up in the English Education Act of 1835.

the very existence of the Indian master builder is sometimes forgotten" (Ibid., 220).

The invisibility of the Indian master builder was both one of architectural style and construction process. As Peter Scriver notes in his study of the colonial Public Works Department, the standard architectural designs of the department reflected its history as a branch of the military board of engineers, being largely functional, uniform and devoid of any ornamentation (Scriver 1994, 2007). On occasions that called for more ornate styles, Lutyen's Delhi for example, Indian motifs were passed over, or superficially incorporated, into more recognized European architectural styles. Havell's description of the design process is remarkable for reproducing the self-image of modern constructionin India only with the valences reversed.

> That which is called architecture in Anglo-Indian caravanserais[6] is merely a mechanical process, originally invented by the dilettanti of the Renaissance in Europe, for tricking out the business arrangements of the Anglo-Indian administration in tinsel adornments called "styles." The official architect sits in his office at Simla, Calcutta, or Bombay, surrounded by pattern-books of styles…and, having calculated precisely the dimensions and arrangement of a building suited to departmental requirements, offers for approval a choice of the "styles" which please him or his superiors, for clothing the structure with architectural garments in varying degrees of smartness, according to the purpose for which it is intended, at so much per square foot. (ibid. 222).

Here Havell mocks, as 'mechanical', the very standardization, rationalization and centralized control that the PWD was envisioned as creating.[7] The text, *Indian Architecture: Its Psychology, Structure, and History from the First Muhamadan Invasion to the Present Day*, is explicitly framed as an attempt to render visible the all but forgotten arts of the Indian craftsmen. Throughout the text the 'living' and vibrant traditions of Indian craftsmen are opposed to the dead and superficial styles of the British colonial administration. The functionalism and efficiency that was praised by the likes of Cotton

[6] A caravanserai was a roadside inn where travellers could rest from their journey. The buildings had a distinctive architecture including an enclosed courtyard and stalls for housing pack animals.
[7] Of course this self-image did not accurately capture of the reality of construction projects undertaken by the colonial PWD (Dutta 2007) or, as we shall see, the postcolonial CPWD. Indeed, part of what makes Havell's critique so interesting is that it presumes the very principles of modern construction that PWD supporters were at pains to produce.

becomes the target of Havell's critique.[8]

The important point for our purposes is that these critiques challenge colonial modernity by taking it's own claims at face value. Havell actually makes a strong argument for the standardizing effects of the Public Works Department even as he decries them. There is an underlying agreement then between supporters and critics of the PWD, and the colonial project more generally, which frames the colonial encounter as one between a European modernity and an Indian tradition. The values of each position may change but the dichotomous structure, and to a large extent its methods (e.g. planning, mechanization, etc.), untouched. As such, Havell's comments on the horrors of the PWD are quite interesting for contextualizing the self-understanding of the PWD and ultimately the ways that this translated into the contemporary goals of the Central Public Works Department.

It is not only the design aesthetics that come in for critique in Havell's work. He argued that the PWD also saps the creative vitality of local craftsmen. It does this through the use of paper documents in the construction process. As Havell notes, after the design decisions have been made and approved,

> a set of paper patterns is prepared and contractors are invited to undertake to get these patterns worked out to proper scale and in the regulation materials. Then, at last, the Indian craftsman is called in to assist in the operations, under the supervision of the contractor and subordinate Public Works officials, who check any tendency the craftsman may show to use his imagination or his intelligence in anything beyond copying the departmental paper patterns. (ibid.)

Havell goes on to point out that this system inevitably reduces the Indian craftsman to "a mechanic who works listlessly for the wages he earns and has no interest in anything beyond his earnings" (ibid.). In this way the very forms of production employed on the site were seen as destroying the traditional connection between the Indian craftsman and his work, turning him into a mere wage laborer. Indeed Havell goes so far as to argue that the problems that emerge on sites, of workers

[8] Havell's critique here may be part of a larger move against style-books, which were used by architects in Britain at the time as well. However, as I demonstrate below, Havell sees the PWD as especially egregious.

shirking work and cheating their employers, are due to their devaluation as the result of the bureaucratized forms of construction.

A central actant in this degradation of work and worker are the 'paper patterns' of the PWD.[9] As Havell describes, the 'paper patterns,' or architectural plans, organize the structure of production on the site. Once the plan has been drawn up, construction labor can be divided among trade-specific contractors and overseen by the subordinate Public Works officials. In this way, the labor of transforming materials into building components is separated, even as it is articulated with, the labor of directing, imagining and recording the production of the built structure itself. Havell argues that the reliance on an abstract architectural plan reduces the Indian craftsman to a mere copier. The embodied skill and living tradition of his craft becomes nothing more than an ability to mechanically follow a pre-given model. It is on the grounds of fit, and these only, that the craftsman's work is judged and, as Havell notes, supervisors ensure that workers are not allowed to deviate from the plan in any way.

In this regard Havell's critique has quite a lot in common with Timothy Ingold's work on the "textility of making" (2009). With this phrase Ingold captures an approach to productive action in the world in which skilled workers produce objects out of a tactile engagement with the affordances of various materials. In this mode of analysis the form of the object emerges out of this engagement rather than being imposed on it. Ingold frames this approach as part of a radical tradition of thought, one opposed to the dominance of what he calls the 'hylomorphic model,' which he traces back to Aristotle. In the hylomorphic model, which Ingold opposes, "[f]orm came to be seen as imposed by an agent with a particular design in mind, while matter, thus rendered passive and inert,

[9] In all likelihood this phrase refers only to the architectural plans, specifications and technical drawings, but it could also to the voluminous specification books that the PWD published (and, as the CPWD, continues to publish). These books outlined very exacting standards for various construction procedures from the laying of bricks to the storage and carriage of cement. (cf. Government of India 2009).

became that which was imposed upon" (ibid.:92). Ingold describes the shifting notions of the architect as a key example in the historical ascendance of this model. In medieval cathedral building, the architect was treated as a master builder, tracing the forms of components on the materials themselves with string piece by piece. Yet in the 15th century the architect came to be understood as creating the entire plan of the building in his mind before any work with materials was undertaken.

As in Havell this transformation in production is associated with a shift to the use of paper plans. Ingold cites the early architectural writings of Leon Battista Alberti as an early example of the hylomorphic model in construction. He argues that, for Alberti, architecture consisted of projecting a complete plan for a structure in one's mind as a set of lines and angles called lineaments. Ingold writes:

> These lineaments have quite a different status from the lines that masons cut from templates or laid with string. They comprise a precise and complete specification for the form and appearance of the building, as conceived by the intellect, independently and in advance of the work of construction. *On paper*, the lineaments would have been inscribed as drawn lines, which could be either straight or curved. (emphasis mine, ibid., 93).

According to Ingold this separation between conception and creation typifies the dominant mode of thinking about construction. Here the work of construction becomes, as in Havell, the simple execution of a pre-given plan. Paper is crucial in this scheme as it is the inscription of the plan, as lines on paper that allows the 'precise and complete specification' of the building to be completed before the work of fabrication begins.

Both Havell and Ingold's critiques are instructive for many reasons but my purpose for mentioning them here is to highlight the longstanding associations between paperwork, especially paper plans, and modern forms of construction work. Whether in the positive comments of Cotton or the critical ones of Havell and Ingold, the hallmark of modern construction is the reliance on a fixed plan that is worked out ahead of time and a building process that ends in a structure that matches the plan exactly. This association turns on the way paper documents are seen as dividing

the production process into a purely mental process of planning and a merely mechanical process of executing the plan.

Ingold's aim is to develop an analytical language and approach to making that undoes the hylomorphic model and its structures of thinking. In its place he champions an account that focuses on the textility of making, that is on the way formed objects emerge not out of the imposition of designs on matter but through the process of engaging different materials. Yet in opposing this model he seems to take some of its claims at face value. The process of abstraction itself is never conceived of as an embodied process in the way that acts of labor are. As Willilam Mazzarella (2002) notes this is a tendency in Ingold's approach more generally (cf. Ingold 2000a). While Ingold's critique operates at a theoretical level and doesn't have the same nostalgia as Havell's account, both end up presuming that the processes of abstraction that they oppose operate in the way the seem to. That is, they presume that the paper plan, which was and is certainly described as the laying out a complete and specific plan that action simply follows, as actually achieving this end.

In what follows I take a different approach by providing an account of the very paper mediated abstractions of modern construction as themselves produced out of a complex engagement with the materials of the site. That is, rather than presume that the plan abstracts or renders production mechanical, I attend ethnographically to the work that various forms of paperwork do in framing labor and coordinating production on the site. The architectural plan does not have an unmediated connection to the work of construction but rather must be translated in different ways in order to catalyze action on the site. Yet this is not the only way in which paper mediated production as labor done on the Central Public Works Department (CPWD) site that I focus on here was also recorded in labor reports. These reports returned work to the plan in a matter of speaking by charting the work done as an amount of built material installed in a particular

section of the plan at a particular time. In doing so the labor reports framed labor as though it were a freely distributable homogenous substance.

I argue that this effect should be understood not as an erasure of the complexities of labor, but rather as producing what Hannah Appel has called 'modularity' (2012a). Appel develops this term in her analysis of the practices through which the oil industry in Equatorial Guinea disentangles its profit seeking operations from the complex interdependencies that it creates. In her case, a focus on modularity brings attention to the way that this project of disentanglement relies on "the use of mobile, compliant, and self-contained infrastructures, labor setups, forms of expertise, and legal guidelines to enable offshore work in Equatorial Guinea to function "just like" offshore work in Ghana, Brazil, or the North Sea" (ibid. 693). Focusing on the documentary practices on the CPWD site as a project of modularity draws attention to the ways in which the CPWD could engage a wide variety of labors while still projecting an image of a 'modern' construction site. Rather than attempting to standardize labor, the forms of paperwork on the site produced a separable sphere in which production appeared as the simple exchange of magnitudes of built material for piece-rate wages.

Paper plans did not accomplish the mechanization and modernization of the production process that Havell railed against; they only presented themselves as doing so by creating a separable level of operation in which production appeared to happen through a step-by-step exchange of materials, including labor, for wages. This is precisely what Appel argues that modularity does. Yet even this image was interrupted by the vicissitudes of production on the site. While the forms of documentation that circulated between Prakash Limited and the CPWD attempted to overwrite the complex translations that made them possible, the heterogeneous labors of the site were constantly threatening the image of construction. On the site, this tension, which at an analytical level exists for all forms of production that coordinate multiple labors, was framed as a clash between the

modern aspirations of engineers and the 'traditional' character of workers and subcontractors. To understand this process this chapter will trace the ways that paper mediated everyday production on the site. We start, appropriately enough, with the architectural plan.

Plans and Maps

The office of the Prakash Limited site-in-charge, a man I call Prajit, was spacious, especially compared to the other offices in the temporary Prakash Limited compound. The desk chair was situated in front of a three-foot by five-foot architectural plan of the entire building. It hung on the wall behind him as he interrogated his engineers and supervisors as to the reasons various tasks had not been done, or assured visiting superiors that the project was running on schedule. It was as though having the image of the building behind him allowed him to speak for the entire project even as he was addressed as being responsible for it. This plan, like all architectural plans, was a diagrammatic icon (Peirce 1931). That is, it represented the building by virtue of a likeness (iconism) based on the interrelations of parts that held in the plan and that (*should*) hold in the building (*CP* 2.277).[10] Of central importance here is that the iconicity of the plan structures a projection into the future, one that necessitates an assemblage of workers and materials. The large diagram on Prajit's wall was part of a particular image of production that was presented to subordinates and superiors alike. It suggested that the construction of the structure was the execution or manifestation of a pre-given plan. As I will demonstrate, it was with reference to the plan that acts of labor were incorporated into the temporal logic of the project. Acts of labor either furthered or delayed the completion of the building by conforming to or deviating from agreed upon contract rates and

[10] Another key feature of icons in Peirce's analysis is that because the represent their object by virtue of a similarity in qualities of the sign and the object there is no need for the object to actually exist (*CP* 2.276). Thus an image of a unicorn depicts an object that doesn't exist. In this way the projective capacity of the architectural plan plays on the underdetermination of icons.

technical specifications.

On the surface it may seem that this image is nothing more than ideological obfuscation. It is, of course, true that this image misses the very complex negotiations and practices through which production unfolded on the site. My goal in starting with the site as seen from Prajit's stems from a crucial insight that Matthew Hull makes in beginning his analysis of the planning techniques of the Islamabad Development Authority. "A planning map is not only an ideological projection of a bureaucratic vision of the city; this vision is embedded in the technical and procedural processes that link a map to roads, structures, streams and documents" (2012b, 5). Like Hull's planning map, the plan is embedded in the procedures that link plans to beams, floors, and documents. The construction site certainly does not operate in the manner that the plan, or the other forms of paperwork I analyze here, would suggest. Yet, and this is the task of the chapter, neither is it altogether removed from the daily life of production. The image of a rational, 'modern' production as the simple execution of a plan is embedded in the very procedures through which the plan is linked to building materials, worker bodies, wages and documents. This approach to paperwork illuminates the ways in which modularity is embedded in everyday practice even if it is never fully achieved.

Translating Plans, Dissecting the Building

Standing on the site itself, one rarely saw images of the complete building. Engineers would carry folders containing the plans for the particular areas of the building that they were responsible for. The foremen who worked under them had similar folders, although theirs were slightly more worn and annotated with measurements and notes relevant to the work for which they were responsible (e.g. bar-bending, masonry, carpentry). These plans, and the ability to read them, grounded the authority of the engineers and the foremen in the production process. General

priorities, such as which parts of which floors of the building needed to be finished first, were dictated by the project managers. The engineers were responsible for different areas of the building, identified by lettered blocks, or sometimes for certain systems (e.g. steel girders, electrical). The foremen were generally in charge of particular trades (e.g. bar-bending, carpentry). They were the primary point of contact between the *thekedar* and Prakash Limited. The *thekedar*, often represented on the site by his own foreman, was normally the one who would directly tell his workers what was to be done and how.

Yet this preliminary summary glosses over the ways in which these sections of architectural plan were themselves translated into imperatives that catalyzed acts of labor. These work orders were not icons of the finished product; rather, they were indexically linked to the activity of building. That is, they represent the building (or a part of it) not through likeness but by being causally related to it, in this case by guiding the actions that bring it into being. In translating the plan into imperatives for work, the semiotic practices that I take up here also articulate different ideologies of labor. This process of translation is undertaken in a number of different modalities, as we will see below. In the case of bar bending much of this translation turned on the production of particular forms of paperwork, namely lists.

Toward the end of each day, the project managers, engineers and foremen of Prakash Limited would have an informal meeting in which the goals for the next day's work were laid out. It was in such meetings that Mitesh, the Prakash Limited foreman in charge of bar bending, was told what, if any, bar-bending work should take priority the next day. Mitesh was not passive in this process, as he himself looked for places where bar-bending work needed to be done on the site. Indeed, Mitesh told me that 'giving work' to the bar-benders was his 'duty.' If he did not find work

for them to do, the *thekedar* would move his men to another site.[11] The bar-bending *thekedar,* Rahim, was quite a successful *thekedar* and had workers on many sites. As a result, for most day-to-day issues Mitesh dealt with Rahim's foreman Aabir.

Figure 4.2 Architectural Drawing: An architectural detail for A-block, well-used and augmented with hand notes. Photo by author.

At the beginning of the day, Mitesh would tell Aabir what work there was to be done. To do this they would usually discuss the work over an architectural plan of the specific area (fig. 4.2). In the conversation they would specify the parts of the building to be built by referring to the block, floor level and structure (e.g. *A3 ka beam banana hai* (the beam on A[block] 3[rd level] needs to be built). Often, specifying the work to be done required that both Mitesh and Aabir physically go to the area in question to discuss it and determine whether the area was ready for the bar-benders to work there. This meant that the area needed have the appropriate scaffolding and that the concrete

[11] This was not always an easy task since almost all construction activities depend on the work of others. For example, the bar-benders can only build so much until the structure must be covered in concrete in order to allow them to build higher. Thus, there were times where there was relatively little to do. In this case Mitesh would have to work hard to find things that needed to be done.

must be dry, among other things. In attending to these considerations Aabir and Mitesh were concerned with what Timothy Ingold has called the 'taskscape' by which he means the ways that tasks take their meaning from the ensemble of other tasks with which they are embedded (2000b). In one sense this chapter unfolds the complex taskscape of bar-bending which includes the act of labor itself but also Mitesh and Aabir's meeting, the acts of concrete pouring and setting up scaffolding that are necessary precursors, and finally the acts of recording and even remuneration that follow the act.

Figure 4.3 Translation Work: Aabir making a *parchi* (on his lap) by reading the architectural detail (right side of image) and the bar-bending schedule (left side). Photo by author.

Once Aabir had agreed to do the work he began a complex translation process in which he converted the architectural drawing into a series of work orders. He began by coordinating between the architectural plan and another document called a bar bending schedule (fig. 4.3). This document specified the relevant qualities of the constituent parts of each beam (number, diameter and length

of each bar as well as the placement of supporting rings). Reading across these two documents, Aabir made his own list (referred to generally by the workers as a slip (*parchi*) of the lengths and dimensions of rebar needed (fig. 4.4). Here, the far left column indicates the diameter of steel to be used, while the middle column gives a graphic representation of the bar's shape with necessary measurements and the right column specifies how many of each piece is needed. The constituent parts of each section of each beam are grouped together. Thus the pair of twos on the list denotes different sections of the same beam.

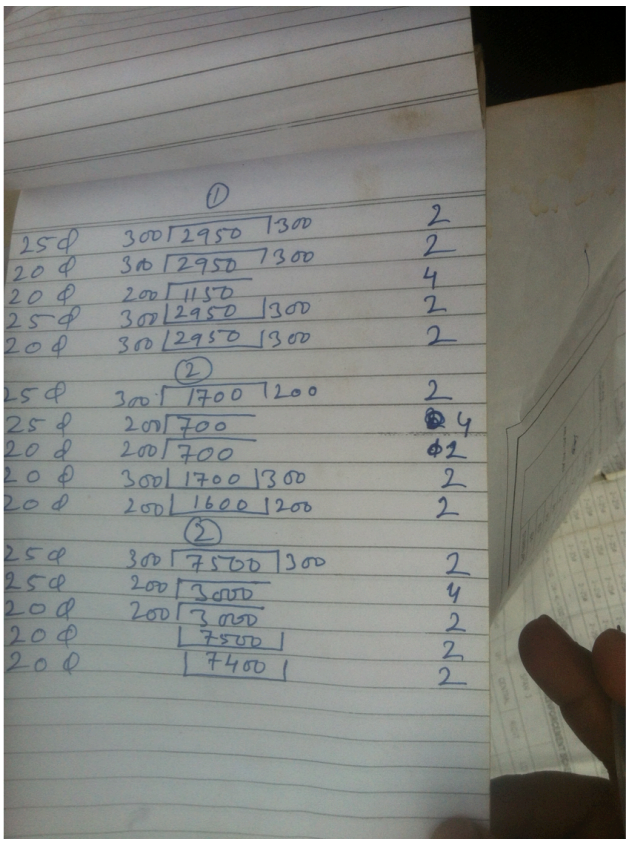

Figure 4.4 Parchi: A finished *parchi*. Photo by author

When the *parchi* was completed Aabir delivered it to one of his skilled workers (*mistri*) who, in turn, took a group of workers to the area where the lengths of rebar were stored. Here the workers would select pieces of rebar and cut them down to the requisite size. Throughout this process the skilled worker in charge would often refer back to the *parchi* in order to mark the bars in

chalk as to where they needed to be cut and or bent.[12] In doing this, the *parchi* was transposed onto the actual material to be worked upon. The result was something that is quite similar to the string templates that Ingold opposes to the geometric lines of the architectural plan. Note then that neither does the architectural plan replace the template, nor are workers rendered mere imitators. Rather, as I have described it, construction operated through a number of intermediary "texts."[13] The force of the architectural plan is not so much in controlling worker actions, reducing them to rule following, as it is in coordinating them with a particular image of production.

From Plan to *Parchi*

Aabir's role in this process is absolutely critical, as it is only once the architectural plan has been transformed into a *parchi* that it is capable of guiding action. That is, it is only as a list of bars with particular dimensions that the plan can operate as an imperative to the bar benders. Aabir, and the documents that he produced, acted as a mediator between the plan and the acts of production required to produce the built object. On the surface Aabir's role would seem to be one necessitated by the ignorance of his workers. Skilled workers, much less helpers, do not generally know how to read an architectural plan and thus would not be able to work off of it directly. Yet this account misses the crucial way in which the *parchi* itself frames the activities of Aabir's skilled workes. To work from the *parchi* is to execute a set of orders given directly by Aabir, the representative of the *thekedar*. Aabir's translational work radically recontexualizes the plan of the building as a work order. This semiotic process is part and parcel of the relationships of authority and power that are

[12] In order to save steel *mistri* often use scrap pieces that they then overlap to create longer bars. Thus the process requires a certain amount of skill and is often overseen by the most experienced *mistri*.

[13] There are resonances here with Jacob Eyeferth's work on ground leveling in Maoist era Shanxi (2016). Eyeferth stresses the importance of 'texts in the landscape' as separate from schematic plans. 'Texts in the landscape' encompass the marks and materials guide workers by augmenting the material worked upon.

produced on the site. Indeed, this translational act produces Aabir as the originator of the work orders for his own workers even as it circumscribes the authority of the supervisors and other Prakash Limited managers.

The *parchi* is a particular sort of document precisely because it does not actually document anything in the sense of recording a reality already constituted in the world. Shoved in shirt pockets, folded, crumpled, read and re-read by the *mistri*, the *parchi* was often destroyed, and always forgotten, by the end of the workday. Yet in this respect Aabir's *parchi* is perhaps an ideal exemplar of the genre of the list. Cornelia Vismann notes that unlike other sorts of writing, the list is a form of writing that aims to "control transfer operations…The individual items are not put down in writing for the sake of memorizing spoken words, but in order to regulate goods, things, or people. Lists sort and engender circulation" (2008, 6). In listing the requisite pieces of rebar, the *parchi* was meant to guide the action of workers in what bar-benders referred to as 'making items' (*mal banana*) as the pieces that were made at this point would later be assembled into the beams and columns of the building. Aabir's acts constitute a translation in the sense that he recreated elements of the plan into elements of a list.[14] The element remains the same, a beam with particular dimensions, but the medium of its representation is transformed, from a diagram to a list. Yet this sort of translation was not only done through paper. It also occurred in brief interactions.

Hit it Lightly

One of the reasons that the project was considered to be 'cutting edge' was its use of steel

[14] In semiotic terms Aabir's actions here, and most of the translations in this chapter, are transductions because they involve a shift in the medium (Silverstein 2003c). That is, rather than taking a phrase from one language and putting it in a different language, these acts take elements from one medium into some other medium (as when a play is adapted into a movie). In strict semiotic terms then, much of what we normally call translation is actually transduction in that it involves these sorts of shifts (Gal 2015).

girders to support expansive ceilings with the minimal number of support columns. In fact, the Chief Executive Engineer of the CPWD told me that this building was, to his knowledge, the first building in Delhi to employ this technology to cover so much space.[15] While they were one of the most valuable components of the built structure, these girders were also the most difficult to construct. In order to attach the girders securely to the walls, special plates had to be installed after the rebar reinforcement had been built and before the concrete for the wall in question was poured. This ensured that the plates, onto which the girders would be bolted, would be able to support the weight. The installation and placement of these plates took up a huge amount of time and effort and was the source of no end of tensions between Prakash Limited and the CPWD. The difficulty was that these plates, themselves very heavy, had to be situated with precision due to the fact that the girders would arrive pre-made at the site. Thus if the plates were more than a millimeter off, the girders would not fit.

The work of installing the plates for the steel girders had fallen to a particular *thekedar*, who in turn, had dispatched his foreman, Nandalal, along with a number of workers to attend to the job. In order to ensure that the plates were placed in exactly the right spot a Prakash Limited supervisor or surveyor would use a machine called a total station, in combination with an architectural plan of the area, to site the precise location (via coordinate points) at which the steel plate should be fixed. He would then call out how many millimeters and in what direction the plate was from the correct location. Nandalal and his men would move the plate in the indicated direction and another measurement would be taken. The process would repeat until the plate was at exactly the correct coordinates. Getting it into this position however, usually involved cutting pieces of the rebar

[15] Steel beam construction is generally associated with office buildings and other 'modern' structures in India. While not a particularly advanced technique within architectural circles, it still stands out as 'new' with respect to the more typical combination of reinforced concrete and brick construction prevalent in India. What was particularly 'cutting edge' about this application was the vast expanses of ceiling/floor space that the steel girders would support.

structure with an acetylene torch, welding and re-welding the plate to the rebar structure, not to mention lifting, shoving and wrestling the heavy plates into place. On one particular evening I watched as Nandalal, his helpers, and a Prakash Limited supervisor struggled with one of the plates for the second floor auditorium. Nandalal and his helpers were waiting to see in which direction and how far they would have to move the plate. Specifically, they were working on getting the plate in line so that it wouldn't protrude too far out or be too flush with the wall. The supervisor peered through his total station and called out "*ek emem piche*" (one millimeter back). Nandal immediately said to his helper who was positioned behind the plate with a large hammer, '*halka sa maro, ek emem*' (hit it lightly one millimeter).

Here, unlike in the case of the bar-benders, Nandalal's comments were, strictly speaking unnecessary. The helper understood that what the supervisor meant was that the plate was still one millimeter 'behind' the level line and thus would need to be pushed one millimeter forward. Yet note that Nandalal's utterance translates a comment about the built environment (the plate is one millimeter behind) to an imperative for action (hit the plate lightly). In Nandalal's utterance, the emphasis was on the imperative to 'hit it lightly'; the measurement was added almost as an afterthought and in a softer voice. In the supervisor's comment the measurement is the focus; it specifies a particular aspect of the built environment. In Nandalal's comment, by contrast, the measurement is used to specify the lightness with which the plate must be hit.

The pragmatic effect of Nandalal's words, then, is actually quite similar to Aabir's *parchi* in that it transforms a referential claim about the world (both rooted in the architectural plan of the building) into an imperative for action. Thus, the resultant actions are framed as second pair parts to the translation, and the foremen (Nandalal and Aabir) are produced as the catalysts of the work done. At the same time the workers, under Anil and Aabir respectively, are positioned as directly under the authority of their foreman. Anil's comment and Aabir's *parchi* do this, in part, by refusing

a direct relationship between the workers and the architectural plan. The foremen and engineers of Prakash are free to specify *where* work is to take place but it is the *thekedar,* through his foreman, that actually causes the work to happen.

This point was made clear to me in an encounter that occurred before Aabir arrived between Sahud the bar-bending *thekedar's* foreman and Mitesh. Mitesh was complaining to Sahud that he had told the bar-benders not to build the rebar reinforcement in a certain way and yet they had ignored him and now the work had to be redone. Sahud, grinning mischievously, told Mitesh that this was why he had told him to put all requests in writing and give them to him. Otherwise he could not guarantee that all the workers would hear and understand the directives. Sahud's comment playfully addressed the tensions within the distribution of labor and authority on the site, while also providing a commentary on the forms through which they were mediated (graphic artifacts and talk). To ask for all requests to be handed over to him in writing parodied the norms of interaction between formal companies. In jest, Sahud claimed that Mitesh should afford him the same text-artifactually mediated relationship that existed between Prakash Limited and the CPWD, in which all requests really did have to be put in writing. Yet at the same time Sahud's comment was aimed at Mitesh as well. This was the result of not respecting the established relations of authority. Indeed, while Sahud was the foreman on the site, the bar-benders were *Sahud ke admi* (Sahud's men) and only took orders from him; once Aabir became the foreman the bar-benders were known as *Aabir ke admi.*

Both the *parchi* written by Aabir's hand and Anil's command enact the productive activities, which they seek to regulate. Not only do they establish the authority of the foreman over his men, they also mark resultant the labor as an action of a particular kind. When Aabir makes the *parchi* or Anil interjects his command, the resultant activity is figured as a response to these first pair parts. The productive actions of the *mistri* (skilled worker) are the execution of an order from the foreman. In this way, the actions of the *mistri* form one part of a reciprocal, although asymmetrical,

relationship between the *thekedar*—mediated by the foreman—and his men. The translational practices described above take the directives of Prakash Limited to focus on this or that part of the plan and transform them into forms that reinforce a the relationship between *thekedar* and worker. From an abstract need for particular components of the built environment to be constructed Aabir and Nandalal fashion directives for particular workers that, as we will see in the next chapter, are recognized and remunerated in ways that affirm the *thekedar*-worker relationship as a hierarchical reciprocity.

From Parchi to Plan

Strategies of Measurement

While the texts of *thekedar*, artifactual and interactional, translated the plan into particular work orders that fit within the *thekedar*-worker relationships, this was not the end of the production process. Virtually every act of production on the site was measured and recorded first by Prakash Limited and then by the CPWD. Ultimately these documentary practices re-figured work on the site as the sequential execution of the architectural plan. It was here that the complex negotiations between *thekedar* and their workers were transformed into the timely, or tardy, execution of the project

After the sections of beam—along with the rest of the second floor of A-block—had been installed, Mitesh, the Prakash Limited foreman, returned to the area to measure the rebar. With pencil, notebook and measuring tape in hand he set about measuring each piece of rebar in the floor, carefully noting the number and dimensions of each type or rebar piece in the floor (Fig. 4.5). The result was a set of notes in Mitesh's notebook that he would use to fill out an official 'steel reinforcement measurement' report. Unlike the *parchi,* the report explicitly linked the work

completed to the architectural plan through references to the architectural grid (Fig. 4.6).[16] As we will see in the next section the report was ultimately presented to a CPWD engineer and formed the basis for CPWD records and ultimately bills of payment.

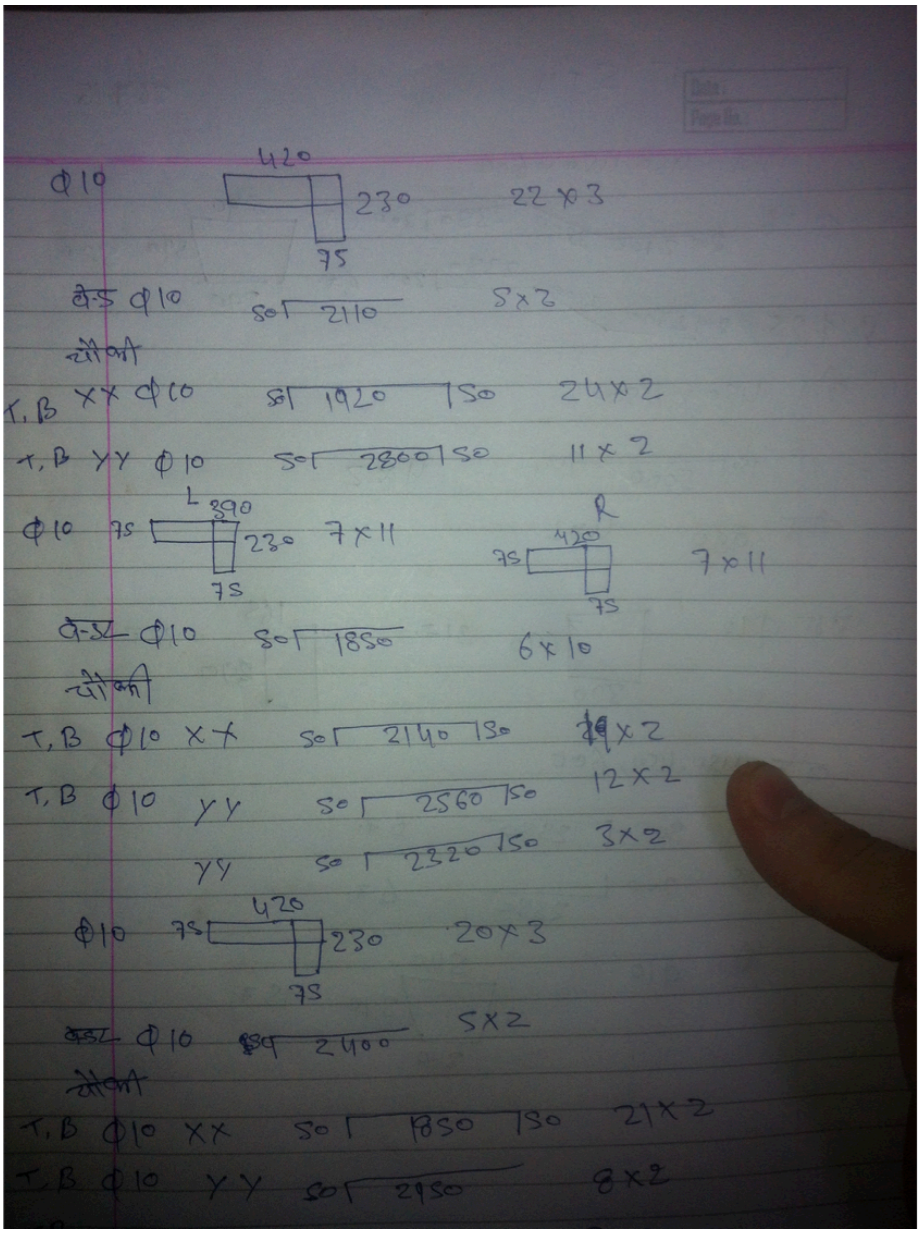

Figure 4.5 Measurements: Mitesh's notes depicting the measurements for a section of stairs. Photo by author.

[16] I was unable to obtain the actual report that corresponds to Aabir's *parchī*. The report shown in figure 3 is for another section of the building. My focus is on the general form of these mediations.

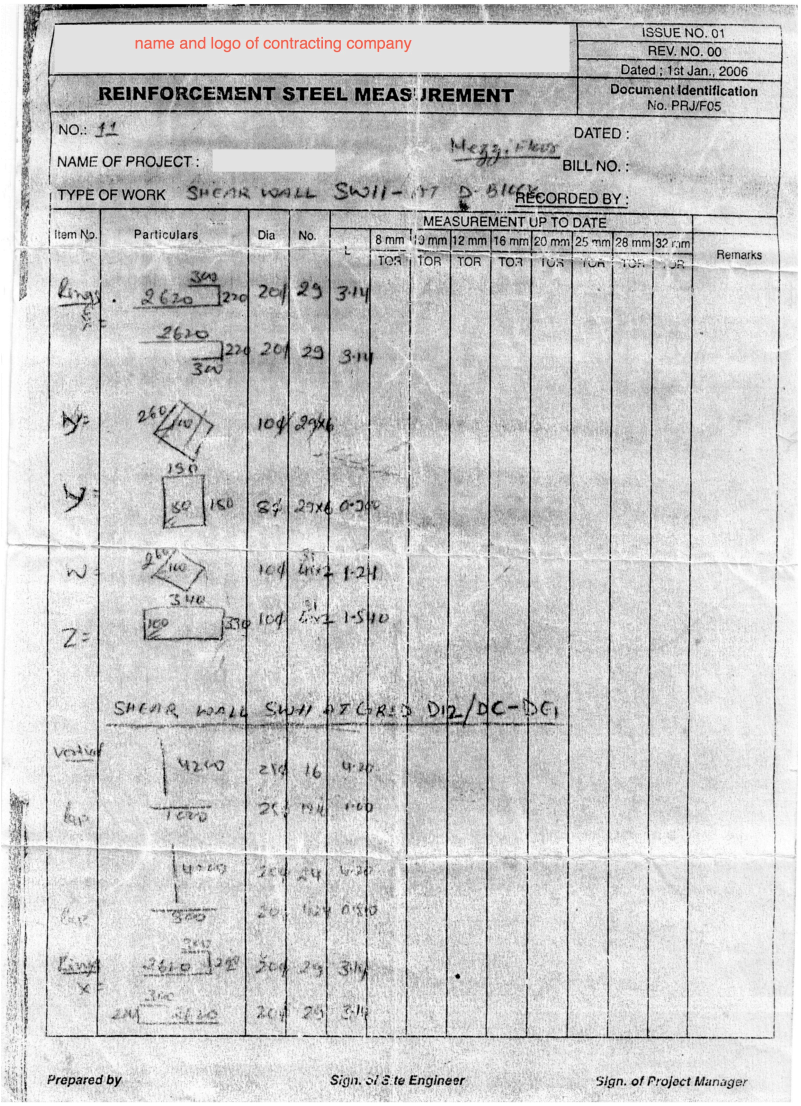

Figure 4.6 Steel Reinforcement Report: Labor report for a section of shear wall specified with reference to the architectural plan. Photo by author.

While not every type of labor was recorded on an official report like the 'Steel Reinforcement Measurement' form every instance of work was measured, recorded, and ultimately submitted to the CPWD. The measurements and notes that Mitesh and others made on the site were a crucial step in translating the particular acts of labor catalyzed by *thekedar* into a calculable homogenous substance that could be accounted for by a piece-rate. The measurement documents that I take up in this section all represented labor through it material output in kilograms of bent rebar, square meters of laid stone, and square meters of erected scaffolding. Unlike the *parchi,* these

reports represented labor as a substance that could be measured in transformation of various amounts of material at various places and times. In measuring the labor done these reports also supported the CPWD's claims to 'zero zero' work. From the reports one could tell if the correct amount of material had been put in the correct place.

Yet these practices of abstraction did not usually have such straightforward effects. Indeed the measurement strategies that I witnessed on the site often short-circuited even as they supported the forms of documentation that marked the site as 'modern.' In these strategies foremen and engineers colluded with *thekedar* to create formally coherent reports of labor at the expense of their accuracy. Yet the lack of fit between document and world should not be seen as a failing but as a generative effect of the form of production on modern construction sites.

Because the measurement and recording of work on the site had to be checked and approved by a Prakash Limited employee, there was always an excess of work to be recorded and engineers (especially those who had relatively little experience) would often take responsibility for recording the work of certain trades. This is how Sivamani, a Prakash Limited engineer, came to be responsible for recording the stonemasonry work on the site. As *thekedar* finished various portions of stonework they would ask Sivamani to measure the work to start the payment process.[17] Sivamani would go to the area specified and produce a document very similar to Mitesh's notes. In this figure (CITE) Sivamani has recorded the width and length dimensions for a stairwell. From these notes Sivamani would then calculate the total area of stonework in square meters and submit a labor report, which would then be checked in much the same way as with the rebar work.

One afternoon I accompanied Sivamani and a stonemasonry *thekedar* named Rajesh as they took measurements of the sandstone slabs that Rajesh's workers had attached to the exterior walls

[17] The number of stonemason *thekedar* on the site fluctuated over the course of the project but there were always at least three working at any given time. This was due to the fact that the building required a number of different types of stone (e.g. Kota tiles in the interior floors, Dolpur (sandstone) for exterior walls, and marble for bathroom counters).

of the building. Standing on the scaffolding two of Rajesh's workers stretched out a long tape measure across the top of the wall in question and then measured down the side of the wall until there was a change in width. When they got to this point one of the workers took the measurement and called it out to Sivamani, as per his directions. The workers then took a new width measurement and continued measuring down the wall. The next section was much more complicated. Not only were there numerous cut outs for windows, and other irregularities, but the scaffolding had been taken down. To make matters even worse Rajesh pointed out that his men had been forced to redo a portion of this wall due to a miscommunication with Prakash Limited engineers about how the stone was to be attached to the wall. As Rajesh noted, and Sivamani concurred, Prakash Limited had agreed to reimburse him for the error, which meant that they would have to count the redone area twice.

In the face of both of these complications—the window cutouts and the redone section—Sivamani shifted his measuring strategy. First he directed the workers to go to the roof where they could measure the width of the wall. Then he directed them to measure the height of the wall by having the workers pass the tape to each other as they hung out of the windows on different floors. In this way Sivamani came up with a measurement for the total area (tiled and untiled) of the wall. While this was happening Sivamani asked Rajesh how high up his workers had gotten before they were told they had to redo their work. Rajesh pointed to a spot on the wall close to the third floor and Sivamani had the workers note how far down from the top of the wall it was. By subtracting this number from the total height of the wall and multiplying by the width Sivamani came to an estimate of the redone area (not accounting for windows). At this point Sivamani turned to Rajesh explained the numbers and they proceeded to negotiate a final measurement number that would take

into account the windows, the areas left uncovered for other reasons,[18] and the area that had been covered twice. When they settled on a number Sivamani wrote it down and made sure that the measurements supported it and went back to the Prakash Limited office to file the report.

This example is instructive not so much because it points to inaccuracies in the measurement of work, but because of the insight it provides into *how* measurements were created on the site. What seemed to be a purely quantitative process of counting the square meters of stone tile laid was actually a qualitative process that relied on a negotiation between Sivamani and Rajesh. This negotiation mixed together estimates of how large the window cutouts were, with more incalculable issues like the trouble of having to recover an area of the wall. Rajesh amplified the trouble that this had caused him, mentioning that a number of the slabs had broken in the process and he had had to replace them. Sivamani listened as he calculated a number and began to negotiate with Rajesh, referring back to his estimates and factoring in windows and other uncovered areas. As was the case with Nandalal and the steel plate, Sivamani framed his authority as coming from his knowledge of the built environment itself (here estimates of window and uncovered areas). The measurement that Rajesh and Sivamani settled on was not the result of a purely technological process but rather depended on the interactional skill and finesse of both Sivamani and Rajesh to negotiate a reasonable measurement.

This focus on the form of bureaucratic documentation rather than its accurate depictions of reality is a common feature of studies of bureaucratic functions in South Asia (Hull 2012b; A. Gupta 2012; Bear 2011) and elsewhere (Riles 2006; Hull 2012a). As these studies point out we should not see the seeming disinterest with accuracy as a sign that these forms of documentation are failing. Rather we should, as these studies do, take this as provocation to rethink what it is that bureaucratic documents do (Hull 2012a). Measuring the work done is undertaken not only to have an account of

[18] Due to the design and topography of the wall certain sections had not been covered in sandstone at the time.

the *amount* of work done, but also to change the *form* of the work itself. The Steel Reinforcement Measurement report and the notes that Sivamani and Tiwari made make the complex acts of labor done on the site tractable to the forms of accounting and recording that the CPWD prides itself on. It was then the first step in a process whose goal was not the accurate description of acts of labor but rather the enactment of transparent construction.

Measurement Books

We return, once more to the beam at A-Block. Once Mitesh had completed this form he signed the original and brought it to a Prakash Limited project manager who also signed the document. After this the report was delivered to the CPWD and an engineer was dispatched to check the veracity of the report. The CPWD engineer met with Mitesh and the project manager who had signed the document and the three men walked out to the second floor of A-block. Moving methodically through each line of the report the engineer asked 'where is this?' to which Mitesh would point to the pieces of rebar noted on the form. After working his way through the entire report the CPWD engineer returned to the site office where the information was used to create a 'measurement book.'

Measurement book entries were the beginning of a complex billing process that I discuss in the next chapter. Assistant engineers in the CPWD recorded entry book measurements to check every type of work done on the site. Each entry included a description of the work, the location, the relevant measurements of the rebar, the rate at which the work was supposed to be billed according to the contract, and the total cost of the piece of work. While measurement books were designed to be disclosed to the public as an account of the work done under the CPWD, I was not allowed to photograph or copy any sample entries. As the CPWD manual notes, measurement books "should be considered as very important accounts records and maintained very carefully and accurately as

these may have to be produced as evidence in a court of law, if and when required" (Government of India 2003, 7.6).

Taken together the measurement books give an account of the process of construction as an orderly series of exchanges of precise amounts of built material for money. In the account books of the CPWD production appears as the smooth, if slow, manifestation of the architectural plan into the component materials of the building. Labor is visible in these documents only as the force that transforms material in a particular amount of time. The measurement books and the labor reports on which they're based should be seen as modular in the sense that they produce an image of standardization and rationality that does not rely on controlling the means of production but rather on a strict regimentation of internal modes of representation (Appel 2012a). This is definitely a process of abstraction but this process itself, as I have demonstrated, relies on the embodied actions of foremen and engineers. Indeed one of the CPWD engineers at the site told me that the only reason they were able to keep up with the work of checking was that they had all memorized the rates for different forms types of labor.

Yet the work of abstraction had its own effects on the worker. The forms of paperwork and documentary practices that marked the site as 'modern' fundamentally shaped the way in which CPWD engineers, and to some extent Prakash Limited's project managers, oriented themselves toward labor on the site. CPWD engineers regularly walked the construction site to check on the progress of construction. As soon as they were spotted on the site a Prakash Limited engineer or project manager would run out to accompany them. The remainder of the walk then usually consisted of the CPWD engineer enumerating the problems they saw on the site. The most common complaint was the relative lack of manpower. Seeing unsatisfactory progress on a certain component of the building, engineers would exclaim 'add laborers here' or 'add at least three more

men here'.[19] The word used for 'adding' men or laborers was *lagana*, which means 'to spread, to apply'. In these comments, productive action is treated as a smooth substance that must be applied liberally to the material surround in order to affect measured and calculated transformations in accordance with the architectural plan.

From the perspective of the CPWD engineers the work of the *thekedar*, when successful, had the effect of rendering labor homogenous. CPWD engineers would identify particular areas of concern to their Prakash Limited counterparts by demanding that more men be added. These demands would then become the directives to Prakash Limited foremen and set off the chain of productive activities described above. Yet the translational work of Aabir's slip or Nandalal's command remained invisible along with the particular relations of labor that they engaged. In part the very forms of translation enabled this effect. On the one hand the slip converted a piece of the architectural plan into a series of actions carried out as part of the *thekedar*-worker relationship. On the other hand it also encompassed these heterogeneous activities as 'Aabir's work'. By asserting their authority over their workers Aabir and Nandalal encompassed the complex negotiations over work under the singular figure of the *thekedar*. In doing this they made the measurement books possible.

The inverted supply chain system of subcontracted production supports the fiction of labor as a freely distributable force by filtering these demands to the appropriate *thekedar* who then gives specific forms of work to workers that they have selected for the job. All of this happens under the label of a particular *thekedar's* work. Furthermore this work is then refigured in the reports. Here the heterogeneous forms of work that constitute the building are erased. The focus in the report, as in the measurement book, is on the inventory. The amount, placement and weight of the rebar is carefully recorded and its correspondence to the contract checked. The way in which it was

[19] *yahan pe labour lagao, kam se kam tin aur adami lagao yahan pe.*

transformed and installed is not only overlooked but also de-linked from the process of production. The complex activity of building emerges as the careful management of inventory; distributing it in the appropriate amounts and temporal sequences.

Workers are not unaware of this process. The worker characterizations of work as 'just filling the stomach' or 'nothing special' that I mentioned in the previous chapter and the outset of this one were complicated by remarks that workers made after I had gotten to know them better. For example, after I had been doing fieldwork on the site for a year or so Afsas, a bar-bender, invited me over to his *jhuggi* for dinner. The dinner, of chicken and alcohol, was generally a jocular affair but at one point Afsas became more serious as he spoke of the big projects he had worked on before this one. He specifically lingered over the Anand Vihar metro station, a job where the work needed to be perfect due to the high standards of the builder. Then, coming to the current project, he lamented 'We built it sir but Prajit's name will come on this building…people will think that he built it.'[20] Of course, as the site-in-charge for Prakash Limited, Prajit's name did not actually come on the building, which was generally recognized, if at all, as a CPWD project. Yet Afsas' comment points out, and critiques, the way in which the processes translation that move work across the inverted supply chain of the site delink the building from the productive activities that have made it. Afsas astutely notes that while Prakash Limited project managers and CPWD engineers can legitimately link their actions to the structure they are building the workers (Afsas' 'we') cannot.[21] Indeed, Afsas only made this rather explicit critique once he knew me quite well and in the context of a night of homosocial drinking. The image of Prajit's name coming onto the building nicely captures the step-wise erasure of worker actions that the forms of measurement and documentation

[20] *Ham log bana diya sir lekin is building pe Prajit ka nam aega…log sochega ki wo banaya.*
[21] This is not unrelated to the fact that the work of engineers and project managers is never accounted for in the project budgets. Rather they were paid monthly salaries, which were recorded at the central offices of the CPWD and Prakash Limited respectively. In this way managerial labor is not dissolved into the building materials but recorded separately as a capacity to catalyze the project.

on the site enacted. In the image of production that emerges from the measurement books, the building appears as the result of acts of management that distribute a homogenous labor in correct areas at the correct times. In this construal engineers and project managers can claim to be building whereas workers simply toil. Yet this process is never complete, the next section turns to instances where the specificities of productive actions seep back in. The modern construction site does not simply erase the actions of workers like Afsas, it frames them as signs of an always unfinished process of modernization.

Kinks in the Supply Chain

I was well into my usual morning walk around the site, when a group of men caught my eye. As I approached the four men, I could hear the shouting even over the din of stonecutters and other construction equipment. I recognized Arjun and Ramesh in their shirts, slacks and relatively clean and unscratched white construction helmets that marked them as CPWD engineers. They were shouting at a shorter, younger man without a hard hat. But they were not concerned with this breach of site safety regulation. Rather they were concerned with the state of the ceiling of the second floor of C-block. 'It should be finished today,'[22] Arjun said gesturing toward the ceiling where the concrete was crisscrossed with a metal grid only partially filled in with white ceiling tiles. Like any good institutional building this one would have false ceilings (also called drop-down ceilings). The younger man—who turned out to be the *thekedar* for the workers who installed the false ceilings—looked nervous as he explained 'sir there aren't enough men'. This only made Arjun more irate as he yelled that he had seen at least two of the young man's men on the third floor. Why couldn't he just move them to this floor where there was important work to be done? This is when the man sheepishly explained that the men Arjun had seen could not install the tiles. They only made

[22] '*Aaj khatam hona chahiye*'

the metal grid in which the ceiling tiles fit. The workers who fit the tiles were still in their village where they had gone to celebrate Eid. At this point Arjun turned to me and with a gesture of exasperation and a shift to English said, 'You see Adam, this is the problem with India. The workers have no sense of profession.'

At one level this incident demonstrates that the processes of translation analyzed above are never smooth. The framing of labor as a unifrom substance that disappears into the built materials is always partial as the specificities of different labors constantly seep back into the frame (Appel 2012a; Callon 1998; Hebert 2014). Such tensions arose, as in this case, when CPWD engineers intervened in the translational process that coordinated production on the site. Here, for example, Arjun attempts to assign specific tasks to the false ceiling worker bypassing the *thekedar* as the catalyst and organizer of particular tasks. Note that in so doing Arjun appeals to the ideology of labor framed in the measurement books. He treats labor as a relatively homogenous category, differentiated only by trade. As such one should be able to redistribute workers to the most pressing task. In this case the ceiling tiles of the second floor were most pressing since a high-ranking CPWD official was going to visit the site the next day and Arjun and Ramesh wanted the project to appear to be making progress.[23] Yet when Arjun attempts to directly organize workers he runs up against the heterogeneity of labors. Indeed, when I talked to the workers on the third floor they told me that setting the tiles in the grid was not their *adat* (see chapter 3). As long as Arjun had stayed at the level of making general calls for work to be done in particular areas the *thekedar* would have been able to translate these directives into specific work orders, as Aabir did with his *parchi*. Yet Arjun's demand for particular workers to do particular tasks leaves the *thekedar* with no option but to refuse. In this instance, as in another I will illuminate in the next chapter, translation breaks down and the tensions between the multiple ideologies of labor at work on the site became evident.

[23] The logic here was that it would be better to have two floors fully finished than three in various states of completion.

Yet there is more at stake in this incident than the tensions of translation. These tensions are inherent to capitalist production; they emerge from the process through which heterogeneous forms of action are rendered into a homogenous, calculable and exchangeable substance. As we have seen in the previous chapters ideologies of labor construe the material experiences of productive action. The clash between ideologies of labor in production is unavoidable in the sense that people's representations of their own and others' productive action will necessarily pick out and obscure different qualities of the action. Indeed, it is precisely this tension that lies behind the creation of surplus value, which turns on the disconnect between the productivity of human action *qua* material process and the framing of that action as labor *qua* necessary labor time (a homogenous, calculable substance).

What happened on the site is that this tension becomes framed in a particular way. To the extent that the processes of translation described above work, they support an image of the site as a space of 'modern,' transparent production. Yet this means that when tensions inevitably arise in the process they are understood by CPWD engineers, and Prakash Limited employees as we will see in the next chapter, as signs of the 'backward' or 'traditional' character of workers, and their *thekedar*. Arjun's claim that Indian workers have no sense of professionalism is an attack on both the workers who wouldn't do what needed to be done and also the one's who weren't at the site for religious reasons. Arjun's comment resonates with colonial framings of Indian laborers as fundamentally rural and ultimately incapable of full conversion to industrial factory work (see chapter 1). Managers on the site, from engineers to project managers, would regularly complain that it was impossible to do construction in summer due to the monsoons and in the winter all the workers would return to their villages to celebrate festivals. As one engineer explained to me workers simply could not think into the future. If they had enough money for now then they would stay in the village until it was gone.

These discourses circulate widely in India but the form of production on self-consciously modern construction sites grounds these discourses in the experienced tensions of production. As we have seen, the forms that mark the site as 'modern' depend on a series of translations that coordinate divergent notions of labor into a single production process. Forms of paperwork are central here in that they operate as boundary objects that link divergent projects together without imposing a shared set of understandings. These translations allow for a form of modularity in which heterogeneous forms of labor are brought together under an image of production as an ordered exchange. It is this model that Afsas protests against when he claims that 'we have built it.' The heterogeneous labors of workers and the labor of translation itself is erased in the image of transparent, 'zero zero' construction.

Anna Tsing argues that "the closer we look at the commodity chain, the more every step—even transportation—can be seen as an arena of cultural production ... yet the commodity must emerge as if untouched by this friction" (2005, 51). The processes of translation that center on Aabir's *parchi*, Mitesh's notebook, and measurement books in the CPWD, could be seen as allowing the building to emerge "as if untouched" by the heterogeneous labors that created it. Hannah Appel (2012a) notes that Tsing's analysis focuses on moments of scandal—for example human rights violations—as moments from which to bring supply chains under critique (Tsing 2009). Modularity, Appel argues, extends this project by focusing attention not on scandal but on the everyday, licit, practices that allow commodities to emerge unscathed at all.

This chapter extends this project in another direction by arguing the scandals of supply chain production may do more than render visible the translational work that supports them. On India's modern construction sites the tensions in the always partial process of modularity itself reproduce a narrative that frames construction workers and their *thekedar* as 'traditional' stumbling blocks to the full realization of a modern construction industry and, by implication, nation. It is the very

mechanisms that allow, however partially, the building to emerge 'as if untouched' from the modern construction site that will not allow construction workers and *thekedar* to emerge unscathed. The modern construction site then reproduces the very thing that it purports to overcome.

Chapter 5
Moral Economies of Remuneration

Dusk was slowly settling in on the construction site when one of the project managers from the main contracting company, Prakash Limited, strode by what would one day be the gently curving back wall of one of the expansive lecture auditoriums. The curve was only one of many in the "state-of-the-art" educational facility, and this particular wall was still in its early stages, consisting only of vertical rebar[1] reinforcements. The project manager spoke loudly as he initiated a conversation that occurred almost daily between Prakash Limited managers and the various subcontractors (*ṭhekedar*) responsible for supplying the necessary number and types of laborers to the site. This time his interlocutor was Aabir, the bar-bending *thekedar's* foreman, who represented his thekedar on the site. The project manager launched into his interrogation, and demanded to know why the wall had not been finished yet. Aabir, for his own part, asked the project manager for some "support." Aabir needed two or three more laborers to help with the work. The wall was particularly difficult, he explained, and hence he felt that the company ought to provide extra help. The project manager said something rather non-committal, and hurried off to another part of the site.

Aabir's request had been made in a semi-humorous fashion, but the need was real. The gentle curves of the auditorium walls were quite hard to build. The walls were to be constructed out of concrete, reinforced with steel rods (rebar). Normally, this would be a simple procedure involving building a lattice, with pieces of rebar coming up from the floor and long horizontal bars bent

[1] Rebar is a shorthand term for reinforcement bar. In Hindi this material is referred to generically as *sariyā* (steel). Both "rebar" and sariyā refer to steel bars of varying diameter that are embedded in cast concrete in order to enhance its tensile strength. The end product is referred to as "RCC" or reinforced cement concrete.

around them. The result would be a three dimensional wall whose crosshatched steel expanse would provide strength and rigidity when covered in concrete.

Yet, due to the gentle curve of the wall, Aabir's workers had to bend each of the 25 millimeter (~1 inch) thick steel bars that were to run horizontally across the vertical supports. To make matters worse, each piece had to be bent by hand at the wall itself, with workers taking their best guess as to the degree of curvature necessary. Only after being bent, and often re-bent, would the pieces fit together tightly enough so that they could be wired into position. Aabir's request for "support" was a request for the Prakash Limited project manager to reassign general laborers to help the bar-benders and thus make the work go more quickly. Not only this, "support" here entailed that Prakash Limited would pay these laborers even they would benefit Aabir.

Part of the benefit from this "support" was due to the fact that the bar-bending *thekedar*, like most other *thekedar* on the site, was paid an agreed-upon piece-rate per metric ton of rebar installed. Thus the addition of laborers at Prakash Limited's expense would allow the bar-bending *thekedar* to install more rebar in less time. The request, and the similar ones that I saw lodged and responded to on this and other construction sites, is essentially a mode of temporarily changing the conditions under which the piece-rate is paid. Aabir's complaints about the time-consuming and tedious nature of the work should be understood as part of a claim that the terms of the contract are no longer fair and that they should be augmented. Measuring the work by the weight of the rebar installed would, in this case, make turning a profit from the work impossible. This was so because the thekedar was caught between the piece-rate by which he was paid and the day-wages that he had to pay his workers. A thekedar's work was only profitable if he was able to install more rebar in a day than the sum of the day-wages he paid to his workers. Aabir's request for support asked Prakash Limited to ease his burden, making it possible to profit off of the agreed upon piece-rate. It was based on the particularly difficult nature of the design. In this case, the project manager never gave a definitive

response and Aabir didn't seem to find the need for support pressing enough to force the issue, or at least not at that moment. "Support" was something that was constantly negotiated on the site through just these sorts of encounters.

Giving support was just one way in which remunerative relations were negotiated on the construction site. The payments that Prakash Limited made to the thekedar they employed were situated in a larger set of linked circuits of remuneration that structured construction work on the site as a complex productive activity. This chapter will follow these forms of payment, and the remunerative practices that undergird them, across the levels of contracting and subcontracting on the construction site (see fig. 4.1). At each level the remunerative form serves as a frame for productive action. On one side were day-wage forms that framed productive activity within a patronage relationship. On the other side were piece-rate forms that figured productive activity as the calculable completion of a contract. In this way modes of remuneration encode ideologies of labor; making implicit claims about what labor is by treating it as an act that can and should be compensated in particular ways. As we will see, the interlocking forms of remuneration on the site are part and parcel of the same translational process that we traced in chapter 4. The labor reports and measurement books described in that chapter were filled out with the express purpose of determining payment in accordance with the piece rate. Because these practices are so deeply intertwined this chapter will necessarily move over some of the same material, although this time from the perspective of wages.

A key element that is highlighted by a focus on wages is the process of recognition and relation between givers and doers of work. While the form of remuneration implied particular understandings of what labor was, practices of remuneration also made claims to the appropriate relations between employers and workers. I therefore speak of 'moral economies of remuneration' in order to highlight the ways in which practices of remuneration encode both evaluations of

productive activity and of the appropriate relations between employers and workers. Here I take inspiration from E.P. Thompson (1971), who coined the term 'moral economy' to describe the norms of behavior according to which economic actors were evaluated in eighteenth century Britain. I will depart from Thompson in arguing that moral economy does not only belong to a fading peasant economy but also thrives in capitalist modes of production. I follow Fassin (2009) in arguing that it is not only the working classes that have moral economies. Capitalists may well have moral economies of their own.

Requesting and giving support, then, should be seen as attempts to bridge two different moral economies of remuneration. The first moral economy centers on the ideal of the piece-rate as a transparent and rationally agreed upon price for a particular amount of work. Here there is an ethic of distance and autonomy as givers and doers of work are to be related as buyers and sellers of any other commodity. The second moral economy stresses a pair of ongoing obligations: givers of work are obliged to make work profitable, and doers of work are obliged to provide loyal service. This moral economy centers on a form of negotiated day-wage through which thekedar remunerate their workers. As the opening vignette demonstrates, the thekedar's own remuneration straddles these two moral economies. Aabir's request for support asks Prakash Limited to acknowledge that the piece-rate form of remuneration does not appropriately account for the specific work that must be done. Further, it presumes that Prakash Limited should participate in making the work profitable for the thekedar. As we will see, these presumptions can be challenged. The project manager could have rejected Aabir's request as unreasonable since they had already agreed on a piece-rate for the work. That he instead indefinitely deferred the issue is indicative of the tensions between the opposing framings of productive activity put forward in different remunerative forms and their necessary interlinking in the process of production.

Moral Economies, Remuneration, and Wages

As part of a workshop on Human Resource Development convened in 2000, a well-known management scholar, K.N. Vaid delivered a paper in which he outlined an ideal vision for the future of construction in India. He foretold a world in which construction companies would provide "work which does not necessarily mean full time jobs…[and would] look out for those who prefer work...who wish to earn more within a flexible regimen…and are willing to commit [to] quality and timely delivery" (2000, 137). Vaid's image of the future is contrasted against the all too persistent structures of hiring and recruitment in the Indian construction industry. As we noted in chapter 1, construction labor in India[2] is overwhelmingly supplied through thekedar(Subrahmanian et al. 1982; Vaid 2003) and has been since at least the colonial era.

As we saw in chapter 1 many media accounts of the industry portray the thekedar as cruelly tricking workers into relations of debt, withholding wages and generally taking advantage of the vulnerable migrant workers that they employ (Wax 2008; Burke 2011), while scholarly treatments tend to focus on hegemonic structures of labor recruitment and credit that exploit workers (Vaid and Gurdial 1966; Shivakumar et al. 1991; Suri 2000; van der Loop 1996). Vaid (1997) specifically points to the system of advances as a key factor in the thekedar's power and in the oppression of migrant workers. Thekedar often give workers advances in order to cover their travel and relocation expenses to come to the site. This money is then counted against a worker's earnings. As I mentioned in chapter 1, thekedar also offered advances for expenses while workers were on the site and also for special events such as weddings. The result, as many scholars have pointed out, is that workers become tied to thekedar through chronic indebtedness that shades into debt bondage in some cases (Picherit 2009; DeNeve 2014; Breman 2007). Furthermore, because the thekedar recruits workers through networks of caste, kinship and village residence, the thekedar system as a

[2] The prevalence of sub-contractors who have patron-like relations to their workers is by no means unique to India (See Thiel 2010 for an example in England).

whole reinforces labor market segmentation in the construction industry as workers are divided along these social lines (van der Loop 1997).

This background is crucial to the understanding the ways in which the remunerative practices that I describe here link up with the dynamics described in the previous chapter and in the dissertation as a whole. The image of the thekedar as the source of problems with the construction industry is what motivates Vaid's image of the Indian construction industry of the future where piecework has completely replaced *thekedar*, a particular tension begins to emerge. Here workers are not tied to thekedar or even to jobs; rather, they move seamlessly from one site of work to another. The "flexible regime" to which Vaid refers is precisely what Harvey (1990) describes as "flexible accumulation" and the piece-rate is its form of remuneration. The rest of the talk stresses that the piecework system would both increase transparency and quality to construction projects while also providing construction workers with better compensation. What Vaid is giving us is a moral economy of the piece-rate that gains much of its ethical punch from the negative portrayals of *thekedar* in journalistic and academic accounts.

My aim here is not to discredit these accounts as the empirical findings, especially of the academic literature is hugely important. Much work has pointed out that the subcontracting system in the construction industry benefits construction companies by providing cheap labor and making it easier to skirt labor laws (Shivakumar et al. 1991; Subrahmanian et al. 1982). These are important interventions and I build off of them in this chapter by focusing on the productive work that the thekedar does. By analyzing how forms of remuneration interlink on the construction site I demonstrate that the 'flexible' regime of production that Vaid envisions, like the forms of paperwork and accounting that mark the site as 'modern,' depend on the remunerative practices of the thekedar. This is not simply an issue of supplying cheap labor, i.e. the amount of the wage, but of the form that this labor takes, i.e. way in which the wage is paid. It is the tensions in these forms

of remuneration that are reread as signs of the 'backward' or 'greedy' character of the thekedar. As with paperwork, the practices of remuneration on the site illuminate the ways in which the 'modern' construction site comes to produce the very forms it purports to overcome.

Moral Economies

The moral economy of the piece-rate is one example of what I am calling moral economies of remuneration. Here I want to clarify my usage of "moral economy" without attempting to give an extensive review of the term (see Fassin 2009; Sayer 2006; Palomera and Vetta 2016). In E.P. Thompson's baptismal use of the phrase 'moral economy' was opposed to 'political economy' as "a consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations, of the proper economic functions of several parties within the community" (1971, 79). It was the violation of these norms rather than the abstract notion of dis-utility that, Thompson argues, guided the actions of the eighteenth century English poor when they decided to "riot" against rising grain costs. What is crucial about this definition for our purposes is the way in which a moral economy defines a set of expected actions of persons variously positioned in economic relations. Thus Vaid's article pushes for a world in which employers remunerate workers by offering piece-rates rather than time-based wages. This is depicted as a desirable situation in which workers earn more and production remains "flexible."

Didier Fassin (2009: 7) traces a subtle shift in the use of moral economy from a focus on norms and obligations in Thompson to values in the work of James Scott (1979). In Scott's work, and in those inspired by his work (e.g. Besky 2014), moral economy is used to explain how it is that certain relations of production come to seem acceptable to those working within them. The focus here is on the way in which moral economies provide an evaluative scheme for different sorts of action. Rather than focusing on the normative rules that when broken lead to uprisings, moral economy can also refer to the ways in which everyday actions are evaluated. Thus in the example

above the piece-rate is figured as the basis for a complete image of production that relates workers and employers in a way that is superior to the current system of subcontracting.

By insisting that the piece-rate is also part of a moral economy I extend the insights of Thompson and Scott whose focus was on moral economies of the poor to analyze the moral economic dimensions of capitalist and self-consciously 'modern' forms of remuneration. This is not a new approach, and many have noted that capitalists too have moral economies which present workers and employers as having idealized relationships of various sorts (Fassin 2005; Sayer 2007).[3] By focusing on moral economies of *remuneration*, I highlight the ways in which different forms of payment for work generate and recognize expectations of how variously positioned actors should relate to one another. In drawing attention to this dimension of wages I build on recent approaches that have argued for renewed attention to the social work that the wage does (Bolt 2014; Nielsen 2012; Adkins 2015). As Bolt argues the wage has largely been read through the narratives of wage labor and money (2014, 116). Here the wage disembeds labor from social relations by rendering it a commodity by making labor into an object that is governed by money (see Polanyi 2001). Challenging this narrative of the wage then necessarily draws on a large literature that has critiqued this image of money as a social corrosive (J. P. Parry and Bloch 1989; Zelizer 1994; Guyer 2004; Maurer 2006). Rather than see the wage, or money, as corroding or disembedding social relations these approaches stress the ways in which money, and the wage, create and transform social relationships.

Vaid's (1997) critique of the thekedar focuses on the advance and the improper relations of indebtedness it is linked to. Here the advance, as a wage form associated with patronage, is depicted as the persistent traditional habit that is holding India's construction industry back. The piece-rate, as imagined through the flexible regime it enables, is associated with the freedom to earn as much as

[3] The 'cultures of capitalism' literature makes a similar argument (Sahlins 1988; M. T. Taussig 1980).

one wants by working more or less quickly and is also marked by a complete lack of advances (Vaid 2000). The moral economy of the piece-rate figures the payment for work as an exchange of objects—money for pieces. As we saw in the last chapter, this image does not necessarily capture the actual negotiations that measure the pieces. However, the form of remuneration supports the image of labor as a sort of constituent element of the piece. It is this erasure, or subsumption, of labor that allows the remunerative relationship to appear transparent. From the perspective of this moral economy the practices of the thekedar appear as exploitative and corrupt.

Yet there is another moral economy of remuneration in operation in the Indian construction industry. I will refer to this as the moral economy of the *hajri*. The term '*hajri'* refers to the day-wage that bar-benders earned on the site.[4] I have opted to retain this local term because the hajri does not operate as a straightforward day-wage. In many cases workers were offered multiple hajri for jobs that were particularly taxing (e.g. dangerous, difficult, or done in adverse conditions). The moral economy of the hajri was based on the maintenance of long-term patronage relationships between givers and doers of work. It was this moral economy that Aabir appealed to when he asked for support in the opening vignette. The contract, which specified a piece-rate, was not sufficient when viewed from the perspective of the obligations attendant on a good patron who ought to make the work profitable for his loyal workers. That the project manager indefinitely postponed this decision is indicative of the larger tensions between the two moral economies of remuneration at work on the site. Rather than characterizing a single, unified moral economy of a particular group I aim to demonstrate the tense co-constitution of opposing moral economies centered on different ideal forms of remuneration.

[4] This term captures the eastern Bihari pronunciation of the standard Hindi word *hāzirī,* which means "attendance" and refers to the attendance registers kept by almost all thekedar. I have maintained this spelling and use the term without diacritics to mark the fact that I am adopting the term as an analytical tool, as a unit of remuneration based on, but not equivalent to, a day wage.

At another level the focus on moral economies of remuneration seeks to generalize recent anthropological insights into the nature of wage labor (Bear 2013, Hankins 2014, Besky 2014). Laura Bear argues that the act of labor is never containable within the structure of capitalist wage labor (2013). Synthesizing Marx (1976), she notes that the very structure of the wage contains a set of internal tensions. On the one hand the wage assumes labor can be exchanged at a fixed moment, yet the worker's survival, and production itself, depend on an enduring relationship between employer and worker. Moreover, the wage paid only recompenses the worker for their means of subsistence rather than the full productive power of the labor, which is thus essentially a gift to the capitalist. In Bear's analysis these tensions—between momentary market transaction and enduring relation, and between monetary transaction and gift—necessarily open a space where the debts incurred in wage labor must be accounted for in terms that go beyond a rational market logic. For Bear, the internal tensions of the wage form are recognized and worked out in the language of kinship and ritual through which workers, boat makers in her case, frame the ongoing debts involved in productive activity (2013: 158).

The tensions between the moral economy of the piece-rate and the *hajri* are linked to this same set of tensions in wage labor. What Vaid gives us is an image in which the piece-rate has all but erased labor. Workers become entrepreneurs and only relate to their employers through contractual exchanges. Here the ideal of wage-labor as purely a market transaction is almost achieved. Yet in practice the piece-rate must be continually augmented in order to work. The piece-rate cannot guarantee the smooth supply of labor that construction projects demand.[5] It is precisely at this junction that the thekedar intervenes. Yet the thekedar employs a different version of the wage. Here the day-wage is augmented not so much by notions of kinship and ritual (although

[5] A smooth supply of labor should not be confused here with a consistent supply. In fact one of the major challenges is that construction projects need significantly more labor at some times than at others.

kinship idioms are used) but by particular practices of remuneration that differentiate between a worker's "needs" and a worker's earnings. Thus these remunerative practices respond to the tensions of wage labor not by engaging in ritual, although this may also take place, but rather by augmenting the wage form itself.

The moral economies that I describe exist alongside the tensions of capitalist wage labor. I suggest that the construction site is characterized by two moral economies of remuneration within which various practices of payment are situated. The tensions I describe emerge between contradictory moral economies brought together in the same political economic process of production. The moral economy of the piece-rate figures the practices of the thekedar as corrupt and non-transparent even as it depends on the thekedar, and the moral economy of the *hajri* that he is part of, to supply a smooth flow of labor. The result is a tense and often ambiguous unity where each side looks immoral from the view of the other.

Wage Circuits on the Site

As I mentioned before (See Part II Introduction) the site was structured as an inverted supply chain with subcontracted workers making a supply chain that moved across the site. The links in this chain were ideally held together by contracts. In fact part of the reason the CPWD had been employed was to ensure that the contracts, and the contractors, were of high quality. Recall that the CPWD was operating as a client-side consultant, meaning that they were responsible for representing the client's interests through the construction process. For the CPWD this meant completing the building within a reasonable time frame, to the exact specifications and within the budget. To this end the CPWD had contracted with a well-known architectural firm to design the building. Once they had received the plans they organized a call for tenders where approved construction firms could bid for the job. The CPWD maintains a list of construction firms who are

approved to work on their projects. The list specifies which companies are allowed to work on projects of what size (determined by the value of the project).

Having won the bid, Prakash Limited signed a composite item rate contract with the CPWD (see next section). While Prakash Limited was the main contractor they, in conjunction with the CPWD, subcontracted all of the work to other companies or *thekedar*. Indeed the distinction was often blurred since many *thekedar* were also officially registered companies and even those that weren't often had the accouterments of companies such as customized stationary. The larger or specialized tasks such as the installation of the steel girders, air-conditioning system and automatic doors, were given to companies who in turn contracted with *thekedar*. The complexity of these situations worked at cross-purposes to the item rate contract which was designed to help the CPWD regulate the work performed on the site. While the CPWD did exercise influence as to which companies and *thekedar* Prakash Limited selected they did not oversee any *thekedar* selected by a company. Indeed, it was often clear to me that the CPWD engineers did not know exactly how or by whom individual workers on the site were paid.

Prakash Limited used thekedar to create a flexible and temporary workforce on the site. Over the course of my fieldwork the number of workers on the site fluctuated between approximately 250 and 300. Yet this number, and its composition, changed almost daily as workers of different thekedar arrived on the site, returned to their villages, or were shifted to other sites. Each thekedar brought the requisite skilled and unskilled workers to the site, where they were housed in corrugated tin shacks. Prakash Limited provided the shacks as well as communal latrines and water spigots that were used for bathing, washing clothes, and drinking. Workers' residences were clustered according to which thekedar they worked for, such that work groups would live in contiguous shacks. Thekedar drew workers from their home regions, which meant that work groups tended to speak the same dialect, be from similar caste backgrounds and be connected by

kinship relations. Within the work group, workers who shared a shack often pooled their money and shared responsibilities for cooking food. As a result, the ties between members of a work group were quite strong whereas those across groups were far more tenuous.[6]

Established thekedar, such as the bar-bending thekedar mentioned above, generally supplied workers to multiple sites simultaneously. In the case of the bar-bending group that I will focus on here, the head thekedar was a man named Rahim. Rahim, together with his brother Azir, always had at least three or four projects going at any given time. Rahim's brother primarily stayed in their familial village located in Purnea district in Bihar, where he recruited workers. As workers arrived in Delhi, Rahim would direct them to the particular sites where they were needed. This was determined by the stage each project was in and how much work was available. On each site a foreman, often a relative of Rahim, supervised the workers, paid wages and kept the accounts. At the CPWD site, Aabir supervised the bar-benders and, in general, Prakash Limited employees did not give direct orders to trade workers but went through the relevant foreman. Indeed, when people on the site spoke about one or another group of trade workers, they would refer to them by the foreman supervising that particular group of workers. That is, the bar-benders were known as "Abir's men" (*Aabir ke ādamī*). All of Aabir's workers were from Purnea district and a number were related to one another and to Rahim. The vast majority of them were Muslim and all spoke a little-known dialect of Hindi called Surjapuri.[7]

This chapter focuses on three interconnected circuits of payment between the three organizations sketched here: the CPWD, Prakash Limited and the thekedar. The first circuit was

[6] These, cross-group, ties did exist, however, and could be a source of novelty on the site. Making friends with workers in other groups often provided access to new sorts of music, amusing tales, and even options for switching thekedar.

[7] With the exception of the general laborers on the site—who came from West Bengal and spoke little to no Hindi—all of the workers on the site were able to communicate in Hindi although, many felt most comfortable in their regional dialects.

between the CPWD and Prakash Limited. Here remuneration was governed by what I call an *idealized contract*. In this idealized contract relation, the interaction between the two entities was cast as a purely economic and rationally calculable exchange of materials (in this case money and elements of a building) at an agreed upon rate. A high value was placed on the transparency of the wage, which was seen as remunerating the work at its precisely calculated and pre-negotiated price. Any deviation from the contract appeared as a suspicious form of corruption. This form of remuneration was governed by the moral economy of the piece-rate.

The second circuit was between Prakash Limited and the thekedar. I focus on the relationship between Prakash Limited and the bar-bending thekedar, Rahim. The form of remuneration was a *partial contract*. At this stage contracts were used which nominally adhered to the moral economy of the piece-rate and yet these contracts were constantly undermined and augmented. The *partial contract* sat uneasily between the idealized contract and the third circuit of payment between the thekedar and his workers. This circuit was governed by the moral economy of the hajri.

The hajri defined the third circuit of payment, that between the *thekedar* and his workers. To investigate the lifeworld and politics of the moral economy of the hajri I will focus on the relationship between Rahim, represented by his foreman Aabir, and his workers. Here remuneration was governed by a patron-client relationship. This wage relation was construed through obligations of care and loyalty. In the exchange between thekedar and workers, labor did not give a worker the right to wages; rather, labor embedded a worker in an asymmetrical relationship of reciprocity with a patron.

Construction work, as a complex productive activity, necessitated the interconnection of all three circuits and yet, as we will see, the moral economies of remuneration that each form drew on were in many ways diametrically opposed. These moral economies of remuneration were never

articulated as such by my informants. Workers and supervisors of all sorts made sense of their own and others' actions by invoking, often implicitly, different imaginaries of labor and its remuneration. As such, the actions of labor and payment that constituted the different circuits outlined above could be given dramatically different meanings as workers and supervisors framed them within different moral economies of remuneration.

Wages and Contracts

Composite Items: The CPWD and RMK

The remunerative practices that took place between the CPWD and RMK were governed by what was called a "composite item rate" contract. It specified item rates for all of the constituent elements of the building. The rates were given as a certain price per unit of installed material. The item rate contract, as opposed to a lump sum contract in which the construction company receives an agreed upon lump sum of money for the project, was seen as guaranteeing a higher degree of transparency from, and control over, the building company. The importance of this form was stressed to me by an engineer at the CPWD, Arvind, who insisted that I note down the exact phrase "composite item rate" contract and offered to help me with my research by allowing me to read from the contract itself, a large book kept in the CPWD site office. By placing such a strong emphasis on the composite item rate contract, Arvind was framing the project in a particular way. The form of the contract presented the work of construction as a precisely calculable process in which component materials—labor, brick, cement, sand—are mixed in appropriate proportions and evaluated at certain rates per unit measurement. The production process is represented as the exchange of materials—bent rebar, laid bricks, formed concrete—at agreed upon rates. Emphasizing the composite item rate contract then, was a way of framing the construction project as governed by a transparent process of production in which all elements were accounted for.

This concern with transparency and calculability was reflected in the mode of payment that accompanied the composite item rate contract. A CPWD accounting officer recounted this process, and its formal complexity, to me with great relish. As we sat in his office next to a metal storage closet with old files piled high, he explained that in order to be paid, Prakash Limited had to first submit reports documenting the amount and location of the completed work. These reports were jointly checked and signed by the relevant Prakash Limited foreman, a Prakash Limited project manager and a CPWD assistant executive engineer (a process I describe in chapter 4). At that point the report was submitted to the accounting office along with an initial estimate of the rupee value of the work completed. In the accounting office these reports were checked multiple times to ensure that the correct rate had been used and the multiplication had been done properly. At this point the accountant would make a 'running bill,' which represented the amount to be paid out by the CPWD as a fraction of the total amount budgeted for the type of work in the composite rate contract. Thus the work done was figured as a measured step towards the completion of the entire project as depicted in the contract. Within the accounting department the running bill would be checked at least twice before being sent to the CPWD Executive Engineer who would again verify it and then send it to the central office where it would be verified again, and ultimately a check for the required amount would be cut and sent back to Prakash Limited.

In a sense Prakash Limited was paid a piece-rate. Yet the particular way in which the piece-rates were paid to Prakash Limited encoded a moral economy of remuneration. That is, the running bill presupposed a set of norms about the forms of action appropriate to doers and employers of labor. As both the accounting officer and Arvind told me, the distributed and redundant structure of the payment in this context was designed to combat corruption.[8] The form of the payment

[8] Construction in India, as elsewhere, is known for high levels of corruption. As I was told on multiple occasions the most common form of corruption on the site was for the builder, or the thekedar, to claim that more material had been installed than had actually been installed or to use an

ensured the transparency of the production process as the progressive fulfillment of a contract. The relationship between the CPWD and Prakash Limited was, at least as represented in the running bill, based on the rational and efficient execution of an agreed upon plan. I call this image an *idealized contract* and it characterized the moral economy of the piece-rate payments made to Prakash Limited by the CPWD. In the form of the item rate contract and the running bill, labor was submerged in the piece-rate of various materials (concrete, steel, marble) that have been transformed into elements of the building. Moreover, there was no obligation between Prakash Limited and the CPWD save that dictated by the terms of the composite item rate contract. Any deviation was immediately suspicious, then, as it could not be accounted for in the transparent imperatives of the contract.

The idealized contract, as a particular moral economy of wages, was part of a larger cultural imagination of a modern India. This imagination thrives on the vision of a time when capitalist development will have fully transformed relations of production into purely economic ones and the market will be characterized by a frictionless coordination of capital and labor (Vaid 2003). The contract as a transparent and binding form of relation is central to this image. Aside from training, the CTC (see chapter 2) was also dedicated to standardizing contract forms across the construction industry. As one of the administrators told me, having standardized contracts was absolutely essential to enabling the timely and frugal completion of construction projects, as it would ensure that all players knew the terms of employment and could depend on them. At the CTC and in industry discourse standardization of contracts is linked to their stricter enforcement. The inability of Indian construction firms to stick to contract terms is regularly pointed to as factor holding back the construction sector and the development it should bring (P. Gupta et al. 2009; McKinsey &

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inflated rate to calculate the bill. Because multiple parties were forced to sign off during the billing process, any successful scam would have to include a much larger number of people and therefore would need to be for such a large amount of money that it would be hard to hide.

Company 2001). In this context the contract is not only an economically rational form but takes on a moral element as a sign of transparent and 'modern' production.

Partial Contracts: Prakash Limited *and Rahim*

In comparison to the fixed terms of the idealized contract, the payments connecting Prakash Limited to the thekedar were more flexible. I discovered this when, on a hot summer day at the site, I found myself sitting in the shade outside the bar-benders' shacks with Rahim, the bar-bending thekedar. Not wanting to return to the construction site, I accepted Rahim's invitation to drink tea at a nearby tea stall. Our conversation turned from how he had gotten started as a thekedar to the specifics of his contract with Prakash Limited. To help explain the contract to me Rahim took out a blank form that he used when bidding for a job and showed me how he would fill it out (see figure 5.1). The first line item of the contract specified a piece-rate (Rs. 4,200 (~$82)) per metric ton of rebar installed. The next two items designated the percentage increase to be added if the rebar had to be moved further than 30 meters or if it had to be lifted above the first floor. These were standard additions to bar-bending contracts, as the increased time it takes to move the rebar will make it harder to keep up a profitable pace. The next item specified that the company would provide the binding wire necessary for binding rebar pieces together. The items listed underneath the table consisted of further stipulations, including that the company must cover room, medical charges, charges resulting from an accident,[9] as well as that they provide Rahim with an advance of Rs. 500 ($10) per week per worker and payment, less the advance amount, monthly.[10] All of these stipulations were fairly standard for a bar-bending contract. Contracts for other trades were similar

[9] It's not completely clear how this is different from medical charges (which would only refer to medical fees incurred by an accident). One possibility is the 'accident charge' here refers to sums of money paid to workers' families in the event of an accident resulting in death.

[10] The importance of the distinction between the "advance" and the "payment" will be made clear later in the article.

with the exception of general labor and brick masonry contracts. These trades were often provided by the same *thekedar* and consisted of fixed day-wages. The explanation for this was that the need for general labor and brick masonry on the site was more constant than for other trades and as such there was a simple relation between the number of men provided and the speed of the work.[11]

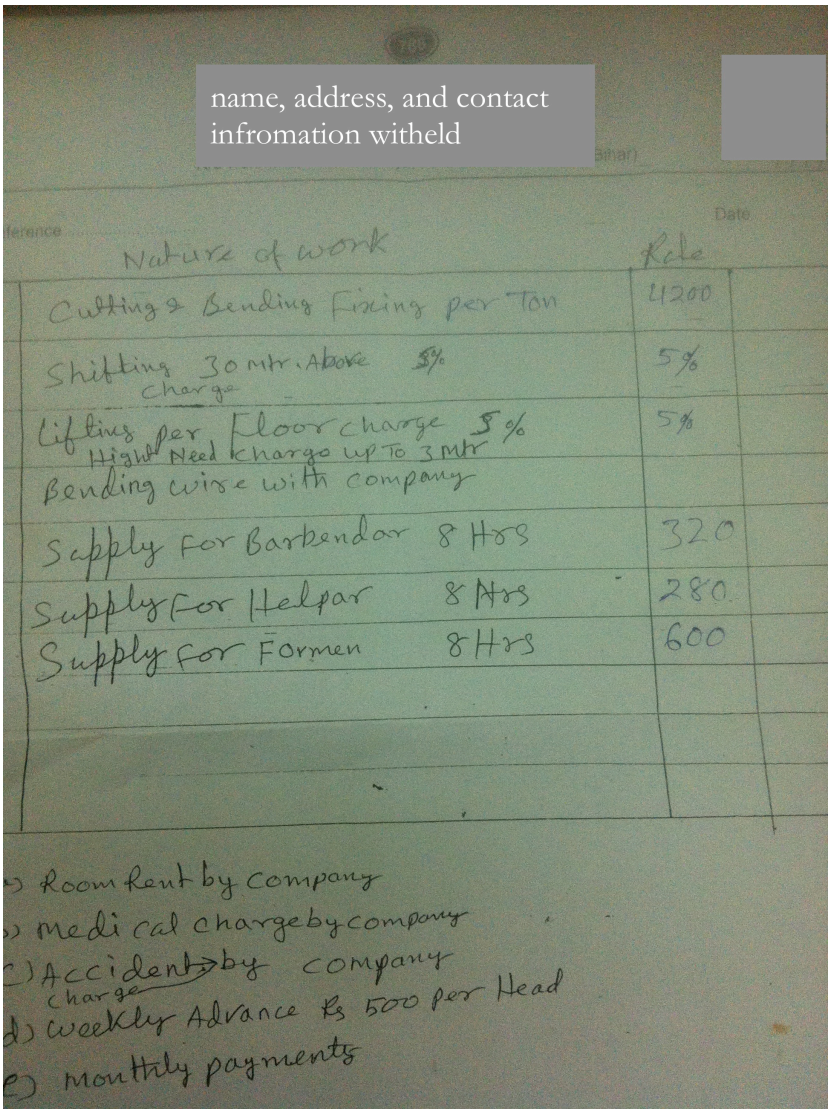

Figure 5.1 Rahim's Contract: A sample contract between Rahim and Prakash Limited. Photo by Author.

[11] Not all brick masonry was undertaken on day-rate contracts just as not all other trades were undertaken on piece-rate contracts. On the site discussed here for example, shuttering carpenters worked on day rates.

To this point the contract seemed to specify a piecework arrangement. Rahim was paid a particular amount of money per metric ton of rebar installed. The rate varied according to predetermined conditions but was always calculated in accordance with a contract. The crucial difference form the piece rate contracts that linked the CPWD and Prakash Limited came with the "supply" rates. "Supply" denoted that workers were provided to Prakash Limited by the thekedar at particular day-rates depending on the type of worker. When workers were given on supply the thekedar did relatively little supervision since his profit for the day was no longer based on the productivity of his workers. The main contracting company (in this case Prakash Limited) would take responsibility for supervising the workers.[12] The contract that Rahim made for me delineated rates at which "bar-benders" (i.e. skilled bar-benders),"helpers" (i.e. unskilled bar-benders), and "foremen," such as Aabir, could be put on supply. The implication was that Rahim earned in two different ways with the same workers. At times he earned a piece-rate for the metric tons of rebar installed and at other times he earned a flat day rate per worker. For this day of work Rahim charged a rate above the day rate that he paid his own workers (300 to 320 for bar-benders, 240 to 260 for helpers).[13]

As Rahim explained the contract to me I became confused not only about what it meant to put workers on supply but also why this would be done in the first place. When I asked him why he would put workers on supply, Rahim explained to me that it was a matter of profit. Based purely on weight, producing the rebar for any construction project would become unprofitable at certain times. At the beginning of construction there was a lot of fat work (*moṭā kām*), but as a project

[12] Indeed, many of the Prakash Limited supervisors I spoke to mentioned that in cases where the entire project was 'on supply' they had to work much harder to supervise workers since workers had no incentive to work faster.

[13] Aabir told me that he made Rs 15,000 a month. To my knowledge he was never put on supply, a fact that he attributed to the relatively high day rate Prakash Limited would have had to pay for his services.

came to completion, there would be more and more thin work (*patlā kām*). "Fat" and "thin" referred both to the material, rebar, and to the profitability of the work. Because the foundations and lower levels of a building have to support more weight, there are more and thicker, or fatter, pieces of rebar in the reinforcement than at the higher levels where it becomes thin. Thus, the same number of pillars, for example, will weigh more on the lower levels than at the higher levels. According to Rahim it took approximately the same amount of time, although perhaps not effort, to install thick or thin steel. Thus when the rebar was thick the project was quite profitable. Thin work, however, went in the opposite way and could even create a net loss for the thekedar since he would have to pay his workers a full hajri (standard day-wage) for every day they spent working no matter how much the installed rebar weighed.

The contract that Rahim presented to me depicted a situation in which the main contracting company colluded with the thekedar to ensure that the thekedar's work remained profitable throughout the course of the project. Yet in order to do this the form of the contract was ultimately subverted. The contract did not specify the conditions under which work should be remunerated on a piece rate or on a supply rate. Instead the shifts between these two forms depended on the longer-term social relations between Rahim and Prakash Limited but also on in-the-moment negotiations between Aabir and particular Prakash Limited foremen and engineers. Indeed, as I found out later, this contract so little resembled the key elements of a contract (binding and pre-agreed terms) that it had been deemed unacceptable by the CPWD. Although the CPWD was not directly involved, they had reserved the right to approve or deny any sub-contractors that Prakash Limited chose. According to Rahim other companies had no problem with this sort of contract, i.e. one that allowed for ad hoc shifts between piece and supply rates, yet the CPWD had insisted that it was unacceptable.

Prakash Limited was caught between the moral economy of the piece-rate, with its reliance on the transparency and binding stipulations of the contract, and the moral economy of hajri, with its emphasis on the long-term reciprocal relations that produced profitable outcomes. The thekedar would not work without the assurance that "thin work" could be negotiated around, yet the CPWD would not accept a contract that seemed to subvert itself. The solution, that had been reached before construction began, highlighted Prakash Limited's ambiguous situation. As I mentioned earlier, there were technically two bar-bending thekedar, Rahim and his brother Azir. Taking advantage of this, Prakash Limited had entered into a pure piece-rate contract with Azir and a purely supply rate contract with Rahim. On paper, whenever bar-benders were employed on a piece rate they were listed as coming from Azir, and when they were employed on a supply rate they were listed as coming from Rahim. In this way the very same workers worked under two different contracts. RMK was fully complicit in this process and actively negotiated with Rahim and Aabir to determine when workers should be on supply or piece rate.

Allowing workers to be put on supply for the day provided a way to mitigate the effects of piece-rate remuneration in situations where this form would not provide an acceptable profit. The negotiations around putting workers on supply foregrounded a set of moral obligations between the thekedar and Prakash Limited. The thekedar was obligated to supply appropriate amounts of labor, and Prakash Limited was obligated to provide profitable work to the thekedar. Indeed, Mitesh (the Prakash Limited bar-bending foreman) told me that it was his "duty" to "give work" (*kām denā*) to the bar-benders. "Giving work" was seen to include ensuring a reasonable profit to the thekedar and a sufficient quantity of work for the workers. Mitesh's position was supported in the choice to create two contracts to allow for *ad hoc* switching between modes of payment. The relationship here was not modeled on the transparent exchange of goods as in the case of the composite item rate contract and the running bill. Rather, the two-contract solution was structured around a different

moral economy of remuneration. Being able to put workers on supply essentially allowed the thekedar to switch between a piece-rate logic of remuneration and a day rate logic. This switch was done on the grounds that the work would not otherwise be profitable. Switching between supply and piece-rate was governed by an understanding that employers were obliged to make work profitable even as workers were obliged to provide loyal service. By insisting on two separate contracts Prakash Limited was able to present itself to the CPWD as enforcing the moral economy of the piece-rate even as it partook of the moral economy of the hajri. Rather than enforcing one contract, which included in its form a space for negotiation, Prakash Limited supported two contradictory contracts for the same set of workers. The negotiations over which contract would apply to the workers for any given piece of work were effectively erased from the official account.

The supply chain structure of production on the site, mediated by paperwork and contracts, worked to insulate the CPWD from these negotiations by translating them into forms that were legible to the CPWD. Like the labor reports dealt with in chapter 4, the partial contracts that linked *thekedar* to Prakash Limited were the result improvised negotiations that ultimately maintained the formal structure of the contract (or the audit in the case of chapter 4). In this sense the partial contract was part of a project of modularity. These partial contracts insulated the the idealized contract between the CPWD and Prakash Limited from the sorts of negotiations necessary to catalyze labor on the site, negotiations to which I will turn in the next section. Of course not all *thekedar* operated with two different contracts, as was the case for Rahim and his bar-benders. Yet the case of Rahim is illustrative of the politics of modularity on the modern construction site. The CPWD was not concerned that the contract regulated labor on the site. Rather what they objected to was the form of Rahim's contract itself. As Hannah Appel notes projects of modularity move "not toward external standardization, as so many anxious ac- counts of globalization feared, but, rather, internal self- containment" (2012a, 697). Other *thekedar* did not have problems with the form

of their contracts, but as we saw in the case of Sivamani and the measurement of exterior stone tiles, this did not mean that they did not engage in negotiations that turned on the obligations of givers and doers of work. The nested relations of remuneration on the site, like the forms of audit, translated work across different moral economies making it appear as calculable substance smoothly exchangeable for money.

Kharcha, Payment and the Moral Economy of Hajri

Workers working under a thekedar generally received two payments every month. The first, in the middle of the month, was widely referred to as *kharcha* (expense) and was offered as an advance against the worker's earnings that month. The second, usually not paid until the beginning of the next month, was called a "payment" and included the worker's earnings for the month less his (or her) kharcha. Importantly, kharcha varied from worker to worker based on articulated needs.[14] For example workers with larger families asked for, and were given, larger amounts of money than workers with no or smaller families. When "payment" was distributed the thekedar, or his foreman, would go through the work register and add up the hajri that each worker had earned that month and then subtract this amount from the monthly kharcha. In addition to kharcha, "payment" was also an occasion to settle loans that workers would often take to cover larger expenses. For example, one of Rahim's bar-benders had taken a loan for Rs. 100,000 (approx. $2,000) in order to finance his daughter's wedding. The loan was repaid by "cutting" the worker's wage, which meant that during "payment" the worker and Aabir would determine an appropriate amount of the

[14] Rahim, like most *thekedar*, had a standard amount that he paid workers for kharcha, which could be adjusted. In 2012 (during fieldwork) he paid Rs. 500 per week ($10). Yet when I visited him again in 2016 he told me that he had increased the amount to Rs. 1000 per week ($20), to account for the increased cost of food and other essentials.

worker's earnings to withhold. These loans were interest free and were given as part of being a thekedar's loyal worker.[15]

The subtractions made for worker's kharcha and loans often meant that the net earnings were quite low. Yet the amount of money disbursed during "payment" was itself augmented by worker needs. That is, the thekedar would calculate the amount earned by a worker but would ultimately give the worker an amount equivalent to what he would receive for kharcha. The difference between a worker's earnings and the amount given during "payment" was recorded in a register and counted as a debt against the next month's earnings. In this sense the worker's wage, the amount of money regularly received from his employer, had an indirect relation to the price of his labor (the standardized day-rate that a worker earned). The remunerative relation was mediated by relations of credit and debt that turned on notions of need and care.

As discussed in chapter 1, thekedar often spoke of their relationship to their workers as one of care. The usage of kinship tropes by thekedar is telling as it highlights the way in which the sort of care that they provided for their workers existed within, and reproduced, a hierarchical relation. I thus follow theorists who have pointed out that relations of care need not imply equality and a lack of exploitation (Kowalski 2016; Ferguson 2013; Klaits and Mclean 2015). Rather my usage of care here draws attention to the modalities in which exploitation was reproduced and maintained on the site. While workers had much more ambiguous feelings about thekedar they too framed the labor relationship in similar terms. When describing different thekedar to me, one worker distinguished good thekedar from bad ones by noting that with a '*dilwale'* (compassionate, lit. heart-haver) thekedar one could earn as many day wages as one wanted. The implication here was that a good thekedar provided his workers with as many opportunities to earn as the workers wanted. The choice of

[15] Only workers who were "known" (*jan pahechan*) to the *thekedar* would receive such sizable loans. In this context part of being 'known' was not only a matter of having worked for a *thekedar* for long period but also of being linked by virtue of kinship or village residence. These ties insured that workers could not simply "run off with the money" (*paise leke bhag jata*).

dilwale, however highlights the way in which the economic relationship was framed as an interpersonal one of compassion if not care.

In the construction industry the practice of separating earnings and kharcha was a hallmark of the thekedar-worker relationship and was spoken of in the language of morality (cf. Suri 1997). For example, when a group of electricians and stonemasons who happened to be working in the same area struck up a conversation, the topic almost immediately turned to a comparison of their respective thekedar. One of the electricians said, "He doesn't even give us money for food he's that kind of man."[16] The other electrician elaborated for the masons, "he says 'after toiling you will get money'…if you don't eat then how are you supposed to work."[17] The first electrician concluded, "First a man eats then he can work,"[18] which drew nods and agreement from the stonemasons. Note that the electrician referred to kharcha, which would be used for food but also other expenses such as cigarettes or even alcohol, as "money for food." In doing this he marked the moral quality of kharcha as a form of money that sustained life.[19] The failure to pay kharcha at the appropriate time reflected directly on the moral character of the thekedar ("he's that kind of man"). The conversation also pointed to the temporality of kharcha. It needed to be given at regular intervals regardless of how much work had been done. Kharcha was figured as part of the appropriate relationship of givers and doers of work. What a worker earned through working was really a position within this reciprocal, if asymmetrical relationship in which necessities, be they food or the marriage of one's children, were provided for by a caring thekedar.[20]

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[16] *kane ke liye bhi nahin dete aise aadmi hai*
[17] *woh bolta hai ki mazdoori karne ke bad paise milenge….agar khaenge nahin to kaise kam karenge.*
[18] *pahle aadmi khata phir kam kar sakhta*
[19] Kharcha ,then, could be thought of as a version of what Vivianna Zelizer has called "special use money" in which money is differentiated based on intended uses (1994).
[20] In cases where these needs are not provided for, workers were likely to seek out other thekedar, as soon as possible. Indeed, when workers I knew switched thekedar they almost always cited the late or non-payment of kharcha as one of their reasons for switching.

The moral economy of hajri not only determined the disbursement of wages in the form of kharcha and "payment," it also permeated the very way in which wages were used to measure work. Hajri did not simply measure temporal durations of work; rather specific jobs could be assigned multiple hajri. The number of hajri given for a certain job depended on the particular qualities of the task and had to be negotiated between Aabir and his workers. As Aabir told me, in setting hajri, "I have to fight."[21] Here "fight" (*ladna*) did not so much refer to any animosity as it did to the inherently agonistic nature of these negotiations, in which both parties would haggle until an acceptable number of hajri for the job was arrived at. At stake in these negotiations was the moral relationship between givers and doers of work. These negotiations operated within a larger moral economy of hajri in the sense that the issue was setting a price for labor that was acceptable to both parties rather than, as in piece-rate wages, shifting responsibility for productivity onto the worker. An example will elucidate this point.

One day Mitesh had told Aabir that the rebar reinforcements for the window frames on the 3rd floor of C block needed to be built. The window frames were relatively small and complex, which meant that the bends had to be sharp and the measurements precise. Aabir first selected four of his men to do the work, assigning the rest to other tasks. Amant, a bar-bender who had made the frames before, acted as the representative of the group of workers. Amant pointed out that the windows were difficult and Aabir agreed to give the workers "*double hajri*." This meant that each of the four workers would receive twice their normal day-wage. Yet Amant was not satisfied. He and the other two *mistri* (skilled worker) in the group demanded that Aabir replace one of the workers, who was only a *helper* (unskilled), with another *mistri*.[22] When I asked Amant about this later, he told

[21] *laḍai karna paḍega*

[22] There is a common distinction between different types of construction labor that distinguishes general laborers who are unskilled and not trade-specific from helpers who are unskilled but trade specific from mistri who are skilled and trade specific. Most helpers, especially younger ones, were

me that with all the men in the group being mistri "everyone can do their own work [i.e. unsupervised]…..it will become easy."[23] I later learned that the helper that Amant had refused to take had a reputation for being particularly lazy.

What is being measured when workers worked on measurement, then, was not simply the amount of material, as in a piece-rate, but rather multiple qualities of the act of labor itself. Aabir began by recognizing the technical complexity of the work to be done and compensated by offering twice the daily wage. Yet Amant demanded that Aabir also recognize the relative qualities of the workers themselves as part of the work process. When Amant said that it would "become easy" he was referring to the process of meeting the material goal of finishing the window frames. In their negotiation Aabir and Amant measured the work through recognizing, or not, various aspects of the collective productive action. In this way, the workers and the thekedar's representative accounted for multiple aspects of the labor process in settling on a "reasonable price" for the work to be done (Thompson 1971: 135). The moral obligation here was to engage in this mode of negotiation in which aspects of the work process are recognized and evaluated. Both sides needed to appear reasonable and the initial requests of workers were often rejected or altered in setting the hajri. The process almost always resulted in an increase in worker productivity. Most bar-benders told me that they preferred working on measurement and, while no one would admit to it, workers on supply often slowed their pace of work in an exaggerated fashion.[24] By contrast workers on measurement would often work quickly or stay late in order to complete the designated task.

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in the process of learning their chosen trade and would at some point demand recognition as a mistri. The movement from general laborer to mistri was somewhat more complicated and would often involve finding a new thekedar and becoming a helper.

[23] *sab apna apna kam kar sakte hain…asān ho jaega*

[24] While this foot-dragging tactic was never articulated as part of conscious strategy on the part of workers, it was quite a common response to late payment on the part of employers (both thekedar and company).

Giving and setting hajri then was a crucial part of the specific relationship of patronage that existed between a thekedar and his workers. On the site, being one of Aabir's men meant being able to count on having one's expenses covered, as well as having the opportunity to earn extra hajri. It was not that the wage, as a representation of the value of labor, was somehow less exploitative in this relationship. Indeed, the profit of the thekedar was secured before the negotiations took place. Aabir would do this by estimating the amount of money the thekedar would receive for a given piece of work. From this number he would negotiate the appropriate hajri with his workers. Thus negotiations always occurred within the thekedar's profit margin. What was crucial was the performance of reaching an acceptable amount of profit for the thekedar, an amount that included the recognition of particular qualities of work deemed salient by the workers. It was the obligation of the foreman, as a giver of work, to not only supply work but also to appropriately remunerate it. The process of negotiating hajri, like the form of payments to workers, was part of an asymmetrical and reciprocal relationship between the thekedar and the workers in which the actions of each were regulated by certain norms of behavior around the evaluation and remuneration of labor. In this moral economy of remuneration, labor was to be evaluated and remunerated through a process of negotiation in which the thekedar demonstrated care for his workers while workers demonstrated their usefulness and loyalty to the thekedar.

Moral Economies in Action

The two moral economies that I have described here are linked to different forms of remuneration: the piece-rate and the hajri. On the one hand the piece-rate contract between the CPWD and Prakash Limited erased labor by lumping it together with measurable amounts of material for which a fair, agreed-upon, price is paid. Here economic actors were expected to act within the bounds of the contract, which guaranteed transparency. On the other hand the hajri that

mediated the relationship between a thekedar and his workers allowed for the constant renegotiation of the conditions of various acts of labor but also for the respective needs of workers. Workers were bound to thekedar through relations of debt just as thekedar were obliged to care for their workers through the regular payment of kharcha and offers of multiple hajri. The structures of sub-contracting on the construction site worked to hold these different moral economies apart, yet they often came into tension in the course of production.

These tensions were especially salient when bar-benders were put on supply. As mentioned earlier, Prakash Limited colluded with Rahim and his brother to allow bar-benders to work under a piece-rate contract or under a day-rate contract. This allowed Prakash Limited and Rahim, often represented by Aabir, to switch between contracts based on the nature of the work to be done. Yet when workers were put on supply, that is were working on day-rates, Prakash Limited managers found themselves in the position of givers of work. Bar-benders, and other workers, asked them to provide multiple hajri in order to finish work quickly or in recognition of particular difficulties. This obligation to be a good giver of work was felt particularly strongly by Mitesh, who, recall, considered it his duty to give work to the bar-benders. Yet Mitesh was not technically authorized to negotiate hajri with the workers. The resulting tensions and disputes should not be understood as simple problems of miscommunication or misunderstanding. Rather they were the result of the fraught work of translation that Prakash Limited enacted between incommensurate moral economies of remuneration.

On a hot May morning I followed Mitesh to the roof of C-block where he was to meet Jamil, the leader of a group of bar-benders who had been put on supply for the day. The CPWD had decided to add a decorative element to the roof of the building that would consist of a forty-five degree reinforced concrete wall that would follow the outer edge of the roof. Mitesh needed the bar-benders to build the rebar structure and since it was going to be made out of thin rebar, and

because it had been added to the design of the building after construction had begun, Aabir had given a group of bar-benders to Mitesh on supply. As Mitesh explained the job, Jamil noted that the work would be very dangerous since there was no scaffolding to save the workers from a four-story drop. Turning to Mitesh, he said, "you'll have to give double hajri."[25] Saying that Jamil would have to negotiate with one of his superiors, Mitesh took Jamil downstairs to discuss the specifics of the job with a Prakash Limited project manager. Jamil told the project manager that the work would be very dangerous and difficult and then asked for three hajri. The project manager seemed not to understand what Jamil meant until Mitesh added that this would mean a total of 18 hajri, three for each man in the group. At this, the project manager became angry and began shouting at Jamil. Ultimately he told Mitesh and Jamil to go ask his superior (the site-in-charge). Instead, Mitesh and Jamil spent quite a while trying to track down other project managers, all of whom refused to take responsibility for authorizing the extra hajri. In the end, Mitesh told Jamil to do half of the work for which he would pay double hajri. The whole process took about three hours and the workers finally commenced work two hours before lunch.

From the beginning Jamil treated Mitesh as a giver of work within a moral economy of hajri. His request to the project manager for three hajri was the first move in a negotiation over the relevant qualities of a given piece of work. Remember that Aabir referred to this process of negotiation as fighting (*ladna*) in which it would make sense to request more than what one actually expected to get. Yet the project manager, who also happened to be new to the site, refused Jamil's opening request as an invitation to negotiation, instead taking it as an attempt to squeeze money out of the company. From the perspective of an idealized contract, claims for the recognition of heterogeneous qualities of work came to appear as ruses designed to cheat the norms of a contract. Later that day Mitesh recounted the story of the altercation to Aabir by saying that the project

[25] *double hajri dena padega*

manager had become angry and said, "we are not assholes, you made us assholes…..you do the fat work and we do the thin work."[26]

The Hindi phrase that Mitesh used in quoting the project manager's speech, "to be made an asshole" (*chutiya banana)*, carries a connotation of having fallen for a trick or been cheated in some way. Here Jamil's attempt to negotiate a hajri with a giver of work was rejected as a sly attempt to shirk contractual obligations. The project manager's anger resulted from the fact that, within a moral economy of piece-rates, Jamil's request contravened the terms stipulated in the contract. It was not only the large amount (three hajri) that was offensive but, as Mitesh's later comment suggests, the fact that this request sought to replace the written contract with another agreement made on the basis of a ad-hoc assessment of the qualities of the work at hand. The project manager refused to cross the line by negotiating hajri and indeed none of the other project managers seemed to be willing to either, although they were not visibly angered by the suggestion. Yet Mitesh felt compelled to offer a solution that gave the workers work, and some recognition of the danger of the job. It is in this fraught relationship between RMK and the thekedar that the two moral economies of remuneration clashed most visibly. The structure of sub-contracting ensures that the CPWD saw less of the complex negotiations necessary to catalyze work on the site. Indeed much of the work of checking and supervising that CPWD engineers on the site did was geared towards creating accounts of production, in bills and in reports, that figured it in terms of the contract form. Yet, as we have seen, the contract often had to be bent or augmented in order to get workers to work.

The contract form precluded the sorts of negotiation that tied givers and doers of work together in production. It was not simply that the contract depended on a fixed rate whereas the workers demanded a variable one. Indeed, the formal contract between the CPWD and Prakash

[26] *chutiya nahin ham, hame chutiya bana diya… aap mote kaam karte hain ham patle kaam karte*

Limited specified conditions and methods for augmenting the piece-rate.[27] These provisions allowed for flexibility with relation to other market forces. Yet this flexibility, unlike that produced by the ongoing negotiations between Prakash Limited and the bar-bending thekedar, was regimented by the contract. Rather than ongoing renegotiation of the mode of remuneration, the provisions in the CPWD contract encompass market fluctuations within the contract's original terms.

Yet, even with the regimented flexibility provided for in the contract, there was a deep tension in the piece-rate model. Ultimately it could not provide a stable work force. "Modern" projects relied on the smooth and dependable flow of labor onto the construction site. Yet this required thekedar. The direct offer of piece-rates was not enough to ensure that workers were available when they were needed. By binding workers to himself in long-standing relations of debt and credit, the thekedar was able to provide labor to construction sites as and when needed. The multiple modes of remuneration are interdependent. The distinctive qualities of a modern project, the "itemized contract form," were produced through networks of caste, kinship and village residence that allowed thekedar to create and maintain relations of indebtedness.

As Mitesh's tribulations demonstrate, just because these systems are interdependent does not mean that they are seamlessly integrated. I have focused on moral economies of remuneration as a way of highlighting this tense unity. While production on the site necessitated the interlinking of the item-rate contract and the thekedar's hajri, they call forth opposing moral economies. This resulted in the partial contracts between Prakash Limited and the thekedar as well as in the disputes that arose when workers treated Prakash Limited employees as givers of work. This put Prakash Limited managers in an ambiguous situation as they struggled to translate between divergent moral economies. Jamil's request for multiple hajri appeared as unreasonable to the project manager, and

[27] Reasons included shifts in materials prices or increases in the minimum wage. The contract provided formulae for recalculating piece-rates in these circumstances. The item rate contract specified equations that were used to calculate how a rise in the price of a material should effect the item rate for given tasks.

yet it was deferred onto a superior, rather than being fully rejected. Mitesh could only provisionally offer multiple hajri even though he believed that it was his duty to give work to bar-benders. It was in these moments where workers stubbornly refused to work even as managers refused to authorize extra hajri that we can see the collision of two moral economies. According to the moral economy of the piece-rate the actions of the bar-benders constituted an attempt to cheat the terms of the contract. According to the moral economy of the hajri project managers' actions were an attempt to side step their responsibility as a givers of work.

This tension is linked to the very tensions of the wage form itself. As we noted earlier, the wage appears as the market price of a commodity, labor. Yet in order for production to occur, and recur, this relation must be extended in time. The composite-item rate contract dissolved labor and its materials into a composite commodity, e.g. bent rebar, which is sold at a certain rate. Here labor disappeared and what the CPWD appeared to buy from Prakash Limited was particular amounts of augmented building materials, products as opposed to services. Yet this exchange depended on the smooth supply of various forms of labor, which was precisely what the thekedar offered through the maintenance of long-term relations of patronage. Each of these forms implied a different set of expectations as to how variously positioned participants ought to act. This was not, then, a tension between economically rational action and a pre-capitalist moral economy. Rather, production on the site operated through the imperfect translation between two different moral economies. The item-rate contract and the hajri imply worlds of action, in which work was given and done in particular ways. It was not that the moral economy of the hajri focused on more-than-monetary values while the item-rate contract was a form of rational calculus. It was only in the context of the moral economy of the hajri that the item-rate contract appeared to cheat workers out of the recognition of their labor. Similarly, it was only in light of the item-rate contract that the moral economy of the hajri appeared to make the employer into an "asshole." These moments highlight the fact that the

struggle over the form of remuneration is always also about the moral economic universe in which the actions of remuneration, but also of labor itself, should be understood.

Coda: Wages of the Modern Construction Site

The tension, between the moral economy of the piece-rate and of the *hajri*, should be understood as another manifestation of the tensions described in chapter 4, between an ideological construal of labor as a personalized capacity for service or as a homogenous substance. The forms of remuneration, and their interconnection, on the site enabled production to occur by translating labor back and forth across these divides as work orders were given, tasks assigned, finished products checked, and wages distributed. The labor reports, running bills, and item-rate contracts that marked the site as 'modern,' and production as transparent, depended on the mediations of *thekedar*. Workers would not work for piece-rates but demanded *kharcha*, loans and the ability to earn multiple *hajri* in a day. *Thekedar* aggregated workers, binding them through hierarchical relations of debit and credit. Yet *thekedar* were themselves remunerated on (augmented) piece-rates. In collusion with Prakash Limited, *thekedar* changed the form in which labor was remunerated. This translation of labor supported the 'modern' construction site by presenting labor as exchangeable for a piece-rate. Through the *thekedar*, labor became one element, along with materials, of the composite items specified in the contract signed between the CPWD and Prakash Limited. The running bills framed production on the site as the step-wise and orderly exchange of thee built components for money.

The translational work of documentary and remunerative practices on the site, then, did not discipline labor but rather produced a sphere in which production was framed as the simple exchange of labor (and other materials) for money, in accordance with an architectural plan and a contract. That this framing was not accurate is only part of what is at stake. This chapter and

chapter 4 have argued that this image was actually the result of situated acts of translation that constituted a project of modularity. The documentary and remunerative practices of the 'modern' construction site allowed the finished project to be disentangled from the complex acts that created it. Yet this process was never seamless, as we saw the moral economies of the piece-rate and the *hajri* collide with each other in situations where givers and doers of work appear to be greedy or callous depending on one's perspective. The project of modularity, like the translations it depends on, is always fraught and partial.

These tensions are inherent to capitalist production and wage labor. In this sense the contribution of the semiotic analysis that this dissertation puts forth is to chart how these tensions unfold in everyday processes of production. We would expect to find similar processes of translation at work in any sort of capitalist production. As mentioned earlier construction makes these processes particularly visible since coordination across the links in the supply chain is constantly being reworked. Similar dynamics are at work even in cases where workers receive wages in the form of cash payments (Bolt 2014). At the same time what is more specific to the situation I have described are the effects of the fraught project of modularity. On the 'modern' Indian construction site, the tension between moral economies of remuneration is taken as a sign of the 'backward' nature of the *thekedar* and his workers. As Mitesh's account of the angry project manager indicates, the request for multiple *hajri* is understood as a sly tactic of the *thekedar*. It is a way of ensuring, unfairly, one's profit at the expense of the company. The actions of the project manager may also appear immoral to the workers but their representations do not circulate as widely. The event described, and the many like it that occurred daily on the site, come to reconfirm for engineers, project managers, and more ambiguously for foremen, the untrustworthy nature of the *thekedar* (see chapter 1). Modularity is always a fraught and tenuous project but on the 'modern' construction site this tenuousness takes on the character of incompletion. The *thekedar*, and the

demands of his workers, appear as unwarranted attempts to fleece the project. As such they become yet another sign, along with frequent returns to the village and an unwillingness to do tasks beyond their habit, of an unprofessional character that is easily read as a stumbling block to modern construction, rather than its foundation stone.

Conclusion: What Does Construction Build?

On November 8th, 2016 Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced that the government would be revoking India's ₹ 1,000 and ₹ 500 bank notes, the new policy would go into effect at midnight. Old bank notes had to be deposited or exchanged, although this was strictly regulated and could only be done in relatively small amounts. The severity and suddenness of the move set off a general feeling of chaos as citizens lined up and waited for days to deposit or exchange old notes (Drèze 2016). The shift hit the construction industry particularly hard. The real estate market had already begun to slow down in 2011, a delayed reaction to the 2008 financial crisis (Searle 2016, 232). Demonetization made real estate deals less profitable since developers could no longer collect cash payments above and beyond the official list price of a property (Searle 2014). More directly, labor contractors and other *thekedar* could no longer get regular access to the large amounts of cash that they needed to maintain their workforces. In response workers left construction sites to return to their villages (*Daily News and Analysis* 2016). In December 2016 Rahim, the bar bending *thekedar* (see chapter 5) and I chatted via Facebook messenger at which point he told me that 50% percent of his workers had gone home.

Despite his trouble Rahim seemed hopeful that once the limits on withdrawal of new notes were lifted that things would go back to normal.[1] In this sentiment Rahim echoed official comments that framed the hardships caused by demonetization as a temporary inconvenience that would be overshadowed by the benefits of demonetization. The most immediate benefit was the elimination of counterfeit currency and 'black money'[2] used to fund terrorism and other illegal activities. By

[1] At the time of our conversation the government had limited the amount of new notes that could be withdrawn in a given day. This meant that Rahim could not take out enough money to cover the expenses of his workers.

[2] This term has a wide, and rather vague, set of referents in India including the exchange of illegal commodities but also the exchange of legal commodities in cash for the purposes of avoiding taxes.

forcing citizens to deposit their bank notes the state would be able to record and investigate suspiciously large cash deposits. The move was associated with a more general push to encourage citizens to open bank accounts (which happened in record numbers) and also to go cashless (which had less success).

While it is still far from clear that demonetization has or will achieve these goals I will focus on the event as an effort to modernize India's economy.[3] That is, demonetization can be understood as an attempt to reform India's economy in much the same way that modern construction sites attempt to reform the Indian construction industry. This was definitely the way in which the move was taken up by local business leaders (PTI 2016) and by international players like the International Monetary Fund (ANI 2016). Finance Minister Arun Jaitley announced that the move would "expand the GDP and make [the economy] cleaner" (PTI 2016). By eliminating counterfeit notes and encouraging the opening of new bank accounts Modi sought to make Indian economic practice conform with an image of 'modern' capitalism where exchange is smoothly and transparently mediated through increasingly digital mediums. In this discourse forcing workers to open and use bank accounts would ultimately benefit them by allowing them to be paid in a way that leaves a verifiable trail. If workers received something like direct deposits the payment of their wages could be more easily checked. It would also set the groundwork for companies to directly pay their workers. Indeed the company that I call Prakash Limited recently posted a note on their website detailing their efforts in supplying construction workers with their own bank accounts. In

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This was widely practiced in Indian real estate where the listed price was augmented by significant cash sums that would go unrecorded (Searle 2016).

[3] I do not mean to imply here that I believe that demonetization has, or will, achieve its goals or that it has modernized the Indian economy but that it can be seen as an attempt to do so and thus part of the same logic that undergirds the modern construction site (for a critique of demonetization see "Demonetisation May Have Caused Lasting Damage to Economy: Political Economist Barbara Harriss-White" 2017).

this way Prakash Limited sought to associate itself with the most recent attempt to modernize the Indian economy and realize a seamless capitalist production process.

From this perspective, demonetization bears a similar logic to many calls for reform in the Indian construction industry. The decision to demonetize was a technological fix aimed at getting the market to operate according to a certain ideal. It was meant to 'clean' the market of imperfections caused by corruption and other practices. The solution to India's incompletely modern economy then is a renewed effort at modernization. In this way demonetization expresses a similar logic that pervades both critical and salutary accounts of the construction industry in India. Whether or not one is a critique or supporter of business the suggested solution to the current state of affairs is always the modernization of the industry. Thus while van der Loop is a staunch critic of the exploitative practices of *thekedar*, in collusion with builders, he ends his insightful analysis of the construction industry in Tamil Nadu by calling for worker training programs and increased vigilance around safety issues (1996). He argues that training would ultimately encourage workers to identify with their class position rather than the 'cultural' differences that *thekedar* use to disguise their exploitation (ibid., 403; see also Srinivas 2008; Prosperi 2013). While industry advocates frame the effects of training and increased transparency as aides to efficient and flexible production, they make quite similar calls for reform (CITES). The goal in all cases is to reform capitalist production so that it either realizes its own ideals, as in demonetization and industry advocate discourse, or creates class-consciousness, as in van der Loop's account.

The danger with these critiques is that they tend to reproduce a notion of India as being in a state of transition; a temporary moment that will eventually give way to the full realization of capitalist production provided certain reforms are made. Throughout the dissertation I have argued that this sense of transition, the "incomplete project" of modernity (Scriver and Srivastava 2015), is not due to a lack of development but is rather one of its effects. This argument is two-fold. First,

capitalist production depends on tenuous practices that capture, partially and temporarily, the diverse "productive powers" (Yanagisako 2002) of human and non-human agents in order to transform them into value. Second, this very partiality is itself generative. It is framed in a particular way; in this case as the unfinished process of modernization. ' That glittering high-rises and backward workers are both produced on India's construction sites is not a sign of incomplete or uneven modernization but is rather a product of it.

My argument here is deeply influenced by William Mazzarella's work on the discourse of film censorship in India which "works by repeatedly staging impasses—that in a way it succeeds by failing" (2013, 2). The modern construction site never produces what it claims to, as many journalistic accounts have made clear, but this does not mean that it does not 'work.' What is produced, and reproduced, on modern construction sites is an impasse between recalcitrant forms of tradition and a modernity just on the horizon. As Mazzarella notes these impasses are often understood by members of the film industry as signs of transition. Yet his analysis demonstrates that "the condition that my informants so often imagined as a state of transition between vanished tradition and future civility is a permanent symptom of the structure of modern mass publicity" (ibid., 18). My own analysis makes a similar argument with respect to labor and infrastructural development. What appeared to my informants, and the critics of the industry mentioned above, as a state of transition whose solution was redoubled attempts at modernization was, in fact, an effect "a permanent symptom," of the structure of capitalist production on 'modern' construction sites.

It is to highlight this dynamic that I approached the 'modern' construction site as a chronotope of production. This term draws attention to the 'modern' construction site not as a, more or less clearly, defined class of projects, but as a particular way of structuring production. The 'modern' construction site, as a crhonotope of production, is not an empirical place as much as it is an emergent structure of production. This is nothing as grand as a mode of production, rather it

marks a repeatable process that orchestrates vastly different labors in space and time so as to stage the drama of effecting a transition from a traditional past to a modern future. Across the chapters of the dissertation I have developed an analytical framework to elucidate how this orchestration takes place in the process of production. The starting point here is an attention to what I have called ideologies of labor, which focuses attention on the ways in which actors orient to their own and others' productive activities. From this perspective production is never a simple process of fabrication but always involves a translation between divergent ideologies of labor. In the following section I elaborate this argument with respect to the chapters of the dissertation before considering the wider implications of this analytical frame.

The Work of Construction

The process of translating between divergent ideologies of labor on the 'modern' construction site was actually articulated to me quite early on in my fieldwork, although I did not recognize it. I return to this moment here in order to illustrate the different themes of ideologies of labor, translation that characterize the 'modern' construction site as a chronotope of production. At the end of my first day on the CPWD site I watched as Nandalal, his workers, and a Prakash Limited foreman named Deepak worked to install a plate for the steel girders that would support the sweeping ceiling of the large lecture theatre I describe in chapter 3. It was already dark out and Nandalal, the *thekedar*, and his workers were covered in sweat and rust from their efforts in nudging the massive steel plate into place. Deepak bent at the waist and peered through the lens of the total station before calling out how many millimeters, and in what direction the plate needed to be moved.[4] Two short pieces of rebar had been welded to the either side of the steel plate and from

[4] Deepak was a particularly highly skilled foreman and had learned how to minimally operate surveying devices, which were normally operated by engineers (see chapter 3).

them pieces of neon green string tied to rocks had been attached so that they formed two straight lines about three inches in front of the face of the plate. After one of Nandalal's workers had nudged the plate forward with a well-placed smack of his sledgehammer, Nandalal steadied the stings and measured the distance from the plate to the string, taking measurements at the top and bottom of the plate for both pieces of string. 'Hit it here' Nandalal said, indicating an area on the top left side of the plate. Laughing, Deepak called out in a loud voice 'do the local technique' pointing at his machine he added 'this is foreign technique, that's local technique.'[5] Everyone seemed to be amused by the joke as all involved paused for a moment to smile or chuckle before returning to their struggle with the massive steel plate.

When I asked Deepak about his joke he grinned and explained in a softer voice that 'local technique' referred to the strings that the workers had been using while 'foreign technique' referred to the machine that he was using. The machine could be used, in combination with the architectural drawing and a physical reference point, to measure points in three-dimensional space. Once a point was entered into the machine, a pole with a reflector could be held out and the operator of the total station could calculate in which direction and how far away the reflector was from the desired point. In short, the total station allowed Deepak to ensure that the physical structure matched the architectural drawing perfectly. The strings were arranged to do roughly the same thing. A horizontal section marked the height of the plate and the vertical strings acted like plumb-bobs. Weighted at one end with rocks and attached above the horizontal line, the strings could be used to check the vertical level of the face of the steel plate. As Deepak explained, the local method would work but it could only ensure relative accuracy—that the plate was in the correct position with respect to other building components—and it was not as precise.

Yet Deepak insisted that both techniques were necessary. He said the foreign technique

[5] *'Desi jugad karo.' 'Yeh videshi jugad hai, woh desi jugaad.'*

alone would take too long. As he spoke he bent down to pantomime looking through the lens, calling out to the workers, and repeating this over and over again. By using the foreign technique to set points the workers could then use the string to get close before checking it with the total station. Combining local and foreign in this way, Deepak concluded, the work could be done quickly and accurately, two goals that were of critical importance but seemed to be often at odds when it came to installing the steel plates.

In distinguishing between foreign and local techniques, Deepak drew attention to the disjuncture between a form of construction practice mediated by high-technology and globally legible procedures—total stations are used in construction the world over—and a form that relied on mix of ingenuity and low-tech, and decidedly local, objects. In this sense the joke is somewhat self-deprecatory. Deepak's use of 'foreign' and 'local' here should be understood articulating the same distinction that others gloss with 'modern' and 'traditional.' His comment projects the distinction between 'modern' construction sites that are associated with high technology and 'typical' ones that rely on old methods onto the production process itself.[6] The joke pokes fun at the discordant nature of Indian construction; its mixing of modern and traditional. That the workers recognized the humor speaks, in part, to the legibility of these distinctions.

Yet the joke is not simply a wry comment on India's lack of development. The demands of the 'modern' construction site—speed *and* accuracy—necessitate the combination of 'foreign' and 'local' techniques. It is perhaps not coincidental that Deepak, a foreman, would make this joke. As wee saw in part II of the dissertation, foremen (like Mitesh) are much closer to the translational intricacies of production than engineers. Deepak's comments to me about the necessity of both 'foreign' and 'local' methods belie his positioning at the center of the complex mediations that

[6] In doing so Deepak's comment is a good example of "fractal recursivity" in which ideological distinctions can be projected onto different scales of experience (Irvine and Gal 2000). Here a distinction between sites is projected onto a distinction within a site.

organized production on the site. In this sense Deepak's comments draw attention to the fact that the project of the modern construction site depends on a negotiated and contingent mixture of divergent techniques. Recall that Deepak and Nandalal were engaged in a process in which Deepak's descriptions of the built environment with regards to the architectural plan (punched in to the total station) were being translated into Nandalal's commands to 'hit' the steel plate. It is only by recognizing, or at least permitting, this translation that production may go on.

In this sense the humor of Deepak's comment stems from the similarities between the two techniques. They are dependent on each other but, from the perspective of the work-in-production, the 'foreign' and the 'local' appear similar. Deepak emphasizes this by describing them both as 'techniques.' The word that Deepak used was *jugad,* which is a difficult term to translate because of its rather large semantic range. While the McGregor dictionary glosses the word as "provision, means of providing for" (1993, 376), the term connotes improvisation and resourcefulness like 'bricolage.' The quintessential example for many was the makeshift passenger carriers that operated in the villages around the Delhi hinterland (cf. A. Roy 2011). These vehicles, often referred to simply as *jugad*, were cobbled together out of mismatched mechanical parts, taking parts form cars but also scooters and even water pumps (website). What makes these cars such a compelling example of *jugad* is both this hodgepodge mixture of parts but also its near constant state of disrepair. These cars are always moments away from breaking down; just barely getting by. In this sense they are like their drivers who eek out a living from day to day getting by on ingenuity and pluck. As in Deepak's usage the term easily shades into characterizing actions. 'To do *jugad*' (*jugad karna*') is to get the disparate materials at hand to hold together, if only momentarily, to accomplish the task.

In the same moment that Tiwari made a distinction between 'foreign' and 'local' he also asserts that they are both *jugad*. While the term may seem apt for the pieces of string weighted down

with rocks it takes on an edge when applied to the total station, a technology being used for its designed task. The notion of foreign *jugad* consisting of such technologically advanced and task specific items as a total station again played into widespread images of India as struggling to catch up to the more advanced countries in the global North. Yet to insist that the total station is also *jugad* is to privilege a view from the ground. The term called attention to the improvisational nature of the work at hand; to the struggle of getting the material world to hang together in a particular way. Even the powerful computations of the total station were not enough, Deepak reminds us, to allow the material building to come together easily. Things had to be checked, re-checked, pushed, pulled and banged into place. *Jugad* brought attention to the skill and ingenuity required in acting on a world full of recalcitrant materials: heavy plates, tightly packed rebar, computers and lasers. The finished components of the building might look smooth and effortless but this very effect was made through an improvised and relational engagement with the material world, including rocks and total stations; workers and supervisors; brute force and careful instruction.

It is at this level of the engagement with the material world that the notion of ideologies of labor makes an intervention. As we saw in chapter 2 the very same physical activities can be construed in drastically different ways. For administrators carrying bricks was part of 'practical' training whereas for students it was part of *labour*. The stakes were high as both activities (practical and *labour*) had the potential to transform the actor into different sorts of selves (a trained worker or a laborer). Ideologies of labor emerged as students, and administrators, framed their actions even as they were engaged in them. Adapting the literature on language ideologies I argued that labor, like language, comes matter through a dialectic between practical action and metapragmatic framings of that action (Silverstein 2003b; Keane 2003). Ideologies of labor offers a new focus for studies of the relationship between language and political economy by focusing on the semiotic constitution of central economic objects; labor.

This approach to labor is attentive to the ways in which the world that is worked on may work back on us (Latour 1996; Bennett 2010; Ingold 2012) but it insists that it does so in conjunction with, rather than in opposition to, discursive framings of labor. As we saw in chapter 3, the discourse of *adat* (habit) expressed ways in which repeated exposure to the materials of one's work transformed the embodied selves of construction workers. Yet in claiming, or refuting, a trade as one's *adat* workers regimented the material experiences of work. They emphasized some elements (stone dust, welding light) as transformative of their embodied selves while simultaneously suppressing others. In so doing workers articulated an ideology of labor in which their activities shaped them to specific trades, and specific types of work within a trade. This ideology of labor was a model for making sense of the ways in which labor transforms those who labor. It was also a tool for claiming, and to a limited degree controlling, these transformations.

This focus on ideologies of labor is the foundation for an analysis of production itself as hinging on a translation between divergent ideologies of labor. By attending to paperwork (chapter 4) and wages (chapter 5) I traced the transformations of labor through the production process. As work orders moved down the subcontracted levels of the site, labor was translated from its form as a homogenous substance in a general call for this or that section of the architectural plan to be completed to its form as a particular task given by a *thekedar* to carefully selected workers whose duty it was to respond. Here the qualities of the specific task were compensated, as were the particular needs of the worker (see chapter 5). Yet just as important was the reverse movement through which completed acts of labor were translated into magnitudes of material installed at particular places on particular days. In this form labor could be compensated with a piece-rate that conformed to an agreed upon contract. These practices communicated about the same realities, the need to make a section of the steel reinforcement for the floor beam of A-block (see chapter 4), yet at every stage this complex task took on a different form. Like all translations the practices that linked together

divergent ideologies of labor into one complex structure of production transformed as much as they kept 'the same' (Gal 2015; Silverstein 2003c).

It was these translational practices that ultimately supported the very forms that marked the site as 'modern' by allowing them to appear to catalyze labor. What emerged from these practices was an image of production as the step-wise exchange of built materials for amounts of money. Yet these translations were never smooth. As we saw, the heterogeneous forms of labor on which construction depended were always leaking back in to the frame of the piece-rate contract or the running account. This happened when the ideological representations of labor as a freely distributable substance that CPWD engineers create and manipulate come up against the ideologies of workers that frame labor as a particular bodily capacity. It was precisely this tension that emerged in chapter 4 when the CPWD engineers attempted to directly intervene in the labor process, getting the false ceiling workers to do a different task. A similar tension emerged when Mitesh attempted to enable the bar benders to negotiate their *hajri* with the project manager. What is crucial about these, and other instances like them, is not only that they mark places where the specificities of productive activities invade the abstract image of homogenous labor, but that they were taken by engineers as signs of the 'backward,' 'traditional,' or 'greedy' character of workers and their *thekedar*.

At one level these incidents could be explained away as insignificant miscommunications, or even as signs of the afterlife of long-standing colonial discourses on the Indian laborer in which it was argued that despite colonial attempts at industrialization the Indian worker remained fundamentally rural (Chandavarkar 2008, 125). As such, workers could never fully commit to industrial labor and thereby become modern subjects (J. P. Parry et al. 1999). This is no doubt an important factor in the incidents described in the previous chapters. But this analysis does not allow us to account for why it is that this colonial discourse has remained so compelling. As we saw in chapter 1 critiques of the *thekedar* and the general backward state of India's construction industry

date back to at least the founding of the Public Works Department (now the CPWD). Just as old are attempts to reform the industry, to bring its practices in line with an image of 'modern' capitalist production. Thus while the incidents on the site do draw off of longer colonial discourses on Indian labor the continued persuasiveness of this discourse itself must also be explained.

A focus on ideologies of labor in production demonstrates the structural nature of these seemingly mundane clashes on 'modern' construction sites. The recalcitrance of workers, or the demands of a *thekedar*, only appears as a 'traditional' setback from the perspective of the forms of audit and accounting that characterize the 'modern' construction site. In providing labor *as if* it were a homogenous substance *thekedar* consciously played off the divergent ideologies of labor united in production. Yet they also produced the grounds for their own framing as 'traditional' impediments to the realization of a modern construction practice. The very forms that the translational processes on the site enable reflexively frame those translations as signs of an incomplete modernity. We could speak then of the 'modern' construction site not as an agent of development in India, although not in the sense that it builds modern infrastructures piece by piece. Rather the 'modern' construction site draws workers together from all over the country, puts them to work under *thekedar* with written contracts, and frames the whole process with the help of foremen, engineers and project managers. The result is not, or at least not only, the creation of the material infrastructure of the modern nation but the production of an impasse—a dynamic tension—that takes the image of an India in transition.

This image has specific contours in contemporary India but its creation and maintenance might apply to projects of capitalist development more broadly. Among other things the recent turn to infrastructure studies in anthropology (Larkin 2013; Appel 2012b; Anand 2011; Chu 2014; Howe et al. 2016; P. Harvey 2010) has demonstrated the key role that processes of creating and maintaining the built environment play in processes of capitalist development. By attending to the

failure of infrastructural projects scholars have critiqued the presumed connections between infrastructure and development. Attending to the everyday workings of infrastructures reveals the tenuous and temporary of infrastructures and the claims based on it (Anand 2011, 559; see also Gupta 2015). Yet, if the analysis I have presented here is valid, we should not be surprised that infrastructure does not deliver on the promises of modernity that it seems to offer. We need not look to the spectacular failures of infrastructural development—to the half finished buildings and abandoned construction sites (A. Roy 2011)—the sites at which infrastructure is, more or less, successfully created are themselves sources of a partial modernity. Indeed, as I have argued this sense of the present as a moment of transition is an achievement of infrastructural production not a sign of its failure.

The dissertation suggests a different way of approaching infrastructure and particularly its production. Rather than focus on the success or, more likely, failure of projects of infrastructural development, I argue that we should attend to the ways in which the production of infrastructure itself creates a sense of a partial but transitional modernity. It is the production of infrastructure, not just the 'finished product' that circulates and transforms people and places. The 'modern' construction site is an increasingly ubiquitous chronotope of production the world over as countries form China, to Equatorial Guinea, to Brazil engage in projects of infrastructural development. By attending to the ways in which these sites depend on translations across divergent ideologies of labor we can create nuanced accounts of the sorts of socio-material transformations that infrastructural development brings for the myriad workers brought together on these sites and for the cities, countries and regions that their actions transform.

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