Dangerous Labour:

Migrants, Age, and Precarious Labour in Mumbai City

Mouleshri Vyas[1]

Informalisation of work and the resultant social insecurity are visible across the world (Webster and Bhowmik, 2014). A preliminary survey of literature points to key concerns relating to these processes in the global south as well as north. In insecure conditions, lacking identity and documents that define their citizenship and related entitlements, millions of people move in and out of cities struggling to survive. Their number is increasing with spatial reorganising of manufacturing at a global level, and restructuring of manufacturing industries. Studies of different types of work examine the specificities of workers' lives in the informal economy, working conditions, as well as industry level changes that have taken place in recent times. The discourse on precarious labour further highlights the role of the state and the contribution of trade unions and other forms of organising that build new spaces for giving a voice to informal labour. That the state is needed is undeniable, and even more important as employment based social security is absent for majority of the population, and labour regimes have become increasingly exploitative and extractive.

Cities such as Mumbai that have been built through the labour of migrants from various parts of the country, the anti-migrant political environment notwithstanding, have created a confused environment where the migrant worker is essential to manufacturing and service provision, and able to find work, while being theoretically unwelcome in terms of occupying physical, social, political and cultural space in the city. Literature abounds on the informal economy in Mumbai city; the impact of the closure of textile mills and manufacturing industries on the working class; as well as the challenge of union building with informal workers.

What is likely to be useful at this juncture is perhaps a nuanced examination of broader and local level conditions and changes that are leading to enhanced structural violence that manifests itself in certain types of work, and the extreme powerlessness that those engaged in this work experience in their everyday lives. I hope to attempt this through a study of migrant labour around two phenomena – morbidity and employment of elderly; and in two occupations. First, those involved in work that is hazardous and unpleasant by all standards, and a challenge to the parameters of Decent Work laid down by the ILO. This category comprises those who work with solid waste and city cleaning work at the risk of their lives. The second comprises those who are part of the security provision industry in the city. This should enable an understanding of the nature of violence and

1   Professor, Centre for Community Organisation and Development Practice, School of Social Work, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai.

social injustice that is now a part of our society, and in effect, strengthened by the state apparatus. At this stage, I would term this as 'extreme precarity' to set apart these conditions of severe vulnerability within the informal economy from the otherwise insecure conditions that characterize most work and labour in the this sector.

In my earlier work, I have examined the tenuous conditions under which migrants live, work, and compete for jobs that are viewed as difficult and are the last resort for entrants into the city who lack skills and the formal education that are valued in the current market situation. Work with waste, which now comprises several categories of male and female workers, is one such type of work. This was one of the aspects of transit labour in Mumbai city, partly explained by privatization of solid waste management in urban centres in India (Vyas, 2012). The vulnerability and precarious conditions of this section of city labour is enhanced by the fact that collectivizing them is an immensely uphill task. The political environment and formal and informal sector divide add to the challenge of union building, and hence claiming of entitlements by these populations (Vyas, 2009). The existing literature highlights the hazardous nature of this work (Vyas, 2014: 90-92), the social stigma associated with it (Vyas, 2014; Vivek, 2000), the precarity of labour emanating from the contract labour regime, and the biopolitics embedded within it (Jha et al, 2013).

There is scope to study another dimension related to work with waste: newspaper reports, as well as data with trade unions presents a darker and even more morbid side of this work. Several workers lose their lives due to the physical and socio-political framework within which they labour. It could be an accident with the vehicle they are working on, a disease that they have been afflicted with due to the nature of work, or an overall sense of despair that makes survival and dignity difficult to sustain. The death of workers engaged in particular type of work such as waste collection and disposal, and the continued struggle for the family and next generation along the same lines, manifests compounded hazards and vulnerability. A closer look at some such cases of worker morbidity could enable a calibrated understanding of precarity.

Secondly, one of the visible changes in the city of Mumbai is the presence of significant numbers of what appear to be elderly or older migrants working as security guards across various types of properties. The beginning question here is: what brings into the workforce, these populations that should now ideally have the choice of leading less strenuous lives; why do they take up these jobs that appear to pay poorly, demand 12 hours of work, and deprive the worker of sleep and social security? What does this indicate about the role of the state and structural nature and violence embedded in poverty? Is this section of the workforce another manifestation of 'extreme precarity'? The second category of labour that I would focus on is the elderly working as security guards in the city.

The demographic profile of India has led to a projection that the total number of elderly in the country is expected to increase from 6.9 per cent of the population in 2001 to 12.4 per cent of the population in 2026 (Subaiya and Bansod, 2011). Using NSSO data from 1983 to 2004-05, Selvaraj et al estimated the total number of elderly workers in India to be 31 million – about 7 per cent of the total workforce. According to the Planning Commission (2011), By 2050, one out of every five

persons in India will be aged above 60 years. Most of the research on elderly in India has focused on issues of health, residential arrangements, social security and ill-treatment (Dhar et al, 2014: 4). The few studies that have looked at workforce participation, have described trends in employment and wages (ibid).

While most of the elderly workers belong to the 60-69 year age group, the workforce participation decreases with increase in age. A study of workforce participation among the elderly in India (ibid) finds that there is a decline in workforce participation rate among the elderly, as well as increasing informalisation of the aged workforce - of workers in the 60-65 year bracket by about six percent. While this result may be attributed to jobless growth in the Indian economy squeezing out the elderly from the formal sector, such an explanation overlooks recent trends in employment in India. Given the easy nature of entry in to the informal sector labour force, this has led to aged workers from low income households flowing to this sector to augment household income (ibid, p. 20). Workforce participation of the elderly, may in the short run, enable them to be economically independent, 'particularly in view of its externalities'. But the declining workforce participation rate for the elderly is likely to be due to declining job opportunities, poor health, lack of skills to match with modern production techniques, and unfriendly public transport. (Dhar et al, 2014: 14; Pandey, 2009), or because of the "buffer provided by MDM, NREGA, PDS etc." (ibid: 16) The elderly workers in urban areas are found more in the service sector. What is a matter of concern is that they are employed in sectors that are marked by low earning, with their earnings being lower than those of others in that sector. Inadequate social security adds to the financial distress, dependence, and health problems of the elderly, particularly for the rural elderly, female elderly living in nuclear families, and elderly with health problems.

Further, Selvaraj (2011) found that more than 70 per cent of the elderly workers are illiterate or do not have primary education. This implies that "it is economic vulnerabilities that 'force' the aged to work in India. Labour force participation is higher among the poor elderly than among the richer elderly. However, this difference is more marked among the female elderly workers." (Dhar et al, p.6). In developing countries, on the other hand, policies targeting elderly from low income households have failed to attain their objectives. This calls for other substitutes to protect the aged population from destitution and poverty. One such instrument is the labour market (Dhar et al, 30 - 31).

More interestingly, although the elderly workers receive lower wages than the non-elderly, their contribution to the total household income is substantial, amounting to 4-5 per cent on an average (ibid). Data of 2009-2010 finds that the elderly among the scheduled castes are participating more than others in urban areas, while in the rural areas, it is the elderly among the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes who participate more. Since care work, household chores and care of grandchildren is not being counted here (ibid, p.7), it is likely that the work of women elderly in particularly is highly underestimated.

Existing studies appear to point to the fact that the participation of the elderly in the workforce is prompted by difficult economic and social conditions in the household, especially when they take up low paying insecure jobs, as they do in the global south, and in industries that are poorly regulated, and yet have large numbers of the workforce competing for the jobs. The larger structural reality, the inadequate social security regimes, as well as the micro level struggles for surviving in conditions of poverty, have created work spaces that allow for subsistence and survival, while pushing populations like the elderly into the workforce. One of these spaces is within the security provision industry where young and old workers are absorbed, trained, and deployed to stand guard for different types of properties or individuals.

A survey of literature on security provision highlights some of its key features: in the North American context (United States and Canada) the shift of this service from the public to the private sphere occurred as early as the 1970s. Research by Shearing and Stenning in 1983 points to the growth in "private security", which provides police services on a fee-for-service basis to anyone willing to pay. The service offered by private security is also seen as more comprehensive than that provided by the public police force. Further, public policing and private security operate in different contexts: the former within the ambit of public law and the criminal justice system, and the latter within the context of "private justice". Private security in North America now outnumbers the public service, resulting in restructuring of institutions for maintenance of order, and a gradual erosion of the role of the state in this regard. Thirdly, the nature of spaces that need to be protected has changed. With increase in "mass private property", private corporations have taken charge of the protection of these properties. This shift has taken place without any opposition because of the nexus between private property and private security and the consequent legitimation of the latter. The analysis of this industry discusses its non-specialized character; its client-defined mandate; and the character of the sanctions that it employs (ibid, p. 499-500). This was the situation several decades ago in North America; these are the issues that are perhaps relevant in the Indian context at present.

Dhar et al (2014) find that Brash's work (2006) speaks about how "new spatializations of social processes empower certain social groups and disempower others, and become sites and weapons of struggle as well…new forms of spatial politics create new possibilities for political action (p. 349-350).

Interestingly, a study in Kenya (Abrahamsen and Williams, 2005) points to the fact that security provision is a highly unregulated sector. While it is an important part of the economy and a significant employer, it is a "notoriously low paid occupation…long hours and very little remuneration". In spite of a minimum wage stipulation from 2003, there are variations across companies, and many do not pay the minimum wage. At the industry level, survival for the smaller companies is challenged if they have to adhere to payment of minimum wages; the justification for this rests upon the labor surplus economy where there is competition for low paying jobs (p. 426-428).

An appraisal of the security provision industry in Thane city, which is part of the Mumbai Metropolitan Region (MMR comprises Mumbai city, and its neighbouring urban agglomerations) points to the existence of tens of registered companies that provide security personnel for protection of various types of properties – those owned by the government and those owned by individuals/collectives or private firms; residences or official, and so on. There is an active presence of regulatory bodies such as the Labour Commissioner, and the Police Commissioner, who play the role of licensing, and monitoring the functioning of these registered companies that are engaged in security provision. A government authorized Security Board, has formulated rules for the companies, including minimum wage payment, upper and lower age limits for recruitment and employment as security guards. However, there is considerable variation in the scale at which the companies operate: some have 30 to 35 employees, while others claim to have 1500 – 2000 recruits that are placed across various properties. Wages vary significantly across the companies from less than the minimum wage to what may be termed as a more decent wage.

However, with multiple stakeholders: the government attempting to control and regulate this industry, the companies as the contractors/recruiters, the private property owners as the employers, and the security guards at the bottom of this hierarchy, the situation is complex, and appears to be in flux. One thing seems certain: the employee as a security guard is the least in control of his work conditions and choices, and has multiple agencies that determine his work situation. One of the stipulations is that the recruits should be between 18 and 60 years of age. While the lower age limit is one that the recruiting company adheres to, they do not do so with the upper age limit. There is an internal justification for it: what is the physically able worker who is above sixty years of age, and in need of a means of subsistence for himself and his family, to do? At another level, it is evident that when rules are not followed, it sets in motion a series of interactions between the regulatory authorities and the companies where things are covered up through bribery on one level, and through underpayment of wages on the other.

The older worker in this industry seems to be located in a structural and systemic context that works against him.

To summarise the above discussion, this study would attempt to examine what I would like to term as 'extreme precarity' as visibilised through work related morbidity within solid waste management and elderly workers in insecure jobs in the private security provision industry. For me as a researcher, the challenge that I foresee is in the unevenness of my own work so far with regard to both of these types of work and implications for labour. I have more of an understanding, field action and research base in regard to solid waste related labour issues, and much less with the latter category. Methodologically this may translate into one part of the study being more descriptive in nature and the other, more exploratory.

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