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Forces of truth: A struggle of migrant workers in Delhi

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Abstract

Under conditions of precarious work in factories of Delhi, how do workers contest terminations and dispersal? In this article, I explore a struggle of migrant workers of a metal polishing factory to retain legal work. I describe experiences of turbulence at the factory, union efforts to oppose management actions, and workers' placard protests on roads of the city. I discuss workers' motives, methods, and difficulties in the protests, interactions with other workers, managers, and the police, and empathetic linkages which arose during the struggle. The struggle's conclusion might be seen to intimate, drawing on Weil and Gandhi, the workings of 'forces of truth' in the world.

Keywords

globalization, migrant workers, cities, protest, non-violence, justice, India

In factories of present-day Delhi, workers confront proliferating, insecure work. Companies routinely seek to terminate regularized workers, utilize illegal, casual, and contract labor, and close and relocate units. How do workers contest these activities? What are their motives and methods in struggles? Why might such struggles succeed? I explore these questions by examining a struggle of migrant workers of a metal polishing factory. I describe the context in which an export company ceased production, delayed wages, and terminated workers, the union's efforts to oppose these actions, and the death of a worker, amidst this turbulence. I discuss workers' street protests in the city, their motives of seeking one's *haq* (right, just due) and methods of non-violence, and the interactions, relations, and activities which arose during the protests, including a grassroots boycott of the company's goods. The conclusion of the struggle, I suggest, drawing on the thought of Simone

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Weil and M. K. Gandhi, might be seen to intimate the workings of 'forces of truth' which may, at times, pose challenges to Capital.

The metal polishing factory, located in the Okhla Industrial Area in southeast Delhi, began functioning in 2001 as a unit of an export company, with American and Indian directors, established in the 1990s. The unit was engaged in polishing of high-end steel artware for export to an American company, for sale in department stores, galleries, and boutiques. The factory employed up to 60 workers, who were male migrants, mostly from the states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Jharkhand, aged in their late teens to mid-40s, comprising backward and scheduled castes, *adivasis* (original dwellers), and Muslims.

Steel polishing is dirty, difficult, and dangerous work, entailing a fusion of brute force and fine artistry. Workers polished metal pieces at eight machines, using cutting, fiber, and cloth buffs, over nine-, 12-, and 17-hour shifts. They wore tattered work clothes, used second-hand *sari* fragments as face masks, and bathed in a single-person latrine and adjoining chamber. Polishers developed thick calluses on the hands, incurred injuries to the wrists, arms, and face, and suffered from chronic colds, fever, stomach disorders, and tuberculosis. They resided with other male migrants, wives, and children in rooms, shanties, and small houses in south and southeast Delhi, Faridabad (Haryana), and NOIDA (Uttar Pradesh).

Through enticements, competition, and pressures, the management exacted high production quantities and quality. Low wages (less than \$2.50 a day), a thickly polluted atmosphere, prolonged casual work, an illegal night shift, efforts to shift workers to another unit without transfer letters, and constant pressures to intensify work gave rise to discontent amongst workers. Workers engaged in autonomous efforts to regulate production; refusal actions to oppose wage stagnation, reduction of bonuses, and retraction of allowances; and struggles, involving leftist unions, to resist terminations of night workers (2002) and to contest a lockout in which 26 workers were retrenched (2004). Production was running smoothly, with 19 reinstated workers, in early 2005, when turbulence returned to the factory.

Death of a *mazdur* (wage worker)

In March 2005, due to a legal dispute between the two directors, work stopped in the company's factories. Groups of managers and workers were terminated. The American majority director, who was also the owner of the American company that bought and marketed the Indian company's goods, assured the workers that the dispute would be resolved quickly, wages would be paid during the dispute, and the unit would resume production. The workers nervously sat idle and received wages. In May, the American director set up a new factory in Okhla, under a new company name, and shifted selected groups of managers and workers from existing units there. On tender of resignations, workers were rehired as new, probationary workers of the new company. New polishers were also freshly hired. An illegal night shift of contract workers was begun, including polishers who were retrenched during the 2004 lockout. Production was outsourced to existing vendors

in Delhi and north India. The dispute dragged on, but the American director's exports were back on line.

The next month, when wage payments were delayed in the older Okhla units, senior managers (now employed in the new company) suggested that idle workers accept their final settlements, as funds in the old company's accounts were becoming depleted. Workers refused, and wages were paid. In July, when wages were delayed, the union filed a complaint at the state labor department office in south Delhi. When the union leader and workers came to the office to inquire about the complaint, the labor officer told them that the company had asked for more time to arrange the funds. Workers were unsure as to what assistance they could expect from the state labor office. During the 2004 lockout, a labor officer had acted as a witness for the offstage terminations of workers.

As they left the labor office, in the midst of rain, a cycle with two workers was hit by a car. Vinod, who was driving the cycle, suffered gashes to the forehead. Ramdev, who was sitting on the cycle carrier, fell backward, and was bleeding from the ear and head. They were brought to the emergency room of Safdarjung Hospital, a large government hospital in south Delhi, and were admitted to the surgical emergency ward, where they lay in beds, sometimes with doubled patients, amidst smells of disinfectants, medicine, and urine, and sounds of hawking, wheezing, and vomiting. Vinod received stitches and was discharged in the morning. Ramdev's CT scan indicated multiple injuries to the brain. He was seen in the late night by the neurosurgery doctors. Surgery was recommended but, for some reason, not given on the case sheet – the decision to operate was cancelled. He was shifted to the general surgery ward, and except for a brief visit the next day by a neurosurgery resident (partly due to the presence of the union leader), the neurosurgeons likely never saw him again. The sparse notes by the surgery ward doctors over the following days, which contradict my own observations, suggest that he might have become a casualty of the ward's triage system.

Ramdev was groggy and agitated, thrashing about in the bed, eyes closed, fists clenched, sometimes abruptly sitting up, hawking and grunting, then falling back onto the bed. His wife and siblings were in the village in Bihar. Relatives and workers came to his bedside. In Okhla, the company paid wages. No manager came to the hospital. Ramdev briefly recovered, recognized persons, and began eating. On the fifth night, he stayed up talking with a neighbor, and went off to sleep around 3 am. He never woke up.

Force, writes Simone Weil, 'is that *x* that turns anybody who is subjected to it into a *thing*. Exercised to the limit, it turns man into a thing in the most literal sense: it makes a corpse out of him. Somebody was here, and the next minute there is nobody here at all' (1986: 163). A development process that induces migrations of huge numbers of *mazdurs* (wage workers) to the cities, companies that do not pay wages on time, a state machinery that permits them to do so, doctors who leave poor patients to die – these were all the workings and manifestations of Force. Force made a corpse of Ramdev.

In the morning, Ramdev's family arrived from the village and gathered at the mortuary, along with neighbors, relatives, and workers. Two junior managers appeared, disbursed cash for cremation expenses, and gave assurances of a future *ex gratia* amount and employment for Ramdev's widow. The union leader advised the workers and relatives, by phone, to delay the cremation, so that they could conduct a demonstration at the new factory to demand firm commitments from the senior managers. Workers resisted the suggestion, as they did not wish to entangle Ramdev's corpse in the union's pressure-building and image-bolstering strategies, and wanted to avoid provoking the management, which was already seeking to terminate idle workers. Ramdev's relatives assented, and along with the workers, waited with Ramdev's body at the Kalkaji cremation ground in the intense July heat. In the evening, about 50 workers from the two Okhla units, with union flags and banners, shouted slogans outside the new factory, pounded on the bolted gate, and deflated the tires of managers' vehicles. A crowd collected in the street. A police officer arrived on motorcycle and summoned the management. The American director and his managers met with the union leader and two workers, and, after initial resistance, gave a verbal promise of a job to Ramdev's widow in the new factory. The leader gave word to the workers to proceed with the cremation.

It was already dark, and the caretakers were eager to close the cremation ground. Wood was hastily gathered. Workers hoisted the bier and brought



Figure 1. Ramdev's funeral.

Ramdev's body to the cremation pit, chanting, '*Ram nam satya hai* [The name of Ram is truth]'. An attendant rapidly chanted verses. The workers and relatives cast ritual essences and set wood over the body. Ramdev's younger brother circled the body, pouring water from a clay pot onto the ground, and lit the pyre. They were quickly ushered out by the cries of the attendants, '*Calo bhai, bahar calo!* [Go on, guys, leave the ground!]', At the factory, labor office, hospital, and cremation ground, *mazdurs* got pushed around.

Afterwards, workers expressed regret and remorse about the abuses they had directed at Ramdev, a thin, quiet, soft-spoken, congenial man in his 30s, for doing exacting quality-checking, with the hope of getting promoted from the post of helper, which never occurred. They had teasingly addressed him as *mariyal* (quasi-dead), due to his gaunt frame. '*Mazdur admi ka koi thikana nahim hota* [There's no telling when something can happen to a worker]', a polisher observed, intimating an awareness that proletarian lives are precarious, uncertain, and vulnerable to the will and ravages of Force.¹ They were concerned about Ramdev's wife and children; despite the director's assurance, the managers did not readily give Ramdev's widow a job.

In public meetings in Okhla, the union leader spoke of the present assault on the rights of the working class, which had been won through great struggles and sacrifices. More sacrifice (*qurbani*), he said, was now required of workers. In late July, Okhla workers saw shocking news images of *qurbani*, when police officers brutally assaulted Honda workers in nearby Gurgaon with bamboo staffs, after a procession involving violence and the beating of police officers. 'The workers fought bravely', the union leader observed. Hundreds of workers were hospitalized. Did the workers desire such *qurbani*?

The next month, when wages were not paid, the union filed a complaint and conducted a procession through Okhla, in which slogans were shouted at the new factory gate. The labor officers later met with the managers (the American director had left India), who stated that the old company accounts were depleted. A legal case on non-paid wages was initiated. On realizing that wages would not be paid soon, about 100 idle workers in other units accepted final settlements, including those who had vociferously shouted slogans. Force seemed to be entirely on the company's side. The 18 polishing workers sought alternatives to the choice of resignations or a militant struggle (entailing slogan shouting at the gate, sit-down protests, possible violence and police beatings, dispersal, and long court cases) to create pressure for the restoration of jobs.

Placards in the city

The workers sought a means of protest that would not confine them to a single place, such as the factory gate, and that would generate wide visibility and exchanges. They drew on a method adopted by workers of the Jhalani Tools factory in nearby Faridabad, in the late 1990s, when their wages were stopped. The workers had stood silently with placards, communicating events at the factory,

several yards from one another, along roads, at intersections, and at railway crossings. After a few months, the Jhalani Tools management resumed paying partial wages. The polishing workers learned of these experiences from discussions with the editor of the *Faridabad Mazdur Samacar* (Faridabad Workers' Newspaper), a Hindi monthly newspaper focused on workers' autonomous activities, with links to autonomist groups elsewhere in the world, which had reported on turbulent episodes in the metal export company in the last year.

In October, the polishing workers met together and composed placards, with recycled cardboard, paper, and markers, describing events to date, with headings such as '*Do malikom ke bic pis gaya mazdur* [Workers ground between two company owners]', '*Tankhva band, malik farar* [Wages stopped, owners at large]', and '*Dashahra phika, Dipavali andhkar* [Dussehra (festival celebrating the triumph of good) was lackluster, Divali (festival of lights) will be pitch dark]'. One placard read, on the activities of the state labor officials, '*Naukri sarkar ki, seva punjipatiyom ki* [Working for the state, serving capitalists]'. In the mornings and at lunch time, they stood with placards along the roads of the Okhla Industrial Area, at the traffic circle, and at the railway siding, traversed by thousands of workers each day. Others looked on with curiosity, paused, crowded around the placard holders, read the texts, and asked questions. The polishing workers initially felt awkward and embarrassed to be standing in front of others, publicizing their problems. They held the placards high to obscure faces, crouched on the ground to hide their bodies, set them on the ground and stepped away, or handed them to one another and disappeared. They felt shy in front of women workers, who might ask them to read out the texts, thinking they were notices for job openings in factories. Passing workers offered advice to seek out unions, lawyers, political leaders, and TV media houses. Some hurled abuse at the directors. Others suggested that they beat up the managers of the new factory.

Before Divali, when companies distributed sweets, gifts, and bonuses to workers, they held placards in the lanes outside the new factory during lunch time. Workers of neighboring factories crowded around the placards. The workers in the new factory milled about, looked on from a distance, and spoke in hushed tones. The managers read the texts and chuckled amongst themselves. Inside, they instructed workers not to fraternize with the placard holders, though some were neighbors and relatives, including of Ramdev, whose story was given on the placards.

In November, the workers made forays into non-industrial parts of the city, such as Connaught Place, the Income Tax Office crossing, the Press Club of India, and the Company Law Board, where the directors' dispute was being adjudicated. The workers felt anxious, insecure, and out of place in these areas of the city. While walking along the clean, wide, uncrowded roads of central Delhi, their village-style, sauntering gaits became more restrained, as if they felt they did not belong there, though the capital city belonged to all Indians. When standing with placards on the roads, they wondered if they were being regarded by others as fools (*buddhu*), idiots (*bevakuf*), madmen (*pagal*), or beggars (*bhikhari*). The roads of the Okhla

Industrial Area, crowded with migrant workers, were more hospitable, if not respectable, for this activity. Occasionally, there were exchanges with students, journalists, activists, and other middle-class persons, who would take an interest in the placards, ask questions, and offer critical advice. The police would walk up to the workers, read the texts, stand about, then go away. When crowds collected around the placards, as in the courtyard of the Nehru Place commercial complex, the police tried to disperse them. One morning, they stood with placards outside the company's registered head office in a posh area of New Delhi. The directors were absent. The police were summoned by local residents, just as the workers were leaving. Two officers asked questions, wrote down details about the workers, and told them that Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code was in force in New Delhi district (restricting gatherings which might cause 'disturbance of the public tranquility'). After this encounter, the workers gave information letters to the police before bringing the placards to sensitive areas.

The next week, the workers attempted a *dharna* (sit-down protest) outside the new factory by sitting with the placards, across the lane from the gate, during the day. The second day, two police officers arrived at the factory, told the workers that they did not have police permission to conduct a *dharna*, but offered to speak to the management and arrange final settlements. When the workers declined, the police dispersed them, threatening to crack their skulls with bamboo staffs (as in Gurgaon) should they return to the gate. As they left, one officer suggested, in a soft voice, that they come back after a while. They did, and stood with the placards along the lanes at lunch time. The police did not return.²

When the workers returned with placards to the head office, the police were puzzled and disquieted. They advised the workers to go to Jantar Mantar, the city's designated (and sequestered) protest site in Delhi, where they could shout slogans, as they had done in union demonstrations, and seek press coverage. '*Aise ilake mem thik nahim lagta hai* [In this sort of area, it's not appropriate]', said one officer. They were not 'disturbing the peace', he agreed, 'but it looks bad, as per my opinion'. Factory workers were visible in industrial areas of the city, not on the roads of elite colonies. The silent protests were disturbing the social-psychic peace. In December, a female face added to the disturbance. Ramdev's gaunt, melancholy widow, Shibbo Devi, in a white *sari* and purple shawl, who was yet to be given a factory job,³ now sat with a placard on the footpath.

Haq (right, just due) and metaxu (bridges of the spirit)

The company managers made various efforts to discourage the protests. While passing the placard holders at the railway siding, they warned workers that they were creating such bad publicity for the company that they would not get jobs anywhere in Okhla. At the new factory gate, they would walk about at lunch time, ostensibly ignoring the placards. But the protests were difficult to ignore. Due to the visibility of the placards beyond Okhla, reports began to appear in newspapers, describing the protests, the background of the struggle, and factory conditions. To remove them

from the head office area, a disturbance was orchestrated in which a woman seized placards and uttered insults and accusations, along with the managers, amidst a collecting crowd, before filing a police complaint, alleging that the workers were holding flags, shouting slogans, and attempting forcible entry. The police, who were acquainted with the nature of the protests, did not remove the workers.

The managers also tried to utilize their own workers. One night, a few polishers from the new factory were sent to the rooms of the protesters, in an urban village of Okhla, with meat and liquor, to persuade them, as old workmates (*purane sathi log*) from a previous Okhla factory, to accept final settlements. These workers, who were relatives of Ramdev, tried to pressure Shibbo Devi, who was residing in his old room in their colony, to stop attending the protests, as she was allegedly causing dishonor (*beizzati*) to them, by publicly mixing with other men. She did not comply.

In mid-December, despite legal constraints of the directors' dispute, a notice was put up on the polishing factory gate, signed by the American director, informing workers of the decision to close the factory, 'due to the certain administrative reasons and paucity of work'. They were thereby terminated and requested to collect their final settlements. 'We wish you all best for the future', the notice concluded. The next evening, a company vehicle drove up behind them on a road in Okhla. The driver asked how long they would continue the protests, and told them that the company would give good settlements. Managers pursued them on foot, the next week, to nudge them to take settlements. But as one placard read, in capital letters in English, for the sake of passersby in moving vehicles, they wanted work and wages, not final settlements.

Why were they not eager to take settlements? In the polishing factory, they were legal workers, with minimum wages, state health insurance (important given the risk of work injuries), and provident fund benefits, within a sea of illegal, precarious work situations in other factories and workshops. Most had been regularized only after working as illegal, casual workers for months and resisting terminations, following a state labor department inspection and union action. They had retained these jobs after contesting suspensions and a lockout in a second union struggle. After surviving these turbulences, they were not eager to give in to this latest attempt at terminations, that too when the new company was getting polishing work done through new hires and contract workers. In fighting for legal work, they felt they were fighting for one's *haq* (right, just due). *Haq* was understood not only in a legalistic sense, as legal rights and justice (as laws and courts could be weak and imperfect), but in a substantive, ethico-political sense, as what they were 'justly due' in these circumstances. In the public nature of the protests, there was also a growing sense that they were questioning exploitative, oppressive practices (*shoshan, atyacar*) in Okhla factories more generally, which were eroding and displacing legal work situations for workers at large.

There was another, less clearly articulated motive for refusing settlements. Through experiences of working, struggling, and surviving together in this factory, for three to four years, workers' lateral relations had evolved from egoistic, competitive, and divisive dealings to the beginnings of a sense of a *samaj* (micro-society), in which there was critical sensitivity, *talmel* (autonomous synchrony), and deeper

izzat (respect). These relations could make it tolerable, even desirable, to continue working together in such polluted, stressful, and exhausting conditions. The *haq*-seeking struggle against the dispossession of legal livelihoods was also a struggle against the forced dispersal of a fragile, ethico-political *samaj* in the making.⁴

The placard protests were disquieting to the union leaders. They thought it to be a struggle of the weak, with anarchistic tendencies, and not a militant trade union struggle. They pursued the legal work with the state labor department, and advised workers to find work elsewhere and fight the court case. Ironically, the managers might have preferred if the workers had adopted militant methods, as it would have facilitated their removal by the police.⁵ But by electing non-violence (*ahimsa*), the protesters were able to maintain a silent, disturbing presence precisely where they were unwanted – outside the gate, at the elite colony, and on the roads of the city. This non-violence derived less from, say, an ideological adherence to Gandhi's ideas or teachings and more from an intuitive, practical wisdom, given the goal of keeping alive possibilities for employment under the existing managers, which would have been diminished by verbal abuses or beatings. *Ahimsa*, rather than *qurbani*, kept the struggle alive.

The struggle for *haq* and the practice of non-violence gradually drew in the solidarity of other Okhla workers. On the streets, they paused to ask and discuss how the protesters' efforts were progressing, what were the responses of management, and what they were planning to do next. They exchanged stories of turbulent work situations, illegal terminations, and union leaders who had brokered final settlements. At the new factory gate, workers from neighboring factories offered words of empathy, giving the protesters a sense of security, amidst rumors that the management was planning a physical assault. As the protests went on, neighboring workers began to get agitated and impatient. Some gave detailed advice to wait, watch, encircle, and beat up the managers. Others seemed to be desiring a provocation, saying, '*Ane to do, un salom ko to mar karke hi yahim bicha demge* [Let them come, we'll kill the jerks and lay out their corpses right here].' The protesters felt protected by the presence of these workers, but also vulnerable to what they might do, should they lose their tempers. The new factory workers, who had their own sources of discontent (having tendered resignations), also began to express support to the placard holders, whispering to them, when the managers were not looking, '*Thik kar rahe ho tum log* [You guys are doing the right thing].' Even the managers could at times joke with the protesters, suggesting modifications to placard texts, and insisting on proper spelling of their names in press articles.

The protests in the elite colony also generated unexpected linkages. Conductors of buses plying from Okhla to central Delhi began to express interest in the struggle. Buses would slow down, and conductors would stick their heads out to ask the protesters when they would be traveling to the head office again, insisting that they go only in their bus. There was a financial interest, admittedly, as 10 to 15 workers would buy tickets each time, but the conductors would give group discounts, not without affective feelings. When a drunk Okhla worker got into a scuffle with the protesters and pursued them onto the bus, a conductor intervened, roughed him



Figure 2. Placards at the Okhla siding.

up, and pushed him out, referring to the polishing workers as ‘*apne admi* [our own people]’. Empathetic links also developed with security guards, drivers, and traffic police officers at the head office colony. Scholars, journalists, activists, and other citizens came to the protests and spoke with the workers. From a place which once evoked anxiety and fear, the elite colony road became a partly habitable space. To invoke a Platonic concept in the writings of Simone Weil, these exchanges, gestures, and sentiments might be seen as the work of *metaxu*, or intermediary bridges of the spirit, such as those extending amongst persons which sustain and promote life (1952: 200–203). *Metaxu* were emerging across the separative boundaries of factory gates, class differences, and city spaces.

There were also emerging *metaxu* across borders. In November, citizens in America, disturbed by news of the situation, began an online petition calling for the absorption of the polishing workers and Ramdev’s widow into the American director’s operating factories, along with the payment of back wages. They would promulgate a grassroots boycott of the company’s goods until these conditions were achieved. As the petition circulated, citizens began writing email messages to the company. One message excerpt read as follows:

As a worker myself, I am concerned about the welfare of my brother and sister workers. When I purchase an item, I am respectful of the fact that I am paying for the sweat and toil of others. I am honored to pay a fair price for their efforts. I have no

wish to profit by their misery and degradation. If the account referenced above is substantially correct, I must conclude that to purchase an item from you is to make a dishonorable purchase.

In its responses, the company affirmed its humane image, defended the strength of democracy, human rights, and labor laws in India, and suggested that the polishing workers were seeking to 'extort large amounts of money' from the company. But the citizen boycott could be damaging, especially during the holiday gift-buying season, hence the managers' efforts to persuade workers to accept settlements.

Andhkar (darkness)

As the winter deepened in Delhi, there were signs of anxiety and fatigue. Numbers lessened for placard protests in the cold and fog of the early mornings. Okhla workers continued to ask about their progress, but some would say, discouragingly, that they were standing and suffering in the cold for nothing. On the road of the elite colony, workers sometimes sat on the ground, as if they were tired, uncertain, and unsure. They could not tell if the protests were having any effects. If the uncertainty persisted, some hinted that they might take settlements.

Bodies were growing thin without wages. Debts were mounting for rents, rations, and children's tuitions. Cash was lacking for milk and vegetables. Strains were entering workers' relations with landlords, shopkeepers, neighbors, relatives, and wives. One heard stories of these struggles in the residences. Naresh Singh, a young polisher from Palamau, Jharkhand, shared a small rented room in Tekhand village, on the edge of Okhla, with Vinod, his younger brother, and Hans Raj, his brother-in-law. They managed the rent through Hans Raj's metal polishing wages. Due to their past record, the shopkeeper allowed their ration bills to accumulate, but as the protests continued, he would get anxious and ask them to settle their accounts. As the three brothers were engaged in the struggle, and not earning wages, relatives in the neighborhood were wary of offering them loans, which might not be readily paid back. Some suggested that they take their settlements.

Firoz, a polisher from Jaunpur, Uttar Pradesh, lived in a rented room in Hari Nagar, in southeast Delhi, with his wife, two small children, and younger brother. They survived through his brother's wages as a contract worker in an Okhla garment export factory and his wife's earnings from home-based stitching. Though the two small boys, one of whom was being treated for tuberculosis, required two liters of milk each day, they could afford to buy only one, which she would secretly dilute with water.⁶ Each evening, Firoz would discuss with her, in detail, what had transpired that day at the placard protests. They buoyed each other's spirits.

Amlakant, an elder polisher from Ballia, Uttar Pradesh, lived with his wife and three children in a shanty close to Okhla, and could avail himself of subsidized rations with a BPL (Below Poverty Line) ration card. His wife was not supportive of the placards and was wary of a long court case. She urged him to accept his settlement.

When cooking supplies would get depleted, she might get angry and shout, as he got ready in the morning, '*Kya karte haim sara din? Kuch ho nahim raha hai!* [What do you do all day? Nothing is happening!]' His school-going daughter, with torn shoes and book bag, would advise him to leave quietly, to avoid escalations. City roads could be a welcome refuge from such uncomfortable exchanges.

The workers gradually came to recognize that the effects of the struggle on the company would not be readily visible to them, as the managers did not disclose such matters. They could not gauge if they were making progress. It was a struggle in *andhkar* (darkness), as they put it. An understanding emerged that they needed to continue making efforts, with calmness and patience, amidst mounting financial pressures. By sitting together and revising the placard texts, protesting more often (now also at the afternoon tea break at the new factory gate), interacting with persons on the roads, seeing video cameras of TV journalists and documentary film makers at the gate, and holding park meetings, where they would discuss and deliberate (without leaders) about possible next steps, the darkness could momentarily recede, and give way to fragile courage and hope. A struggle fund, cobbled together by students, citizens, and activists in India and America, providing loans of Rs. 1000 (\$22) to each worker, in December and January, helped to keep stove fires lit amidst the darkness.

In early January, citizens in America set up a website under the name Justice for Workers, which included a chronology of events, the petition, press reports, and photographs of the workers. More letters were written to the company. One person who had worked in a store selling the company's goods wrote:

[I]t was with great disappointment and sadness that I learned of the deplorable working conditions your factory workers must endure to create these pieces of 'artwork', and worse yet that many have been deprived of these very jobs due to a dispute [...]. Every object has a story, and when the truth about how your pieces were created comes to light, people will no longer regard them as beautiful.

On the streets of Okhla, workers expressed more impatience and rage. '*Aise faisla nahim hone vala hai. Ap log bahut din gatte dikhaye. Ap log Gandhivadi ban gae haim, lekin tumhem azadi nahim milne vali hai. Ab batao, kab ikkatha hona hai* [Nothing is going to get resolved this way. You've shown the placards for many days. You've become Gandhians, but you're not going to get freedom (as in the independence struggle). Now tell us, when do we get together (to attack the factory)]', said one group of workers. At the new factory gate, others would shout, in earshot of the managers, '*Are raho! Aj nahim to kal dega!* [Hold fast! If not today, they'll concede tomorrow!]' Some agitatedly spoke of setting fire to the new factory.

In mid-January, the American director returned to Delhi. The management called a meeting with the polishing workers and told them that due to constraints of finances and space, the new factory could not give them jobs. Though this was anticlimactic, the workers could now see the partial effects of their protests. Workers' wives, who were resistant to the struggle, changed their views. The placards continued. Justice for Workers sent letters to retailers of the company's goods

in America. The next week, the managers called a second meeting, and gave the workers a day to accept double the legal settlements, or else they would engage lawyers to fight a prolonged court case. The workers reiterated their request for work. A few days later, at the end of January 2006, the director called the workers inside, apologized for the events which had transpired, and gave the workers and Shibbo Devi legal jobs in the new factory, with back wages and other dues.⁷

Forces of truth

In Delhi factories, it can often seem as if managements do as they please, in hiring, utilizing, and terminating workers, and opening and closing units. In the metal factory of Okhla, workers contested these practices. If they succeeded, it was partly due to the motives, methods, and activities which arose in the struggle. They sought the *haq* of legal work and the survival of a nascent *samaj*, which assisted in resisting enticements and despair. They adopted non-violence, which allowed them to sustain a visible, disturbing presence on Okhla roads and in other areas of the city, and to transform these spaces into silent theaters of protest. These motives and methods catalyzed unexpected linkages (qua *metaxu*) with other workers and citizens across factory gates, city spaces, class differences, and geographical borders, eventuating in a grassroots boycott and absorption into the new factory.

Gandhi, a silent presence in this struggle, writes of the existence of other forces in the world besides brute force, of soul-force and truth-force (*satyagraha*), exhibited in non-violent activities which non-cooperate with perceived wrong or injustice (1997: 79–99). These forces of truth, as one might call them, can give rise to *metaxu* and, at times, counter-pressures on Force. ‘The strong are, as a matter of fact, never absolutely strong, nor are the weak absolutely weak, but neither is aware of this’, writes Weil (1986: 173). The placards struggle offers a glimpse of the non-absolute weakness of migrant workers in Delhi, when acting together with others in the world, and a *darshan* (vision) of forces whose workings suggest possibilities for less precarious, less distorted, urban-proletarian worlds.

Glossary

ahimsa: non-violence
haq: right, just due
mazdur: wage worker
qurbani: sacrifice
samaj: micro-society

Notes

1. The phrase is invoked to describe the ephemerality of workers’ work situations, residences, and physical movements (e.g. within the city, between cities, to the village),

and conveys the sense of vulnerability and exposure to hazardous work, road accidents, illnesses, and inadequate medical treatment. The world, one might say, is no *thikana* (fixed place) for *mazdurs*, but rather is a fragile space which one passes through, dwells in for a time, and seeks durable forms and relations, yet where death may come at any time.

2. The police are reportedly given cash amounts by managements to disperse workers from the gate, in the absence of court stay orders.
3. The company had given her a collection of Rs. 32,000 (about \$700).
4. As one polisher put it, '*Naukri to hamem bahut mil jaegi, isse accha kuradan mil jaega, lekin aisa hamara samaj nahim milega* [We'll be able to find many other jobs, we'll find a better garbage dump than this, but we won't find a micro-society like this one]'
5. The management reportedly made complaints to the Okhla police that the workers were quarreling, shouting abuse, and beating up persons at the new factory gate.
6. '*Us time to kuch samajh mem nahim ata tha, itni pareshani. Ghar mem na koi ciz, na paise. Tension to bahut thi ki kya hoga, kaise bacce ko jilaya jae, dudh kaham se laya jae, kaise kharc calae jae. Rona ata tha, bas* [I could not understand anything at that time, there were so many difficulties. Neither any essential things nor money in the house. One felt a lot of tensions as to what will happen, how are the children to be kept alive, where is the milk to be brought from, how are the expenses to be met. I felt like crying, that's all]', recounted Firoz's wife, Asma Begam.
7. At the time of writing, they were working in the new company.

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