

The cultural politics of wages: Ethnography of construction work in Kochi, India

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This article argues for an understanding of wages as a cultural and spatial relation. By examining the wages of migrant workers and local unionised labour in Ernakulam in Kerala, South India, it demonstrates that 'wage' embodies practices and processes. The article details the labour practices in a port building site and in spot labour markets for construction work. It examines skill as a social relation and non-payment of wages as an accumulation strategy. Wages of local workers and that of migrant workers differ not only in terms of quantity, but also in terms of the processes and practices that surround them. These differences are viewed through the lens of cultural politics and spatial differentiation.

Keywords: wages, politics of labour, migration, trade unions, Kerala

I

Introduction

Wages, even as the price of labour in the classical political economy sense of the term, become tropes in the articulation of labour market relations and a representation of interests and claims by various groups of workers. They reflect the matrix of social relations within which each concrete form of labour takes place. An inquiry into wages becomes an inquiry into these social relations. The object of this inquiry is not just the amount of wages

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or wage differentials. Rather, I am interested in the forms in which they are paid and the culture they give birth to. Wages have traditionally been looked at quantitatively, as comparable numerals, while their qualitative dimensions are often overlooked.

A culture of wages connotes the norms, expectations and practices associated with the determination of wages and their payment. Viewing wages as a cultural relation and as a process provides insights into the political economy of work and the geography of migration that undergirds it. Viewed from this perspective, wages have been under-theorised in contemporary social sciences apart from serving as just aids in explaining exploitations and labour situations of various kinds. A notable exception is Mann's (2005) argument that conflicts over real and money wage rates were the central means through which male workers constructed a moral economy in the post-war US. Taking the case of unionised oil workers during 1945–47, he shows that the wage bargaining constituted an important process through which workers pressed for alternative social and political economic agendas. He examines the political and cultural power unions have invested in wages and how wages form the locus around which worker agency is articulated. Building on Mann's arguments, I argue that a critical analysis of the culture of wages is necessary to understand migration for manual work to further contemporary research that looks at wages as the workers experience them.

Looking at the differences in wages between and among migrant and local labour exposes the interactions and network between their places of origin and destination. It reveals the politics of labour that shapes and in turn is shaped by geographical relationships. Wages are a useful entry into these relationships because how they are determined and the practices around them reveal the conditions of labour. They also speak about how these conditions are determined by the socio-spatial relations of production. These insights gained by focusing on migration may be used to conceptualise wages in political terms. I wish to emphasise the analytical significance of wages as a political and cultural category. I examine wage practices in construction sites managed by global capital in Kerala and lay out the social relations that produce them. The focus of the present article is the wages being paid to migrant and unionised Malayali construction workers in the construction of Vallarpadam container terminal and attendant infrastructure in Kochi.

This study draws on ethnographic fieldwork and data collected from government departments. Research began in March 2008 when I made

contacts with the organisations working against displacement of residents of Vallarpadam and nearby islands in the north-west of Kochi. The construction of the container terminal and of the rail and road connectivity involved eviction of local residents and destruction of marine livelihoods during 2008–10. For building the road to the terminal, 46.43 hectares were acquired in seven villages and 183 families were affected by the eviction. For the rail link to the terminal, 6.75 hectares was acquired displacing 144 families in four villages. I attended a few protest meetings of the evictees and got in touch with the social activists who were organising the evictees and were questioning the political economy of the container terminal. This provided valuable insights into the accumulation process in these islands and the political economy of labour recruitment for the construction of the container terminal. I stayed in Ernakulam for a year during March 2009–March 2010 and again for 3 months during September–December 2010.

The research project generated a core of 46 in-depth interviews. Of central interest to the project were the accounts of experiences, perceptions and negotiations of migrant workers. Interviews with local Malayali workers and trade unionists were carried out to understand the politics of migration. Residents who were displaced by construction projects in which migrants worked were interviewed to understand the context in which these migrations take place. The interviews in Vallarpadam and nearby islands included interviews with 15 migrant workers, seven displaced residents and seven trade unionists and political activists. 17 interviews were carried out in various parts of Ernakulam district including a spot labour market in the city and two construction sites.

II

Qualifying quantities: Wage relation as a cultural and spatial relation

Marx indicted classical political economy for looking at wages as the price of labour and for failing to recognise the relations of production that are manifested in it, namely the value and price of labour power (Marx [1867] 1976: 675–82). A few sentences later, he accuses economists of even failing to do what they do, that is, to examine the various *forms* of wages. He goes on into an exposition of time wages and piece-rate wages and differences in wages in various nations. Marx was ridiculing

the ‘vulgar economists’ of his time who tended to reify economic phenomena. While he worked with the theory of value proffered by classical political economy, especially the Ricardian framework, unlike classical political economists, he analysed wage not only as a quantity but also as a social relation between capital and labour as classes. It is, however, useful to separate different strands of classical political economy and neoclassical economics to understand the pedigree with which wage, wage rate to be specific, enters this discussion.

Mann (2007) argues that the binary of quality/quantity is not helpful in understanding wage politics. He draws on Hegel for whom quality and quantity along with measure are part of the triad that forms one of the subcategories of the nature of being. Wage politics is often a politics of measure which is ‘constituted by the persistent effort to articulate the unity of quantity and quality, to tie knots in the slippery thread of value’ (2007: 27). He sees wage as both qualitatively and quantitatively indeterminate and a historically specific form of value. What Mann, however, excels in is reopening the conceptual terrain that has long been ceded to the discipline of economics to examine its political content.

How does seeing wage relation as a spatial relation help us in understanding the politics of migration? The critique of economic wage theories shares an epistemological affinity to the critique of migration theories. The push–pull theory sees migration as undertaken by rational agents who respond to economic incentives and whose movement, from a place that pushes them away to a place that pulls them in, helps to clear markets. Wages in destination appear as one of these factors that pull workers to the destination. The purpose of the present article is to show that the politics of migration is much more complicated than this even when one follows an ostensibly ‘economic’ category like wages. This politics reflects the specific social history of each place that makes the working class and in that sense prepares the conditions of encounter between migrant and local labour. This article focuses on a construction site managed by transnational capital in Kerala to understand politics of labour and wages.

A construction site that employs migrant workers engenders a different set of practices and idioms around wages than the factory shop floor. This article takes a cue from Buckley (2014) and understands construction as commodity production. Erlich and Grabelsky (2005) note that the seasonal

character and spatial immobility of the construction process especially lends itself to the use of migrant labour, as lower labour costs cannot generally be achieved by moving the production process across borders but by capitalising on cheaper segments of labour in situ (cited in Buckley 2014). Thiel (2013) too recounts the squalid conditions in which London's building workers worked and the nature of non-contractual, no-questions-asked nature of the industry.

The sense of time involved in irregular and temporary work such as occurs in the construction sector is not only different from the technological conditioning of factory work, but also as it appears in other sites of flexible work. This time sense is immanent in the exigencies of construction work as it is practiced at the level of current technology. Construction companies keep moving as projects move and workers too have to travel along with projects or in search of work. This is especially true of workers who are dependent on contractors and in turn remain attached to large construction companies to find work. For these workers, it is important to make as much money as possible in a short while by working for long hours to make the most of their lives away from home. As capital disregards their daily and intergenerational reproduction, they strive to save as much as possible by submitting to an intensified work regime.

The accumulation process in construction sector is, thus, somewhat different from those of factories or those businesses with a fixed site of production but flexible operations. The spatial strategy of accumulation involved in subcontracting appears in a different form in construction as fragmenting production (distributing it across centres where labour and materials are cheap and across different organisational segments as small-scale units or household production) is not possible, capital reaps the benefit of geographical/spatial differentiation through other means—by drawing labour from various centres where it is 'cheap', even drawing them over long distances. It is different from other sites of production in the manufacturing sector, like fish processing or cashew production that uses migrant labour because of the constant movement of the work site and the redrawing of the scale and nature of production to suit the changing terrain. With labour contractors and subcontractors controlling their set of labour at the work site, it is like subcontracting occurring right at the site of final commodity production. These specificities of construction sector have a bearing on the politics of

wages. Wages are negotiated for each work site afresh by the unions, contractors and workers. Not only do these negotiations depend on the local political conditions, but the fact that wages have to be discussed and negotiated each time the site moves has the remarkable effect of intensifying this politics. This is especially true in the case of transnational construction companies who move their work sites across the world and hire predominantly migrant workers. Gibson and Graham (1986: 140) emphasise this when they write, in the context of Filipino migration to West Asia, that international construction capital enforces a wage contract in which the migrant workers' work and domestic life is controlled by the company and the geographical context of work is always foreign to the migrant worker.

Construction sector in India is one of the largest employers of migrant and casual workers (Agarwala 2008; Dietrich 1992; Fernandes and Bino Paul 2011). It acts as a gateway for urban employment and is the largest avenue for employment after agricultural work in India (Baruah 2010). Deshingkar et al. (2009) found that the rise in migration is driven by growing opportunities in construction and services because of the rapid growth of small cities across rural Andhra Pradesh. Harilal (1986) argues that the construction industry's capacity to adapt and remain flexible is determined by the casual nature of employment. Regardless of the type of building and organisation of work, the workers are employed temporarily and most often on task basis. Breman (1996) writes about 'footloose labour' who migrate to the construction sites and brick kilns in South Gujarat from different parts of the country. He details recruitment and wage practices, especially how *Mukadams* or labour intermediaries keep part of the wages to ensure continued subservience and availability of workers. This resonates with what I am trying to do here, but my attempt is to focus exclusively on wages as a cultural category that can illuminate politics of work in a place. In this sense, it attempts a study akin to that of De Neve (2005) and Chari (2004). The differing geographies of capitalist development and the specificities of each place mean that particular production politics continue to matter for particular places. In the building of port infrastructure in Vallarpadam, there were different layers of recruitment wherein each of the contractors and subcontractors managed his own set of workers. The following section focuses on the language and practice of wage that frames this politics of labour in a work site that was managed by transnational capital.

III

Idioms and wages: Mobilising labour in construction of a port project

‘Rupees 11,560 for three Sundays’, said Kapil Karji, a migrant worker from Jalpaiguri district in West Bengal. I wondered what that meant. He had tottered in with a plate of rice and chicken curry. There was sweat and alcohol in the air. ‘I don’t get “facilities” from the company; I just get the basic, but not the other allowances. I just get rupees 1,660 a month.’ He paused for a few seconds to start eating and then said ‘I got rupees 4,660 last month including rupees 1,660 basic. I have ruined my health working, I work for twelve hours.’ Meanwhile, other workers filled in the details. They said that he got rupees 9,668 last month. They were paid salaries on the seventh day of every month. I asked them whether they were getting any weekly allowances. The managers might delay the salary, pay, say up to tenth of a month instead of seventh, but never do they pay early. However, Kapil got 2,000 rupees in advance last month. ‘Kapil works as hard as he eats and drinks. If the *saablog* (superiors/supervisors) say get into the mud, he will get in. So nobody says anything to him and he gets what he asks for’, said Dilip Mandal, from Kaliachak in Malda district of West Bengal. Dilip, a mason, was directly employed by the company and not by contractors. Kapil did all types of manual work and was also employed by the company directly. When I asked Kapil about the wages again, he said rupees 11,560 for 110 hours of overtime. This was how workers referred to their wages: 110 hours of overtime in a month in addition to 12 hours of regular work.¹

Thompson (1967) explains how industrial workers internalise time consciousness in capitalism by accepting the categories of their employers. For example, striking for ‘10-hour work day’, ‘overtime’ or ‘time and a half’ also meant accepting these time categories and the organisation of work it implied. The idioms in which wages are expressed are related to inward notations of time and industrial discipline as much as to money and its purchasing power. The precariousness and marginality of being a worker doing manual labour is often captured by the practices of wage determination and payment, and the idioms they cultivate. According to his co-workers, Kapil is directly employed by Afcons. Even after asking

¹ Interview dated 28 September 2009.

him repeatedly, he was unable to provide a clear account of his daily wage such as could be compared to that of other workers. His co-workers told me that he got double wages for overtime unlike many of them who are employed through contractors but do similar work and are in the same work site. His inability to quote a daily wage and the opacity of numerical wage figures must not be understood solely as a capitulation to the miasma of work arrangements that differ from month to month and one work site to another. Rather it also hints at the possibility that wage has a meaning that cannot be determined only with references to quantity and quality. Before undertaking a more detailed investigation of wages in Vallarpadam, a brief look at the nature of capital and labour recruitment is in order.

The terminal operates in a special economic zone comprising the islands of Vallarpadam and Puthuvyppu. The total cost of the project was estimated to be rupees 32 billion. The cost of the rail and road link and dredging to increase the draft was borne by the Cochin Port Trust (CPT) which was estimated to be rupees 17 billion. Since the CPT is a public sector company, the amount was spent by the Government of India. Dubai Port World (DPW) was awarded the contract after a global tender and it invested rupees 16 billion. A majority of the company is owned by Dubai World, an investment company that manages and supervises a portfolio of businesses and projects for the Dubai government across a wide range of industry segments and projects. Dubai World is part of what Hanieh (2011) calls Khaleeji capital, that arose as a result of internationalisation of capital in the Gulf countries, drawing from the Arabic word for Gulf, *Khaleej*. This mega port project combined large-scale public investment—the dredging, the rail and road linkages—with a generous policy package for private sector which included 33 per cent revenue share with CPT for DPW, handing over an existing container terminal (Rajiv Gandhi Container Terminal) to DPW and post-tender concessions. Building of road and rail infrastructure was carried out by several transnational construction companies like Afcons, Simplex Infrastructures Limited and Soma Enterprise Limited.

The work sites of the project were spread over Vallarpadam, Vypin, Mulavukad, Moolampilli, Kothad and several smaller islands. There were four types of recruitment in the building sites of the container terminal and the rail and road infrastructure: First, workers, who were recruited through a big contracting company. An example is Sreebhadra Associates which recruited thousands of workers for Afcons mainly for piece work

that it has undertaken. Second, workers who were attached to an individual contractor who had undertaken relatively small amounts of piece work and was working alongside. Third, workers directly employed by the main contractor, for example, by Afcons. Fourth, workers who had been recruited through trade unions. These diverse modes of recruitment complemented each other towards the creation of a coherent mode of spatial practice.

Saleem, a worker from Midnapur, who worked in the site to construct the power plant for the port, said that there were 200 Bengali workers in that site and about 1,000 in the different work sites in and around Vallarpadam. My fieldwork in 2009 when the work was at its peak in many of the sites affirmed these numbers. In Puthuvyppu alone, there were around 400 workers who were building the liquefied natural gas terminal. A large section of the workers under contractors were Bengali while the skilled and semi-skilled workers like engineers, machine operators and supervisors who were directly employed by the company were drawn from different parts of India—Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal and Kerala.

Sreebhadra Associates was a prominent labour contractor of Afcons. I met five workers recruited by Sreebhadra from Naushehra Pannuan in Varia village in Tarn Taran district in Punjab. They were dalits who had converted to Christianity from Sikhism. They got rupees 160 for working eight hours per day (in the year 2009). They specialised in ‘centering’ and ‘decentering’, erecting structures and laying and taking off brackets for concreting the bridge.

Sukhwinder Singh, the one who spoke most of the time, told me that the rail bridge in Vallarpadam is Asia’s longest bridge. They were living in a room in a line of tin sheds and cooked on their own. The tin shed was in a swampy land adjacent to the backwaters. The living quarters of the workers did not have basic amenities like beds and kitchens. They recounted: ‘When the work was in Mulakupadam, the accommodation was civil. There was fan and light. Here it is full of mosquitoes and heat, in these tin sheds.’² These workers were attached to a labour contractor who supplies them in different sites. These workers lived in tin sheds unlike the workers recruited by smaller labour contractors who lived in rented houses.

² Interview dated 15 November 2009.

Tayab Ali, a fitter from Gorakhpur in Uttar Pradesh, took piece contracts from Afcons. Tayab and his workers belong to the second category of recruitment, that is, a small contractor undertaking piece work along with his small set of workers. He got rupees 150 for eight hours of work. I met him at a workshop in Vallarpadam, a makeshift shed covered with tarpaulin and tin. He was overseeing the work of making of iron girdles for the railway line. He explained:

This company, Afcons, has a head office in Bombay. The main contractor of ours, our *seth*,³ our main *malik* (boss/owner), Motilal, goes to the head office. He has relations with saablog. He knows the saablog there. They call him and tell him 'There is work there and take your labour there'. That is how we came here. We are from different places and have come independently. Some are from Bihar and some from Orissa and some from Bengal. Nobody is from the same place. Wherever we get workers from, we take them. We come together and work together and make others work. Our work is going on in Bombay, Gujarat and Delhi and our workers are needed there. So we have sent some workers to those sites. We don't have any union. This is contractor work. This is no fixed company work. There is no company. We go from one place to another.⁴

Kamal Mandal from Manik Chowk, Malda in West Bengal, a rig operator, was directly employed by Afcons in the building of railway. He belonged to the third category of recruitment, that is, workers directly employed by a company. He got rupees 15,500 per month as salary for a 12-hour work day. He explained:

I learned this trade in Delhi. I did labour work for six months and then came into the trade of rig operation and learned it in work sites. I live in Vaduthala near the church. I used to work in the site in Mulavukadu. Food is brought here from the common kitchen in Vaduthala. Some workers live in Vaduthala and some in Vallarpadam.

³ A Hindi word meaning a rich man/trader which workers use to refer to their recruiter.

⁴ Interview dated 15 September 2009.

I found this work through my previous malik. I used to work in Delhi metro. The same malik has work going on in Delhi for Afcons. There are saablog, engineers, they know where all there are new projects. They tell me there is work here. They tell me 'there is a new project in such and such place, you go there', and I have to go wherever they ask me to go.⁵

There were long-term employees too, of Afcons, who were nevertheless not permanent employees but moved from one work site to another as and when projects came up. K. G. R. Nair, foreman, has been working with Afcons for the past 29 years. He worked in Bombay, Delhi and Gujarat. For the past nine years, he had been in Kerala. He worked in Kalamassery overbridge, Goshree bridges and Vallarpadam wherever Afcons got the contract. Nair said that the company has its own men as drivers, operators, etc. but it recruits masons and unskilled workers through contractors.⁶ Nair has been attached to Afcons for a long time, and yet do not have steady employment or social security. I also met Malayali workers who were employed through trade unions. Eighty-one per cent of the unskilled jobs were reserved for trade unions. Sukumaran, from Moolampilli Island, worked for Afcons and was employed through CITU (Centre of Indian Trade Unions). The politics of the unionised workers in Vallarpadam is examined in greater detail in the next section.

Kannan who is a Malayali individual contractor for Afcons got rupees 20 per day as commission from each worker and earned rupees 200–250 per day. In addition to this, he got rupees 450 from Afcons for his supervision of workers. The Bengali worker who put him in touch with other workers, Sujay, got rupees 20 per day for each worker who went to work with him. The workers who were 'skilled' got rupees 250 and who were 'unskilled' got rupees 180 in the masonry work for building the bridge.⁷ The Punjabi workers recruited by Sreebhadrha, the biggest recruiting agency that operated in Vallarpadam, for erection of girders for the rail bridge, were paid rupees 160. In contrast, the Bengali workers recruited by Constell Consultant Private Limited (CCPL) got only rupees 120.

⁵ Interview dated 15 September 2009.

⁶ Interview dated 28 October 2009.

⁷ Interview dated 4 August 2009.

The diversity of wage practices that existed in the work site was astounding. Each of the four above-mentioned categories of recruitment had a different wage practice associated with it. The migrant workers who were recruited by a company that got a labour subcontract or a piece contract were paid the least. The migrant workers who were recruited by an individual contractor were paid slightly higher wages. The workers directly employed by Afcons were paid higher too, but these workers were mostly skilled workers like Kamal Mandal and hence their wages were not comparable to others. In all cases, the intermediaries were paid a commission per worker although the figures for the labour subcontracting companies were not available. In case of some of the workers recruited by individual subcontractors, an amount as high as rupees 50 per day per worker was pocketed by the intermediaries including the subcontractors in 2008. By 2010, this had gone up to rupees 100 in many parts of Ernakulam district.

The eclectic wage structure in the port building site reflected different trajectories and processes of bargaining within the labour market as much as the diverse conditions of production and work practices in the construction industry. In fact, wages are registers of such diversities operational in the work site. Some of the lowest wage rates were observed in the sites of big infrastructural projects planned and financed by the government with private participation. Workers received a wage of rupees 120 in Vallarpadam when the going wage rate for an unskilled migrant worker was rupees 300 in Kaloore spot labour market, a few kilometres away, in 2010. In 2014, the metro construction sites in the city paid as low as rupees 250 when the going wage rates were at least rupees 400 in the spot markets for migrant workers.

The recruitment to big infrastructural projects is undertaken through circuits that are regional and even national while the casual labour markets respond to specificities of local social history. A migrant worker in an infrastructural building site/mega project site is recruited through contractors that operate and circulate workers across multiple sites in the country that involve mobilisation of large number of workers. A small house building construction site, however, is deeply embedded in local relations of power where trade unions influence wages through everyday interventions in the casual labour market. It is to one such market that I turn to in the next section.

IV

Everyday wages in street corner markets for labour in the city

Some workers sell their labour power on a daily basis. They wait at intersections and junctions in cities in the mornings to meet employers and contractors. These meeting places are called labour *chowks* or *nakas* in cities like Mumbai or Delhi—a common sight in smaller cities too (Mosse et al. 2005). In Kochi, there are many places such as Kaloor, Kadavanthra and Palarivattom where workers come in the mornings and wait to be picked up. In this section, I briefly sketch Kaloor as a place in relation to wage determination and operation of the ‘casual labour market’.

In the Kaloor labour chowk, in June 2010, there were four groups of workers who waited for contractors and employers comprising Tamils, Malayalis, Telugus and people from Rajasthan. The wage rate for unskilled men was rupees 350 and for women, rupees 300. I met Parvati and Lalita from Tirupati who had got only three days of work in that one week. I also noted that there were six Telugu and eight Tamil workers at the labour chowk. I learnt that the Telugu workers had been here only for the past five months, while the Tamils had a longer history of working at the chowk here as in other parts of Kerala. I met Thankamma from Pollachi in Tamil Nadu who had come for *koolippani* (wage work) with her husband 30 years back. Married at 13, a mother of three children, Thankamma was barely 19 when she came to this labour chowk following floods in Pollachi. Thirty years ago, she used to stand at this junction and there were only Tamils and Malayalis at that time. The Telugus started coming only four to five years back. She told me that not many Malayalis come here for *koolippani* anymore. The Malayali women who used to come here have moved into other occupations, as they grew older. ‘Are there Malayalis now?’ I asked. She said ‘Yes, there are. They are standing there, can’t you see?’ She pointed to four or five Malayali men workers at the chowk.

It is important to note that the wage rates in some of the occupations that have a higher status are low in Kerala. For example, nurses, private school teachers and sales assistants in textile and jewellers’ stores earn lower wages than unskilled construction workers (see Biju 2013). A

glance at the schedule of minimum wages published by the government shows that unskilled workers in construction and river sand collection are entitled for more wages than those who are skilled in occupations such as nursing, laboratory technology and 'minor engineering'.⁸ I desist from generalisations regarding the status of manual labour in Kerala for want of detailed evidence. The study, however, returns to the question of skill and its absence in one of the sections in this article.

How do workers experience these wages? Thankamma traced the change in wage rate and the price of essential commodities. She further explained:

When I first came 25 years back, the wage rate was rupees 70. Now it is rupees 350. Every year it used to increase by rupees 10. Nowadays it is increasing by rupees 50. At that time, a kilo of rice cost rupees 6 and a kilo of beef was rupees 15. At that time, the rent was rupees 100 and advance was a month's rent. Now the rent is rupees 1,500 and advance is rupees 10,000. It has become almost 10-fold, the advance. If there is no work for 10 days, we will go to Pollachi and search for work there.⁹

According to the data collected from Directorate of Economics and Statistics, women construction workers earned 49 rupees less than what men earned in Ernakulam in 2013, confirming my experience during fieldwork of persistence of wage difference between men and women in construction work. These wage rates are collected from 10 units in the city. The enumerators in the government statistics department whom I interviewed told me that it had become increasingly difficult to find women construction workers and often they wrote a wage rate as reported by people around or contractors but not by women workers. I have observed that there is an exodus of Malayali women from construction work in urban areas in Ernakulam and only older women continue to do construction work.

⁸ Government of Kerala. 2011. *Notification of minimum wages for scheduled industries*. http://www.lc.kerala.gov.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=11&Itemid=66. Accessed on 15 June 2013.

⁹ Interview dated 8 June 2010.

Thankamma explained that the trade unions, even though none of its members stand here, determine the process of hiring and wage determination here.

There are union people here. They are Malayalis. Beyond that car over there. If some worker who stands here goes to work for less than rupees 350, the fellow workers report to them. They call us and tell us that you cannot go for less than rupees 350. If you are going to work for less, then you need not stand here. They tell us: 'If you are so unhappy, then go back to your places'. It is the head load workers' union of Malayalis who decide this. They then communicate the decision to us.

It was the head load workers' union that determined the wages of construction workers in Kaloor. Waite (2001) argues that head load workers in Kerala have attained symbolic capital through organisation and politicisation. I see this as attainment of a stake in the local that goes beyond their immediate work environment and involves the enforcement of work and wages in general. Unions are able to enforce a wage rate from a distance without organising these workers drawing on the long history of unionisation and building of political identity for workers in Kerala. The trade union intervention in wage rates in spot labour markets occurs in the wider context of decline of their strength in determining wages and working conditions in other sectors in Ernakulam—especially factories and dock work in the port. I look at trade unions in port building in Vallarpadam in the next section to obtain a more detailed account of their role and predicament in the emerging relationship between capital, local labour and migrant workers.

V

Quotidian collusions: Unions and migrants

The unionised Malayali construction workers in the district are recruited through trade unions in a system known as *site pidikkal* (capturing the site) whereby unions negotiate with the builder regarding the number of workers to be employed, their wages and the quantum of work. In small construction sites, usually one of the big unions enters into an agreement and more often than not, this is an oral agreement. In big construction sites where the government is involved, the agreement is written down

between the company and multiple unions prescribing the share of each union. Heller (1999) too notes that union officials from both INTUC (Indian National Trade Union Congress) and CITU insisted that work site negotiations between unions are no longer a source of conflict. Work is allocated according to existing local membership levels of trade unions.

In the construction of the container terminal in Vallarpadam, a negotiated settlement was written up between Afcons and the trade unions detailing the wages and working conditions of workers. It fixed the wages for 'unskilled' labourers who are members of trade unions at rupees 225 per day for eight hours of work. It stated:

[B]onus will be paid at 15 per cent on Basic, tea allowance will be Rupees 30 per day, overtime allowance will be paid on actual extra hours worked beyond 8 hours (at double the basic wages), Sunday wages will be Rupees 100 (in addition to the basic wages) if worked 6 days a week and will be Rupees 75 if worked 5 days a week. In case attendance is less than 5 days a week then Sunday wages will not be paid.

All the members of trade unions were Malayalis. The document was signed by construction workers' unions of INTUC, CITU, AITUC (All India Trade Union Congress), BMS (Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh) and TUCI (Trade Union Centre of India), trade unions affiliated to Indian National Congress, Communist Party of India (Marxist), Communist Party of India, Bharatiya Janata Party and Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Red Flag, respectively. The unions were to provide 77 per cent of the unskilled workers in civil works at a wage of rupees 372 for 12 hours of work. The company could recruit the remaining 23 per cent of workers. Of the total share of trade unions, CITU and INTUC were to provide 30 per cent each, BMS 12 per cent and AITUC and TUCI, 3 and 2 per cent, respectively. These shares reflected the bargaining power of these trade unions, their proximity to the state and central governments, and their organisational strength in Ernakulam.

The settlement document formalised the relations between trade unions and capital and the regulatory role of the government in securing the interests of the local labour. It translated these relations into a culture of labour and wages by specifying it in terms of hours, days and money. This culture of wages takes shape in a political economy dominated by big capital and unions that are deeply implicated in systems of migrant

exploitation. Jirar, a leader of TUCI, one of the smaller trade unions, and a signatory of the agreement had to say this:¹⁰

The contractors draw up estimates on the basis of the Kerala wages (wages to Malayali workers). But they pay only much less than that. For example, suppose the contractor is actually paying Kerala wages, then the net profit might be say rupees 1 million. But suppose he employs migrants, then the profit increases to rupees 3–3.5 million.¹¹

In Vallarpadam, the contractor did not implement the agreement and the leaders of big trade unions—CITU and INTUC—colluded with the contractor. Out of the 81 per cent of workers from trade unions, 30 per cent is allocated to CITU or INTUC. When 100 workers are hired, 30 have to be CITU or INTUC members. But the management would hire only 10 or 15 CITU workers. The rest 15 or 20 which should have been from CITU are hired from among migrant workers using contractors.

Jirar said that the migrant workers are paid only rupees 100–150:

So when 10 migrant workers are hired instead of Malayalis, the contractor saves rupees 2,220 (at rupees 222 per worker). The convener of CITU/INTUC in Vallarpadam area gets a commission for this. This convener is paid like any other skilled worker in addition to this (*oru divasathe thachu kodukkanam*). The convener manages the union labour and it is hard work. Even the wages in Vallarpadam project was fixed low. Only CITU and INTUC were consulted and only they participated in a meeting convened by the government and Afcons.

Jirar felt that rupees 372 is low considering that the work is for 12 hours. ‘Malayalis will get that wage for 8 hours in other construction sites. Millions changed hands. District leaders of major trade unions got money. So this system functions in layers (*thattu thattayulloru system anu*)?’.

The difference between union wages and migrant wages comes out starkly if one compares migrant wages and wages prescribed in the negotiated settlement between trade unions and the construction companies.

¹⁰ Interview dated 22 July 2010.

¹¹ Hypothetical figures to illustrate the proportional difference between profits in two scenarios.

Kapil's wages are lower than the union wage for unskilled labourers/helpers. If a trade union member is employed for 26 days of a month, he will receive rupees 5,850 (rupees 6,630 including the tea allowance) for eight hours of work. This is for 208 hours of work in a month. For 12 hours of work, he would have received rupees 11,700 since the extra four hours a day would fetch overtime wages. This is 312 hours of work in a month whereas Kapil works for 422 hours including 110 hours of overtime hours in a month and gets rupees 11,560. Kapil's overtime starts after 12 hours whereas for a union worker, it starts after eight hours.

Tayab who is employed by a contractor gets only rupees 150 for eight hours of work though he is a fitter and would be considered a skilled worker. A union worker would have got rupees 275 a day for eight hours of work according to the settlement document. A skilled worker under a labour contractor got much lower wages than unskilled workers working directly for the company or recruited through trade unions. The lowest wage rate I have encountered in the islands was rupees 120. This was paid to workers South 24 Parganas in West Bengal. They were working under a contractor who had taken the contract for soil testing. In 2008, this was below rupees 188, the minimum wage for construction workers fixed by the Government of Kerala.

Jirar sees the commission that trade union conveners get as a corrupt practice as it cuts directly into the bargaining power of workers in the area in the long term. However, it probably shows the resilience of the figure of the jobber (Bremen 1996) and the diverse forms in which it exists even among highly unionised labour. Chandavarkar (2008) argues that the greatest value of the jobber to the employers lies not in the recruitment of labour or its cultural adaptation but in his role as an agent of discipline. The conveners of trade unions are employed as jobbers of their respective union members. They organise work and mediate between managers or engineers of the company and local workers. They organise the workers under them and the work parcelled out to unions by the engineers of the company. In the same work site, one can see the unionised Malayali workers and migrant workers undertaking different set of tasks.

The scene changed, however, as recession hit construction work in Kochi in 2009. As Jirar explained:

This arrangement worked for some time. Then the recession started. Construction sector got 'stuck'. The CITU workers from Ernakulam

area lost work. These workers were residents of the island area of which Vallarpadam is a part and worked in construction sector in Ernakulam and were members of CITU, Ernakulam area. They came with a letter from Ernakulam area committee to Vallarpadam convener asking to be 'accommodated' there. This became inconvenient for Vallarpadam convener. He said wait till tomorrow or day after tomorrow and was reluctant to part with his commission. The workers became impatient and finally managed to get in. Now, the ten workers CITU used to let the management hire illegally from its account may have decreased to five.

The private small- and medium-scale construction (individual houses and apartments) in Kochi had slowed down in 2008–09 and this had dwindled the opportunities for construction workers. The workers who became jobless belonged to Ernakulam area¹² although they lived in the island area. Recessions and economic slowdowns lay bare geometries of power that lie beneath labour arrangements by threatening to destabilise them and exposing their fragilities dependent as they are on sustained demand for labour. The word 'arrangement' is used here to denote the transience and temporariness of these devices of labour mobilisation.

Denning (2010) historicises 'unemployment', a term which came to parlance in late 19th century, to suggest that it was normalised by trade unions. He quotes Walters (2000) who proposed that 'the status of "out-of-work" was actually invented by trade unionism' (p. 83). Denning (2010) calls this normalisation of employment and unemployment as the lynchpin of social democracy. It provides the ideological legitimacy for trade unions to become colluders and co-operators alongside capital and validates trade union politics. This also explains the gate keeping they perform in terms of who can be members of trade unions and access the worker identity.

Chakravarty (2010) points out in the context of West Bengal that mainstream trade unions representing a miniscule set of employees are implicated in informalising the manufacturing sector by colluding with management. It would be fruitful to probe further into this apparent collusion and cooperation with capital that draws on lower wages of migrant workers in Kerala. I argue that collusion or compromise (Heller 1999) is not a useful characterisation of this wage politics, neither would be a reduction to 'false consciousness'. As Gramsci argued, one is confronted with the agency of workers in the

¹² Area is a territorial division of a trade union. Ernakulam district has 14 such areas.

persistence of capitalism and in shaping its specific form in a place. Yet, it is problematic to equate these efforts at survival and coping with agency if it is defined in terms of resistance and social transformation.

VI

Skill, 'unskill' and wages

Marx distinguishes between abstract and concrete labour in *Capital*. He says:

On the one hand all labour is, speaking physiologically, an expenditure of human labour power, and in its character of identical abstract human labour, it creates and forms the value of commodities. On the other hand, all labour is the expenditure of human labour power in a special form and with a definite aim, and in this, its character of concrete useful labour, it produces use values (Marx [1867] 1976: 137).

What are the axes of this concreteness? Is it gender, skill, caste, sensuality and distance? Is this concreteness to be located in the body of the worker as much as outside it? Kelly (1992) in the context of indentured Indian labour in Fiji asks:

Could it be that slavery, indentured labour, wage labour and various other labour arrangements—salaried labour, professional services, and so on—are not resolvable into one commodity form, but are different forms? In other words, how best are we to understand labour in contemporary society in terms of how it is constituted as cultural experience? (p. 106).

Seeing the wage relation as a political-cultural relation warrants looking closely at work and the relationships that constitute it in their concrete materiality. Wages and the practices surrounding them perhaps do not make for a 'thick description'. Most anthropologists do not face the problem of having to invest richness of meaning in 'thin' cultural forms purely generated in response to capitalism (Clifford and Marcus 1986). While wages are a 'thin' cultural form so to speak, yet, one needs to engage with wages to understand contemporary capitalism and the concrete forms of labour that are produced in it.

I return to Kapil's narrative to examine skill as an axis of this specificity and concreteness of labour. Kapil was skilled in the so-called 'unskilled'

work. Unskilled work is a skill category that has no existence outside of the wages that are paid for it. In the context of port construction work, it involves the ability to put in long hours of arduous labour, to grope in the mud, climb up walls, cart stones around and to hang down from tall machines. The miscellaneous physical abilities that are required for it make 'unskilled' a nebulous term. Being unskilled in the case of Kapil involved a certain daredevilry and a dilution of consciousness with alcohol to numb fatigue or as Kapil himself says 'to ease body pain'.

Skill, as has been pointed out by Chandavarkar (1994) in his study of Bombay textile mill workers, is a relative and socially determined category. It is intimately connected to the recruitment process and the bargaining position of the individual worker and his social location within the market for labour. A labour subcontractor who recruited workers in Vallarpadam told me: 'Bengalis can be as good as Malayalis.' 'They are like us in learning technical things. If they apply their mind into something, they can learn it in a month. But an Oriya will not learn the job even after a year.' 'Unskill' here becomes a set of abilities reified and deposited in the bodies of some workers and some ethnicities. The contours of the wage relation are culturally determined and are produced as much in the everyday materiality of the workplace as in the social relations of capitalism. This brings a distinct dimension to the 'segmentation' of the 'labour market' in question. Mann (2007) points out that jobs can be defined as unskilled either because they are the province of 'inferior' workers or to ensure that 'undesirable' tasks are performed by 'undesirable' people, regardless of their abilities or experience. This resonates with the work of feminist economists in exposing skill as a gendered category where 'women's work' is identified as unskilled work (Phillips and Taylor 1980).

The concrete multiplicity of tasks and time-discipline that inhere in each occupation needs to be taken into account to understand the idioms of wages that are heard in the workplace and living quarters. These idioms for wages point to the temporalities that exist at the scale of the body of the worker as well as at other scales. Migrant workers who were working in a biogas plant construction site in Edathala in Ernakulam district compared work and wages in agriculture in Sunderbans in West Bengal and construction work in Kerala. The daily wage is rupees 80 or rupees 90 for work in tobacco fields in Sunderbans; in the gas plant construction site, it was rupees 225.

In our place, the timing is different. Work starts at 6 o'clock and it will go on till 11 or 12 PM. In between there is a meal and tea of 15–20 minutes. If we work for an hour, then we rest for 15–20 minutes. After lunch, we sleep for 2 hours. Then at 3 PM, we start again and work till 6 o'clock. But here there is a lot of work. There is no time to rest. We have to work from 8 AM to 5 PM. And then someone will tell us, 'Do 10 minutes more'. We will end up working 15–20 minutes more instead of 10. If we don't do it, they won't give us our wages. But in our village, we do it as we please. Nobody will tell us anything.¹³

Wage practices are bound up with such important temporalities in the spatial experiences of the migrant workers. In this sense, wages inhabit both the material and ideological worlds. The migrant workers in Edathala straddled agriculture and construction and the difference in wages in both places are circumscribed by considerations of such temporalities. Taking into account space brings time alive where the measured time reveals itself as lived time. Lived time is time that is embodied in experience and is retrieved when time is reconceptualised as qualitative and non-linear.

Once a particular work site or a particular wage situation is closely examined, practices that are unique, almost idiosyncratic, come into sight. Take for example the DLF¹⁴ building site in Kakkannad, where there were four Malayali women who worked as 'unskilled' construction workers. Their wages were 50 rupees less than male Malayali workers. Out of this, migrant workers had to compensate the Malayali women with rupees 25. They paid this to the union leaders. Migrant workers got at the most rupees 400; some new workers got only rupees 275. Malayali women got rupees 550 and men, rupees 600. The male migrant workers as a group had to pay rupees 100 to the union every day. This was divided equally among the four women workers. Malayali workers had to pay rupees 10 to the union. But migrant workers had to pay the union to mitigate the male–female difference in wages of Malayali workers.¹⁵ It is important to recognise these particularities and acknowledge these as signifying a shift in social relations and processes of work.

¹³ Interview dated 29 September 2009.

¹⁴ Delhi Land and Finance (DLF) is one of the largest commercial real estate development companies in India.

¹⁵ Interview dated 9 November 2014.

VII

Non-payment of wages

Another wage-practice is that of not paying wages at all. The culture of wages includes non-payment, underpayment and various breaches of agreement by contractors and subcontractors. The contractors promise a wage when they recruit workers and once the work starts, they delay the payment, pay less than what they promised and often do not pay at all. The disparity between ‘the going wage rate’ and the actually paid wages can be substantial depending on the arrears and the extent of non-payment. This questions our notions of a singular wage rate which apply across the board for a certain set of workers and skill level. Breach of contract and cheating are considered outside the parameters of capitalist rationality. Yet, they are very much central to the accumulation process in capitalism. This section looks at various instances of non-payment of wages and the conditions that produce them.

In September 2010, I met Pinak Burman, a 28-year-old worker from Jalpaiguri district in West Bengal. I met him in a construction site of an apartment complex, undertaken by Silpa Constructions, in Chittethukara in Kochi. I had gone there after reading a newspaper report¹⁶ about cases of testicular atrophy among migrant workers. This report described the *pooja* (a prayer ritual) conducted by the workers to ward off the ‘wrath of god’ and characterised the disease and its outbreak as ‘possibly psychological’. The entire episode constructed a superstitious and irrational other out of the migrant worker. After the cases of testicular atrophy were reported, the health and labour departments of the Government of Kerala inspected the site and enquired about living and working conditions. They served the construction company a ‘stop memo’¹⁷ until the conditions improve’. I quote from my field journal dated 3 September 2010:

Pinak said: ‘Yesterday when the “Union” (Government Labour department inspectors and not trade unions) people came, a man told them that we are getting rupees 250 (for helpers) and rupees 350

¹⁶ ‘Anyasamsthana thozhilalikkku apoorva rogam: Arogya vibhagam anweshanam thudangi’ (Rare disease among migrant workers: Health department starts investigation), *Mathrubhumi*, Kochi Edition, 2nd September, 2010.

¹⁷ A stop memo is a decree issued by a government department to institutions to stop work until further notice when irregularities are brought to its attention.

(for *mesthris* (Contractor-cum-recruiting agent)). This was a lie. We only get something between rupees 160 and rupees 220. Sunil, the labour convenor from CITU did this. He must have been paid by the company. All we are asking is to get this amount. Why this lie? Why can't he say the truth? So he didn't care whatever happened to his kisan bhai (farmer brothers). He doesn't care about others. He signed a lie. We asked him 'Give us the money you signed.' Why provide false accounts (jhoote hisaab kyon)?'¹⁸

Pinak and 20 others from his village and the nearby town were working under Sunil, a CITU convenor in the construction site. The unions of construction workers in Kochi engage in subcontracting and individual members act as supervisors of a particular set of workers. The Malayali workers who were also labour supervisors and contractors who took up work on piece-rates from the company reported wages of migrant workers much higher than what was actually being paid. After a few days, Pinak was thrown out for being too outspoken especially when the press visited the site. The work resumed even as conditions remained the same. Pinak said that they were not paid wages during the period of the stop memo and that the entire episode made their position disadvantaged as they were now out of work too. What is striking here is the role of trade unions as active collaborators in this economy of non-payment and underpayment of wages. The unionised workers are no more mere workers, but are entrepreneurs in the market for labour. The commission of a labour subcontractor can be anything between rupees 15 and 50 per worker and in some places up to rupees 100.

Pinak, after leaving Kochi, went and stayed with a friend in Thrissur and met an engineer in a bus station in Thrissur. The engineer offered him a job in the construction site of a factory building for Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL)¹⁹ in Kasaragod. He took eight workers from his village, many of them adivasis. After about two months, I received a call from Pinak saying that he along with 20 other workers were stranded

¹⁸ Interview dated 3 September 2010.

¹⁹ HAL is an aerospace and defence company owned by the Government of India based in Bangalore, Karnataka. Its production unit is located in KINFRA (Kerala Industrial Infrastructure Development Corporation) industrial park in Kasaragod in northern Kerala.

in Kozhikkode after being threatened by a contractor when they insisted on being paid their full salaries. I assisted him to get in touch with some activists of Solidarity Youth Movement and journalists who bought the workers tickets to go to Kochi. Eight of them decided to stay back in Kozhikkode to look for jobs in construction sites there. Twelve workers came to Kochi. They stayed in a short stay home run jointly by the Municipal Corporation and Catholic Church. Two lawyers belonging to Manushyavakasha Prasthanam²⁰ agreed to petition on their behalf the Assistant Labour Commissioner. There were arrears amounting to rupees 62,380 for 14 days of work done during 5 December 2010 to 19 December 2010. The workers were from Falakata in Jalpaiguri district and Mathabhanga in Cooch Behar district. The labour commissioner ordered the contractor to pay the wage arrears. Though HAL was a respondent in the petition, it never had to appear or defend itself in the labour office. Capital, especially big capital, is rendered invisible by the government through legal procedures and processes. The figure of the contractor appears as exploitative and malevolent while corporate strategies of recruitment and labour management escape recognition and justice. Rarely do workers choose to fight against non-payment of wages. They are often unable to trace the contractor and the employer after a certain piece of work is finished.

In another instance, 16 workers from Siliguri district in West Bengal who were living in Cheranalloor and were working in different construction sites of Vallarpadam terminal had each wage arrears of rupees 1,400. They did not know what to do and they continued working in the hope that the contractor will pay them someday. In another instance, some Malayali workers reported that they had met a group of Oriya workers in a plywood factory in Erumathala near Aluva in Ernakulam district whose employer refused to pay them to prevent them from going back to their villages. Contractors used unpaid wages to tie workers down to them.

Most of the migrant workers I met have had to put up with unpaid wages at some point in their working lives. It also affects workers who undertake piece-rate work along with their colleagues. Jitendar Sharma, a carpenter from Lakhisarai district in Bihar and working at Ernakulam, had a million rupees ‘stuck’ with eight contractors he had worked in the previous five years. Jitendar had taken work on piece-rate basis hoping to

²⁰ Human Rights Movement—an organisation based in Kochi.

make as much money as possible by putting in long hours and finishing the work as fast as possible and moving on to take up new work. He said that they preferred to do piece work and since they quoted much lower than Malayali carpenters, they tended to get a lot of work. Upendra from Orissa who also recruited workers had pending wages of around a quarter of a million rupees from DLF. When he gave a legal notice, he got only half of what they owed him as there was no written contract or any other evidence of work performed and wages due.²¹

Labban²² notes that non-payment of wages or wage theft is assumed away by Marx in his theory of exploitation. He makes the assumption that the worker receives the wage stipulated in the contract in its entirety immediately on sale of his/her labour power (Marx [1867] 1976: 279). Marx makes this assumption because he wanted to criticise bourgeois political economy on its own terms. Labban argues that this assumption should be relaxed or dropped altogether in critiquing present-day capitalism as paying workers below the subsistence wage and not paying wages altogether is quite common. Wage theft is predicated upon a material geography that facilitates the extraction and realisation of surplus value. Unauthorised migrant workers in the USA and Europe are subjected to wage theft, thus bringing out the connection of class to race, ethnicity and migration. In South Asia, it is intimately related to histories of bonded labour and debt bondage (see Brass 1990, 1999; Carswell and De Neve 2014; Washbrook 1993).

It may seem paradoxical that cash advances and wage arrears could be compared. But as Lerche (2007) suggests, unfree labour and debt bondage has to be understood in terms of uneven trajectories of capitalist development. It is this unevenness that is *necessary* for capitalist development that explains wage arrears and defaults. Defaults and arrears of wages happen to migrant workers and not to Malayali workers. First, migrant workers are forced to stay until the work gets over through the means of arrears. It keeps a tab on their mobility across employers and work sites. Second, they are chased away using violence and force when they demand wages. This is similar to the way debt bondage operates in contexts where caste and feudal land relations determines

²¹ Interview dated 9 November 2014.

²² Mazen Labban. 2013. Wage Theft, Wage as Theft. *Monthly Review's MRZine*. <http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2013/labban230813.html>. Accessed on 30 November 2016.

commodification of labour. Pouchepadass (2009) brings this unevenness to fore when he writes:

that while labour in capitalism is by definition commodified, this commodification may take on many different forms and a working class comprising slaves or forced labourers as well as wage-earners and other free workers is not necessarily inconsistent with the rational capitalist division of labour (p. 37).

VIII *Conclusion*

Wages figure as one of the forms through which landscapes of capitalist relations change on the ground. They are a catalogue of the relations that constitute the labour market and act as signs that relay the extent of segmentation and differentiation that characterise the labour market. The trade unions of Malayali workers collude with capital and contractors thereby acting as active participants in the remaking of the capitalist landscape in Kerala. The imperative to defend the existing wage rates in Kerala across sectors in the face of migration has driven trade unions to pursue various strategies. The regime of subordination of migrant labour proved to be compatible with the practices of local labour and trade unions.

Mann (2005) contends that wage negotiation is penny politics. For him, quantity can consist in many culturally and politically valuable qualities—security, dignity, autonomy, citizenship, identity and political power—understanding wage struggles thus means ‘taking the difference between 99 cents and a dollar seriously’ (p. 316). In the case of construction sites in Vallarpadam, defending existing wage rates for unionised Malayali workers was not just a question of economic survival, but was of cultural and political significance. However, this process was defined by a legacy of union bargain which embedded itself into an emerging capitalist geography of exploitation of migrant labour rather than through confrontational class politics. Massey ([1984] 1995) argued that the structure of local economies can be seen as the product of successive layers of economic activity—investment and labour movements—and the effect of each new layer of activity on a place depends on the unique legacy of previous layers of activities. The social history of labour movements in

Kerala which involved unionisation of manual labour in the unorganised sector often determined the options available to capital. Trade unions constituted the contradictory space that emerged as a result of port building. Here, they represent old social relations that are superseded or reworked by the production of capitalist space. Wage is an ethnographic object that informs us about these specific contradictions.

However, these wage differentials are often explained in terms of ‘wage discrimination’ and ‘labour segmentation’. These terms presuppose that there is something called ‘same work’ which is then paid differently or treated differently. In fact, evidence from fieldwork shows that there are multiplicity of tasks that are contingent and non-uniform across workers. These multiplicities demonstrate that the idea of a certain category of work in typologies of work does not stand up to critical scrutiny and seems to be framed a posteriori. This is not to be understood as a difference in skill but as the impact of political and ideological conditions and as part of labour process that determines the concrete form of labour itself.

While it is capital which essentially controls the production process, both in its day-to-day functioning and in the broader processes of allocation of investment, the dynamic of the system revolves around the contradiction between these two classes (Massey [1984] 1995). Capital, faced with the social history of labour in Kerala, recruits workers from north and north-eastern India. The agency of workers and unions in creating differential wages in the context of large-scale migration should not be missed. It is in the quotidian labouring that the key to understand this resides rather than in any overarching policy or decision of unions to collude. It is determined based on viability at each site and each locality. The analytical purchase of wages as a category, thus, lies in its ability to bring alive the local as a crucial arena of political struggle and a unit of analysis to examine migration and social change.

Wages make us question the nature of agency of workers in surviving, resisting and transforming capitalism. Unionised construction workers are able to defend wages by drawing on a political settlement of the previous era and by creating an ethnic wage niche. While it might seem as though they suffer from myopia that obscure their long-term interests, it is enabled by a politics of labour that restricts representation on the basis of ethnicity. There is no objective ‘interest’ that labour needs to see and fight for, but an articulation of agency given the distinct juncture of capitalism (Mann 2007). Labour capitalises on differences within

working class in its encounter with capital; these differences, in turn, are embedded in spatial structures of production. At the same time, to portray negotiation, coping and survival that draws on these differences within working class as the full spectrum of workers' agency vis-à-vis capital will be excessively imprudent.

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