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Between construction yard and village: Changing relations of caste and hierarchy among Madhya Pradesh's labouring classes

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Abstract

In Madhya Pradesh, India, rural migrant workers hired in flyover's construction yards experiment a space of work where the social practices relating to caste separation and hierarchy are temporally softened. This paper shows that these processes of conviviality, through mixing between castes and trans-communitarian work identities based on the hierarchies of labour, are taking part in the lower classes' long quest for less oppressive labour relations. Starting from the construction yard, and then going to the village, this paper shows that the labour relations involved in the circulation of rural migrants to the flyover construction yards are contributing to shaping their complex and flexible social consciousness in a context of slow reconfiguration of oppressive rural labour relations.

KEYWORDS

caste, classes of labour, conviviality, Indian labour, migration

1 | INTRODUCTION

In March 2011, I was doing fieldwork on migrant barbending workers building flyovers in and around Bhopal. A vast majority of these people shaping the iron rods that made the metal structure of the flyovers came from the

I take Bernstein's conception (2006, 2008) of a multiplicity of segmented and porous classes of labour in the contemporary informal sector as granted, as it is already widely used in studies of the Indian agrarian and migrant working relations (see Lerche, 2010; Lerche et al., 2018; Pattenden, 2012).

[Correction added on 17 January 2023, after first online publication: The copyright line was changed.]

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countryside, from many villages and many different states. Almost all of them were Hindus, and there were tensions between them and the Muslim settlements surrounding the labour camps: Hindu workers used to take the longer route to go to the market just to avoid walking through the Muslim settlements. Incidents of theft of migrants' belongings, which the workers immediately attributed to local Muslim youths, had been reported. However, the watchmen protecting the workers against the thieves were also from the Muslim settlements.¹ One day, I saw a very cordial lunch taking place between these Muslim watchmen and the Hindu supervisors; they were making a Rajasthani dish made of a paste stuffed with potatoes, cooked directly over a fire on the ground. At first glance, this suggested that working in the construction yard allowed some conviviality between otherwise antagonist communities.

The construction yards in and around Bhopal where I did part of my PhD fieldwork were all embedded in these arrangements, evoking a performed conviviality (Chambers, 2019) between different castes and communities, because that was necessary for the cohesion of the work. Though this conviviality was instrumental, I will show in this paper that, for low-caste rural migrants coming to these construction sites, living in a social space where the work hierarchies are more mobilized than caste hierarchies does matter because it constitutes a space of relief from the caste-bound exploitative agrarian work relations in the village.

This paper argues that in the construction, there is a certain sense of conviviality, which tends to downplay the hierarchies of caste, or at least their more apparent manifestations. However, this conviviality exists alongside a strong disciplinary regime that ranks the workers according to their skills and in which they are under the tight control of a skilled worker who acts as an overseer as well as an intermediary between the building companies and the labourers, called the *thekedar*. The conviviality also exists to optimize the construction yard's disciplinary regime. Hierarchies of caste and community are downplayed, and conflicts and claims on this base levelled, for the hierarchy of skills to emerge plainly and for the disciplinary regime to shape the daily politics of labour.

Still, evidence from the field shows that many labourers appreciate this space of relative though temporary relief from the caste-based inequalities and the conflicts they generate, especially but not exclusively the lower caste workers. Indeed, this performed conviviality (Chambers, 2019) contrasts with the sharp caste struggles that happen in the village's agrarian labour relations. But in the villages, too, the situation is somehow evolving for the lower castes who manage to reduce their dependence on the landowning upper castes, thanks to the cash provided by migration as well as access to government schemes such as MGNREGA.²

This paper aims to contribute to discussions on the relationship between class, labour, and identity³ in contemporary labour relations and in particular in regard to the question of how caste and class combine in the workers' consciousness. Chakrabarty, in his well-known essay, "Rethinking working class history" (1989), on Bengal's jute mill workers' lives between 1890 and 1940, was attempting to challenge classical and Eurocentric conceptions as well as some Marxian concepts, including class consciousness. His argument was that the constitution of class consciousness in the way Karl Marx imagined was not possible in the context of the colonial Indian jute industry, because the workers' struggles took place in a situation where an egalitarian idea of citizenship on which Marx developed his idea of class consciousness was not relevant. Workers' struggles took place within social representations that tended to frame solidarities through the ties of kinship, caste, religious communities, and conflicted logics concerning landlord/servant relationships.

Numerous Indian scholars, such as Chandavarkar (2009), but also Sarkar (2004) and Joshi (2008), have shown the limits of Chakrabarty's argument by highlighting how his de-essentialization of class consciousness somehow leads to an essentialization of Indian culture. According to Chitra Joshi, the combination of gender, caste, and class relations is shaped by the historical and social context (2008). This paper argues that the context of the workplace in Madhya Pradesh's construction yards is shaping collective identities in such a way that they also constitute the grounds for symbolic struggles. Gidwani and Sivaramkrishnan (2003) describe this sense of citizenship as acquired by migration as a

¹As many of the workers presented here, they had multiple occupations. The watchmen were principally hired in Bhopal because of the prevalence of theft in these bastis.

²The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act is a scheme providing 100 days of subsidized employment per year to the landless rural labourers, thus reducing their economic dependence on the landowners.

³In this paper, I define identity as the mobilization of a sense of belongingness in a certain context.

cosmopolitan cultural formation. Because, in the context of these construction yards, the conviviality is more ephemeral and instrumental than in their argument, I prefer to use the term conviviality, less linked with a metropolitan vision of these inter-communitarian exchanges (Marsden & Reeves, 2019). This conviviality from above is indeed observed in many Asian urban contexts (Marsden & Reeves, 2019). Here, I look at how the identities at work developed by people from a multiplicity of castes, religious communities, and geographical origins allow them to develop a temporary sense of trans-communitarian identities, creating a space of exploitation that is also a space of conviviality that they appreciate, especially in comparison with the brutal caste oppression that reigns in the village.

Therefore, this paper shares in part its conclusions with Alpa Shah's (2006) assertions when she says that, for Tribals, the life of the building site provides a temporary freedom compared to the repressive life of the village. The paper addresses Chakrabarty's argument⁴ in a balanced manner; it shows the lasting reproduction of inequalities and structures of domination based in villages and caste structures that have little to do with a Western idea of citizenship or individuality, but rather highlights the significance of time spent outside on the construction sites when sociability touches Gidwani and Sivaramkrishnan's (2003) idea of migrant cosmopolitanism. Lower caste workers appreciate the migration because daily life is far away from their links of dependency in the village, but the purpose of the migration is itself part of the many attempts to loosen, in the long run, these ties within the village.

Therefore, this paper wishes to contribute to the debate on how migration and work produce identity within relations of production in contemporary India. Jonathan Parry argues (1999) that the long-distance and permanent migrant workers of a steel plant of the public sector⁵ in Chhattisgarh have developed a class identity marked by a negation of caste ideology and a strong devalorization of village life. For him, this modernist and nationalist class identity is typical of Nehruvian projects and of the public sector (Parry, 1999) where workers are described as much more cosmopolitan than those in the private sector (Parry, 2008, p. 327). Christian Strümpell remarks that there is a climate of conviviality between different castes as in the public sector dam that he studied in Orissa (2008), another Nehruvian project. Strümpell uses the concept of "conviviality" as a set of social relations that shape social group space and directly negate the caste order. For both authors, conviviality is rooted in common celebrations that do not occur in the construction yards discussed in this paper. I shall thus demonstrate in this paper that the more limited and temporary conviviality that can be seen in Madhya Pradesh's construction yards still contributes to shaping the worker's social space in a way that displaces the caste order at the periphery and places the work hierarchy's order at the centre during the migration period. Therefore, conviviality is also a form of labour control and a tool to undermine potential collective struggles.

In his studies of Bhilai's informal construction sector, Parry (2014) focuses on the dual relations between labouring-class women and supervisor (*mistris*⁶ [masons]) and contractors to explain how the so-called impurity of women who engage in sexual intercourse with the *thekedars*⁷ or *mistris* in the construction sites constitutes a criteria of distinction between the formal sector workers (whose women are not exposed to such harassment or intercourse) and the informal workers. In this paper, I show that the working identities themselves and the way they are shaped along lines of skills are an essential criterion of distinction between the workers. In the construction yards studied, the staff employees (engineers, overseers, and clerical staff) belong to the formal sector and enjoy the best working conditions and the highest status. The vast majority of manual workers belong to the informal sector, are generally in

⁴Considering the temporal difference between colonial India and neoliberal India at the time of the fieldwork, the reference to Chakrabarty is made more to note an evolution than to attempt to directly contradict him.

⁵"Organized sector" refers to the registered and legally protected regular jobs, which account for approximately 8% (Lerche, 2010) of India's actual workforce. I take as an accepted fact that there is no dualism between the two sectors but a continuum of inter-dependent labour segments (Breman, 1996, 2013; Heuzé, 1996; Lerche, 2010). Although the unorganized sector does not exist as a separate economic sector, the term is convenient to address these armies of daily labourers forming the bulk of India's contemporary workforce.

⁶In North India, the *mistri* is a foreman, and the *thekedar* is a foreman subcontracting labour. In South India, a *mistri* is a foreman subcontracting labour, or sometimes even a contractor.

⁷As there is a multiplicity of overlapping names for *mistris*, *jobbers*, and *thekedars*, in North India, I will use in this paper the term *thekedar* to designate the skilled workers that also have the task of recruiting a gang of workers and managing them, while the contractor is the one who exclusively takes care of recruitment and management (and often deals with bigger teams). The foreman, in the context of these construction yards, means a specialized and very skilled "expert" worker and not any skilled supervisor, while the supervisor is a part of the permanent staff and is an overseer making a bridge between the engineers and the informal workforce.

precarious situations, and much less considered; however, among them, there are important wage and status distinctions following how their skills are recognized. For example, an elder barbender is much more respected than a younger one, but all barbenders see themselves as superior to material carriers. All these rankings play a role in the dynamics of conviviality. Engineers and management employees who have earned degrees claim to have a real understanding of the construction yard's work, and the informal skilled workers, who valorize their skills contradict this claim. The informal skilled workers affirm that their work is "*dimag ka kam*" (work of the mind), implying intelligence, and they engage in symbolic struggles with permanent workers, sometimes declaring that the degrees held by the permanent workers are irrelevant compared to their own concrete experience of work, while they, the unskilled workers, are devalored by the degree holders. Parry (2014) also remarks that life at the construction site is not without a feeling of freedom. I show that construction site workers, too, experience this feeling of freedom because of the trans-communitarian identities built during the working process, increased by a sense of conviviality in their dwellings.

Lastly, this paper's analysis takes place in a context of social mobility caused by migration from rural India. Pattenden's (2012) earlier studies of migration to construction sites in Karnataka show how migration could slightly shift the landless proletariat's status to their advantage within labour relations even if it does not drastically change the balance of power within the broader relations of production. Picherit (2009a, 2012, 2018) has shown how migration can be the basis for upward mobility at the village level even in the absence of contestation at migration sites and how mobility is uneven following the castes⁸ engaged in these non-agricultural labour relations. In Madhya Pradesh, too, the socio-economic studies of Deshingkar et al. (2008) show that migration in the beginning of the 21st century has more efficiently begun to improve the livelihood of the rural proletariat even if these gains are less salient among the lowest castes (erstwhile—untouchables) and the Tribal population.

These relative mobilities are an important contextual feature—especially in a wider contemporary Indian context where sustainable mobilities are so hard to achieve for the Indian poor (Krishna, 2017)—which explains why the paper ends with a sidestep to Bandha, the village of some of the workers I followed the most during the fieldwork. I recollect the narratives of various actors regarding these changes to put the findings from the construction yards into a broader context of changing agrarian relations. My paper shows that in the construction workers' villages of origin, the loosening of direct ties with the landowners, supported by the possibility of working outside or for the state (through MGNREGA), is presented by all the lower caste workers I interviewed as a trend of relative emancipation.

These are also the conclusions of Gert De Neve and Grace Carswell's (2014) paper on neoliberal regimes in Tamil Nadu. They compare two villages, one involved in the powerloom industry where Dalits and other lower caste workers are stuck and the other in an industry in a neighbouring town triggering the commuting of labour from the village. They affirm that in the second village, this commuting work has made the Dalits more assertive and less dependent on landowning castes, which makes caste irrelevant in certain ways but does not contradict the fact that caste-driven relations and hierarchies are still central to village life. The narratives of relative emancipation collected in this paper among the Dalit and Tribal respondents are not contradictory to the above claims of reproduction of caste domination: The statements about loosening of domination links are always nuanced by an acute consciousness of the exploitation that still prevails.

The empirical data presented here are based on 6 months of fieldwork done between 2011 and 2013, consisting of participant observations and 50 semi-structured interviews. Though I speak Hindi to a decent level, I hired a research assistant, Shankare Gowda, for the last stage of interviews, and I want to thank him for his valuable contribution in the data collection process. The 6 months of fieldwork was organized in the following way: I spent 1 month alone in 2011, 2 months in 2012, and 3 months in 2013, including 3 weeks in the village. I then concluded the study with Gowda, with 2 weeks of interviews in the construction yards and 1 week in the village. This fieldwork was part of the 13 months of fieldwork of my wider research on skills and work identity in Madhya Pradesh, which compared

⁸Thus, the Gollas, a low-status shepherd caste, seems to gain much more mobility from migration than the untouchable Madigas (Picherit, 2009a, 2012, 2018).

these migrant workers with the workshop workers in North Bhopal. These two groups of workers had contact with one another (Shah Rukh, for example, worked in the construction yards as well as in the workshops from time to time), and I built strong comradeships with the workers. I did an immersion in participant observation, sleeping several nights in the sheds with the workers, sometimes working with them, for example, on the operations of barbending that takes place on the ground level. Despite this in-depth participatory observation, it was still extremely difficult to make contact with women. As Jonathan Parry himself explained in an oral interview, he could only be in touch with women because of his advanced age, which made him sexually harmless in their representations (see also part one on Gurujii)⁹: The first part details the configuration of conviviality taking place in the construction yards. The second part explores the labour cultures and identities to show how workers share, on the one hand, common values of work and stay extremely segmented and divided, on the other hand. The last part explains how, in the village of Bandha,¹⁰ people's narratives emphasize how agrarian labour relations, as well as power relationships between castes, are evolving, partly thanks to migration.

2 | SPACES OF CONVIVIALITY

2.1 | Configuration of the construction camps

I carried out fieldwork on three construction yards: One was in North Bhopal, crossing the settlements situated behind Union Carbide's factory ruins; the second was situated in Budni, a small town neighbouring the south of Bhopal; and the third was in Mandideep, an industrial town that is part of Bhopal's agglomeration. The construction yards are always situated perpendicular to the railway lines, in this case extending their storage enclosures and the worker's quarters alongside the flyover to be built. They are a public/private partnership, a mode of organization that has now become the state preference for big infrastructure projects, for example, for the Delhi Metro (Bon, 2015). The order comes from the Indian state and is then transmitted to the Public Works Department. The work is distributed between the railway company and private companies. The railway company takes charge of the part of the flyover, which passes over the railway line, as according to the engineers, it is said to be especially sensitive.

The staff, composed of senior engineers, junior engineers (also called "control engineers"), supervisors (who are situated above the *thekedars* and are more order givers than discipline makers), and some specialized workers, such as crane drivers and architects, generally live in rented rooms. They almost all have a permanent contract, "*naukri*" (job), and are part of the organized sector. They are not culturally an aristocracy of labour as such, as the engineers have always been white-collar workers. Supervisors, who come, in the case of the oldest ones, from the manual workforce and who were, in the case of the younger ones, recruited directly after their studies, form an intermediate body, showing less distinction from the manual workers than the engineers, but still clearly affirm themselves as part of the staff and could fit in what would be a construction yard's aristocracy of labour. Hence, the construction yard's hierarchy is embedded in the opposition between "*kam*" and "*naukri*" explained by Jonathan Parry in his recent book on Bhilai's working classes, *Classes of Labour* (2019), except that in Madhya Pradesh, the colloquial expression opposed to "*naukri*" is "*mazduri*," be it in the construction yards or in the urban workshops, which I also studied during my previous research (Kaba, 2022). But both overlap the distinction made by Gérard Heuzé between "service" and "work" (1996). As in Bhilai, though some of the supervisors—the oldest ones—were sometimes previously labourers, the real distinction is not between white- and blue-collar jobs but between the "*naukri*," permanent jobs, and the informal, "*kam*," here "*mazduri*" jobs.

On the side of the *mazduri*, informal labourers—who comprise the totality of the workforce handling the building material—are hosted in sheds made from metal scraps that they have built themselves on several spaces situated on the

⁹<https://newbooksnetwork.com/jonathan-parry-classes-of-labor-work-and-life-in-an-indian-steel-town-routledge-2020/>.

¹⁰These workers come from hundreds of different villages, so I chose one village for detailed fieldwork analysis over a period of 2 months. Though this study does not claim to carry out an ethnography of the village, important and relevant elements of the agrarian context have been gathered.

sides of the construction yards, where there is no habitation, where some water points are provided by the company, and where sometimes (as in North Bhopal's construction yard) guards watch over the safety of the workers' belongings alongside some of the building material. These migrant workers come for various periods: from weeks to years to on a permanent basis. For example, the worker's gang I followed the most was composed of between 5 and 15 men following the labour demand. It was led by a family of Brahmins from a village called Bandha on the border of Uttar Pradesh whose members had, for different reasons other than work, quite a loose connection to the life of their village.

The big brother, in his 50s, was nicknamed "Guruji." He wore dreadlocks and pretended to be partly a sadhu: He had to work but said that he had refrained from sexual relations for years and had been on several pilgrimages. He also aspired to a life of renunciation after taking his retirement and refused sexual intercourse with his wife. He had gone to migration work in need of money but also following a dispute with his eldest brother. His little brother, in his 40s, had joined him after searching for him, as Guruji had spent years far away from the village due to the familial tensions. The little brother was called "Panditji."¹¹ Later, their nephew came to join them, also after a fight with one of his uncles, and was nicknamed in the labour gang by his kinship position to his elders: Bhatija, nephew. He was known as one of the best concrete levellers of the whole region.

The three Brahmins had at some point decided to loosen their links to the village. Guruji was pushed out of the village because of relative poverty¹² and personal disputes with his elder siblings and Panditji because of the emotional link with his elder brother. Bhatija also migrated because of a dispute. They stay in the construction site on an almost permanent basis, as do the "core" of their most regular workers. Guruji's workers return from their villages at very different times depending on the crops they grow in their village and the familial economic arrangements. Some of the Muslim workers from Bhopal's *bastis* come on a frequent but intermittent basis as part of Guruji's gang because they shift between employment at the construction site, familial obligations, and short-term employment in the metal workshops or in the vegetables market inside Bhopal. Thus, the pattern cannot be labelled as circular or seasonal and is much more diverse and complex.

In terms of regional diversity, these construction camps represent—although in a temporary way—what Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan characterize as rural cosmopolitanism (2003). The workers almost all come from the countryside and sometimes from far away: A large majority are from Madhya Pradesh, but others come from Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Bihar, and even as far as West Bengal. Alongside the dominant shed zone from Madhya Pradesh can be seen the Bengali sheds (which, in Bhopal, were on their own and quite isolated from the rest of the camp). In Budni, Rajasthani sheds are next to the ones belonging to Guruji, and in Mandideep, a neighbourhood of sheds belonging to a group of Biharis sheltered one of the biggest workers' gangs and showed a strong solidarity regarding their origins. However, if migrants from other states tend to stick together, it is also because they are often brought by a single *thekedar*; therefore, in the situations I observed, the belongingness to a state and to a team overlapped.

Inside the camps, the spaces of conviviality are separated between teams. They live together and stay most of the time as a group even if they gossip with neighbouring teams after dinner or go together to the wine shop on Sundays. Socializing is often linked to the consumption of alcohol and drugs, and not to geographical origin; for example, in Bandha, the group with whom Guruji's gang sympathized the most was the Rajasthanis, because they were quite close and because they shared tips for buying ganja in the neighbouring city, Hosangabad. These times were also characterized by discourses that relativized the caste hierarchies.

2.2 | A temporary loosening of caste discrimination

Inside these spaces shaped by the hierarchies of labour, there is a discourse, spread by the *thekedars* and shared to some extent by other workers, stating that the construction yard's social space is not an appropriate place for the

¹¹All the names in this paper are anonymized, but not the nicknames that have a precise signification in the study's social context.

¹²Their parents died when the brothers were all young, which has caused problems for the family.

affirmation of caste identity. People and *thekedars* used to say in the construction yard, “*idhar koi jati nahi hai*”: “there is no (existence of) caste here.” The gangs were all very diverse in terms of caste background: There were, for example, middle castes (such as Gadaria) in gangs led by a very low-caste (Kumhar) *thekedar* (contractor), Sunit, and consisting of a majority of Kumhars.

As Parry noted in Bhilai (2014), the rules of caste separation are generally loosened, on the sites as compared to the village. Similarly, Guruji used to sleep alongside his workers often from lower caste background, to eat with them, and even to let them cook (I saw people as low as Shudra and even sometimes of Tribal background touching the food while it was being made). In the village, accepting food from a lower caste person is not acceptable for a Brahmin as it is seen to pollute him ritually. Guruji used to explain this disrespect for pollution premonition rules by an expression stating the unity of mankind “*insan ek hi hai*” (mankind is one), which, as we will see, he considers irrelevant back in the village. It is common to avoid conversations about caste discrimination: The same arguments were used in the Muslim neighbourhoods I studied (Kaba, 2022) and in Shah's site of study (2006). Here, there is a need to put caste and community-related tensions aside to have peace and order in these migrant workers' dwellings.

Guruji also stated that he liked this freedom concerning caste separation rules, explaining to me later that the question of ritual pollution is mainly about public social status that one must respect inside the village, and he tends to find the rules less useful when he is far away from his family. This did not prevent him from sometimes using his guru reputation not directly linked to his Brahmin (upper) caste background but more easily recognized thanks to it—to gain prestige and authority in the construction yard. I saw a supervisor, hierarchically higher than him according to work hierarchies, touching his feet before giving him orders. Except for these rare moments, the labour hierarchy comes first at the construction site. People like Guruji do not forget the importance of their caste background at work, but here he can simultaneously enjoy an upper caste status while feeling free of some of the obligations and constraints that would come with it in the village.

When the Brahmins are in migration, they work together with much lower status castes and they experiment with flexibility in inter-caste relations. Shomdev, Guruji's cousin, was working with him for some months at the construction yard after he lost his job at a hotel. He was taken in as a helper, at the bottom of the hierarchy, and was experiencing working with lower caste labourers, in similar conditions. Becoming distant from agrarian working relations is often a synonym for experimenting with a lifestyle where the practices of caste separation are loosened, the discourses and struggles for status are lightened, and the hierarchy governing daily life is revolving much less around caste power relations and much more around work relations organized according to each one's skills and team.

The construction yard's social space presents a configuration of social relations where caste and religious identity are mobilized so as not to make the vertical relationships linking the workers and the *thekedars* more salient even if the *thekedar* is generally from a higher caste status. *Thekedars* minimize caste identities' mobilization to reinforce their relationship of domination over workers. These techniques of disciplining workforces have to be considered in the light of the ambiguous consequences of the caste bond between a *thekedar* and a worker: As Heuzé stated about the workers in the Dhanbad coal mines in the 1980s, the community bound in a *thekedar-mazdur* relation can be a means of exploitation but also a commitment to hire, and not fire a worker (1996, pp. 267–287). Therefore, regarding the level of commitment and bonding that a *thekedar* wants to achieve, he may or not play the card of the communitarian bond.

In a context where the *thekedars* want to bond the labour force, Picherit has remarked that in Telangana, the *mistris* (*thekedars*) would control their workers by creating an ideological construction reproducing the ideal village—and its caste divisions—in the migrant camps (2009a). Here, the worker's groups were much bigger, which allowed the *thekedar* to recreate a miniature village in the construction yard, of which he could be the chief, and strong debt relations made his control even tighter. In Madhya Pradesh's construction yards, there is a lot of turnover regarding workforce, candidates showing up every day at labour force gathering zones (*labour chowks*) and leaving aside the most skilled workers—who will not necessarily share a caste or local connection with the *thekedar*—the *thekedars*

I met had little interest in binding the workforce. Guruji told me that he avoided giving advances, especially to people from his villages, precisely so as not to create committed links with the workers. This situation contrasts with the one observed by Picherit in Telangana's construction yards, where bonded labour was systemic and where the *thekedars*¹³ sought to bound workers much more often (2009a, 2012, 2018).

Though the context is quite different from the public sector dam in Orissa where Strümpell did his research (2008), the situation of conviviality, a state of temporary loosening of caste commensality, which does not imply a modification of caste-based rules back in the village, is to a certain extent comparable in the Madhya Pradesh construction yards with what Strümpell observes in the public sector (Strümpell, 2008). As he states, the question of commensality is after all a question of exterior judgement by the family and the caste, and this is one of the reasons why, according to him, conviviality is so strong in the settlements he observes: The family and the caste fellows from the village almost never visit their fellows at the settlement. Similarly, Guruji explained to me regarding this difference in caste commensality between the construction yard and the village that “when one goes to defecate, one might use more water to clean his hands than to clean up his arse.” Therefore, migrating to this space involves experimenting with the relative and socially constructed part of these symbolic rules of pollution meant to sustain the caste hierarchy's ideology.

These discourses have also to be relativized in the light of certain practices. That the workers share more interactions between different status castes than they would in the village does not mean that everything is permitted or that the workers do not do the maximum they can to maintain a level of caste-related distance. Often, they have little choice. For example, in the Kum'har workers' shed, all the workers are Kum'hars, only a little higher than Dalits in their assumed origins, and even considered Scheduled Caste (CS) in some parts of Madhya Pradesh. The Yadav worker (considered slightly higher in the caste hierarchy) who works and eats with them has little choice; he is a subaltern in terms of hierarchies as an unskilled worker and is in absolute terms a numerical minority. How could he possibly claim his caste superiority and the behaviours of segregation that comes with it?

When it comes to the Dalit workers, Guruji did not hire any of them in the long period while I was following his group, and he stated that he still considered Tribals superior to Dalits in terms of purity because “at least they eat wild pigs which is not as polluting as eating domestic pigs.” This means that he considers the Tribal's diet less impure than the Dalit's so that it was easier for him to accept their contiguity. Though he stated that he had hired Dalits in the past, they may have remained physically separated. The most numerous Dalits interviewed were Chamars. Though they also declared they were less discriminated against than in the village, they often had their own huts, a little away from the rest of the groups. One interesting case was that of Shivam, a *thekedar* (contractor) who did not take part, as many *thekedars* did, in the work process, but was only in charge of hiring and managing the workforce. I met him in Mandideep, in 2013. He explained that he was from a Dalit background. He lived close to his co-workers, but in a separate hut, so he kept some distance, which was undefined between hierarchical and caste-related needs to isolate himself from his workers.

Even in the off-work day configurations, the hierarchical position in the construction yard plays an important role. Being hired by a Dalit *thekedar*, Shivam's workers were not in a position to indicate his caste inferiority to him openly by frankly avoiding him, besides which, unlike Guruji, Shivam was only a labour broker and was not working alongside them; he had his foremen to discipline them directly. Whatever their caste origin, his workers were in a position of submission and pushed by the need of work. Within his gang were Sahus (also called Teli, oil pressers, a higher Vaishya caste that is dominant in numerous North Indian villages) and some Chamars. The workers used to stay in adjacent huts, without any separation between beds, and ate and slept close to each other. But the Sahu also declared that they kept a minimum distance when possible. For them, eating together and sleeping close to one another occurred in a context of outside work; as in a public canteen, or in a full train, lying down with other castes is done in a context of necessity, where everyone's caste is not and cannot even be clear because the workers come from too many different places.

¹³In his place of fieldwork, *thekedars* are called *mistris* but it is the same job.

Conviviality here is marked by ephemerality, contrarily to the more permanent one described by Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan (2003). In this regard, the situation could be compared to what Magnus Marsden and Madeleine Reeves (2019) mean when they characterize Asian conviviality as often being the rule for marginal spaces and ephemerality, though the construction yards are not temporally a margin—they occupy a large part of many workers' lives—and, as I will show, an important part of their lives. The socio-spatial setting of the construction yard has without doubt an ephemeral and marginal dimension with regard to family life, which stays, for the barbenders, at the village, and is the main dimension where caste purity bears importance.

These barbenders' settlements were purely male while women workers were indeed present in the construction yard, but as a minority. Women were staying either together or with siblings. They were among the unskilled workers who never mixed with the barbenders. It was extremely difficult to approach them except the elderly women who did not flee from interviews. Attempts to interview women were marked by obvious disapproval from women themselves. For example, they took their *ghunghat* (face veil) and observed silence with eyes lowered; if I tried to insist, frank commands to go away were given. As on other construction sites (Parry, 2014), the women often faced sexual advances and harassment by the men. The supervisors with whom I used to chat at the restaurant did not hide, after a few drinks, their endless attempts to have sex with women. When it came to the male workers I used to stay with, as in the village, open socialization with women of marriageable age was always seen as an offence and could not be done openly. A little interaction could happen with *thekedars* like Guruji, because as a *sadhu* (ascetic) who was seen to have given up sexual desires, he was not considered a threat. From time to time, he used to watch the babies of young women workers during working hours.

In these regards, the situation here is comparable to the inter-caste conviviality that Strümpell (2008) observes but to a lesser degree, as Strümpell finds that invitations are given to attend weddings between castes with different statuses in the migrants' village of origin, which certainly did not happen among the construction yard workers, where families were never involved in these inter-communitarian exchanges. This is limiting the range of the relativization of the caste discrimination practised in the construction yards because, as women are seen as the bearers of caste purity, it has less consequences in terms of collective purity to make these arrangements in a context where they are not involved. Still, the workers experience this space as an important part of their lives. Therefore, I somewhat disagree with Marsden and Reeves when they characterize the Asian spaces of conviviality away from the urban centres as spaces of marginality (2019). As Shah argues, the places of migration are exploitative but are also seen by the migrants as important and freer spaces (2006). However, I agree with Marsden and Reeves when they emphasize the ambivalence and intricate nature of the inter-communitarian exchanges in these places (2019). As we shall see in the next section, these arrangements are primarily made to reinforce the disciplinary regimes of the construction yard.

3 | OTHER CONTEXTS, OTHER HIERARCHIES: SO-CALLED SERVICE MIGRANTS AND THEIR SUBALTERN ELITES

3.1 | The construction yard's disciplinary regimes

The social relations within the working day are shaped by disciplinary regimes that follow work hierarchies rather than caste-related ones, even if the picture is often nuanced. The workers from the lower castes (mainly Chamars and Kum'hars) or Tribal workers have an attitude of submission towards Guruji, because he is the foreman but also an upper caste male. His orders are *never* contradicted during working hours. The control subsists inside the sheds where, despite the flexibility of caste pollution rules, the workers are submitted to the disciplinary order settled by the *thekedar*. They cannot consume impure food and drink inside the shed and must show deference at all times. In 2010, a Kshatriya (upper caste of traditionally warriors/princes) worker insisted on consuming a little alcohol with me inside Panditji (Guruji's brother's) hut. This was only possible because Guruji was a bit less rigid on the question

of alcohol than his elder brother but also because of the caste background of the workers; a majority of the Brahmin *thekedar's* workers drank a lot, but far away from the huts in the public restaurants serving alcohol by the side of the road. None of them ever dared to bring beer into the huts.

That disciplinary regimes are starkly imposed does not mean that there is an absence of everyday resistance. Workers evade work, for example, before the lunch break by hiding themselves far away from the *thekedar*. Before the night break, youngsters roam similarly in the construction yard's remote areas to prevent the *thekedar* from noticing that they have finished their tasks before the break, as he might find some extra work for them. Sometimes, a worker responds in English to Guruji's orders to work, saying "I don't care."¹⁴ The workers can complain about the *thekedars* and the working conditions, but only when they are far away from their sight. Here, the conviviality is negated by the strong disciplinary regimes, but comes back in these resistances to the discipline, made solely and often by small groups of workers bound together by the comradeship links woven in the construction yard's huts. Ephemeral escapes for the time it takes to smoke a cigarette or for a discussion of the love stories of the village are ways to cope with working days that are otherwise stressful. In contrast, the major part of the time is marked by the absence of discussion and the omnipresence of the *thekedar's* orders, sometimes shouted out, when the workers are showing signs of tiredness during the increasing of the hours, especially when construction has to speed up and when the days of work can be lengthened from 8–9 to 11–12 hours a day.

Furthermore, there is the presence of two levels of authority: The *thekedars* discipline the workers directly, but if a *thekedar* was too lax or too kind to his workers and let them shirk, the permanent staff, the overseers or the engineers, would take the relay and coerce the workers verbally even more violently. The ambivalence of the *thekedar* acts then as a buffer: He is the cornerstone, who can organize resistance and break strikes (Picherit, 2009a), like Panditji, who could alternatively shout loudly at his workers and complain loudly at the staff that they were being paid too little for their overtime. This ambivalence of the *thekedar* that Picherit has well noted is also central to understanding how these intermediaries of labour are shaping, in the construction yards, certain identities and representations of work and why conviviality is created to provide a proper context to the blooming of these representations that they brandish to set discipline and hierarchies.

But the ambivalence is not equilibrated; it is very rare that the *thekedar* takes the workers' side. When I witnessed it, it was only in circumstances when their own cuts of the workers' salaries could be impacted by low payments by the company, or in the very rare cases when a *thekedar* could work himself and get some wage work done, as when Panditji had so few workers that he himself worked for a wage. This unusual case was linked to the fact that Panditji was, according to him, a petty *thekedar*, which made him somewhat closer to the worker's position. The *thekedar's* role is not monolithic, and there is an internal hierarchy among them coming from the size of their gangs. The most important *thekedars* do not touch the work, and some of them, being only labour entrepreneurs, never touched it. The smaller the *thekedar*, the more ambiguous his role can be, not only regarding discipline but also in the sharing of the *ethoses* of skills and labour that I will comment on later.

The disciplinary regime reveals the instrumental dimension of the conviviality, as Thomas Chambers observed among urban artisans (2019): It is often there to get the work done and to suppress communitarian conflicts in order to leave all the space for discipline to be deployed. Barbending and centring¹⁵ require a lot of physical labour; the teams spend hours in heat that can be above 40°C, bending thick iron bars of up to 20 cm diameter, with just the strength of their arms, sometimes helped with pipes put on the bars to augment their strength. The work then done upstairs to set the iron structures is extremely dangerous, and the risks are overwhelming. Shankar, one of Guruji's older Tribal workers, often ended these long working days with barely the strength to climb down the ladder. The next section of this paper shows how the values promoted at the work place are at the same time a source of valorization for the workers and of legitimation for the disciplinary regimes.

¹⁴This was a sentence the *thekedar* could not understand. A double disobedience consists in contesting the order but also in showing that the *thekedar* has less knowledge of English than his worker, which is a bold challenge to his status.

¹⁵Job that consists of building a mould around the metal structure in order to pour the concrete inside.

3.2 | Values of work and the work's valorization

Migrant workers have always been more docile, and they have been preferred for this reason since the 19th century, at least (Robb, 1993). This is mainly why the rural proletariat is kept footloose (Breman, 1996), by endless migrations. Though this condition may be explained by material factors, because migrant workers are in alien territory with no, or small, networks and thus depend on the *thekedar* for almost everything (Breman, 1996), there is also an internalization of this condition. The migrants there turn this attitude of submission in a positive direction. According to them, it was also the sign that they were rural, and thus honest and willing to do the hard work, the *mehnat*. Making the effort also means supporting the labour's harshness and controlling one's emotions, in particular the fear of falling when working on small metal girders suspended at heights of 20 m.

These work values plainly look to be a "choice of the necessary" in the sense of Bourdieu's distinction (1979), when he characterizes the dominated classes' cultures by a valorization of the masculine virtues related to strength and virility. According to Bourdieu, they are making a virtue of a necessity, by valorizing the only social value that is left to them: their labour power. The construction site's workers also qualify this quality as a rural virtue linked to honesty (*imandari*). For example, when they were working in Bhopal's poor neighbourhoods, Guruji's workers used to valorize their sense of honesty and their inclination for hard work, constructing their rural identity in opposition to the Muslim dwellers around, seen as dishonest and lazy (*kamchor*). But, when interviewed, a Muslim worker of Guruji's gang admitted that there was a spirit of laziness, violence, and delinquency in the poor dwellings of Bhopal, because of the irregular work in the workshops. He said that trying to make a career in construction was also a way to escape from this milieu. This shows how these common values, this *ethos* of the migrant worker, can even be shared—at least publicly—by workers who come from an alien milieu, a milieu against which this *ethos* is built. While it is impossible to know whether making these statements against their own community is a tactical choice or not, sharing them is certainly a necessary condition for their being accepted by the Hindu-dominated construction yard society.

Regarding the job's nature, it is difficult to valorize oneself by staying at the bottom of the hierarchy. Higher skill sets in the job will bring better payment and a higher status. So, promotions are very important for a worker who wants to earn good money and make a living, or simply be respected. But very few workers will become skilled and one day become *thekedars* or foremen, for these must be a part of what Breman calls the "core" of the gang (1996), a group formed by a few workers who are close to the *thekedar*. Let us analyse the criteria that allow a worker to rise in the construction yard's hierarchy to be a part of that "core."

As they are marginalized in the camps, women are totally excluded from this *ethos* of labour: They are present in the construction yard but stay relegated to the most subaltern tasks, invoking protection from the risk of falling when working without protection at the top of structures, at heights of 20 m. These flyover construction yards rely on metal building, centring, and concrete pouring. Women are far less present than in the construction yards studied by Parry (2014) because trades like centring or barbending are considered skilled and women are restrained from entering the training processes. They are hired for marginal tasks, mainly curing (wetting the concrete to avoid cracking), and, as in other construction sites (Parry, 2014), carrying building materials. As in many other contexts, such as the jute industry (Sen, 1999) or the urban workshops (Chambers, 2019; Kaba, 2022), they are discriminated against not only in terms of so-called exposure to risk and to avoid sexual harassment but also because men deny them the ability to become skilled. Their subaltern work, exhausting but often devalorized as "easy" by men, is never recognized and always paid less, even compared to a man doing the exact same job. This is also linked to a certain sense of a masculine vision of the man's breadwinner role: As Parry said (2014), the supposed moral looseness of the construction sites is a source of worry for the men who have normative obligations to control their spouses' sexuality. Shah Rukh and Bamba affirmed in 2012 that there is also a sense of pride for a working man to protect his wife from the supposed dishonour implied by working in the construction sector.

Then, there are, of course, personal affinities between the *thekedar* and the worker. In Guruji's gang, the criterion was "friendship" (*dosti*). This "friendship" is an instrumental bond of trust (Picherit, 2009b) between the

thekedar and the worker, implying ambiguous bonds of submission versus assistance, which does not exclude the building of sincere affinities over time. To develop this bond of trust, kinship or caste ties were often not prominent. For example, Guruji's stepbrother was said to be his "worst student," but his brother and nephew followed his path and are now *thekedars* with him. Moreover, he had difficult relationships with Manoj, a caste fellow presented as a (distant) relative who soon left the work altogether. He was satisfied by the work of many Tribal or other lower caste workers.

As kinship does not always seem to be relevant, neither is caste and nor is local provenance: None of the workers from Guruji's village are presented as his followers, even though he had brought many of them there. Who was taught how to become a *thekedar*? These were two young boys he met in Bhopal's slums, one of them being Asim (Muslim), who adopted the migrant's ethos, and the second Shah Rukh (also Muslim), who shared a strong "friendship" with Guruji, a friendship that was sometimes criticized by some of his Hindu workers.

Though holding strong stereotypes about people belonging to the urban Muslim community, Guruji would say that his Muslim workers are different, honest, and trustworthy, in particular his friend Shah Rukh. This shows that the core of trustworthy workers is not always defined by the strongest links (i.e., family, caste, and by extension the village). Rather, it is defined by developments of affinities with the *thekedar* at the workplace, because a successful skilled worker may become his competitor. For example, Guruji explained his friendship with Shah Rukh and the source of his trust by mentioning—among other events—the day Shah Rukh defended him with a sword against a dozen young residents of Bhopal's *bastis* who were threatening him. Moreover, Shah Rukh and Asim have both worked in Bhopal's metal workshop, and it seems logic that in a specialized niche like barbending, the disposition for skills is central to getting the job done and has sometimes little relation to caste, family, or village ties.

There are also criteria to do with the representation of a worker's merit, which are verbalized as norms by the *thekedars* and the workers; they stayed the same for all the workers and overseers interviewed. According to these norms, one must begin at an early age to become skilled and to climb up the hierarchy. Workers think that only younger bodies are flexible and resistant enough to learn the gestures quickly. Therefore, skilled workers prefer to transmit their knowledge to unmarried workers because taking care of a family would burden a person with additional worries and obligations to come back to the village and, overall, would compel a married man to make as much money as he could, rather than focusing on learning. Multiple *thekedars* insisted on this point, and Guruji frankly condemned the decision of one of his workers from the same village, Bamba, when he decided to marry while he was not yet skilled and still had some debts to repay to landlords in the village. The *mistris* and *thekedars* take cuts from the wages of those who want not only to work for them but also to learn from them. Therefore, a worker who must earn enough money for his family cannot afford to take this cut and thus cannot become skilled.

Second, the worker would have to do the job willingly (*dil se*). Another quality would be to have interest (*pasand*) or, here, curiosity. Then the "curious" apprentice would have a great capacity for understanding; he would catch the *thekedar's* explanations quickly. People who can "catch the job" quickly were said to be "smart," literally that they have a "brain," *dimag*. The pinnacle of this quality is the ability to reproduce gestures by direct observation. This is the most valued virtue as it is considered to be harder than learning from the *thekedar*, and according to the labourers, the one who has this virtue does not necessarily need to be in this privileged personal relationship with the *thekedar* in order to become skilled. He can increase his skills by himself and thus short-circuit the gang's core-periphery structure that reserves knowledge transmission for the favourites. Therefore, those who have this quality are seen as smart, the ones who have the most *dimag*.

The more skilled a job is, the more it is said to be a *dimag ka kam*, a "brain" job. The more unskilled a job is, the more it is said to be a *hath ka kam*, a "hand" job. There is a continuum between the jobs that are said to involve more of *dimag* or more of *hath*. Though linked to the brain, virtue in the skilled job does not mean that the skilled worker is not doing labour anymore. The majority of the *thekedars* I saw do participate in the work (the ones who do not work at all are generally called "contractors"), and though they manage other labourers, they are often no more than skilled labourers themselves. Their very legitimacy lies in the way they master the manual work. This is also why they

call their knowledge “technical knowledge” in English or “*technical jankari*” in Hinglish.¹⁶ And the acquisition of this knowledge is symbolized as a path leading from the hand to the brain, even though the work stays manual.

If Jonathan Parry (2020) demonstrates that “class trumps caste” in the Indian contemporary formal sector, then it is manifest from this example that in places of work such as these construction yards, hierarchies of work are more often put forward than the ones of caste in the daily logics of identity and socialization. The two contexts are not directly comparable, not only because one is in the formal sector and the other is in the informal sector but also because the logic of socialization at work here is distinct from the logic of life, which take place in geographically, socially, and culturally different settings. Still, for the migrants, this configuration of the social relations at work is far from being insignificant. While labour relations are fully embedded in caste-class struggles in the village, they experiment here with a mode of relation at work where the *thekedar* is a *thekedar* and will take the risks for the team, Brahmin, or otherwise and where the helper must help, whether or not he is of upper caste extraction. In the next section of this paper, I argue that these social relations form the bulk of symbolic struggles around status at work.

3.3 | Symbolic struggles and material resistances

More importantly, these types of work *ethos* are not the bulk of concrete class struggles but are mobilized for symbolic struggles. The struggles are for the most part that of informal workers who face the less considered and much more precarious condition of “*mazduri*” in contrast to those who have the “*naukri*.” Here, the symbolic struggle is strongly articulated on the literate and non-literate boundary. As Parry rightly observes in Bhilai—and the argument is absolutely relevant in these construction yards—possessing a *naukri* has little to do with actual skills but a lot to do with being literate and having benefited from higher education (2019, p. 64).

Therefore, the white-collar group of the permanent employees—engineers and overseers—all degree holders, marks an important distinction from the rest of the workers whom they call with contempt the “labour.” Staying together in the same dwelling places, showing a distinction through their white shirts, their attitudes of superiority, which in the case of the engineers can go as far as asking the workers to set up a dais for them in the construction site in the full summer heat—they clearly constitute themselves as a symbolically separate class. They possess the material advantages to confirm this gap: wages reaching at least double or triple those of the worker, a permanent contract, and numerous advantages (provident fund, diverse allowances for scooters, computers, etc.). This is still the case even though they complain that these benefits are shrinking with time, especially among the private sector permanent workers and among the most recently recruited who enjoy respectively fewer and fewer protections. As Parry also pointed out (2020), there are therefore different levels of *naukri*, which are not all equivalent: The public sector engineers are *sakrari naukri*, permanent government jobs whose advantages are the stronger, while the ones working for the private companies are private *naukris*. All the permanent employees stated that their protection tends to be eroded through time, and older supervisors from the public company had much more advantages (e.g., specific allowances) than the younger ones. But even if they are not a homogenous group, they strongly distinguish themselves from the manual workforce.

Permanent employees usually do not recognize the value of the informal worker's knowledge. When I interviewed an engineer, a Pandey (Brahmin caste, the same as Guruji's), about the knowledge that Guruji once demonstrated to me by explaining the theorems of Thales and Pythagoras with iron rods, the engineer said “this is rubbish, he can only do what he is told, he cannot understand these things.” This comment was made by another Brahmin, from the same caste as Guruji. But here, what counts more than their common caste origin are the two different labour segments to which they belong, a reflection that class matters as well as caste. During interviews, the engineers stated that the labourers cannot understand the work they are doing because they lack formal education. This devalorization of their labour is precisely what they stand up against when the *thekedars* and the foremen sometimes

¹⁶A mix of Hindi and English.

state that they are “almost as, or as skilled as an engineer.” Stories, for example, about a *mistri* called “foreman”¹⁷ who had an engineer fired because the engineer, despising him, did not consider his indications, which appeared to be true, are shared among the workers and are told with great delight. By characterizing their work as “brain” work, alongside the engineer’s work, the elite workers blur the dividing line between the staff’s position of degree holder versus casual job holder, the latter seen as the illiterate worker’s fate. These symbolic struggles are central to the workers’ discourses because they are a way to valorize themselves against the so-called “educated” people whom they face not only in the construction yard but also throughout their entire lives.

However, this does not mean that these symbolic struggles are creating unity among the workers. It is rather the opposite as they draw another line between the workers who manage to become skilled and develop “brain” and the others who stay at the bottom of the hierarchy. A distinction (Bourdieu, 1979) is thereby created between those who have only their labour power and those who have gone beyond it. The main consequence of this segmentation around skills is a breakdown of many horizontal solidarities that could emerge: Caste solidarities are broken down by the organization of gangs, weakening the process. Inside the gang, devalorizing the labour of the weak constitutes a form of oppression, justifying their subaltern position, and the microhierarchies of the gang and the everlasting competition sustaining them tend to suppress any attempt to form horizontal solidarity that might have formed based on the idea that “we are all workers” or that caste does not matter. Therefore, the hierarchies introduced by the process of work and the working *ethos* contradict the sense of conviviality that can be felt outside of working hours, disciplining the workforce along the segments of teams managed by *thekedars* and contractors.

The fact that the working *ethos* reproduces and legitimizes the work hierarchies explains the absence of collective struggles. Guruji once told me that in the case of a strike, if all the workers of all the gangs, all the communities, and all the *thekedars* agreed to strike together, the company could find new groups of employees and starve their existing workers in a matter of a few weeks. Sunit, the Kum’har *thekedar*, had some things to say about the equality of all workers, coming from his affiliation with the CITU,¹⁸ but could declare in private “we know how to break their unity” (*unity toreng*) if a leader emerges, and justified his cynicism by the fact that unionism was only possible in the organized sector. The only configuration where the workers could show both horizontal and vertical solidarities together was as follows: first, the rare case of severely low remuneration, which might cause the *thekedar* to suddenly remember that he was also a worker, and second, the very low compensation in case of death on the site, which could lead to the emergence of solidarities on their condemnation. Except for these rare cases, the construction yards did not witness clear solidarities between the workers.

If the configuration of cosmopolitan conviviality exists, the ways in which identities at work construct themselves, mainly around concurrence and opposition, show a sharp difference with the egalitarian and class-based *ethos* often found in the public sector (Parry, 1999; Strümpell, 2008). At the end of the day, the real dividing line lays between the possessors of *naukri* and the one in the *mazdari*. The permanent employees have more secure jobs and much better wages and enjoy a much higher status, while the latter are by far disadvantaged and would have common interest to struggle together beyond symbolic bravado. The hierarchies around skills that enhance the concurrences between workers, combined with the concurrence between *thekedar*’s groups, do a dividing work that is no less efficient than the caste-led division in preventing any group mobilization and reproducing the disciplinary regime—confining the worker’s struggles to a largely symbolic mode. There were only ephemeral individual resistances and the even scarcer resistances for wages payment at the scale of a worker’s gang. I sometimes heard narratives of collective resignations, after accidents in other construction yards, and especially after low compensations for a dead worker, but never witnessed such actions in the construction yards where I did the fieldwork.

Workers and *thekedars* are well aware that the configuration of the construction yards makes it impossible to mobilize horizontal solidarities to any significant extent, because the labour management system is too well

¹⁷Which means that he was an exceptionally skilled *mistri*. A *mistri* is literally a foreman, but when a *mistri* is called “foreman” (in English) in the construction yard, it means that he is much more skilled than a normal *mistri*.

¹⁸Communist trade union, affiliated to the Communist Party of India (Marxist).

developed to allow collective resistance. In this context, the *ethos* of work is mobilized in order to legitimate hierarchies or find a status and a sense of work; but in other contexts, Guruji, his nephew, or some of Sunit's workers affirmed that this kind of difficult and dangerous work is done, first of all, out of necessity (*majburi*), and almost none of the workers hoped to see their children in this line. As a defence, a whole group of casual workers, coming from different caste backgrounds and from different hierarchical positions, have to symbolically shape themselves as a skilled spirit (with *dimag*)—a gifted professional body that is itself sub-divided along the line of skills: centring, barbending, welding, having vertical solidarities along the lines of knowledge possessed by those interested in the job, have the capacity to grow, and are elected by *thekedars* and *mistris*. These working identities are powerful ways to defend one's work but also one's general status when a worker of any caste background insists that one is illiterate. This was an observation that came spontaneously and repeatedly when I addressed workers, as often as it was a reminder of a sign of inferiority by permanent, white-collar construction yard employees. Last, these identities are circumscribed to the construction sites, but they interact with more complex changes regarding the cast and class relation between the construction sites and the villages.

4 | CHANGING POWER RELATIONS IN THE VILLAGE: MIGRATION AND AFFIRMATION

4.1 | Patterns on migration and oppression

Making a contrast with village life puts into perspective the construction yard's findings. It shows that, on the one hand, caste domination is much more salient here in rural areas; on the other hand, lower caste workers' narratives highlight a feeling of gradual loosening of caste-related oppression even in the villages. There is thus no opposition between a “modern” conviviality in the construction yards and a static or “traditional” context in the villages. The struggles in the village stay central as expectations often lie there, and the migrants seldom wish to settle somewhere other than their place of origin.

The interviews that I conducted at the end of the fieldwork (in spring 2014) at the Bandha and Mandideep construction sites among workers from a Dalit (mainly Chamar), Adivasi (Kol and Gond), and very low-caste (e.g., Kum'har¹⁹) background led to similar conclusions about the concrete effects of tolerance in ritual discrimination between castes in terms of limiting caste oppression in the construction yards. All the respondents also agreed that caste-related oppression was much more salient in the village. They declared that the two main forms of oppression, besides labour relations, were land predation (to reimburse loans) or political control of the dominant caste, which could be, following the villages and regions, Kurmis, Telis, or Jats. The construction yard's labour relations were always considered better than the agrarian labour relations in the village. Many of these workers possessed indeed little plots of land but not enough to live from and preferred working in the construction yard than working directly for the landlords in agriculture. For example, they said that wages were often unpaid in the countryside. Especially in situations where workers were in dependent relations with landlords, or in debt to them, the latter would often claim that the work has not been properly done, justifying their not paying for the working day or paying the workers in grain instead of in cash. In the construction yard, the *thekedars* were indeed oppressing the workers, but at least they paid for every day of work. The MGNREGA's effects on opening possibilities of breaking these ties of exploitative labour relations were underlined by many migrant workers from Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. All the respondents described a situation of oppression by the dominant castes, which was not static: They always said that in their perception, the links of oppression in the village have loosened compared to a generation ago, and they believed that they had more agency in the village than their fathers had.

¹⁹Kum'hars are labelled SCs in Madhya Pradesh but not in Rajasthan.

4.2 | Shy hopes of mobilities in the village of Bhandha

So how do these changes in agrarian village relations articulate themselves with the relative freedom encountered by lower castes at the construction yard? To investigate this point, I carried out 1 month of participant observation alone and conducted 30 interviews with Shankare Gowda, my research assistant, at Bhandha, Guruji and Bamba's home village. The village of Bandha is part of the Rampur Baghelan district (tehsil). It was ruled for centuries by the Baghelan Kshatriya (warrior and princely caste) clan, and still today, they are the main landowners of the village. According to a Pandey respondent, they saved a great chunk of their land at the time of the land reforms by declaring plot of lands to belong to urban siblings. The two main Brahmin castes Pandey (Guruji's caste) and Mohapatra were classified as "bare log" (big people), upper and powerful castes, but the Brahmins were seen less as exploiters than the Kshatriyas by the village inhabitants because they own less land and also take part in village life. They are particularly numerous in the village. The few members of merchant castes such as Teli are also ranked high, while Galaria (shepherds) are a peasant caste, ranked Shudra (craftsmen and cultivator castes) but much higher than the Yoghia, a numerous low-status cultivating caste. There are some families of Kum'hars, who are ranked as low status and are considered locally as SC ("untouchables"). The most notable caste of "untouchables" is the Chamars, who take the Chaudhuri name, and two tribes, whose members are considered almost as low as the untouchables: the Kol and the Gond. All the castes have different places of dwelling in the village, though many places, especially those along the road, may have alternate different clusters of houses belonging to one caste.

One evening in March 2013, Shankare Gowda, Guruji and I were sipping tea together at the village's main road tea stall. Some Tribal workers from the Gond tribe, some Chamars (Dalits), and a Yoghia farmer who used to make extra money by working in construction in the neighbouring town, Rampur, were sitting next to us. The Yoghia farmer had back pain due to a fall on a construction yard, leaving him with a bowed stature. As we were discussing the status of his caste, which is considered of low status in the village, he was arguing that the Yoghia caste is indeed composed of yogis and that they used to be rishis (saints). Guruji reacted to this assertion with much laughter, answering "they are not yogis, they are 'bhogis' " (imposters). He then explained to us the typical ideological *varna* order and tried to demonstrate how the Yoghias could not pretend to such a status. On being asked how he could repeatedly state that "there were no castes," that "mankind was one" in the construction yards, and so cautiously defend the *varna* hierarchy in the village, he answered "well, mankind is one but a unique category like 'clothes' wherein there are shirts and trousers." "So, what is the use of this system?" asked Gowda. There was sudden silence, and a man who belonged to a craftsman (Vishvakarma—middle status) caste declared: "Well, I think the goal is that we work and they do nothing." All the other customers agreed to this provocative statement. The Yoghia worker rose as if his back problem had disappeared. He shouted, "I only believe in one god, the sky and the ground!" A Chamar complained of the oppression from the upper castes and recounted how his father had been a bonded worker and had died just after the day he was able to finally repay his debt and set himself free. Guruji remained silent, feeling challenged and upset.

This scene teaches us how much the Brahmanical ideology is salient and central in defining ritual and social status but also how it can be openly contested even in the village setting. Later, I met a group of Chamars who were going to perform a ceremony with their own untouchable priest to bless newborn goats. While asked about the caste hierarchies in the village, the assembly made fun of the *varna* ideology saying: "so there is this man, Manu, every caste order is a part of it and we are the excrement, who can believe in it except Brahmins?" These kinds of contestation are taking place in a context of slowly changing labour relations in the village. For example, Guruji's family has a narrative of past decadence and reminded me bitterly of the land reforms that took some of their land, followed by the judiciary and financial problems that brought the family to a lower economic level. A friend and former worker of Guruji told me that the latter's family all had to get involved in daily wage work in the town and how it was a source of shame for them. Their young nephew is now working as a daily labourer for the nearby cement factory, an informal contract.

To make a comparison, Shuk lal and Lalit are two Galaria ex-workers of Guruji's gang. They are very good friends with Guruji, and they usually spend their time together when the latter is back from the construction yards. Lalit, in his 50s, is very modest and was humiliated numerous times by Mohapatra (Brahmin) landowners during my sojourn in the village; he stayed in submission, not responding to their provocations regarding his lower caste status. However, Lalit sold a part of his land to pay for the studies of his two sons and now both have a (private) *naukri*, permanent employment, one as engineer in Bombay and the other as technician in Bangalore. He experienced much better social mobility than Guruji's family, albeit his lower caste status.

Of course, there are members of relatively powerful castes at the scale of the village level, who have access to land. However, even among lower caste inhabitants, narratives expressed a feeling of improvement of their bargaining power. For sure, links of oppression (*dabana* in Hindi) were often highlighted. For example, a family of Kum'har, as well as multiple Chamar and Tribal families, complained unceasingly about the indirect oppression by the upper castes, which were especially demonstrated in forms of coercion when they did not vote for the party they were asked to support. If the village inhabitants acting as middlemen for the political parties (*dalals*), coming to the households with alcohol, could not persuade them, the upper castes would forbid passage through their fields and the roads they controlled as a rule of retaliation. The relations of domination have not changed drastically, but in terms of labour relations, they have become less direct than when the landless workers had no other choice than working in the landowner's fields. Kum'har, Chamar (Dalit), and Kol (Tribal) respondents all stated that for the previous generation, there was little other choice than to work for landowners, often for payment in kind (with grain instead of cash, with a widespread practice of just skipping working days' payment for arbitrary reasons). These labour relations did not leave much space for negotiations, within and outside the labour relation, and they created debt bondage, land predation, and dependence by credit. Working in other places as well as the local implementation of the MGNREGA, albeit imperfect, have reduced the concrete links of dependency on landowners. As Shomdev, a Brahmin teacher and landowner summarized: "Before, we were distributing food and clothes to the landless, now it changed [...] It is good that the [MG]NREGA has brought new possibilities, but now it is almost cheaper to rent a tractor and to buy the gasoline for us than to hire the village's labourers."

Stating the importance of these changes would call for an in-depth socio-economic study of the village, which lies outside the scope of this paper, but these narratives simply confirm a very general trend in India: The link between MGNREGA, migration, and a greater autonomy of the landless castes is highlighted in numerous studies of transformation in agrarian relations. Even in the South's bonded labour relations, Telangana construction workers as well as Tamil Nadu brick kiln workers experience relative empowerment through migration even though they remain in extremely oppressive and often unfree labour relations even if the Dalit workers are still the ones who experience the rarest mobilities (Guérin et al., 2012; Picherit, 2012). De Neve and Carswell (2014) present, in Tiruppur's hinterland, the disappointment of Gounder landlords who complain that since the generalization of daily migration to the city for work, Dalit workers now refuse to come to their fields even if they make the effort to avoid talking to them in a disrespectful manner.²⁰ This paternalist and astonished tone recalls a lot of Shomdev's complaints, and De Neve and Carswell's interpretation is that even if the landlords still think that they are superior, the lower castes can afford to care less about their opinion.

These narratives from the villages are putting the loosening of caste hierarchies and the development of inter-caste professional identities in the construction yard in perspective. They are relativized by the stronger presence of caste-related oppression in the village, but when it comes to labour relations, workers of the construction yards also cite a context of loosening relations of dependency on landowners, thanks to these multiple possibilities to find work abroad and inside the village without the direct control of landowning castes. At the end of the day, the construction yard is only one of the multiple spaces of relative freedom that are slowly unravelling. People from Bhandra's village work as daily labourers in the neighbouring cement plants and migrate to Chhattisgarh's brick kilns. This is not to say

²⁰Sujoy Dutta made the same observations regarding low-caste workers who used to work for landowners in Uttar Pradesh and now commute to a bulb making factory (2012).

that the links to the contractors, unavoidable in these jobs, are free from connections to these landowning castes; but the greater flexibilities experienced are in the form of many small interstices of freedom where migrant workers hang on to try to make their way with greater autonomy.

5 | CONCLUSION

In the segmented classes of labour that make up the bulk of India's workforce, the evolution of labour relations introduced by migration is in the long run loosening the local links hitherto shaping dependency on upper caste landowners. In the case of the construction yards' migrant workers, the narratives confirm a feeling of slow and gradual jeopardization of these links. Labour relations far away from the village are opening spaces of life where these workers feel that they can breathe, because relations of caste domination are less salient and new hierarchical relations have been forged, beyond those that have for generations tied villagers to the upper caste landowners.

These spaces of conviviality are not utopias: They are spaces dedicated to work where people live in rather difficult conditions to earn money. They take place in a sector that uses the *thekedar* system to employ them while avoiding almost any legal frameworks, even when the order giver is the Indian state itself. However, here workers also build camaraderie around the fireplace and experience a more relaxed way of life regarding pollution rules. Other hierarchies that are seldom bound to caste dynamics rule the construction yard's life. Accepting these hierarchies and injunctions means to share—at least superficially—some common values whatever the caste or community of origin. The need for workers to be docile becomes part of one's pride in working hard as rural migrants. The need to climb the hierarchies of labour through mastering skills becomes a means to gain the self-satisfaction of having a sharp brain despite a lack of formal education. These workers know all too well that the pride acquired through their labour hardly softens the everyday competition, the frustration many experience when they remain at the bottom of the hierarchy all their life, or the continual humiliation resulting from the engineers' lack of consideration. After all, the sharper divide in the *mazduri* remains between the literate owners of the *naukri* and the others. If we except the bigger labour suppliers, all the unorganized worker, be them petty *thekedars* like Guruji, or helpers, all have to cope with precarious working conditions and with widely devalorized jobs. Several *thekedars* are lucid about how they could come together over common interests and how the *thekedar* system prevents collective resistance, while their real aspirations and dreams are often far from the construction yard. Women are severely laid-off from this system or valorization within work.

Yet the itinerant life between these freer spaces of the construction yard and the evolving spaces of the village encourages the blooming of a flexible social consciousness, between the emphasis on inter-communitarian professional identities at the construction site and the caste-driven struggles for loosening the ties of dependence and domination in the village. This blooming is possible because of a wider context where the development of migration and state-driven policies such as MGNREGA are opening potential spaces of freedom. Although the reproduction of exploitation is also quite prominent, these patterns of symbolic struggles and attempts of mobility, thanks to the work in Madhya Pradesh's construction sites, are some of the multiple ways for contemporary Indian classes of labour to hook onto the small interspaces they can find within multifaceted structures of oppression in order to seek a better life.

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