

Unpicking Precarity: Informal Work in Eastern India's Coal Mining Tracts

Itay Noy

ABSTRACT

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, this article explores two widespread types of informal and precarious work in eastern India's coal mining tracts. It seeks to contribute to recent attempts to disaggregate the umbrella notion of precarity and the related concept of 'classes of labour' in the context of the global South. It does so by illuminating the more nuanced yet significant relative distinctions between different forms of precarious coal-related work as perceived and experienced by labourers. The article illustrates how labourers evaluate such forms of work in relation to one another in terms of relative stability, autonomy, tempo and gender dynamics, which affect their livelihood decisions and activities. It thereby turns attention to differentiating dimensions of precarious work that are easily veiled in broad debates about precarity and 'classes of labour'. Such dimensions are essential to probe — through comparative ethnographic study — to understand how people engage with different modalities of precarious work on the ground and how they configure their livelihood strategies in particular capitalist and social contexts.

INTRODUCTION

In the mining tracts of Jharkhand, in eastern India, large numbers of rural Adivasis or indigenous people have come to depend on coal-related livelihoods over the past decades. Rather than being employed in the open-cast mining projects that quarry their lands, however, where jobs are in dire short supply, most of them have to eke out a living through informal,

The research on which this article is based was financially supported by the London School of Economics, the UK's Economic and Social Council, and a European Research Council Starting Grant (313664, project UNDERINDIA, PI Alpa Shah). The author is grateful to his interlocutors and to Manish Kumar Ekka for his research assistance. The fieldwork on which this article is draws would not have been possible without them. Special thanks are also due to Jens Lerche as well as to the members of the Centre for Energy Ethics at the University of St Andrews for their generous comments on earlier drafts, and to three anonymous reviewers for their helpful feedback and criticisms.

Development and Change 0(0): 1–24. DOI: 10.1111/dech.12739

© 2022 The Authors. *Development and Change* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd on behalf of International Institute of Social Studies.

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

precarious forms of coal-based work. This article compares these different types of work, from the perspectives of labourers, to contribute to attempts to unpick the umbrella notion of precarity — and, relatedly, Henry Bernstein's concept 'classes of labour' (2007), which comprises all those who are compelled to reproduce themselves through precarious work in the informal economy. The article does so by exploring ethnographically the distinct meanings and outcomes of different kinds of precarious work undertaken by labourers, and the ways in which they experience and evaluate them in relation to one another.

While the issue of precarity has a long history in the literature on labour informality (e.g., Chang, 2009; Moody, 1997; Munck, 2002), it has recently been the subject of renewed, ample attention, notably through the writings of Guy Standing (2011, 2014a, 2014b). Standing's assertion of precarity as a new global phenomenon, however, has drawn critique from scholars of the global South (e.g., Munck, 2013), where precarious livelihoods in the informal economy are far from a new occurrence but have long been the more dominant reality for labour. More recent scholarship has subsequently sought to consider the differences in processes of precarity in the global North and South (Bhattacharya and Kesar, 2020); and, within the latter, to distinguish the different modalities of work encompassed by the term precarity (*ibid.*), and the different 'classes of labour' involved in them (e.g., Mezzadri and Lulu, 2018; Pattenden, 2018).¹ This scholarship has been mostly concerned with analysing the differentiated structural positions of different spaces of precarious work and 'classes of labour' in particular capitalist production realms. Much less scrutiny, however, has been applied in this context to the more nuanced, relative distinctions between different kinds of precarious work as perceived by labourers themselves, and the role these play in their livelihood decisions. Although studying precarity and informality from the perspective of labour is, of course, not new (e.g., Breman, 1994, 1996; De Neve, 2005; Lee, 2007b; Ngai, 2005; Ong, 1987), far less common is a comparative ethnographic examination, from this perspective, of more than a single type of precarious work, particularly when carried out by the same labourers. Such an examination, I suggest, allows for a greater focus on the more subtle yet significant differences between variants of such work for those engaged in them.

Drawing on 18 months of fieldwork (2015–17) in an Adivasi village I call Karampot,² located next to a state-run opencast colliery in Jharkhand, this article discusses and compares the two main forms of informal, precarious work in which villagers participate. The first is coal peddling — a

1. While earlier studies on the informalization of industrial production in the global South (e.g., Chang, 2012; Lee, 2007a, 2007b) also investigated various types and settings of informal work, they did not generally seek to analytically and explicitly map and compare these in relation to one another.

2. Most names of both places and people have been changed throughout.

form of petty commodity production in which villagers illicitly gather coal from the mine, coke it,³ and sell it as cooking fuel on the nearby highway.⁴ The second is casual wage labour in the mine's depot yard, which involves manually loading coal onto trucks for dispatch. By probing the ways in which villagers regard these two activities, the article illustrates how different types of precarious work are assessed differently by labourers in terms of degree of precarity and (ir)regularity, autonomy, work rhythms and time, and gender dynamics. It thereby demonstrates how people construct their livelihood strategies around dimensions of work that are often neglected in broad debates about precarity and 'classes of labour' (see also Picherit, 2018). The article thus contributes to the endeavour to disaggregate and concretize these generalizing categorizations by elucidating, from the bottom up, the distinctions labourers themselves make between specific modes of precarious work, and the implications of these for their livelihood configurations and choices on the ground. Moreover, through its ethnographic focus on precarity as a lived everyday experience, the article offers a study of precarity from an emic perspective that diverges from structural, generalized theorizations of the term. It does so by seeking to understand precarity through the distinctions made by, and the experiences of, labourers themselves rather than in relation to pre-existing definitions of what can be considered 'non-precarious'.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. The next section lays out the research methodology used to collect the data on which the article draws, and considers how the ethnographic comparison it offers differs from other ethnographic work on informal labour. The following section then discusses the re-emergence, and critiques, of labour precarity as a 'new' issue of concern. It introduces the concept of 'classes of labour' in relation to precarity in the global South, and considers recent attempts to unpack the two terms, in this context, by discerning different precarious labour arrangements and groups of workers. The article then provides a brief overview of informality in the Indian economy and, more specifically, the country's coal sector, which constitutes the backdrop for the analysis. Next, it focuses ethnographically on the economic activities of, first, coal peddling, and second, truck loading. It describes each type of work, examines its different facets, and explores villagers' variegated considerations for engaging in it. The subsection on coal peddling explores the contradictory role of this activity in the lives of villagers. It illuminates the unexpected benefits they

3. Coking entails burning the coal over small fires to remove volatiles in order to use the finished product as cooking fuel. The process prevents food from being tainted during cooking.

4. I refer to coal peddling as petty commodity production — or a small-scale, household-based production process — as villagers do not only obtain the coal but also, through coking, produce the finished, sold 'product' (which is actually coke, used as a cooking fuel, rather than raw coal). On the dynamics of petty commodity production in contemporary India more generally, see Harriss-White (2012).

draw from it, which make peddling coal generally preferable to casual wage labour, including truck loading. The subsection on truck loading then investigates the reasons that lead villagers to nevertheless engage in this work. By juxtaposing the particular features of coal peddling and truck loading, and their meanings for labourers, the section as a whole casts light on aspects of precarious work that are easily overlooked but nonetheless play an important role in shaping people's livelihood decisions. The conclusion summarizes the argument and reflects on the limitations of the broad-brush categories of precarity and 'classes of labour' for understanding what people do on the ground and why. It underscores the importance, for this purpose, of comparative ethnographic research on the specifics of different forms of work from the viewpoints of labourers, and of developing an understanding of precarity through emic categories and distinctions.

FIELDWORK AND METHODOLOGY

The ethnographic fieldwork from which data are derived was carried out between 2015 and 2017. During this period, I was living in Karampot alongside villagers engaged, with variable frequency, in coal peddling and truck-loading work as their main means of income. Research methods comprised a comprehensive household survey, covering the village's 146 households and recording data on the livelihood activities of each member; numerous in-depth, semi-structured interviews and open-ended conversations with villagers, centred on different aspects of coal peddling and truck loading, earnings, and their use; and participant observation in the everyday lives and labour of villagers. As part of this, I observed and participated as far as was possible in my interlocutors' daily work practices, closely accompanying the different stages of each type of labour as well as the interspersed periods of leisure. Some individuals, both men and women, were continually consulted through regular home visits and more casual, everyday encounters. This close interaction allowed me to also take part in people's domestic lives, and gain insights into the connections between labour practices and household dynamics.

Through its comparative ethnographic focus on the labour of coal peddling and truck loading, the article seeks to contribute to the study of precarity and informal labour not only theoretically but also methodologically. Most ethnographic studies of informal, precarious work centre either exclusively or primarily on a single type of labour (e.g., Bolt, 2015; De Neve, 1999, 2005; Prentice, 2015; Swider, 2015). More comparative studies, for their part, have tended to offer a comparison of different types of work carried out by different people. Parry's recent (2019) monograph, for instance, situates the precarious labour of casual workers in the Bhilai Steel Plant in relation to its much narrower stratum of regular, permanent workers, while Pattenden (2018) compares two groups of 'classes of labour' working in

the informal economy in two contrasting areas and contexts in southern India. This article, on the other hand, provides a related but different and less common type of comparison — namely, between different forms of precarious work routinely undertaken by the very same labourers.⁵ This provides a more fine-grained ethnographic insight into the ways in which people rationalize the choices they make between different kinds of similarly insecure, informal work based on their respective specific features.

The ability to carry out such an ethnographic comparison, I suggest, is by no means limited to Karampot, which can be considered a typical field site and village for at least two reasons. First, and more locally, based on the available literature (e.g., Ahmad and Lahiri-Dutt, 2014; Lahiri-Dutt, 2014a, 2016: 208, 2017) as well as my visits to other villages in the area, peddling coal and loading trucks in collieries' depot yards appear to be prevalent forms of work in which villagers inhabiting eastern India's mining tracts engage. Second, and more broadly, Karampot is one of numerous villages in rural India — and indeed other parts of the global South — where people (or 'classes of labour') now combine and shift between different kinds of precarious work, notably casual wage labour and petty commodity production (Bernstein, 2007, 2010; Shah, 2014: 348; Shah and Harriss-White, 2011). Karampot, in this sense, is embedded within a much wider reality of labour where people have 'complex livelihoods' comprising informal forms of wage labour, self-employment, and other subsistence activities (Shah and Harriss-White, 2011: 17).

PRECARITY AND 'CLASSES OF LABOUR'

The analysis of precarity has, at least implicitly, been part and parcel of the debate on informal — and characteristically precarious — labour in the global South since the 1970s, particularly in so-called 'world market factories' (e.g., Elson and Pearson, 1981; Nash and Fernández-Kelly, 1983). Most of the recent, burgeoning focus on this phenomenon, however, owes much to the work of Guy Standing (2011, 2014a, 2014b). In Standing's work, precarity is understood in terms of emergent forms of 'non-standard', unstable, insecure work — generated through processes of globalization and labour market flexibilization — that give rise to a 'new' global class of precarious workers. This proposition, however, has attracted criticism for its Eurocentric approach — in other words, its reliance on, and universal extrapolation of, the relatively recent experiences of capitalist economies in the global

5. Scholars such as Breman (2007) and Picherit (2018) have explored the labour of seasonal migrant workers in India — for example, in construction or in brick kilns — while also describing their work in their home villages. That research is not, however, explicitly and comparatively focused on the particular characteristics of the different types of precarious work in which labour migrants are engaged while away and at home.

North (e.g., Breman and van der Linden, 2014; Munck, 2013; Scully, 2016). While in the global North, the critics argue, secure employment came to be seen as the norm, in the informal economies of the global South precarity has long been the prevalent condition for labour. The experiences of labour in the global North and South, then, have considerably differed; a uniform understanding of precarity as a global phenomenon is therefore an over-simplification, which decontextualizes precarity and ‘displaces it from its specificities’ (Bhattacharya and Kesar, 2020: 388; see also Scully, 2016).

Precarity in the global South is most often understood in connection with, and is intrinsically related to, informality (Bhattacharya and Kesar, 2020; Munck, 2013). In different economies in the region, including India, capitalist growth has not been accompanied by a growth in secure employment. Indeed, contemporary capitalism is essentially so capital-intensive that it creates fewer (formal) jobs (Shah et al., 2018: 10). Extensive informal economies therefore continue to exist, where ‘surplus populations’ — superfluous to the needs of capital — seek their livelihoods through precarious labour practices such as casual wage labour and petty commodity production, with generally low earnings, no employment security and no welfare benefits (Bhattacharya and Kesar, 2018, 2020; Breman, 2016; Sanyal, 2007). According to recent figures, the proportion of workers in informal employment ranges from 53 per cent in Latin America and the Caribbean, to 68 per cent in Asia and the Pacific, to 92 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa (ILO, 2018).

For their reproduction, it has been pointed out, such workers often transition across the spheres of informal wage labour, petty commodity production, and — where available — subsistence agriculture (Bernstein, 2007, 2010; Lerche and Shah, 2018). To capture this dynamic, Henry Bernstein (2007) has proposed the category of ‘classes of labour,’ which encompasses all those who depend on precarious ‘combinations of employment and self-employment’ (ibid.: 6). Indeed, while other work has sought to stress the dividing line between petty commodity production and wage labour (Harriss-White, 2010, 2014), the concept of ‘classes of labour’ underlines how informal workers in the global South routinely meld and move across these different spheres. While precarity concerns the insecure nature of work, ‘classes of labour’ is in fact a broader concept that seeks to extend the framework for class analysis beyond wage labour to straddle multiple exploitative work processes, including petty commodity production. While, strictly speaking, ‘classes of labour’ also includes those in permanent waged employment, it has a clear emphasis on wage labour as a mode of work that is progressively scarce, informal and insecure, which together with informal self-employment is how ‘the working poor of the South have to pursue their reproduction’ (Bernstein, 2010: 111). This is, accordingly, also the way in which the concept has been predominantly used by scholars, namely in relation to informal, precarious work and workers in the global South (e.g., Cousins et al., 2018; Pattenden and Wastuti, 2021; Shah et al., 2018: 12).

Yet, even in the context of the economies of the global South, as Bhattacharya and Kesar (2020) importantly note, the catch-all term of precarity 'agglomerate[s] heterogeneous production and labour processes, thereby veiling the particularities of these processes and their variegated implications for capitalist development in such economies' (ibid.: 388). To bring out these implications, the authors contend, it is necessary to maintain an analytical distinction between different processes and spaces of precarity. Focusing on India, Bhattacharya and Kesar identify different, distinct domains of production and labour in the informal economy — 'non-capitalist' petty commodity production, subcontracted petty commodity production, and informal wage labour — and explore the specific ways in which each is reproduced and sustained under modern-day capitalism and economic growth. In a similar vein, several scholars have sought to unpack the broad category of 'classes of labour' by considering the distinctions between such classes. Lerche (2010), for example, has offered a classification of 'classes of labour' in the Indian context according to a hierarchy of occupational categories — or types of employment and self-employment — with corresponding levels of income and power, or lack thereof. Pattenden (2016, 2018), for his part, is concerned with the politics of 'classes of labour', and discerning which groups along this continuum are easier to control and which are 'more likely to mobilize' (Pattenden, 2018: 1057). Lastly, Mezzadri and Lulu (2018) examine different production and work arrangements in the informal peripheries of the Indian and Chinese garment industries, and the different vulnerabilities and resilience mechanisms of 'classes of labour' in each setting.

These analyses attempt in different ways to unravel precarity and 'classes of labour' by examining the structural features of different types of informal work and workers in relation to capital, and within the overall terrain of labour precarity. This article, on the other hand, seeks to draw out the distinctions between different variants of precarious work by focusing ethnographically on the bottom-up perspectives and experiences of labourers, and asks how such different forms of work are perceived and evaluated by them in relation to one another. Such a method of inquiry, the article suggests, also departs from generalized conceptualizations of precarity based on broadscale analyses of global or regional regimes of capital and labour, and their tendency to reproduce an 'ideal type' or standard of non-precarious work against which modes of precarity are assessed (see also Breman and van der Linden, 2014). Instead, it proposes an approach that centres on precarity as an experienced, internally differentiated category of everyday life.⁶

The context for the ethnography that follows is the informal economy in India — where 88 per cent of the country's total workforce earn their living

6. This approach bears similarities to that proposed by Millar (2014) in her study of the work of waste pickers in Rio de Janeiro. Millar's ethnography, however, does not include an element of comparison between different forms of precarious labour.

(ILO, 2018) — and, more specifically, in the coal mining sector. Most of the country's coal reserves are located in the state of Jharkhand (Government of India, 2020),⁷ where mining operations — carried out mostly by the state-owned Coal India Limited (CIL)⁸ — have for decades taken place in areas populated by marginalized Adivasi communities.⁹ For these communities, mining activities have expropriated land, degraded living environments and eroded traditional land- and forest-based forms of subsistence (Fernandes, 2007, 2008; George, 2014). At the same time, mining has offered little to Adivasis by way of employment. Up until the 1980s, collieries relied mostly on manual labour, but since then increased mechanization and the expansion of opencast mining methods have significantly reduced labour intensity (Lahiri-Dutt, 2014b). This has been compounded, since economic liberalization in the early 1990s, by continuous downsizing and casualization of the permanent workforce for the purpose of economic efficiency, which has been a feature of public-sector enterprises specifically (Parry, 2013, 2014; Strümpell, 2014).

These factors have led to a salient decline in employment, especially for mostly unskilled local populations such as the Adivasis (Dhananjayan and Shanti, 2007; Lahiri-Dutt, 1999; Levien, 2013). Non-mining formal jobs are likewise scant, particularly for rural Adivasis; casual work opportunities are limited; and subsistence farming plots — if not dispossessed for mining — are small, unirrigated, and faced with demographic pressure (Shah et al., 2018). Under these circumstances, large numbers of Adivasis in the state's coal-bearing areas have taken to peddling coal as a form of livelihood (see Lahiri-Dutt and Williams, 2005; Lahiri-Dutt et al., 2014). Coal peddling is often complemented, whenever possible, by informal truck-loading wage labour, which is available intermittently in the depot yards of some collieries. For many rural Adivasi communities in the region, these two precarious economic activities together constitute the main source of income, and are the focus of the article's next, ethnographic section.

INFORMAL COAL-BASED LIVELIHOODS

Coal Peddling

Shiv and his wife Savitha left their mud house before dawn, as they do most mornings, and set off on foot to the nearby colliery. Taking advantage of

7. See also: <https://coal.gov.in/en/major-statistics/coal-reserves> (accessed 29 March 2022).

8. Coal has been a nationalized resource in India since 1973. Despite the recent increased entry of private companies into mining, such companies are expected to play only a limited role in the sector in the foreseeable future (Lahiri-Dutt, 2007; Rakshit, 2018).

9. Alongside Dalits (low-caste communities previously called 'Untouchables'), Adivasis are firmly situated at the bottom of social and economic hierarchies in India, and overwhelmingly work in the informal economy (Lerche and Shah, 2018).

the absence of security guards at this early hour, Savitha entered the mine's depot yard. Along with a large group of women who had arrived before her, she started collecting lumps of coal into a wide metal bowl she had brought with her. Shiv, in the meantime, stayed on a patch of dirt land just outside the depot. In front of him was a small heap of coal that Savitha had gathered over the previous few days, crudely coked through igniting the pile and letting it burn overnight to remove some of the coal's impurities and to make it usable as cooking fuel. Using large, plastic woven bags, Shiv began packing the coked coal. Later, he would attach the bags to his bicycle and push it to the highway, where he would sell the coal to a roadside restaurant.

Like most people in Karampot,¹⁰ Shiv and Savitha peddle coal for a living. The work is veritably strenuous: a coal-filled metal bowl can weigh up to 20 kgs, while a loaded bicycle can carry up to 150 kgs of this black substance. To reach their buyers — such as restaurants or tea shops, as in Shiv's case, or makeshift coal stalls that buy from villagers and sell to highway passers-by¹¹ — coal peddlers push the bicycle from the coking ground to the main road, and then along the edges of that road for another kilometre or so. For a full bicycle load of five coal bags, they receive INR 225 — the equivalent of US\$ 4.50 at the time of fieldwork.

The sight of women scavenging for coal, and of men pushing their coal-laden bicycles like 'a line of ants struggling with food seemingly too big to be handled' (Lahiri-Dutt and Williams, 2005: 99–100), readily conjures up a sense of a desperate last resort. Scholars who have written about coal peddling have, in this vein, invariably depicted it as a marginal subsistence activity which the very poorest are forced into in order to survive (Lahiri-Dutt and Williams, 2005; Sainath, 1996: 145–47; Singh, 2013). Indeed, as dirty, back-breaking, illicit work, coal peddling would by all appearances seem to represent the brutal epitome of precarity and informality — and, within this sphere, be placed at the bottom of the pecking order in terms of desirability. Such a view, however, fails to account for the multilayered ways in which coal peddling is experienced by Karampot villagers. While coal peddling is not, by any stretch, 'decent work' (ILO, n.d.), it is

10. According to a household survey conducted as part of fieldwork, 85 per cent of households in Karampot engage in this economic activity. As discussed elsewhere (Noy, 2020, 2022), a minority of Adivasis in the village, originally from another hamlet, have been able to obtain formal employment in the colliery as compensation for having lost land for mining and for being displaced, as part of CIL's Resettlement and Rehabilitation Policy. This group constitutes a local Adivasi labour aristocracy, and is distinguished from the majority of villagers, who depend on precarious work. See Corbridge (1987) for a historical overview of the emergence of intra-Adivasi economic and power divisions as a result of permanent mining employment.

11. Coal buyers are predominantly non-Adivasi, and are typically from the caste known as Mahto. While Mahtos are, in Jharkhand, formally classified as Other Backward Class (OCB) — a collective government term for socially disadvantaged castes — they are a powerful group locally, certainly compared to Adivasis.

simultaneously perceived by villagers as being not only a source of relative livelihood stability but also, importantly, one that gives them a degree of autonomy. This leads villagers to ultimately prefer peddling coal over other forms of informal work in the vicinity.

Since obtaining coal from the depot is officially illegal, villagers' access to coal for peddling is essentially insecure, and depends, as explained below, on CIL's overall tolerance of this activity. But at the same time, for most villagers, coal peddling is the most accessible, stable and profitable means of livelihood at their disposal. Not too long ago, before the opening of the colliery in 1982, villagers in Karampot had had to 'hunt and gather' wages (Breman, 1994) from casual labour outside the village, for example on construction sites or through seasonal migration to work in brick kilns. Coal peddling, by contrast, allows villagers to earn within Karampot's environs, which distinguishes them from India's swathes of 'footloose labour' (Breman, 1996) who constantly shift between temporary work sites.¹² But coal peddling is also viewed as more attractive than the other local, informal form of mining-related work, namely truck loading. While loading trucks is generally considered less physically onerous, and does not involve any illicit activity, the work is only available sporadically. In comparison, coal peddling is a steadier source of income: while the quantities of coal that villagers are able to obtain can fluctuate, depending on when and how often the mine's security guards show up at the depot, they are normally able to collect *some*. This renders coal peddling more reliable and constant than truck-loading work as well as other types of casual wage labour outside the village. Compared to the yet more precarious alternatives, coal peddling is a relative anchor of stability in my interlocutors' livelihood strategies.

Coal peddling, moreover, generates earnings that by local standards are not meagre. The INR 225 that a coal pusher receives for a coal-laden bicycle is, relatively speaking, no paltry amount, especially as many often deliver more than one bicycle load per day. For loading a truck with coal in the depot, by comparison, which is done in a group and takes roughly four hours, labourers earn INR 160 each. At variance with popular notions of scavenging-based activities (in this case, of coal) exclusively as a means of survival, coal peddling allows those engaged in it to not only subsist but also to save, however modestly. I know villagers who have used money they earned from coal peddling and saved for months if not years to replace their mud house with a simple and more durable brick structure, or to purchase a small, second-hand television for their home. Others use their earnings to send their children to the small, fee-paying private school across the highway — instead of the free and reputedly inferior government school just outside Karampot — or to pay for after-school tuition. Indeed, coal

12. Compared to the strong trend of Adivasi seasonal labour migration from Jharkhand to other parts of India (Deshingkar and Start, 2003; Shah et al., 2018: 20), among Karampot's Adivasis such migration is indeed much less common.

peddlers generally aspire for their children to eventually find other, less drudging work than theirs, and many seek to spend what they can on improving their children's education. Such longer-term saving and planning, and the pursuit of particular aspirations with regard to housing, consumption, and children's schooling, challenge the image of informal, precarious labourers as constantly caught up in a mode of 'informal survivalism' (Davis, 2006: 178). Moreover, contrary to arguments about an Adivasi ethic that rejects material acquisition and focuses on living for the moment (e.g., Gell, 1986; Roy, 2007; Shah, 2018: 229), the new earning opportunities enabled through coal peddling have, in Karampot, been accompanied by a transition from subsistence to moderate saving.

Finally, in addition to providing relative stability and profitability, coal peddling has one further feature that distinguishes it from truck loading and other forms of informal wage labour. Peddling coal, in short, provides a greater degree of freedom and flexibility in terms of when, how frequently, and how much to work. This autonomy stems from the fact that coal peddling constitutes a form of self-employment, however vulnerable, and is central to how villagers perceive this work. Autonomy as a feature of precarious own account work has recently been discussed in different contexts (e.g., Millar, 2014; O'Hare, 2019), but is arguably even more significant in the Adivasi context, where autonomy is an important element in both traditional economy and attitude to work. While Shah (2018) has underlined historical Adivasi autonomy in accessing land- and forest-based livelihoods, Bird (1983) and Carrin-Bouez (1993) have stressed the autonomous aspect of Adivasi work practices, carried out only when and as much as necessary, and the Adivasi aversion to 'the submission inherent to a hierarchical work organization' (Carrin-Bouez, 1993: 157). When Adivasi people from the Jharkhand region were first drawn into mining work in the 19th century, for example, they would stay in the coalfields only for a few weeks at a time, returning to their villages periodically, which was taken by managers to signify a lack of work discipline (Seth, 1940: 24). This desire for independence and flexibility chimes with coal peddling as self-employment. As one older villager succinctly put it, 'Earlier people used to go to the forest to forage. Now, they go to collect coal'.¹³

13. Other, non-Adivasi people, who are not involved in coal peddling, told me about the 'mafia' that allegedly controls the local informal coal sale chain. But around Karampot, at least, this is more of an assumption than reality: during my time in the village, I found no indication that coal peddlers, or the coal stalls to which some of them sell, are controlled in any organized manner. This is in line with findings by Lahiri-Dutt and Williams (2005), who note that despite claims by trade unionists and journalists, they traced no evidence of any mafia involvement in small-scale coal peddling. The same is true for extortionary Naxalite activity around coal, which has been reported in relation to illegal mining in other parts of Jharkhand (NDTV, 2010) but, to the best of my knowledge, does not play a role in coal peddlers' work in my field site area, where Maoist influence is generally limited.

The relative autonomy provided by coal peddling is enabled *inter alia* thanks to the police and CIL largely turning a blind eye to the illegal activity of gleaning and selling coal from the depot. While the police are known to occasionally crack down on artisanal mining activities (see Lahiri-Dutt and Williams, 2005), found in other parts of Jharkhand, they usually ignore the relatively small-scale practice of coal peddling. The project's security guards, for their part, do stop the collection of coal by villagers whenever they encounter it. Soon after they leave, however, the gathering of coal usually resumes, normally without any serious consequences for villagers. The common view among local CIL officers is that Adivasi people who pilfer coal do so not to 'make a profit' but 'to survive', and therefore should not be treated too harshly.

This is accompanied, importantly, by the company's wish to avoid confrontation with villagers. Similar to the way that Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programmes of extractive companies act as mechanisms to 'respond to and occasionally forestall disquiet' by locals in light of unfulfilled hopes or expectations of colliery employment (Kale, 2020: 1216), tolerating villagers' pilferage of coal can be understood as a way for CIL to deflect the risk of confrontation and any disruptions to production. Nonetheless, for many villagers the fear of a violent response to the illicit collection of coal still lurks — which is why it is only women who enter the depot for this purpose. The male guards, the villagers believe, are less likely to use force against them, as doing so is stigmatized and could elicit resistance from villagers. Men entering the depot, on the other hand, might draw a more aggressive response from the guards, especially given the still widespread stereotype of Adivasis as *jungli* — savage, uneducated, and potentially dangerous (Shah et al., 2018: 24; see also Pal, 2019). For this reason, women go to collect the coal, while the men push the bicycles and sell it — a practice that will become significant later on in the discussion.

The autonomy afforded by peddling coal has, I suggest, two main aspects. The first is temporal. A day of wage labour, for example in construction, typically involves work 'from morning till evening', while with truck loading, labourers do not know when they will be called to work, which happens irregularly and often at short notice. Coal peddling, on the other hand, affords villages greater control over their schedule, and allows time for such non-work activities as 'timepassing' with friends (Jeffrey, 2010), playing cards, fishing in the local pond, or hunting birds and foraging mushrooms in the forest. Coal peddling has a distinctive tempo, reminiscent of what Millar (2015) has called 'woven time'. In this temporality, work and other domains of the everyday are intertwined, and 'labour' and 'leisure' continuously interlace and alternate. Villagers often go to gather, coke and push coal in the morning; then they return home to attend to house chores and, in the agricultural season, to their fields, or simply to rest or timepass; and later return to the depot or their coal pile to collect or to coke more coal.

Bouts of work, too, are often interspersed with breaks. After filling up a few bowls of coal from the depot, for example, women normally pause to sit together and chatter in the shade of one of the trees in the coking area, before returning to the depot to gather more coal. Indeed, despite the hard work, it would be misleading to describe the atmosphere in the coking ground as bleak, as labouring around coking piles and cycles is accompanied and punctuated by chit-chatting and joking between villagers: about the rice beer they intend to drink later in the day, bankrupting CIL by stealing all its coal, or about the children, who assist their parents with the work as part of the local 'coal peddling school'. Finally, after delivering the coal, and depending on the place of sale, those pushing coal-laden bicycles sometimes sit around for a while at the coal stalls; have a cup of chai at the tea shop; or spend some time in front of the television that some roadside restaurants have — especially if a cricket match happens to be on.

Peddling coal, moreover, enables villagers to have more control over how often and how much they work. The frequency with which bicycle pushers make their way to the highway to sell coal can vary significantly: while some do this on a daily basis, usually delivering one or two bicycle loads of coal a day, others push coal only a few times a week, according to their shorter- or longer-term economic needs and wishes. Similarly, as I often saw during the period of fieldwork, the same coal pushers can reduce or increase the amount of work in different periods, peddling more coal in a particular week or month, and less in another, according to their circumstances and plans. When Shiv, for example, felt like spending some time with one of his cousin brothers in another village in the district, he took a break from pushing his bicycle for a few days; another coal pusher I know did the same for about a week during the construction of a new brick room as an extension to his mud house, paid for through coal peddling savings. Alternatively, villagers can increase the frequency and quantity of work when they need extra cash — say, to buy *mahua* wine¹⁴ and chicken from the market to celebrate a festival — or in order to save for a specific purpose. Take, for example, 19-year-old Parmeshwar, who was due to get married to an Adivasi girl from a nearby village. In the weeks before the wedding, Parmeshwar was delivering four bicycle loads of coal every day in order to earn enough to cover all expenses, including copious amounts of *mahua* wine, foodstuffs to cook for all the guests, and a rented speaker system to belt out selected Hindi tunes.

The second aspect of the autonomy furnished by coal peddling has to do with its lack, compared to wage labour, of any evident labour hierarchy. While it is true that the security guards in the depot can hinder villagers' access to coal, they are neither their bosses nor their work supervisors. Coal peddlers, in a sense, manage themselves; they are not subject to the dictates of contractors or employers, or to monitoring by truck loading supervisors,

14. A traditional Adivasi alcoholic drink, distilled from the flower of the same name.

whom villagers believe, as I describe below, occasionally siphon off a portion of their wages. Unlike wage labour, then, coal peddling does not entail an explicitly enacted relationship of authority and subordination. This too dovetails with the Adivasi proclivity to work independently and disinclination for ‘ties of control and instruction’ (Bird, 1983: 67; see also Carrin-Bouez, 1993), and is another reason for villagers’ preference for peddling coal over other, more hierarchical forms of informal work.

Truck Loading

While coal peddling is the primary means of making a living in Karampot, truck loading is the second most common form of labour in the village. Whereas coal peddling provides the bulk of income for most households in the village, truck loading serves as an additional — albeit irregular — source of cash. Coal peddling, for the reasons discussed in the previous section, is generally perceived as the better type of work. Nonetheless, villagers — and particularly women, who comprise the majority of truck loaders — continue to engage in this work whenever it is available. After describing the labour of truck loading and the challenges involved, I examine the reasons that drive them to do this. The answer, I suggest, again has to do with autonomy, but of a different kind. While peddling coal provides relative autonomy in work and time, truck loading offers women access to independent wages. This allows them increased financial control, and consequently status, in the household, and serves as a motivation to participate in this otherwise undesirable form of work.

Truck-loading work is part of an effort by CIL to provide ‘project-affected people’ in the vicinity of its projects with ‘opportunities for indirect employment arising out of mining activities’ (CCL, n.d.),¹⁵ and is another mechanism to forestall potential local agitation over the adverse impact of mining operations and lack of jobs.¹⁶ Truck-loading work takes place in what is known as the project’s coal sale depot — different from the depot yard to which villagers go to obtain coal for peddling. In the coal sale depot, coal is stored which is wholesaled to private coal dealers, who transport and sell it to private industries in different parts of the country. As part of this operation, dealers’ trucks are loaded before dispatch with the coal they have

15. A distinct subset within the category of ‘project-affected people’ are villagers who have been directly dispossessed of land for mining, for whom the company, according to its Rehabilitation and Resettlement Policy, should in principle offer a compensatory colliery job (CIL, 2012). Elsewhere, I examine the actual process by which such jobs are distributed (Noy, 2022).

16. While in Karampot no agricultural land has so far been relinquished for mining, my interlocutors often complained about the blasting from the colliery, which ripples through the village and fractures their mud houses; the ample amount of coal dust in the air; and the expropriation of surrounding common grazing and forest land.

purchased from the mine. Truck-loading wage labour involves exactly what the name implies: manually loading the coal onto dealers' trucks for transportation. The loading takes place in more or less fixed groups of about 15 villagers (usually about 11–12 women and 3–4 men). Using pickaxes, the men chop large chunks of coal from the depot's coal mounds into smaller pieces that can fit into metal bowls which can be carried; the women fill the bowls and carry the coal onto the trucks' rear open cargo bed.

The work takes place under (non-Adivasi) loading supervisors, employed by the coal dealers, who are also tasked with notifying villagers about the work. Whenever Shiv, for example, got a call from one of the supervisors, usually in the morning, he would set off to gather the other men in his loading group from the neighbouring houses. Savitha, who is part of the same group as Shiv, would gather the women, and the group would make their way, on foot, from the village to the depot. At the depot, they would be directed by the supervisor to the truck assigned to them, and they would spend 4–5 hours carrying out the loading. For this period of work, Shiv and each other group member would normally receive INR 160 (US\$ 3.20), paid by the coal dealers and distributed by the loading supervisors. At times, though, as I explain below, this wage would be cut in half, leaving each labourer with a paltry INR 80 (US\$ 1.60) for the loading.

As noted above, there are several factors that make truck-loading work less attractive to villagers in relation to coal peddling. First, there is a general agreement among my interlocutors that, on the whole, coal peddling is the more gainful economic activity. As Shiv noted, 'Loading trucks, you earn 160 rupees, and the work takes at least half the day. But selling coal you can make more than 200 rupees just by going out with your bicycle for an hour in the morning'.¹⁷ Second, while coal for peddling is relatively available and accessible, truck-loading wage labour is sporadic and unpredictable: in some weeks, my interlocutors would be called to the depot for work several times, in others, not at all. Practically all of them referred to the scarce availability of truck loading. Indeed, during my stay in Karampot, most of my interlocutors were loading trucks only once or twice a month on average.¹⁸

17. This calculation does not take into account the time needed to gather and coker the coal, carried out by Shiv's wife. Indeed, because coal peddling consists of several stages — gathering, coking and selling — that can span several days, and because it involves more than one person, it is difficult to accurately work out its economic profitability vis-à-vis truck-loading wage labour. The prevailing view, however, is that coal peddling is overall more gainful.

18. The situation in Karampot still appears to be better than in other collieries in the area, where either the coal sale depot has been deemed uneconomical and shut down, or the loading of trucks has been fully mechanized (Ahmad and Lahiri-Dutt, 2014). Nonetheless, the availability of the work is generally low and intermittent — a far cry from CCL's claim that project-affected persons are 'regularly engaged' in truck-loading work 'for a minimum of 20 days every month' (CCL, n.d.). According to project officers, the local fluctuations

Third, as villagers told me at length, working under the loading supervisors creates particular difficulties. Apart from the explicit sense of labour hierarchy entailed, working under supervisors also makes villagers susceptible to exploitation, as the following account illustrates. Much of the loading work that villagers get takes place as part of a procedure known as *adkati* (literally, ‘splitting’), specified in the truck-loading guidelines set out by the project. *Adkati* refers to a situation in which a loading group that has been booked for loading does not turn up at the depot — for instance, because some of its members are ill, away from the village, or otherwise unavailable for work. In such a case, the loading supervisor calls another, substitute loading group that can make it to the depot at a short notice. This substitute group, however, receives only 50 per cent of the loading wage, with the other 50 per cent going to the loading group that had been assigned the work initially. But many instances of *adkati*, Shiv and other villagers insist, are in fact bogus, and contrived by supervisors so that they can pay labourers only half the wage and pocket the other half themselves. Indeed, a reputedly common scam is for supervisors to simply not inform the intended loading group about the work to begin with; call another group in its place, which is paid only half the wage; and keep the other half to themselves. The point, in short, is that with *adkati*, loading supervisors have more room for manoeuvre, and can more easily ‘eat up’, as villagers say, a portion of labourers’ wages. While the scope of this allegedly common practice is difficult to gauge, there is no doubt about its existence as conceded to me by a few young loading supervisors I came to know in the depot.

For all these reasons, villagers consider truck loading to be a less desirable form of work compared to coal peddling: not as remunerative, less reliable and more exploitative. Nevertheless, most villagers — and especially women, who make up the lion’s share of labourers — still take part in this work whenever the opportunity arises. Why, despite the issues with truck loading, and having coal peddling as an alternative, is this the case? I consider several possible explanations, ending with the one that I believe is the most pertinent. First, while truck loading is less reliable than coal peddling, the latter’s stability too is only relative. Villagers’ access to coal is ultimately precarious, and there is ‘no guarantee’, as my interlocutors put it, that they will be able to obtain the amount of it they want or need. ‘On some days’, they said, ‘you can get enough coal for a few cycle loads before the guards arrive, but on other days you can only get little’. In this context, truck loading is seen as a complementary source of income that should be utilized whenever possible. Second, truck loading, which is done in a gang, has a social aspect that coal peddling can lack. While the gathering of coal for peddling, by women, is also often done in small groups, the coking and

in this work’s availability are a result of, first, changing coal production levels in the mine, which determine how much coal is available; and second, the amounts of coal purchased by dealers.

packing are carried out by just one or two household members. The pushing of the bicycle, moreover, is always undertaken by men on their own which, as Shiv remarked, can get rather dull. Loading a truck as part of a gang, on the other hand, is also a social experience, and can diversify an otherwise tedious, repetitive work routine. Indeed, during the truck-loading work in which I participated, labourers would often humorously rib one another to 'hurry up the work', and tease me for my evidently poor loading skills.

However, the striking preponderance of women among labourers — alongside interviews with female interlocutors — leads me to suggest that the most important point pertains to them, and has to do with the gender dynamics of truck loading vis-à-vis coal peddling in terms of earnings. The latter, as I have described, involves a clear division of labour, whereby women obtain the coal from the depot and men push the bicycle. While the coal Shiv peddles, for example, is sourced by his wife Savitha, the coal peddled by Parmeshwar is gathered by his younger sister. Importantly, as it is the men who deliver and actually sell the coal, it is also they who receive the payment for it. Although women have an indispensable role in the work process, namely the gathering of coal, it is exclusively the men who collect the earnings. From these earnings, men usually hand over the better part to their wives or mothers, who normally keep the purse, and retain a portion for themselves. Where their sisters gather the coal, as is the case in Parmeshwar's household, the men might occasionally hand out a small amount to them, too.

The issue is that women cannot always know, or have control over, exactly how much of the coal-peddling income reaches the household budget, and how much of it is kept by their husbands (or sons) for individual spending. Shiv's uncle, for example, remarked to me more than once with disapproval how Shiv fritters away too much of his coal-peddling money on card games, while his kitchen is short of such basic supplies as mustard oil or sugar. Truck-loading wages, by contrast, are paid to each labourer directly. Truck-loading work therefore provides women with an opportunity to earn individual wages, which, in turn, contributes to their financial and social independence. Scholars of gender and labour have pointed to the ways in which female participation in paid work can be linked to wishes for, and in some cases enhance, women's autonomy and decision-making power (e.g., Benería and Roldán, 1987; Mills, 1997, 2005; Ong, 1987; Prentice, 2015).¹⁹ In Karampot, I suggest that such wishes are, at least in part, advanced through truck-loading wages, which allow women labourers to reduce their dependence on husbands and brothers, and to strengthen their position in the household.

19. The extent to which this leads to women's 'empowerment', however, is contested, and depends on how the concept is used and understood, the meanings and values attached to paid work for women in particular cultural contexts, and the kinds of paid work involved (Kabeer, 2008; Kabeer et al., 2011).

At variance with most of their non-tribal, caste counterparts in India, Adivasi women traditionally are engaged not only in agriculture but also in casual wage labour, and enjoy ‘relative gender equality and freedom’ in relation to Adivasi men (Shah, 2018: 230; see also Carrin-Bouez, 1993). In a context in which the dominant form of livelihood — peddling coal — is one where cash earnings are invariably delivered to men, participation in truck-loading work is a means for women to maintain this autonomy. Unlike coal peddling, truck-loading wages allow women to earn and spend independently. They can decide how much of this wage to allocate to household maintenance, or towards saving, and how much of it to use as pin money — for example to purchase shampoo sachets from the shop or bangles from one of the hawkers that occasionally pass through the village. It became clear from our conversations during fieldwork that women like Savitha attach value to going out to work and earning on their own, ‘instead of sitting at home’. Their cash wages were a source of satisfaction and could be spent however they saw fit — whether on the household or on their children, or as pocket money for personal purchases. For younger, unmarried women, too, truck loading provides access to cash for such expenses, as well as, in some instances, for school textbooks, notepads and stationery which they would otherwise have to request from male household members. This is the case, for example, with Parmeshwar’s younger sister, who gathers the coal that he peddles, and who has to ask for money from her brother whenever she wants to buy something for herself. When she goes out to load a truck, on the other hand, she earns money that she can use as she pleases, without having to rely on him.

While in other regards, then, coal peddling may be the preferred form of work, how and to whom earnings are paid is a factor that motivates women to take part in truck-loading wage labour. Unlike their involvement in the work process of peddling coal, this form of labour provides them with access to a separate, independent income which, while by no means regular, enables them in different ways to sustain a measure of autonomy relative to the male, coal-pushing members of the household, and contributes to their sense of agency.

CONCLUSION

Through this discussion of two widespread forms of informal, precarious work in Jharkhand’s coal mining tracts — coal peddling and truck loading — this article has sought to contribute to attempts to disaggregate the broad, related categories of precarity and ‘classes of labour’, and to concretize them in particular economic and social contexts. While other analyses (Bhattacharya and Kesar, 2018; Lerche, 2010; Mezzadri and Lulu, 2018; Pattenden, 2016, 2018) have endeavoured to distinguish structural differences across different types of precarious work and groups of labourers, this

article has focused on labourers' own perspectives to illuminate how they perceive, navigate and evaluate different forms of such work vis-à-vis one another. Indeed, whereas most ethnographic studies of precarity and informality observe either a single type of labour or different types of labour carried out by different workers and/or in different contexts, this article's ethnographic comparison of coal peddling and truck loading — undertaken and alternated by the same people — allows for scrutiny of the more nuanced, graded distinctions workers make *between* different modalities of precarious labour, and the ways in which these influence their livelihood configurations.

Ethnographically, the article has shown how, within the local labour landscape around Karampot, coal peddling — seemingly *the* exemplar of informality and precarity — is perceived by villagers to be not only a relatively dependable and profitable means of income but also an enabler of autonomy. Compared to informal wage labour and its hierarchical structure, peddling coal allows villagers more control over the work schedule and intensity. Its flexible work rhythm makes it possible for different dimensions of everyday life, such as earning, farming, housework (including childcare) and leisure, to be woven and pursued together. It is not contradictory, then, to see coal peddling as onerous and insecure while also understanding that certain features render it preferable for villagers over other locally available forms of work such as truck loading. Compared to peddling coal, truck loading is more irregularly available; it pays less well; and is mediated through and carried out under the watchful eye of loading supervisors, exposing labourers to exploitative practices. And yet, while they probably could have made their living through coal peddling alone, most villagers — and women in particular — still engage in truck loading whenever possible. One salient reason for this, I have suggested, is that truck loading allows women to earn independent wages, which enhances their autonomy in the household in relation to men. Then again, women's participation in truck-loading work can only take place as part of a wider, composite livelihood strategy — that is, in a context in which it can be combined with coal peddling as a more regular source of household income.

This analysis illustrates how distinct forms of precarious work have different degrees of desirability and are weighted differently by labourers in terms of relative stability and regularity, autonomy, tempo and the gender dynamics of remuneration. Such distinctions — and their meanings and implications for labourers — are easily concealed in the broad-brush notions of precarity and 'classes of labour', which cluster together diverse precarious work processes. Illuminating them requires a comparative ethnographic focus on the specifics of particular precarious labour arrangements as perceived and evaluated by labourers, which demonstrates that there are nuanced yet important qualitative differences between modalities of precarious work that *matter* for labourers, and influence their livelihood choices and activities. Paying attention to and probing these differences is essential

for understanding how people (or ‘classes of labour’) engage with precarious work on the ground, and how they configure their livelihood strategies in particular capitalist settings and along a spectrum of informal labour practices.

The article’s ethnographic approach, moreover, offers a more general shift from an etic to an emic mode of studying precarious work that seeks to develop an understanding of precarity through the distinctions employed by workers themselves. Existing theorizations of precarity and informality are based on broad temporal and geographical frameworks for analysing global (or at least regional) labour and capital regimes, and are largely characterized by structural, generalized distinctions across geographical and social spaces. While the strength of such analyses lies in their scope and breadth, their limitation is the tendency to reproduce an ‘ideal type’ of non-precarious work against which different forms of precarity are measured. Centring the analysis on the experiences and perceptions of labourers themselves, on the other hand, enables us to understand precarity as an internally differentiated way of evaluating different types of work — as well as, by extension, assessing past and future work opportunities — rather than defining it through a priori notions of what is considered ‘non-precarious’. This kind of analysis departs from abstract, ideal-typical conceptualizations of precarity and moves towards a framework that focuses on precarity as a lived, experiential category of everyday life.

REFERENCES

- Ahmad, N. and K. Lahiri-Dutt (2014) ‘Gender in Coal Mining Induced Displacement and Rehabilitation in Jharkhand’, in K. Lahiri-Dutt (ed.) *Coal Nation: Histories, Ecologies and Politics of Coal in India*, pp. 229–54. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited.
- Benería, L. and M. Roldán (1987) *The Crossroads of Class and Gender: Industrial Homework Subcontracting, and Household Dynamics in Mexico City*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Bernstein, H. (2007) ‘Capital and Labour from Centre to Margins’. Keynote speech at the conference ‘Living on the Margins’, Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch (26–28 March). <https://urbandevelopment.yolasite.com/resources/Capital%20and%20Labou%20in%20the%20Margin%20Bernstein.pdf> (accessed 15 June 2021)
- Bernstein, H. (2010) *Class Dynamics of Agrarian Change*. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing.
- Bhattacharya, S. and S. Kesar (2018) ‘Possibilities of Transformation: The Informal Sector in India’, *Review of Radical Political Economics* 50(4): 727–35.
- Bhattacharya, S. and S. Kesar (2020) ‘Precarity and Development: Production and Labor Processes in the Informal Economy in India’, *Review of Radical Political Economics* 52(3): 387–408.
- Bird, N. (1983) ‘Wage-gathering: Socio-economic Change and the Case of the Naiken of South India’, in R. Robb (ed.) *Rural and South India: Linkages, Changes and Development*, pp. 57–86. London: Curzon Press.
- Bolt, M. (2015) *Zimbabwe’s Migrants and South Africa’s Border Farms: The Roots of Impermanence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Breman, J. (1994) *Wage Hunters and Gatherers: Search for Work in the Urban and Rural Economy of South Gujarat*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Breman, J. (1996) *Footloose Labour: Working in India's Informal Economy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Breman, J. (2007) *The Poverty Regime in Village India: Half a Century of Work and Life at the Bottom of the Rural Economy in South Gujarat*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Breman, J. (2016) *On Pauperism in Present and Past*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Breman, J. and M. van der Linden (2014) 'Informalizing the Economy: The Return of the Social Question at a Global Level', *Development and Change* 45(5): 920–40.
- Carrin-Bouez, M. (1993) 'From Forest to Factory: The Santal Conception of Labour', in P. Robb (ed.) *Dalit Movements and the Meanings of Labour in India*, pp. 150–58. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- CCL (n.d.) 'Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) & CCL'. Jharkhand: Central Coalfields Limited. www.centralcoalfields.in/sutbs/corpcte_social.php (accessed 15 October 2020)
- Chang, D. (2009) 'Informalizing Labour in Asia's Global Factory', *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 39(2): 161–79.
- Chang, D. (2012) *Capitalist Development in Korea: Labour, Capital and the Myth of the Developmental State*. London: Routledge.
- CIL (2012) 'Rehabilitation and Resettlement Policy of Coal India Limited 2012'. New Delhi: Coal India Limited. www.centralcoalfields.in/indsk/pdf/employ_land/land_rules/r&r_policy%202012.pdf (accessed 15 October 2020)
- Corbridge, S. (1987) 'Industrialisation, Internal Colonialism and Ethnoregionalism: The Jharkhand, India, 1880–1980', *Journal of Historical Geography* 13(3): 249–66.
- Cousins, B., A. Dubb, D. Hornby and F. Mtero (2018) 'Social Reproduction of "Classes of Labour" in the Rural Areas of South Africa: Contradictions and Contestations', *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 45(5–7): 1060–85.
- Davis, M. (2006) *Planet of Slums*. London: Verso.
- De Neve, G. (1999) 'Asking for and Giving *Baki*: Neo-bondage, or the Interplay of Bondage and Resistance in the Tamilnadu Power-loom Industry', *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 33(1–2): 379–406.
- De Neve, G. (2005) *The Everyday Politics of Labour: Working Lives in India's Informal Economy*. New Delhi: Social Science Press.
- Deshingkar, P. and D. Start (2003) 'Seasonal Migration for Livelihoods in India: Coping, Accumulation and Exclusion'. *ODI Working Paper No. 220*. London: Overseas Development Institute. <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a08cfced915d622c0016df/WP220web.pdf> (accessed 5 October 2020)
- Dhananjayan, R.S. and R. Shanti (2007) 'Impact of Privatisation on Public Sector Enterprises and Employment in India', in R.S. Jalal and N.S. Bisht (eds) *Emerging Dimensions of Global Trade: Discussions on Trade Related Policies*, pp. 275–84. New Delhi: Sarup and Sons.
- Elson, D. and R. Pearson (1981) "'Nimble Fingers Make Cheap Workers": An Analysis of Women's Employment in Third World Export Manufacturing', *Feminist Review* 7: 87–107.
- Fernandes, W. (2007) 'Mines, Mining and Displacement in India', in S. Gurdeep, D. Laurence and K. Lahiri-Dutt (eds) *Managing the Social and Environmental Consequences of Coal Mining in India*, pp. 333–44. Dhanbad: The Indian School of Mines University.
- Fernandes, W. (2008) 'Sixty Years of Development-induced Displacement in India', in H.M. Matur (ed.) *India Social Development Report 2008: Development and Displacement*, pp. 89–102. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Gell, A. (1986) 'Newcomers to the World of Goods: Consumption among the Muria Gonds', in A. Appadurai (ed.) *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, pp. 110–38. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- George, A.S. (2014) *Status of Adivasis/Indigenous Peoples Mining Series 2: Mining Jharkhand, An Adivasi Homeland*. New Delhi: Aakar Books.
- Government of India (2020) *Energy Statistics 2020*. Report. New Delhi: Government of India. mospi.nic.in/sites/default/files/publication_reports/ES_2020_240420m.pdf (accessed 19 July 2021)

- Harriss-White, B. (2010) 'Globalization, the Financial Crisis and Petty Production in India's Socially Regulated Informal Economy', *Global Labour Journal* 1(1): 152–77.
- Harriss-White, B. (2012) 'Capitalism and the Common Man: Peasants and Petty Production in Africa and South Asia', *Agrarian South: Journal of Political Economy* 1(2): 109–60.
- Harriss-White, B. (2014) 'Labour and Petty Production', *Development and Change* 45(5): 981–1000.
- ILO (n.d.) 'Decent Work'. Geneva: International Labour Organization. <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/decent-work/lang-en/index.html> (accessed 30 August 2018)
- ILO (2018) *Women and Men in the Informal Economy — A Statistical Picture*. Geneva: International Labour Organization. www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-dgreports/-dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_626831.pdf (accessed 21 June 2021)
- Jeffrey, C. (2010) *Timepass: Youth, Class, and the Politics of Waiting in India*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Kabeer, N. (2008) 'Paid Work, Women's Empowerment and Gender Justice: Critical Pathways of Social Change'. *IDS Pathways of Empowerment Working Paper No. 3*. Brighton: Institute of Development Studies. https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/53077/1/Kabeer_Paid-work_Published.pdf (accessed 10 November 2021)
- Kabeer, N., S. Mahmud and S. Tanseem (2011) 'Does Paid Work Provide a Pathway to Women's Empowerment? Empirical Findings from Bangladesh'. *IDS Working Paper No. 375*. Brighton: Institute of Development Studies. www.ids.ac.uk/download.php?file=files/dmfile/Wp375.pdf (accessed 10 November 2021)
- Kale, S.S. (2020) 'From Company Town to Company Village: CSR and the Management of Rural Aspirations in Eastern India's Extractive Economies', *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 47(6): 1211–32.
- Lahiri-Dutt, K. (1999) 'State, Market and the Crisis in Raniganj Coal Belt', *Economic and Political Weekly* 34(41): 295–56.
- Lahiri-Dutt, K. (2007) 'Coal Mining Industry at a Crossroads: Coal Policy in Liberalising India', in G. Singh, D. Laurance and K. Lahiri-Dutt (eds) *Managing the Social and Environmental Consequences of Coal Mining in India*, pp. 27–40. Dhanbad: The Indian School of Mines University.
- Lahiri-Dutt, K. (2014a) 'Between Legitimacy and Illegality: Informal Coal Mining at the Limits of Justice', in K. Lahiri-Dutt (ed.) *Coal Nation: Histories, Ecologies and Politics of Coal in India*, pp. 39–62. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited.
- Lahiri-Dutt, K. (2014b) 'Introduction to Coal in India: Energising the Nation', in K. Lahiri-Dutt (ed.) *Coal Nation: Histories, Ecologies and Politics of Coal in India*, pp. 1–38. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited.
- Lahiri-Dutt, K. (2016) 'The Diverse Worlds of Coal in India: Energising the Nation, Energising Livelihoods', *Energy Policy* 99: 203–13.
- Lahiri-Dutt, K. (2017) 'Resources and the Politics of Sovereignty: The Moral and Immoral Economies of Coal Mining in India', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 40(4): 1–19.
- Lahiri-Dutt, K. and D. Williams (2005) 'The Coal Cycle: Small Scale Illegal Coal Supply in Eastern India', *Journal of Resource, Environment and Development* 2(2): 93–105.
- Lahiri-Dutt, K., D. Williams and J. Imam (2014) 'Revisiting Coal Cycles in Eastern India: Report of 2012 Survey'. *Commissioned report*. Canberra: ANU College of Asia and the Pacific, Australian National University. <http://asmasiapacific.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Coal-Cycles-Report-2014.pdf> (accessed 25 July 2021).
- Lee, C.K. (2007a) *Against the Law: Labor Protests in China's Rustbelt and Sunbelt*. Berkley, CA: University of California Press.
- Lee, C.K. (ed.) (2007b) *Working in China: Ethnographies of Labor and Workplace Transformation*. London: Routledge.
- Lerche, J. (2010) 'From "Rural Labour" to "Classes of Labour": Class Fragmentation, Caste and Class Struggle at the Bottom of the Indian Labour Hierarchy', in B. Harriss-White and

- J. Heyer (eds) *The Comparative Political Economy of Development. Africa and South Asia*, pp. 66–87. London: Routledge.
- Lerche, J. and A. Shah (2018) 'Conjugated Oppression within Contemporary Capitalism: Class, Caste, Tribe and Agrarian Change in India', *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 45(5–6): 927–49.
- Levien, M. (2013) 'The Politics of Dispossession: Theorizing India's "Land Wars"', *Politics & Society* 41(3): 351–94.
- Mezzadri, A. and F. Lulu (2018) "'Classes of Labour" at the Margins of Global Commodity Chains in India and China', *Development and Change* 49(4): 1034–63.
- Millar, K. (2014) 'The Precarious Present: Wageless Labor and Disrupted Life in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil', *Cultural Anthropology* 29(1): 32–53.
- Millar, K. (2015) 'The Tempo of Wageless Work: E.P. Thompson's Time-sense at the Edges of Rio de Janeiro', *Focaal* 73: 28–40.
- Mills, M.B. (1997) 'Contesting the Margins of Modernity: Women, Migration, and Consumption in Thailand', *American Ethnologist* 24(1): 37–61.
- Mills, M.B. (2005) 'From Nimble Fingers to Raised Fists: Women and Labour Activism in Globalizing Thailand', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 31(1): 117–44.
- Moody, K. (1997) 'Towards an International Social-movement Unionism', *New Left Review* 1(225): 52–72.
- Munck, R. (2002) *Globalisation and Labour: The New 'Great Transformation'*. London: Zed Books.
- Munck, R. (2013) 'The Precariat: A View from the South', *Third World Quarterly* 34(5): 747–62.
- Nash, J. and M.P. Fernández-Kelly (eds) (1983) *Women, Men, and the International Division of Labor*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- NDTV (2010) 'Naxals Turn Mining Mafia in Jharkhand', NDTV 20 April. www.ndtv.com/india-news/naxals-turn-mining-mafia-in-jharkhand-415800 (accessed 25 July 2021)
- Ngai, P. (2005) *Made in China: Women Factory Workers in a Global Workplace*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Noy, I. (2020) 'Public Sector Employment, Class Mobility, and Differentiation in a Tribal Coal Mining Village in India', *Contemporary South Asia* 28(3): 374–91.
- Noy, I. (2022) 'The Politics of Dispossession and Compensation in the Eastern Indian Coal Belt', *Critique of Anthropology* 42(1): 56–77.
- O'Hare, P. (2019) "'The Landfill Has Always Borne Fruit": Precarity, Formalisation and Dispossession among Uruguay's Waste Pickers', *Dialectical Anthropology* 43: 31–44.
- Ong, A. (1987) *Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline: Factory Women in Malaysia*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Pal, C.G. (2019) 'Atrocities against Adivasis: The Implicit Dimension of Social Exclusion', in V. Srinivasa Rao (ed.) *Adivasi Rights and Exclusion in India*, pp. 217–41. London: Routledge.
- Parry, J. (2013) 'Company and Contract Labour in a Central Indian Steel Plant', *Economy and Society* 42(3): 348–74.
- Parry, J. (2014) 'Sex, Bricks and Mortar: Constructing Class in a Central Indian Steel Town', *Modern Asian Studies* 48(5): 1242–75.
- Parry, J. (2019) *Classes of Labour: Work and Life in a Central Indian Steel Town*. New Delhi: Social Science Press.
- Pattenden, J. (2016) 'Working at the Margins of Global Production Networks: Local Labour Control Regimes and Rural-based Labourers in South India', *Third World Quarterly* 37(10): 1809–33.
- Pattenden, J. (2018) 'The Politics of Classes of Labour: Fragmentation, Reproduction Zones and Collective Action in Karnataka, India', *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 45(5–6): 1039–59.
- Pattenden, J. and M. Wastuti (2021) "'Waiting for the Call to Prayer": Exploitation, Accumulation and Social Reproduction in Rural Java', *The Journal of Peasant Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2021.1970540> (accessed 29 March 2022).

- Picherit, D. (2018) 'Rural Youth and Circulating Labour in South India: The Tortuous Paths towards Respect for Madigas', *Journal of Agrarian Change* 18(1): 178–95.
- Prentice, R. (2015) *Thieving a Chance: Factory Work, Illicit Labor, and Neoliberal Subjectivities in Trinidad*. Boulder, CO: University of Colorado Press.
- Rakshit, A. (2018) 'Despite Liberalisation, Power Demand to Sustain Coal India's Dominance', *Business Standard* 21 February. www.business-standard.com/article/companies/despite-liberalisation-power-demand-to-sustain-coal-india-s-dominance-118022100717_1.html (accessed 20 December 2018)
- Roy, D. (2007) 'Politics at the Margin: A Tale of Two Villages', *Economic and Political Weekly* 42(32): 3323–29.
- Sainath, P. (1996) *Everybody Loves a Good Drought*. New Delhi: Penguin Books.
- Sanyal, K. (2007) *Rethinking Capitalist Development: Primitive Accumulation, Governmentality and Post-colonial Capitalism*. New Delhi: Routledge.
- Scully, B. (2016) 'Precarity North and South: A Southern Critique of Guy Standing', *Global Labor Journal* 7(2): 160–73.
- Seth, M.A. (1940) *Labour in the Indian Coal Industry*. Bombay: D.B. Taraporevala Sons & Co.
- Shah, A. (2014) "'The Muck of the Past": Revolution, Social Transformation, and the Maoists in India', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 20(2): 337–56.
- Shah, A. (2018) 'Tribe, Egalitarian Values, Autonomy and the State', in S. Srivastava, Y. Arif and J. Abraham (eds) *Critical Themes in Indian Sociology*, pp. 225–39. New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Shah, A. and B. Harriss-White (2011) 'Resurrecting Scholarship on Agrarian Transformations', *Economic and Political Weekly* 46(39): 13–18.
- Shah, A. et al. (2018) *Ground Down by Growth: Tribe, Caste, Class and Inequality in 21st Century India*. London: Pluto Press.
- Singh, N. (2013) 'India's Coal Cycle Wallahs: "People Have No Alternative but to Steal from Mines"', *The Guardian* 6 September. www.theguardian.com/global-development/2013/sep/06/india-coal-cycle-wallahs (accessed 12 November 2019)
- Standing, G. (2011) *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Standing, G. (2014a) 'Understanding the Precariat through Labour and Work', *Development and Change* 45(5): 963–80.
- Standing, G. (2014b) 'Why the Precariat Is Not a Bogus Concept', *Open Democracy* 4 March. www.opendemocracy.net/en/why-precariat-is-not-bogus-concept/ (accessed 12 July 2021)
- Strümpell, C. (2014) 'The Politics of Dispossession in an Odishan Still Town', *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 48(1): 45–72.
- Swider, S. (2015) *Building China: Informal Work and the New Precariat*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Itay Noy (in14@soas.ac.uk) is a Lecturer in Anthropology at the Department of Anthropology and Sociology, SOAS University of London, UK. His research focuses on the effects of mining operations and land dispossession on local communities, livelihoods, and politics in eastern India, where he has carried out long-term fieldwork.