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**Class Relations in India's Building Construction:
Bihari Migrant Labourers and the Political
Apparatus of Surplus Extraction**

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Thesis submitted for the degree of PhD

2024

Department of Development Studies

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Declaration for PhD thesis

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Abstract

The thesis examines class relations, i.e. social relations of organising exploitation in the case of internal migrant labourers in India, in explaining class formation. By incorporating migrant labourers through production relations, such as sub-contracting in building construction, social relations of caste, ethnicity, region, etc., are deployed to organise and reinforce exploitation. A case in point is the historical and intergenerational exploitation of migrant labourers from the East Indian state of Bihar. Bihari migrant labourers, on the one hand, form the bulk of the labour force in, among others, building construction in India and, on the other hand, face ethnic discrimination and stereotyping as 'Bihari' labour. They are incorporated in building construction through historically exploitative labour relations organised by labour contractors, i.e. *thekedars*.

However, the existing literature on class analysis has ignored how capital accumulation is enabled and reinforced through labour migration. Further, how the experience of exploitation is politically produced in shaping class formation remains to be discovered. The research fills these gaps in the literature on class formation.

The thesis argues that the political apparatus of production relations shape the lived experiences of exploitation in 'configuring' class relations. The thesis outlines configurations of class relations, i.e. the conditions and mechanisms for the emergence and silencing of class conflicts shaping class formation. Methodologically, the research employs ethnographically informed approaches using qualitative research techniques. By employing these approaches and techniques, the thesis examines specific conditions and mechanisms that enable and reinforce the architecture of surplus extraction in the case of Bihari migrant construction labourers. In doing so, it explains the politics of production relations in building construction, shaping class formation.

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Glossary

Beedi: A thin cigarette filled with tobacco flake, commonly wrapped in a leaf.

Bhai: Brother, in colloquial Hindi

Bigha: A traditional unit of measurement of area of a land, commonly used in northern India

Bihari: Someone from Bihar or undivided state of Bihar and Jharkhand

Bihari-ness: Social and political characterisation of a *Bihari*

Hajri: Petty contracts

Hisab: Account

Ji: Suffix to someone's name to show respect

Khaini: Tobacco

Khuraki/ Kharchi: Amount for petty expenses

Lebar: Labour

Maistry/ Mistri: A master-craftsman, foreman or supervisor of manual workers

Mazdoori: Labour work

Majboori: Helplessness or compulsion

Mehnat: Hard work

Munshi: Accountant

Nakas/ addas: Labour market

Roti: Indian flatbread, also known as *chapatti*

Rupiya/ Rupaya: Rupee

Sardari: Chiefship

Theka: Contract

Thekedar: Contractor

Thekedari: Practice of taking *theka* (contract) in return for a sum of money

Zamindars: Landowners

Abbreviations

DLR: Daily Labour Report

EBCs: Economically Backwards Classes

ESI: Employee State Insurance scheme

GST: Goods and Service Tax

ID: Identification

IT: Information Technology

MP: Madhya Pradesh

NGO: Non-Governmental organisations

OBCs: Other Backward Classes

OT: Over time

PM: Project Manager

Pvt Ltd: Private Limited

SC: Scheduled Caste

ST: Scheduled Tribe

UP: Uttar Pradesh

Introduction

The thesis examines the process of class formation. In the Marxist sense, it emphasises class as a social relation of exploitation embedded in production relations (Burawoy 1985, Camfield 2004, Lerche and Shah 2018, McNally 2013, Thompson 1963). It understands exploitation as the extraction of surplus value, i.e. the difference in value between what labourers produce and what they are paid. Labourers are paid for the labour time necessary for their reproduction, measured as the value of labour-power. However, what labourers produce is surplus labour, identified as the value created by labour-power. Surplus value is the difference between necessary and surplus labour, i.e. the value of labour-power and the value created by labour-power.

The thesis refrains from viewing class through the lens of stratification or situation-oriented perspectives of category, rank, status, membership, and position in the Weberian sense. Instead, it views class as a dynamic social relation in the process of 'becoming'. Further, the thesis takes the view that class is the basic principle of the organisation, reproduction and transformation of societies (Burawoy 1985) and that it pervades all aspects of social life (Camfield 2004). While examining class in the Marxist sense serves as a medium to transform societies, it also enables us to explain the (historical) emergence of, continuity in, and changes in exploitation (ibid).

Research problem: Context and research question

The significance of class has been questioned in the context of changes in production relations, for instance, the increasing contractualisation and informalisation of labour relations (Chhacchi 2014, Lerche 2009, Lerche and Shah 2018) in enabling the contemporary process of capital accumulation. While surplus value extracted in the production process leads to capital accumulation, the organisation of the process through which surplus value extraction, i.e. exploitation, is made possible can take different forms and possess different dynamics. In this regard, labour migration, both international across countries and internal within countries such as India, China etc., has formed a central component of organising and reinforcing production relations across different contexts of capitalism (Burawoy 1976, Ferguson and McNally 2015).

Cases like that of Kuna and Guaymi workers on banana plantations in Latin America (Bourgeois 1988), East European workers in the UK construction industry (Datta 2009), Filipino workers in the Middle East (Gibson and Graham 1986), South Asian migrant workers in the Gulf construction (Buckley 2013), Bangladeshi workers in Singapore construction industry (Baey and Yeoh 2018) etc. indicate the exploitation of international migrant labourers. In countries such as India, labourers from specific regions such as Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Odisha etc., migrate within India to work in the construction industry, brick kilns, plantations etc. Labour migration from specific regions results from the historical and spatial politics of uneven regional development (Shah and Lerche 2020, Shrestha 1988, Sinha 2013, 2017b). In this way, labour migration becomes central to controlling and cheapening labour power (Shah *et al.* 2017) and mobilising labourers who are easier to discipline (Bremner 2019). Moreover, the '*internal alien-ness*' of migrant labour based on caste, ethnicity, region, tribe etc. (Lerche and Shah 2018, p937) enables and reinforces exploitation (Bremner 1996, Sanchez 2012, Sanchez and Strümpell 2014; Shah and Lerche 2020). Recent works from India examine the '*super-exploited*' seasonal migrant labour from the far-off states in Eastern India, viz. Bihar, Jharkhand and Orissa have been replacing the local Adivasi and Dalit labourers in factories and tea plantations in South India who had been otherwise working permanently since colonial times (Lerche and Shah 2018). Such ways of organising and reinforcing exploitation have profound implications for thinking about the relevance and significance of class formation.

The thesis examines the process of class formation by taking the case of a particular group of migrant labourers, i.e. migrant labourers from Bihar, often addressed as *Bihari* migrant labour who, among others, form the bulk of the labour force working in large-scale building construction in India. Bihari migrant labourers are incorporated via sub-contracting in a migrant-intensive building construction industry within India. They are preferred as cheap, docile and skilled labourers, among others, over the local or intra-state migrant workers in the construction industry (Mosse, Gupta and Shah 2005, Parry 2003, Pattenden 2018, Srivastava and Jha 2016, Shah and Lerche 2020).

Bihari labourers have historically followed a variety of streams of migration originating from the same village - rural to rural, rural to urban etc., which have created labour

catchment areas such as the Bhojpur region in western Bihar and the Kosi region in North and Northeast Bihar. For instance, migrants mainly from the Bhojpur region in Bihar went to the British colonies in Mauritius, the Caribbean and Surinam to work as indentured labour; migrants from Eastern and South Bihar worked in coal and iron ore fields in the steel industry in the current state of Jharkhand (earlier Bihar), jute mills of Calcutta, tea plantations and other factories in Burma, Myanmar and Bangladesh; migrants from North Bihar- Kosi region- working in brick-kilns within Bihar, UP and West Bengal etc. and as agricultural labourers since the Green Revolution in the agricultural belt of Punjab and Haryana (Deshingkar and Farrington 2009, Pushpendra and Jha, 2018). Such streams of migration and the rise of labour catchment areas are intertwined with Bihari migrant labourers escaping from their villages in Bihar owing to natural disasters, absence of employment opportunities and displacement by development projects (Sinha 2013) and high levels of poverty leading to low levels of human development indices (Shah and Lerche 2020).

Among Bihari labour migrants, though both upper caste and lower caste migrate to the cities, it is primarily the historically oppressed castes, lower class Muslims, SCs, STs, OBCs, EBCs and Mahadalits who dominate the rank of labour migrants involved in labouring occupations like construction, security, domestic help, hawkers etc. (Karan 2003, Pattenden 2012, Pushpendra and Jha 2018b, Roy 2016). However, unlike labour migrants from other states (Fazal 2016), Bihari migrant labourers have been subjected to being the dirty 'other' in India's cities (Fazal 2016, IIPA 2010, Pushpendra and Jha 2018, Sinha 2013), being the victims of xenophobic violence, ethnic attacks, brutal killings since the history of their migration to Punjab, Haryana which continues until today in states such as Maharashtra, Gujarat etc. (IIPA 2010, Kumar 2009, Pushpendra and Jha 2018, Sinha 2013, Verma 2015). On the one hand, Bihari migrant labourers form the bulk of the labour force in building construction in India. On the other hand, they face ethnic discrimination and stereotyping as 'Bihari' labour who are seen as 'culturally poor' and inferior.

In being seen as cheap, docile, replaceable and disposable by capital and remaining aware of their exploitation in different production contexts, it is argued that Bihari migrant labourers have not become political or shown any class-based political

organisation (Sinha 2013). While the migration of Bihari labourers has been well documented, a class analysis is missing (ibid). In such contexts that question the relevance of class, either the working class has been accommodated, compromised (Wright 2000) or otherwise circumvented to study agency, identity, subjectivity, representation and culture (Chhachhi 2014). This has led to dismissing the relevance and significance of class even though exploitation continues to be organised and reproduced under the contemporary process of capital accumulation.

By examining the organisation of exploitation, the research aims to answer the question: How do Bihari migrant labourers working in building construction form a class? The research question will be answered through the following sub-questions.

1. How does sub-contracting in building construction construct, enable, and reproduce the process of surplus extraction?
 - a. How is the labour process organised and reproduced in building construction?
2. How do the organisation and reproduction of exploitation in building construction shape class relations?
 - a. How does surplus extraction shape the lived experience of exploitation of Bihari migrant labour in building construction?

To begin with, it would be helpful to underline some of the critical debates on class formation to identify any theoretical, empirical and methodological gaps.

Key debates on class formation

Under classical Marxist analysis, working-class formation is embedded in material (economic) labour conditions. After being dispossessed from their means of production, labourers enter into a relationship of working for a wage for those, i.e. capitalists, who own the means of production. While the labour process, i.e. organisation of work at the point of production to produce surplus value, is at the centre of such analysis, it depicts the inevitable emergence of the working class in developing consciousness and transitioning from being a class-in-itself to becoming a class-for-itself, i.e. becoming political to challenge exploitation.

Such an analysis of class situates production relations objectively in determining class formation, valorising a deterministic model to explain class formation by examining the development of consciousness. In this kind of determinism, it is assumed that labourers necessarily become political in developing consciousness. Moreover, such a class analysis assumes the production relations as the 'economic' realm, i.e., the base and all other relations – social, cultural, political- as the superstructure outside the production relations. In this explanation of class, class formation happens through the development of class consciousness due to the antagonistic relationship between labour and capital. Class analysis in this fashion has remained embedded in what has been called the base-superstructure dichotomy, devoid of a historical understanding of class. Further, a deterministic focus on class consciousness assumes an inherent antagonism between labour and capital.

Two scholars who challenged the above assumptions of class analysis are E.P Thompson and Michael Burawoy. Their scholarship provides directions for class analysis in the context of labour migration. I would start with Thompson's (1963) seminal work on the making of the English working class. In challenging the base-superstructure dichotomy of sociological thought and the ahistorical analysis of class, Thompson (1963, 1978), a social historian, indicated that the social and cultural realms do not trail after the economic (i.e. production relations) and that they are immersed in the economic. His seminal work on the English working class emphasises the emergence of the working class as a historical actor focussing on the working-class experience. Following Thompson's (1963) focus on the subjectivity of English workers, his focus on class as a social and cultural formation challenged *post-facto determinism*, i.e. pre-determined explanations of class formation (McNally 1993).

While Thompson's attention to the working-class experience emanating from changes in production relations is crucial, it does not enable us to examine the dynamic ways exploitation is organised in specific historical, social and cultural contexts (Camfield 2004). For instance, while migrant labourers may own the means of production circulating between their villages and workplace in India, their social relations, such as caste, race, tribe, gender, region, ethnicity etc., enable and reinforce exploitation. Following Thompson's (1963) work, cultural identity has been essential to

understanding class relations (Chakrabarty 1989). However, its critics have argued against reifying the singular importance of culture (Bahl 1995, Chandavarkar 1998, Fernandes 1998, Simeon 1995). Such explanations focus only on the presence or the absence of class consciousness through the 'cultural' realm with relatively little attention to its linkages with the organisation of surplus extraction.

Burawoy (1985), in challenging base-superstructure dichotomy and ahistorical understanding of class, examined specific conditions and mechanisms of organising exploitation which shape, rather than assume, antagonistic relations between labour and capital. He reimagined production relations as a composition of social, political and ideological institutions which shape the lived experience of exploitation. Burawoy (1985, p8) emphasises that a deterministic lens of examining class ignores that the working class needs to be examined both in its turbulence and passivity. While the point of production enables the consciousness of workers to challenge capital, it also enables capital to dominate labour (ibid). Such a dialectical process is central to studying class formation instead of assuming that production relations are inherently antagonistic.

Concluding the absence of class on account of the passivity of labour for Bihari migrant labour working in building construction would undermine how class relations are organised. As a result, the specific conditions and the mechanisms through which class formation takes place need to be studied. In explaining class formation, the thesis draws from Thompson (1963) and Burawoy (1985) to study how exploitation is experienced in relation to how exploitation is organised.

In examining the organisation of exploitation through social relations such as caste, ethnicity, tribe and region, etc., the thesis refrains from the view that class relations are superior to, say, that of caste-based domination or ethnic discrimination or that the relations of gender, caste, etc. are derivatives of class (Camfield 2004, Lerche and Shah 2018, Mezzadri 2016a). Instead, the thesis understands that class relations do not exist outside of other social relations such as caste, gender, tribe, ethnicity, and region located in specific social and cultural contexts but are internally co-constitutive of the same (Camfield 2004, 2016; Lerche and Shah 2018).

Argument and main findings

My key findings indicate that sub-contracting in building construction is not only a form in which construction work is organised for capital accumulation but also forms and shapes the '*political apparatus*' of production. I use the term 'political' in the thesis to understand how exploitation, as organised through production relations in the case of building construction, is accepted, negotiated or challenged. In this sense, becoming political emerges from the *conditions* under which interests between labour and capital become antagonistic instead of assuming a contradictory relationship (Burawoy 1985, p29). This occurs through the regulation of class struggles. The shaping of antagonism of interests can lead to the emergence and suppression of class, i.e. the rise of class conflict and the possibility for class compromise. Class struggles are regulated through the exercise of control by specific social, political and ideological institutions which form the 'political apparatus' of production, in this case, the *thekedari* system. While sub-contracting in building construction is organised through labour contractors colloquially known as *thekedars* in the Hindi-speaking regions of India, the *thekedari* system enables and reinforces the architecture of surplus extraction. Exercising control via coercion and consent shapes the lived experience of exploitation. In this way, while enabling capital accumulation, the *thekedari* system acts as the political apparatus of production in large-scale building construction. Through the politics of the lived experience of exploitation, the *thekedari* system regulates class struggles in shaping class formation.

I argue that the formation of class as a social relation of the extraction of surplus value results from the dialectical relation between the architecture of surplus extraction and the lived experience of the act of exploitation. Class relation is the result of how the architecture of surplus extraction is shaped at the point of production and how exploitation is lived and historically experienced by labour, primarily, but not exclusively, at the point of production (Burawoy 1985, Thompson 1963). By shaping the emergence of or silencing class struggle, the politics of the lived experiences of exploitation 'configures' class relations. Configuration indicates the emergence and suppression of class under certain conditions and mechanisms. Following this, the configuration of class relations is the ensemble of all permutations and combinations

of class relations shaped by the politics of 'concrete universals' of the lived experience of exploitation. Through these 'concrete universals', Bihari migrant labourers constitute themselves as a 'class' (McNally 2015).

Through my research, I bring back the relevance and significance of class formation in the contemporary process of capital accumulation by examining the dynamic ways in which surplus extraction is dialectically related to the politics of the lived experience of exploitation. This is done through the case of Bihari migrant labour working in India's building construction industry. My research develops and applies a theoretical framework to examine specific conditions and mechanisms of organising and reinforcing exploitation in production relations, shaping the lived experience of exploitation. Through analysing labour relations in specific social and cultural contexts, which tie the production process with the reproduction of specific forms of labour power based on caste, region, ethnicity etc., the thesis outlines configurations of class relations shaping class formation. In doing so, my research explains class formation in a context where migrant labour who are fully aware and conscious of the same continues to be exploited. In presenting a nuanced analysis of labour relations in a migrant-intensive industry, i.e., building construction, the thesis closely examines the emergence and suppression of class formation.

Organisation of the thesis

I answer the research questions by discussing how the architecture of surplus extraction in the case of Bihari migrant construction labour 'configures' class relations for capital accumulation. In the first chapter, the thesis develops a theoretical framework for the architecture of surplus extraction. In chapter two, I employ the framework for sub-contracting in building construction work to examine class formation. For the same, I develop and explain the analytical framework of the '*configuration of class relations*'.

In chapter three, I present the thesis methodology and my findings and empirical data in the subsequent six chapters. Broadly, the empirical chapters shed light on the conditions and mechanisms that enable and reinforce the architecture of surplus extraction in shaping the lived experience of exploitation of Bihari migrant labourers.

The following two chapters explain the organisation of production relations in building construction. In chapter four, I explain the organisation of sub-contracting in the building construction industry. In chapter five, I highlight the organisation and reproduction of a system of migrant labour in building construction work for surplus extraction and the emergence of the lived experience of exploitation.

Further, the following three empirical chapters focus on the organisation of construction work (chapter six) and the everyday exercise of control through which surplus extraction occurs in the case of Bihari migrant labourers working at construction worksites (chapters seven) and living at labour camps (chapter eight). The chapters shed light on how the lived experience of exploitation is produced at worksites and labour camps in dialectical relation with the process of surplus extraction. In the subsequent and final empirical chapter, chapter nine, I highlight how surplus extraction is reinforced under sub-contracting relations in building construction and its effect on class formation. In conclusion, the thesis reiterates the research's argument, findings, contributions and limitations.

Chapter – 1: Class Formation: Enabling and Reinforcing the ‘Architecture of Surplus Extraction’

Class is the basic principle of the organisation, reproduction and transformation of societies (Burawoy 1985), and it pervades all aspects of social life (Camfield 2004). In the Marxist sense, class is seen as a social relation of exploitation embedded in production relations (Burawoy 1985, Camfield 2004, Lerche and Shah 2018, Thompson 1963). While exploitation is the process of extraction of surplus value, i.e. the difference in value between what workers produce as they transform nature into commodities and what they are paid as wages. The organisation of social relations through which exploitation is made possible can take different forms, and possess different dynamics (Banaji 2010, Pattenden 2016a, Thompson 1963). Beyond the organisation of social relations enabling exploitation, McNally (2013, p407) indicates that class relations are recognised not because of “*identical conditions of labour or employment, but by distinctively similar social circumstances experienced by people belonging to the same class.*” This is useful to examine class relations in the case of migrant labourers in India who are compelled to find work outside their villages, for instance, in building construction industry in the cities and return back to their villages either to work on their agricultural land or in different forms of self-employment. This combinational use of migrant labourers’ working as wage labourers alongside using self-employment to reproduce themselves within the circuits of capitalism indicates their position as ‘classes of labour’ (Bernstein 2007, Lerche 2009) in trying to meet their reproduction needs. As a result, class relations hold significance in examining the distinct yet similar experiences by people belonging to the same class or otherwise who share their position of being exploited as ‘classes of labour’.

While class is a social relation of exploitation, how are class relations constituted or organised? This explains the ontology of class formation. Class relations are co-constituted by social relations other than class such as caste, tribe, race, gender etc (Camfield 2004, 2016; McNally 2015, Lerche and Shah 2018, Shah *et al.* 2017). Recent studies on exploitation and labour migration in India have brought attention to the co-constitution of class relations by caste, race, tribe, gender, ethnicity, region, etc. (Lerche and Shah 2018, Gidwani and Ramamurthy 2018). Pattenden (2016a)

indicates that class relations are shaped by the 'diversity of the concrete' i.e., the combination of multiple social relations (Fernandes 1998, Harris-White and Gooptu 2001, Mezzadri 2016a). While class relations combine with other relations, for instance, that of race, gender, sexuality, etc., these relations, however, cannot be reduced to class and are also not the result of class (Lerche and Shah 2018, Mezzadri 2016a). Class formation encompasses how class relations are organised and how class relations are lived and experienced. While class relations are anchored in production relations, social relations beyond that of class shape class relations indicating the need for a dialectical approach to class formation (Camfield 2004, McNally 2015, Lerche and Shah 2018). In explaining class formation, the thesis examines how exploitation is organised in relation with how production relations shape the lived experience of exploitation.

Classical Marxist analysis depicts a functionalist and teleological explanation of working-class formation by indicating that the working class develops consciousness and transitions from class-in-itself to class-for-itself to challenge exploitation. Such a class analysis objectively situates production relations as the base or the economic realm and all other social relations as the superstructure in shaping class formation. It valorises an inevitable or deterministic model to explain class formation considering the limitations of examining production relations as the 'economic' realm.

A class analytical lens of this kind remains insufficient to explain class formation in contexts where the extraction of surplus value continues to occur despite the 'consciousness' of labour exploitation. For instance, in the context of internal labour migration within countries such as India, China etc., historical processes of violent, primitive accumulation continue, where labourers continue to own means of production and remain exploited as 'classes of labour'. The thesis examines the process of class formation by taking such a case of exploitation of migrant labourers from the East Indian state of Bihar i.e. Bihari migrant labourers, working in building construction in India. If Bihari migrant labourers, who straddle between their villages in Bihar and construction worksites in the city, are aware and 'conscious' of their exploitation, why haven't production relations turned them into becoming political? How do Bihari migrant labourers working in building construction form a class?

To examine if production relations turn labourers into becoming political, forming a class, we need to closely examine not only how production is organised at the workplace but also how interests between labour and capital are shaped i.e., the politics of production, which enable, enforce and reproduce relations of exploitation and shape labourers' lived experience of exploitation. To do so, following Burawoy's (1985) work on the politics of production, the chapter proposes a theoretical framework for the 'architecture of surplus extraction', i.e., the actors and mechanisms through which surplus extraction is shaped and politically reinforced at the point of production.

To begin with, the chapter discusses the centrality of production relations and class formation. Then, in going further, the chapter engages with Thompson (1963) and Burawoy (1985), who challenge the base-superstructure dichotomy for class analysis, albeit in different ways, by examining working-class experience of exploitation emanating from production relations. Following this, I elaborate on Burawoy's (1985) framework on the politics of production that explains the organisation and reproduction of the labour process through which surplus extraction is enabled and reproduced in the context of building construction in India. In doing so, the significance of the political apparatus of production is explained. Further, by interrogating and expanding the form and function of the political apparatus of production, the chapter proposes a theoretical framework for the architecture of surplus extraction.

1.1 Production relations and its politics: From Thompson's '*making*' to Burawoy's *lived experience of exploitation*

Burawoy's (1985, p86-87) analysis of four resolutions regarding the processes through which labourers' consciousness (of their exploitation) can translate into action against exploitation is noteworthy. These resolutions enable us to highlight the significance of production relations and associated conditions and mechanisms in shaping class formation.

1.1.1 Examining class formation: Some propositions

In his first proposition, Burawoy (1985) indicates that the deliberate intervention of the working class to translate class consciousness into action against exploitation ignores

the ability of capital to suppress labour. Another proposition indicates that the translation of the experience of exploitation to consciousness could be left to take place logically or naturally if and when capitalism meets its death. This proposition dismisses the emergence of the working class as a historical actor. A third proposition for class formation indicates that the struggle against exploitation necessarily requires the intervention of the political party, the trade union, etc., enabling labour to recognise its potential to challenge exploitation. However, this resolution treats labour as 'ready to change' its conception of the existing state of affairs, i.e., exploitation. Also, it assumes that the intervention of the trade unions or political parties would challenge exploitation.

All the above propositions have inherent assumptions about the process of class formation. In the first proposition, consciousness is assumed to be present by ignoring the ability of capital to dominate labour or is otherwise presumed to be absent on account of the domination of labour. In the second proposition, consciousness is imagined as logically possible because of capitalism's death, ignoring the working class's role as a historical actor. Finally, in the third proposition, consciousness ought to be developed through political organisation. However, in the case of India, trade unions and left political parties have been unsuccessful in enabling labour, mainly migrant labour, to recognise the need to challenge exploitation, and have been, instead, caught up in divisions perpetuated by caste, region, tribe etc. (Sinha 2017a).

The fourth and final proposition for class formation is offered by engaging with the totality of historical working-class experience rather than the development of class consciousness. The case of 'English' workers experiencing the Industrial Revolution (Thompson 1963) supports this proposition for class formation. Thompson's study of the English working class challenged *post-facto determinism*, i.e. pre-determined explanations of class formation (McNally 1993), arguing against the inevitable formation of a revolutionary proletariat. In doing so, Thompson challenged the dichotomy of 'class-for-itself', 'class-in-itself' and the ahistorical nature of examining class formation under classical Marxist analysis. Thompson (1963) understands class as a relationship in which the working class emerges as a *historical* actor in its own 'making' i.e., the working class acts upon its experience resulting from the changes in production relations. As a result of the Industrial Revolution in England, the cultural,

political and communal realms emerged as loci of struggles of the 'English' craft-worker, the weaver, the artisans etc., against the encroachment of their autonomy. This was done to defend and protect their position as individual producers and maintain their 'control' over ownership and production (Calhoun 1982). In doing so, Thompson (1963) emphasises the self-activity of the working class. He argued that class is as much a social as a cultural formation.

Further, the 'working-class' experience encompasses social and cultural realms such as the family, the neighbourhood, the pub, the church, the club, etc. Thompson (1963) indicates that this working-class experience from social and cultural realms provides the necessary ingredients for the 'making' of the working class. In this way, Thompson emphasises that the conditions that lead to class formation may occur outside production, considering that social and cultural phenomena also shape the working-class experience.

Under this proposition to examine class formation as a process, the working class emerges as a historical actor. However, the presence or lack of class consciousness is explained by searching for answers in the 'moral' or the 'cultural' realms, for instance in the 'Indian' case. For example, Chakrabarty's (1989) work on *Rethinking Working-Class History: Bengal 1890-1940* laid emphasis on the primordial cultural identity of migrant labourers from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, working in Calcutta, rooted in their caste, kinship ties, community, village origins, language etc., for explaining absence (or the lack) of class-consciousness. Consciousness (or lack thereof), in this sense, came to be recognised as a product of 'cultural' dimensions of social relation rooted in categories of caste, tribe, and gender. In the case of studying the history of the 'Indian' working class, writings drawing upon Thompson's work relied on the pre-existing consciousness of workers seen to be located in the moral-cultural realm to explain the presence or lack of consciousness (Chandavarkar 1997, Robb 1993).

None of the propositions explained above help examine the case of Bihari migrant labourers in the building construction industry, who are conscious and aware of their exploitation and have not shown indications of class-based political organisation. However, what lies at the heart of the propositions is the attention paid to the role of production relations in organising exploitation and shaping the process of class

formation. Examining class formation requires revisiting production relations and including its politics, which organise exploitation and shape the lived experience of exploitation.

1.1.2 Emphasising the politics of production: Producing lived experience of exploitation in regulating class struggle

What makes production relations central to class formation? To answer this question, it is significant to examine production relations and its conditions and mechanisms which enable, enforce, and reproduce exploitation in shaping the interests of labour and capital. To begin, one needs to understand how production relations have been understood and studied, focussing on the politics of production.

Thompson (1963) imagined production relations as the economic realm. Further, he indicated that the social and cultural realms do not follow or trail after the economic (Thompson 1965, p356). Moreover, Thompson's (1963) attention to social and cultural domains was only to understand their effect in composing the totality of working-class experience for enabling resistance by English workers to changes in production relations. His seminal work helps us understand the significance of the social and cultural realms in forming a historical working-class experience (McNally 1993). However, it misses out or does not account for how the social, cultural and moral realms can be co-opted or embedded within production relations to enable contemporary processes of capital accumulation. For instance, Hall (1986, p24) indicates that the 'culturally specific forms of labour-power' enable the extraction of surplus value. In doing so, Thompson (1963) examines production relations only through the lens of how workers experience exploitation in social and cultural realms with little attention to the conditions and mechanisms through which exploitation is organised. Further, the social and the cultural domains, otherwise seen as 'fixed' primordial or pre-capitalist identities in Thompson's (1963) case, could also be shaped by work and politics (Chandavarkar 1997, De Neve 2001).

Though the moral and the cultural realms can co-exist alongside the economic realm, they can also inform production relations in organising and reproducing exploitation (Burawoy 1985, p77). In this way, moral and cultural realms, otherwise identified with

pre-capitalist or primordial identities, could be preserved and replicated in reinforcing exploitation. In this sense, Thompson's examination of class formation offers a limited framework to study production relations. It ignores how production relations serve as the foundation for forming and reproducing the surplus extraction process in producing and reproducing the working-class experience.

Drawing from departing from Thompson (1963), I would like to throw light on how Burawoy (1985) expands the ambit of production relations by going beyond its economic realm and including the politics of production. He indicates that production relations are rooted in the Marxist understanding that every production process is, at the same time, a reproduction process. Following Marx, Burawoy's work (1985, p123) emphasises the act of production as a simultaneous act of reproduction i.e. labourers, in producing things shape the basis of their existence and that of capital, reproducing capital-labour relations. Burawoy indicates that production is not just about the economic realm, i.e., the production of things, but also about political and ideological effects which produce and reproduce social relations and their experience. In this way, Burawoy emphasises the significance of not only the organisation of relations of the labour process for producing things i.e. relations *in* production but also relations *of* production i.e. the reproduction of the relations of the labour process. Burawoy (1985, p25,39) indicates that the production process itself is an "*inseparable combination of both subjective and objective condition composed of production of things (economic), production of social relations (political) and production of an experience of those relations (ideological).*" The production of social relations and an experience of those relations is a historical process and can occur in myriad ways, including incorporating the moral and cultural realms (Thompson 1963, 1971).

By understanding production relations as an ensemble of production and reproduction, Burawoy expands on how the organisation and experience of exploitation can be examined. In doing so, he emphasises the significance of the politics of production, which shape how the interests of labour and capital remain coordinated or otherwise become antagonistic. In expanding how we view production relations, Burawoy (1985) suggests 'class' is the combined effect of three inseparable dimensions of work, viz. production of things (an economic dimension), the production of social relations (a political dimension) and the production of an experience of those relations (an

ideological dimension). These dimensions of work produce political effects composing the politics of production. In examining class formation, my research outlines the politics of production by interrogating how the interests of labour and capital are shaped, i.e. under what conditions and why do they remain coordinated or otherwise become antagonistic, considering the existence of a social relation of exploitation?

Following Burawoy (1985, p254), the thesis understands politics as “*struggles within a specific arena aimed at a specific set of relations,*” highlighting production politics, state politics, family politics, etc., both by the ‘arena’ and the ‘specific set of relations’. In the case of my research, such relations are class relations, and therefore, its politics encompasses struggles within the workplace. Roy (2017, p28, emphasis original) argues that politics is composed of struggles over power, meanings and identities *intended* to advance a perspective or idea even though the outcomes of such struggle may remain unanticipated. In this sense, he indicates that political practices comprise compliance and contestation. Following this understanding of politics, struggles over production relations, i.e. the politics of production, comprise the acceptance of, negotiation with, and resistance to the process of surplus extraction, indicating the possibility rather than the inevitability of antagonism as a result of exploitation. While ‘becoming political’ emphasises compliance and contestation, they emerge largely as a result of the political effects of production relations. In emphasising the ‘political’, Burawoy cautions against the over-emphasis on the state and the minimal attention given to institutions in the production process, which can shape production politics by regulating workplace struggles. Further, while the state shapes production politics, it cannot be reduced to state politics. In this sense, Burawoy indicates that “*production politics are struggles waged within the arena of production over relations in and of production*” (ibid). Such struggles over the organisation and reproduction of the relations of the labour process emerge from the above three dimensions of work. As a result, examining the politics of production is crucial to explain class formation.

Following this, a starting point to examine class formation would be to understand production relations producing political, and ideological effects, underpinned by moral and cultural domains. To do so, the thesis studies the politics of production in the case of building construction work in India taking construction sites as the workplace. While moral and cultural realms could lie outside the workplace, these realms are significant

to the organisation of exploitation and in politically shaping how labourers experience exploitation. In focusing on studying the workplace, the thesis agrees with De Neve (2001, p136), who indicates that the workplace is not “as a *static and single-dimensional conceptualisation*” of production relations. Instead, the thesis focuses on the workplace to examine the politics of production to explore the conditions and mechanisms through which exploitation is organised and how it dialectically produces the lived experience of exploitation.

While the significance of not only production relations but also its politics has been emphasised, what now requires attention is the lived experience of exploitation and how it is politically shaped by production relations? How does the ‘lived experience of exploitation’ differ from Thompson’s (1963) focus on the English ‘working-class experience’ ?

The totality of working-class experience, as Thompson (1963) explains, is subjective and arises ‘from below’ through the social and cultural realms embedded within the economic domain. However, it remains devoid of how the experience is composed ‘from above’, crafted by the workplace’s social, political and ideological institutions (Burawoy 1985, p77). Further, Thompson’s work on class formation is rooted in a pre-existing consciousness emanating from the pre-industrial era, which composes the working-class experience. In contrast, Burawoy’s work valorises the significance of ‘social relations’ across temporal and spatial contexts in shaping the (historical) conditions and mechanisms of the production process and the production of ‘lived’ experience. The simultaneous act of producing things and reproducing social relations in enabling and reinforcing exploitation composes the ‘lived experience of exploitation’ (Burawoy 1985). In this way, the ‘lived experience of exploitation’ is a composition of the subjective, i.e. from below *and* the objective, i.e. from above.

The lived experience of exploitation emerges from and is visible *in* the everyday production process. While exploitation is visible in the ‘everyday’ organisation of production relations through its various routines, rhythms and repetitions (Lefebvre and Levich 1987), one cannot dismiss how exploitation has been organised historically through social relations of caste, ethnicity, tribe, gender etc. In this sense, the experience of exploitation emerges from the embeddedness of ‘culturally specific forms

of labour-power' (Hall 1986) in production relations. Further, the experience of exploitation is lived *through* multiple social differences, which form the 'concrete universals' such as relations of caste, region, race, ethnicity, gender, 'skill' etc. (Bourgois 1988, McNally 2015). For instance, the everyday experience of exploitation of Bihari migrant labourers who work in building construction would be concrete and specific, constituted in and through ethnic discrimination, class-caste based oppression given their regional and intergenerational histories of labour migration from the East Indian state of Bihar. However, such 'concrete universals' of Bihari migrant labourers working in building construction would differ from that of Bengali migrant construction labourers. This is because of the difference in which culturally specific forms of labour-power are incorporated into production processes and how social, political and ideological elements of the production process reproduce relations of the labour process. Following this, I indicate that the 'lived experience of exploitation' is enabled through social, political and ideological elements of the production relations, which include relations of domination, oppression etc.

While the lived experience of exploitation is visible *in* the production process and *through* concrete universals, Burawoy indicates that it is *the reproduction of the relations of the labour process* which shapes the lived experience of exploitation. In challenging the assumption, similar to Thompson (1963), that there is an inherent antagonism or contradiction between labour and capital, Burawoy (1985, p29, emphasis mine) stresses that the interests that shape the lives of labourers are produced and reproduced in *particular* ways in the process of production. In this way, Burawoy highlights the role of conditions and mechanisms through which production relations enable, enforce and reinforce exploitation in politically shaping the lived experience of exploitation i.e, how interests between labour and capital become (or otherwise do not) antagonistic. To engage with specific conditions and mechanisms under which labourers resist or accept their exploitation, or their interests become antagonistic, we focus on the workplace- as the site for production relations. He further indicates that the reproduction of the relations of labour process in the workplace, regulates working-class struggle and, as a result, shapes class formation. But why and how is the workplace a crucial determinant of class struggle? How do we understand class struggle?

Thompson (1978) and Balibar (1991) discuss class struggle *without* class. They both indicate class formation due to class struggle, not before the struggle. Thompson (1978, p149) argues that class struggle takes place, “*when people find themselves in a society structured in determined ways (crucially, but not exclusively, in productive relations) as a result of which they experience exploitation (or the need to maintain power over those whom they exploit) and identify points of antagonistic interests.*” For Thompson (1963), even before diverse groups of English workers realise that they ‘form’ a class, they are already in the process of class struggle due to the ‘friction of interests.’ This indicates that class is not formed a priori but due to class struggle (Thompson 1978).

Balibar (1991), however, explains class struggle by reflecting on an economic and political class theory. In an ‘economic’ reading of class, political conflict arises (or is seen to arise) inevitably to resist exploitation, i.e. the extraction of surplus value recognised as an expression of economic contradictions between labour and capital. However, a ‘political’ reading of class gives theoretical primacy to the substantial variations of the contents of labour exploitation, resistance etc., in producing the “game” of antagonistic strategies rather than logic (ibid, p11). Similarly, Burawoy (1985) indicates that the interests between labour and capital are politically and ideologically shaped in the production process.

Further, Balibar (1991, p12) indicates that “*class struggle is not an expression but a cause, in the structural sense, of the economic configuration which needs to be regulated in its historical junctures due to the evolution of conflicting forces.*” This means that the specific organisation of production relations is because of class struggle, a historical and ongoing process. Class struggle, however, needs to be regulated to minimise class conflicts. Such conflicting forces arise from ‘above’ in sustaining capital accumulation and ‘below’ in shaping the potential to challenge exploitation.

I examine the concrete variations Balibar (1991) highlighted at the level of organising exploitation, composing the lived experience of exploitation, and potentially acting upon it. Considering such variations in the contents of exploitation, class struggle encompasses the struggle arising from the need to maintain and the possibility to

challenge the relation of exploitation. Further, class struggle encompasses all such social relations which enable, reinforce and remain intertwined with exploitation, for instance, domination, social oppression, and ethnic discrimination etc. (Lerche and Shah 2018). This view on class struggle informs the thesis. On the contrary, following Thompson's view, class struggle aims at protecting or defending the interests of weavers, artisans, etc., who were losing their control over ownership of means of production due to the Industrial Revolution. Only when the dynamics of exploitation are examined can we understand the workplace as central to class struggle, and in turn, to the process of class formation.

We now return to the central questions of the research. How do Bihari migrant labourers experience exploitation in the building construction industry? What is their 'lived experience of exploitation'? How does it inform the process of class formation? For examining these questions, the thesis follows Burawoy's (1985) seminal work on examining the politics of production. In doing so, the thesis pays attention to production and reproduction, i.e. the politics of the 'lived experience of exploitation' embedded in production relations. Unlike the reification of class consciousness which labour develops (or does not) to respond to capital, attention to the 'lived experience of exploitation' enables us to examine class formation. The thesis argues that the lived experience of exploitation arises from the dialectical relation between how exploitation is organised and experienced in production relations. Further, to examine class relations, I draw from the literature that underlines the evolution of capitalism, and hence, the organisation of exploitation through differences of caste, race, gender, tribe, region, kinship etc., embedded in specific social and cultural contexts (Lerche and Shah 2018, Shah and Lerche 2020).

Burawoy's (1985) attention to the reproduction of the relations of labour process in regulating class struggles provides us with a theoretical framework to examine the *conditions* and *mechanisms* in forming the architecture of surplus extraction. How are relations of labour process organised and reproduced? It is these questions to which we turn to.

1.2 Organisation and reproduction of the relations of the labour process: The political apparatus of production

Examining the mechanisms of organising and reproducing relations in the labour process is crucial to imagining the architecture of surplus extraction.

Henry Braverman's (1974) seminal work on the Marxist theory of the labour process explains how capital appropriates surplus from labour through the production of things. For the same, he indicated how capital both uses and destroys the skills and knowledge of workers in translating the capacity of labour, i.e. labour-power, to labour. As a result of the labour process, Braverman indicates that workers are alienated from the labour process and gradually de-skilled. In doing so, Braverman (1974) offers an 'objective' understanding of the labour process, ruling out any possibility for the 'subjective' experience of workers arising from the process of surplus appropriation. To recuse the objective-subjective dichotomy in explaining the labour process, Burawoy articulates a *relational* understanding of the labour process, i.e. the significance of workers and those they work for.

Burawoy's relational lens emphasises the production of things and the production and reproduction of social relations. He indicates that one needs to understand the production process as the combination of the organisation and reproduction of the relations of the labour process.

The labour process, i.e. the production of use-value, as Burawoy (1985) argues, in the capitalist mode of production, produces both the capitalist and the labourer. The production of use-values through the organisation of tasks comprises the *relations in production*, i.e. social relations between and among workers who produce use-values (p29, emphasis original). However, he indicates that the social relations through which surplus is extracted or pumped out at the point of production compose the *relations of production*, which organise exploitation through appropriation and distribution of surplus (ibid). This framing of relations *in* production and relations *of* production is of analytical value rather than a distinction which can be located in production relations. By elucidating a relational understanding of the labour process, Burawoy (1985, p14,

emphasis mine) lays significance on the *reproduction* of social relations of the labour process to extract surplus.

The questions that arise are: what comprises the reproduction of social relations of the labour process? How is surplus pumped out at the point of production? Burawoy (1985, p31) alludes to the essence of the labour process in capitalist production to examine the reproduction of the relations of the labour process. Following Marx, this essence concerns the absence of a separation between necessary and surplus labour time in capitalism. This indicates that labourers do not first work to secure their subsistence and then work for the capitalist. Instead, labourers need to ensure their reproduction alongside producing things or commodities, in the case of my research, the construction of buildings. Burawoy (1985, p34) indicates that in capitalist social relations, “*necessary and surplus labour time are indistinguishable at the level of experience as they are invisible (and possibly implausible)*,” indicating that surplus is hidden in the process of production, both for labourers and capitalists. The wage relation both seals and conceals the surplus. Following this, he (p32) highlights the simultaneous securing and obscuring of surplus in the capitalist production process, as the capitalist is never sure whether the surplus has been recovered. The obscuring of surplus enables and sustains capital accumulation by reinforcing social relations of production. Moreover, obscuring produces conditions that shape the antagonism of interests between labour and capital.

In this way, the necessity for enabling simultaneous securing and obscuring of surplus constitutes the critical element of ‘capitalist control’ central to the capitalist labour process. What entails ‘capitalist control’, i.e. the securing and obscuring of surplus in reproducing relations in production, is made possible by specific mechanisms and institutions in the production process, what Burawoy (1985, p87, emphasis original) calls the *political apparatus of production*. In serving as the realm of exercising control to secure and obscure surplus, the political apparatus of production reproduces the relations of the labour process and, as a result, shapes antagonism of interests between labour and capital. Both the labour process and the political apparatus of production produce political effects in reproducing relations of the labour process. They are a ‘political’ apparatus as they regulate and shape struggles over a specific set of relations in the workplace, i.e. production relations and as a result, shape the

lived experience of exploitation. For instance, under what conditions can labourers' lived experience of exploitation be co-opted within the process of capital accumulation and under what conditions would it lead to struggle against it? How and under what conditions do the interests of labour align with or resist capital? In this sense, one can think about the 'political' aspect of production.

Burawoy's comparative work across different contexts of capitalist development highlights that while the political apparatus includes the state, the 'political' cannot be reduced to the state (p9,254). However, that is not to deny that the state apparatus consisting of laws, regulations etc. have no role in shaping the politics of production. For instance, literature from the Middle East, China and South-East Asia indicates that the state exercises political control in reinforcing exploitation of migrant labour via legal arrangements such as *kafala* in the case of Gulf countries, *hukou* i.e. household registration system in case of China or contract labour in the case of East and South-East Asia (Deshingkar 2018, Fan 2004, Gibson and Graham 1986).

By taking a specific case of organising production relations in the case of building construction in India, one can highlight the significance of the political apparatus of production in shaping production politics. Existing literature indicates 'sub-contracting' as a method of organising production process in global building construction by relying heavily on migrant labour (Lerche 2007; Shivakumar, Sheng and Weber 1991; Srivastava and Jha 2016, Suresh 2010, Wells 1996). Under sub-contracting, the principal building contractor who undertakes the contract to construct the building, delegates different stages of the process of construction to multiple labour contractors who mobilise migrant labourers for construction work. This kind of sub-contracting in building construction is domestic and takes place at temporary worksites as compared to sub-contracting in garment industry which is global and is organised through relatively permanent production units (Lerche *et al.* 2017, p3). In the case of India, builders or building companies owning construction sites identify sub-contracting as a politically easier way to deal with issues of labour by subverting labour rights, disguising wage relation, side stepping labour regulations and entrenching exploitation (Lerche *et al.* 2017, Ngai and Huilin 2010, Pattenden 2016b, Suresh 2010, Srivastava and Sutradhar 2016). Sub-contracting organises the labour process in building construction, but how are social relations of the labour process reproduced under sub-

contracting? How does sub-contracting secure and obscure surplus in enabling capital accumulation in building construction? How does sub-contracting produce the lived experience of exploitation in shaping antagonism between labour and capital? While it is known that sub-contracting enables capital accumulation in building construction, little is known empirically about its politics- the ways in which sub-contracting reproduces social relations, regulates class struggle, and shapes the lived experience of exploitation. This is an empirical gap which the thesis aims to fill by focussing on identifying and examining the political apparatus of production in building construction, the production process of which is organised by sub-contracting.

For the same, it would be useful to explain the composition of such apparatus drawing from historical and contemporary contexts of capitalism as indicated by Burawoy (1985). Burawoy indicates that the political apparatus of production is hinged on the labour process and ties the production process with the reproduction of labour-power. He suggests that the decisive basis for identifying an effective political apparatus of production is rooted in the degree of unity or separation of the reproduction of labour-power and the production process. In the case of early capitalism, such unity of the reproduction of labour-power with the production process was made possible through organising the political apparatus of production along the lines of family, kinship, gender, race etc. However, Burawoy indicates that in the case of advanced capitalism, the intervention of the state, substituting for family, kinship etc., separated the reproduction of labour-power from the production process.

What is the scope and limits of the political apparatus of production? How does it change depending on contexts of production? An interrogation of the form and function of the political apparatus of production would be necessary to make sense of how architecture of surplus extraction can be shaped.

1.2.1 Interrogating the form and function of the political apparatus of production

The political apparatus of production, as Burawoy indicates, ties the reproduction of labour-power with the production process. He emphasises that the political apparatus of production is dynamic and determined by the combined and uneven nature of

capitalist development. In the case of despotic regimes of early capitalism, social relations of race, gender, and kinship served as the organising principle of the political apparatus of production. Further, Burawoy (1985, p11) indicates that political apparatus of production can also reproduce relations of domination outside production, for instance, gender and race in the case of women workers in United States mills and black workers in South African mines. However, Burawoy (1985, p8) does not deny the existence of racial or gender oppression. Instead, he indicates that racial and gender domination are shaped by class more than forms of class domination are shaped by gender and race. This raises questions concerning the *form* or the *constitution* of the political apparatus of production through social relations beyond that of class to enable the reproduction of the relations of the labour process.

Further, at the centre of understanding Burawoy's (1985) political apparatus of production has been the particular modes and institutions through which control is exercised in the production process in reproducing relations of the labour process. In expanding the 'boundaries' of control, social and spatial dimensions of control received attention in economic geography in the 1990s, indicating the need to 'localise' labour control giving rise to 'labour control regimes' (Jonas 1996). Empirically, this was visible in the exercise of control by social actors and institutions such as labour recruitment agencies, trade unions, and labour intermediaries in the production process by recruiting labourers (Kelly 2001, 2002; Wetlesen 2016). For instance, drawing on Jonas (1996), Pattenden (2016b) throws light on one of the significant ways in which collective action by labourers is mediated through the *maistry* or manager of migrant labourers working in the building construction industry in India and at the same time 'remotely' controls reproduction of labour, i.e. via labourers' circulation or commuting to their villages of origin. Pattenden (2018), taking the case of the building construction industry in India, further indicates that exploitation occurs through fragmentation of labour within production sites and reproduction zones of migrant construction labourers in India, management by labour contractors and mediation by the state. Recent literature further indicated the spatial fragmentation of production and reproduction by emphasising the role of 'temporary' accommodation of women workers in dormitories in case of factories in Special Economic Zones in China (Ngai and Smith 2007), labourers in the garment industry in India (Mezzadri 2016c), manufacturing industries in Europe (Schling 2014) in enabling the exercise of

spatial aspects of control and discipline over labour (Fei 2020, Goodburn and Mishra 2023).

Some questions concerning the form and the function of the political apparatus of production emerge. Can the political apparatus of production be constituted by social relations outside class, such as caste, ethnicity, region etc.? How do specific forms of labour-power shape the political apparatus of production? Further, can the degree to which the reproduction of labour-power is tied to the production process be shaped by cultural, regional and intergenerational histories of the 'lived experience of exploitation'? Moreover, how does the lived experience of exploitation shape and define the scope and limits of control exercised by the political apparatus of production? Can the political apparatus of production secure and obscure and legitimate surplus extraction by exercising social or spatial control to reproduce relations of the labour process? These questions enable us to revisit the constitution of the political apparatus of production which reproduces relations of the labour process in shaping the politics of production.

1.3 Revisiting the form and function of the political apparatus of production: Towards an architecture of surplus extraction

In this section, I revisit the form and function of the political apparatus of production in moving towards a theoretical framework to explain how surplus extraction takes place, how relations of the labour process are organised and reproduced in forming an architecture of surplus extraction. The architecture of surplus extraction, composed of how relations of the labour process are organised and reproduced, shapes the evolution of the lived experience of exploitation informing class formation.

At the core of methods of surplus extraction lies the difference between the value of labour-power and the value created by labour-power in the labour process. As indicated earlier, the political apparatus of production is shaped by the degree to which the reproduction of labour-power is tied to the production process and has its roots in the value of labour-power and the value created by labour-power in the production process. In moving towards an architecture of surplus extraction, there is a need to expand how the political apparatus of production is composed through the

unity/separation between the reproduction of labour-power (i.e. the value of labour-power) and the production process (i.e. the value created by labour-power) in examining the politics of production. Further, how the realm of control can be expanded in reproducing relations of the labour process and in turn shaping the politics of production.

1.3.1 The value of labour-power

The value of labour-power is the value of the means of subsistence necessary for the maintenance of the owner of labour-power or reproduction of himself, i.e. the labourer. It is measured through necessary labour time in the working day, the value equivalent to what is needed to reproduce labour, also called necessary labour. Marx indicated that “.... *the number and extent of his [the labourer’s] so-called necessary wants, as also the modes of satisfying them, are themselves the product of historical development, and depend therefore to a great extent on the degree of civilisation of a country, more particularly on the conditions under which, and consequently on the habits and degree of comfort.*” This highlights that different historical forms of labour-power may have different necessary labour times, and the process of capital accumulation uses different ways to meet the reproduction needs of their labour-power. However, to what extent are these needs of reproduction met and how? How does this shape the constitution of the political apparatus of production?

It is necessary to situate the reproduction of labour-power in the contemporary process of global capitalism, particularly in the context of the Global South. It is the marginal position of labour under capitalism with which labour enters or seeks to enter the production process to meet their reproduction needs. However, labourers remain compelled to sell their labour-power to secure their reproduction needs by using combinations of wage-based or self-employment (Bernstein 2007). Moreover, the compulsion of labour to sell their labour-power is marked by migrant labour within India originating from specific backward regions characterised by high poverty levels and low human development indices and hit by combined and uneven capitalist development. The case of migrant labourers in India, who remain footloose with one foot in the city and the other in the village in meeting their reproduction needs, indicates their shared position of being exploited under global capitalism. This is

captured by Bernstein's (2007) term, 'classes of labour' which indicates the fragmented ways in which migrant labourers within India reproduce across the city-village divide. Such fragmentation results in differentiated forms of incorporation into global processes of capitalist accumulation (Hall 1986). For instance, the migration of Bihari migrant labourers from the East Indian state of Bihar is marked by caste-based violence, natural disasters, absence of employment opportunities (Sinha 2013). Further, the compulsion to sell their labour-power is reinforced by labour being forced to work under certain conditions within the production process. However, the production process, in this case, building construction, only meets certain components of the reproduction of labour.

In opening up what constitutes the 'value of labour-power', Meillassoux (1981, p100) outlines three components of the same, i.e. the everyday reconstitution of labour-power, maintenance during periods of unemployment and replacement by the breeding of offspring, indicating the everyday reproduction of labour (power) and components of the wider 'social' reproduction of labour. However, Meillassoux (1981) suggests that in organising surplus extraction, capital may only meet the needs of everyday reconstitution or renewal of labour-power and leave the other two components comprising of the 'social' aspects of reproduction to be met by the household/family of the labourer. He highlights this to explain the super-exploitation of migrant labourers in West Africa by being paid only for the immediate renewal of labour-power compared to the local labourers. Further, Lerche and Shah (2018) indicate that Dalits and Adivasi migrant labourers in India are super-exploited and that their super-exploitation is organised through their kinship relations in the village, including but not limited to that of women (Shah and Lerche 2020).

In indicating the two elements of reproduction of labour-power which capital is concerned with, Burawoy (1976) highlights the significance of maintenance (i.e. subsistence of labourers) and renewal of labour (i.e. replacement of vacancies of labour by recruits) for the capitalist economy. He indicates that, under capitalism, a 'system of migrant labour' conceals and at the same time reinforces the separation between the maintenance and renewal of the labour force in producing cheap labour. Burawoy (1976, 1985) highlights that the 'system of migrant labour' was enforced through legal and political institutions between villages and towns for mines in South

Africa, farms in the United States and textile mills in Russia. This separation is made possible by *externalising* renewal costs of labour to an 'alternate economy or state' through the intervention of the employer and the state. In contemporary times of capitalist development, this 'system of migrant labour' is visible in the practice of *kafala* in the case of the Gulf which mobilise migrant labourers from South Asian countries, and *hukou* in the case of China which relies on internal labour migrants.

Further, Burawoy indicated renewal costs of labour could be *reduced* through certain historical institutions by mobilising a differentiated labour force on the grounds of race, for instance, black workers in plantations against white ones (p1080-1081). Following Burawoy (1976), the specific modes in which labour force is inserted into the reproduction of labour-power, for instance, on the grounds of the region, race, gender etc., determines the value of labour-power (p1084).

Such differential modes of inserting labour enable capital to 'pick' or replace certain kinds of labourers and 'leave' the others, making labour disposable and replaceable (Ferguson and McNally 2015). At the same time, constructing the 'chosen' or the 'replacement' labourers as docile, disciplined, and hardworking in relation to others legitimises the basis of their exploitation (Mezzadri 2016c). Local labour being replaced by migrant labour, or migrant labour from one region being replaced by migrant labourers from another part, both within and beyond national borders, have historically served and continue to serve as crucial ways to organise surplus extraction. Examples of these from India are visible in both historical and contemporary times in the context of tea plantations in Assam in which migrant labourers from the states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh replaced local labourers (Das Gupta 1986), textile mills in Surat where earlier migrants came from Ratnagiri district were replaced by migrant labour from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh (Chandavarkar 1997), Adivasis from Jharkhand replacing Dalits working in the tea plantations in Kerala (Shah *et al.* 2017) and the case of sub-contracting in building construction which relies heavily on migrant labour for surplus accumulation.

Following the above literature, it is argued that the value of labour-power depends on the *specific* forms of labour-power embedded in social relations such as race, gender, region, kinship etc. Such forms shape the reproduction of labour-power alongside

externalising certain reproduction costs onto the family, women, kinship relations etc. I indicate that it is essential to consider the historically specific forms of labour-power rooted in race, region, ethnicity etc., based on which labour is inserted into the extraction of surplus value (Burawoy 1976, Ferguson 2016, Hall 1986). How are specific forms of labour power i.e. migrant labourers deployed in the context of sub-contracting in building construction in enabling surplus extraction? How are social relations of caste, region, ethnicity etc. deployed under sub-contracting enable the relations of the labour process to be reproduced? Explaining such process inform the constitution of the political apparatus of production in the case of building construction, and in turn, shape the architecture of surplus extraction.

1.3.2 The value created by labour-power

In the organisation of the labour process (i.e. relations in production), the value created by labour-power depends on the value of labour-power. The different specific forms of labour-power rooted in the compulsion to sell their labour-power shapes the value created in the labour process. The value that labour-power creates in the production process above wages and the cost of reproduction of labour is the 'surplus value' resulting from the labour process.

Central to the modes through which surplus can be extracted is the degree or the extent to which labourers' "own" time can be used by the employer (Thompson 1967, emphasis original; Chakravarti 2001b). However, the distinction between labourers' and employers' time, i.e., necessary and surplus labour time, is blurred in capitalism. Marx indicates that the "*surplus value produced by prolongation of the working day is absolute surplus value, while the surplus value arising from the curtailment of necessary labour time is relative surplus value,*" i.e. increasing work intensity is the relative surplus value. In production, surplus extraction could occur through absolute or relative terms, i.e., intensifying work and extending or prolonging the working day. Jain and Sharma's (2019) discussion of surplus extraction in the case of Adivasi migrant labour working in the construction and textile industry in Gujarat indicates both the intensification of the work and the extension of the working day. The extraction of surplus value through intensification of work or extension of the working day can also be further or otherwise *complemented* with mechanisms of curtailing necessary labour

time, enabling and entrenching surplus appropriation. For instance, Burawoy's (1985, p105) attention to accommodating Russian migrant labour in 'dormitory cubicles' or 'common barracks' indicates the daily reproduction of labour-power by curtailing necessary labour time. In these ways, labour-power can create value through the labour process by intensifying the working day, extending the working day, and curtailing the necessary labour time.

The realisation of labour-power at the point of production produces a surplus, but how is the potential of labour-power to create value *secured* in the labour process? What are the enabling mechanisms in the production process that can intensify the working day, extend it, or otherwise curtail necessary labour time? The thesis would unpack these questions empirically in the case of sub-contracting in building construction. In reproducing relations of the labour process, mechanisms that reinforce how specific forms of (value of) labour-power creates value through the labour process inform the constitution of the political apparatus of production.

1.3.3 Incorporating specific forms of labour-power: Expanding the realm of everyday control in the workplace

In revisiting the form and function of the political apparatus of production, I argue that the political apparatus of production can be constituted by social relations outside class, such as caste, ethnicity, region etc., for reproducing the relations of the labour process. The organisation of the labour process is dependent on specific forms of labour-power. However, I indicate that the political apparatus of production, in being hinged on the labour process, is *also* constitutive of and determined by specific forms of labour-power. Such forms are rooted in regional and historically exploitative labour relations within and beyond that of class, for instance, caste, tribe, ethnicity, region, etc.

Burawoy (1985) indicates that the political apparatus of production is dynamic and determined by capitalist development's combined and uneven nature. The capitalist process of production rooted in (historical) processes of differentiation and difference (Shah *et al.* 2017) impinges upon and interacts with the specific forms of labour-power in reinforcing the appropriation of surplus. The histories of African slavery and the

Asian indenture system are a case in point, rooted in the use of the racial difference of migrant labour (Shah *et al.* 2017, p19). The processes through which extraction of surplus value is reinforced could be located in historical, regional and intergenerational social relations within and beyond that of class, i.e. modes of social oppression/domination based on class, race, caste, gender, ethnicity. Alongside class-based domination and oppression, social relations beyond class provide mechanisms to enable and reinforce exploitation. In the case of examining agrarian labour relations in Gujarat, India, Breman (1974) identifies exploitation rooted in the caste-based patronage exercised by landlords on agricultural labourers. Lerche (1995, p488) argues that patron-client relationships could be used to legitimise the dominance of one class or caste in deepening exploitation. In examining class relations in a village in Bihar, Chakravarti (2001a, 2001b) argues that maliks, the dominant landowning caste, exercise interrelated and overlapping economic, coercive and social power in deepening a 'culture of exploitation' of Dalit landless labourers and petty cultivators.

Burawoy indicated that racism was a colonial apparatus of production in the case of South African mines. Similarly, the contemporary process of capital accumulation continues to use and reinforce, for instance, racial difference, caste-based domination, ethnic discrimination, region-based stereotyping and stigmatisation etc., as constitutive principles of the political production apparatus. In this way, the degree to which the political apparatus of production ties the reproduction of labour-power with the production process is marked by cultural, regional and intergenerational histories of lived experiences of exploitation. In doing so, the relations of exploitation are legitimised, which makes labour accomplices in their exploitation through moral idioms of being a hard-working or disciplined worker etc., or through the processes of stereotyping, stigmatisation, and discrimination, which serve to naturalise exploitation. Alongside examining the function of the political apparatus of production, how the political apparatus of production is historically constituted through mechanisms of differentiation and difference would enable us to reflect on the scope and the limits of control in shaping the lived experience of exploitation.

Further, the marginal position of labour in relation to capital compels labour to sell their labour-power. It serves as the starting point for the emergence of the lived experience of exploitation. However, it is the very compulsion of labour which can make labour

both compliant to exploitation and, at the same time, enable them to navigate their exploitative labour relations composing the lived experience of exploitation. Such a lived experience composed of the 'compulsion' of labour is contrary to the 'silent' or the 'dull' compulsion of economic relations, which indicates the domination of capital over labour. In doing so, the political apparatus of production, in shaping and being shaped by the lived experience of exploitation, reproduce the relations of the labour process. As a result, the political apparatus of production secures and obscures the surplus and serves as a mode of naturalising or legitimising relations of the labour process (Burawoy 2012).

In laying down the scope and the limits of exercising control in the workplace; securing, obscuring and legitimising surplus extraction shapes the production and reproduction of the lived experience of exploitation. This would enable us to explain how control is exercised under sub-contracting in reproducing relations of the labour process which organise building construction work?

By expanding the form and function of the political apparatus of production, one can imagine and explain the 'dynamic' architecture of surplus extraction through which surplus value is created and sustained in the contemporary process of capital accumulation. The thesis sheds light on this through the case of capital accumulation in building construction industry in India.

1.4 Theoretical framework: The architecture of surplus extraction

The organisation and reproduction of the relation of the labour process composes the architecture of surplus extraction. In this sense, the political apparatus of production, while remaining hinged on the labour process, needs to be seen as central to the architecture of surplus extraction. As a result, the architecture of surplus extraction shapes the politics of production. How does the political apparatus of production remain hinged on or emerge from sub-contracting in building construction? While sub-contracting enables the organisation of building construction work, how does it shape the architecture of surplus extraction and in turn, the politics of production in building construction? This is crucial to examine in making sense of class formation- a key area of contribution of the thesis. In explaining how relations of labour process are

reproduced, it is crucial to situate the emergence and the constitution of the political apparatus of production. The mechanisms adopted by the apparatus emanate from social relations within and beyond class, such as caste, ethnicity, race, gender, region etc. Such mechanisms enable, appropriate and reinforce differences and induce differentiation among labour, to reproduce relations of the labour process. The specific forms of labour-power shape and define the degree to which labour-power reproduction is tied to the production process. It constitutes a particular *form* of the political apparatus of production and shapes distinct *mechanisms* in reproducing the relations of the labour process, i.e., the relation of exploitation. However, the extent to which the reproduction of labour-power is tied to or separated from the production process is the decisive factor in determining the form of the political apparatus of production.

I argue that the organisation of the labour process in production is dependent on and shaped by the value of specific forms of labour-power and the value created by labour-power. The value of specific forms of labour-power is rooted in the degree of reproduction of labour-power, and labour-power creates surplus value through the intensification of the work, the extension of the working day and curtailment of the necessary labour time. Therefore, for the reproduction of relations of the labour process, i.e. continuities in the process of surplus extraction to be enabled and guaranteed by the political apparatus of production, one needs to examine – a) how *specific* forms of labour-power rooted in regional and historically exploitative labour relations and social relations beyond class are, firstly, central not only in the organisation of labour process, i.e. relations in production but also in the formation of the political apparatus of production, i.e. relations of production, secondly, b) how political apparatus of production in enabling the securing and obscuring of surplus, to some extent, may also naturalise and legitimise the extraction of surplus and c) finally, following the first and the second, how the political apparatus of production rooted in regional and historically exploitative labour relations produce concrete and specific lived experience of exploitation in reproducing the relations of the labour process.

The organisation and reproduction of the relation of the labour process compose the architecture of surplus extraction. It is embedded in the value of labour-power and the value created by labour-power at the point of production. The value of labour-power

comprises, what I call, the *mobilisation (for reservation and retention)* and *renewal* of specific forms of labour-power in the production process, which shape the mechanisms for the reproduction of labour-power in constituting the form of the political apparatus of production. The value created by labour-power comprises, what I call, the *realisation* of labour-power through the labour process at the point of production, indicating how surplus is appropriated. Mobilisation entails the reservation and retention of the specific forms of labour-power in the organisation of the labour process. Renewal entails the everyday reproduction of labour-power, and the realisation of labour-power indicates how surplus is extracted at production.

The mobilisation, renewal and realisation of labour-power indicate the extent to which the reproduction of a specific form of labour-power is tied to the organisation of the labour process and, in doing so, co-constitute the political apparatus of production in particular production processes. I indicate that the securing, obscuring and legitimisation of surplus value, in reproducing relations of the labour process through the political apparatus of production, is *embedded* in the process of mobilisation, realisation and renewal of labour-power, producing the architecture of surplus extraction.

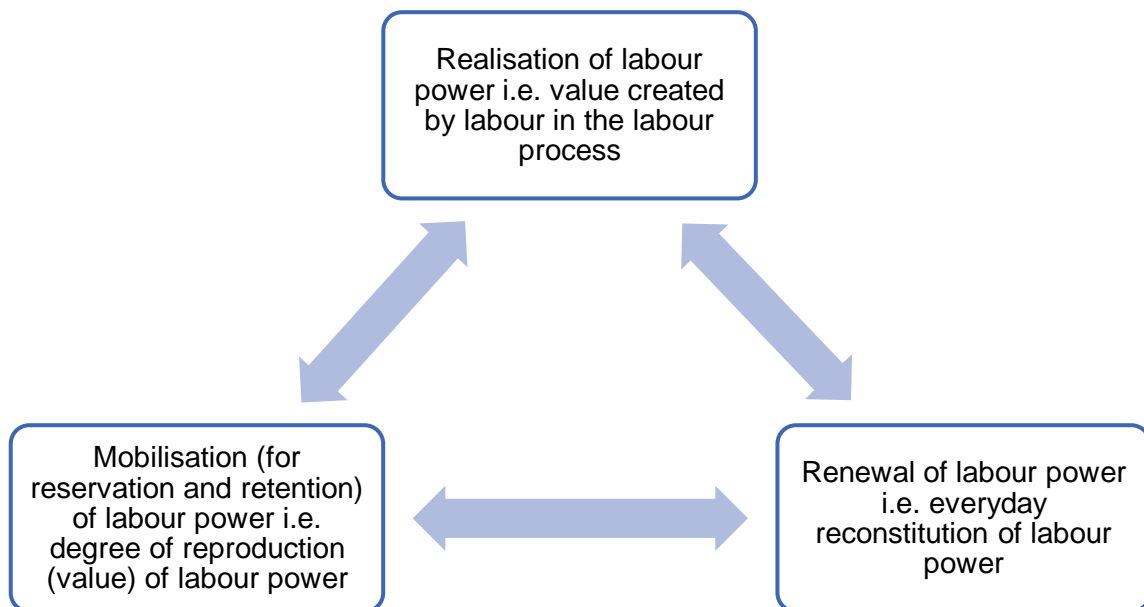


Figure 1.1: Architecture of surplus extraction

The thesis lays emphasis on the mobilisation, realisation and renewal of labour-power in the context of sub-contracting in building construction in explaining how do they co-constitute the political apparatus of production, in shaping the architecture of surplus extraction? How does the apparatus regulate class struggles and shape the politics of production? I begin to answer these questions from the next chapter by providing an analytical framework to examine class relations taking the case of sub-contracting as a method of organising relations of the labour process in building construction.

1.5 Conclusion

The theoretical framework for the architecture of surplus extraction enables us to examine the conditions and mechanisms through which exploitation is organised and reinforced in shaping class formation.

The chapter reiterates that production relations and its politics, in remaining central to organising and reinforcing exploitation explain the emergence of class formation. Following Burawoy (1985), the chapter indicates that the production process is the ensemble of economic, political and ideological realms. Further, the production process needs to be seen as the combination of the organisation of the labour process and the reproduction of the relation of the labour process to be able to examine the politics of production.

The political apparatus of production, determined by the combined and uneven nature of capitalist development, reproduces the relations of the labour process. The apparatus enables the exercise of capitalist control for reproducing relations of the labour process by tying labour-power reproduction with the production process. To examine the form and function of the political apparatus of production, one needs to examine specific forms of labour-power and the mechanisms for securing, obscuring and legitimising the extraction of surplus.

The political apparatus of production enables and enforces the architecture of surplus extraction through the mobilisation of labour-power for production, the realisation of labour-power through the intensification of work or/and the extension of the working day and the renewal of labour-power on an everyday basis. By exercising control to

reproduce the relations of the labour process, the political apparatus of production shapes and produce concrete and specific lived experience of exploitation.

In the following chapter, I employ the framework for the architecture of surplus extraction to explain how it shapes class relations, considering the lived experience of exploitation of Bihari migrant labourers working in building construction. In doing so, I examine the system of sub-contracting as a way of organising the building construction work for capital accumulation through the lens of the political apparatus of production.

Chapter 2: Configuring Class Relations: The *Thekedari* System as the Political Apparatus of Production

In the contemporary time of contractualisation and informalisation of labour relations in general and in the case of India's large-scale building construction industry in particular, sub-contracting forms a dominant and endemic feature of capital accumulation (Bhattacharya and Kesar 2020, Lerche 2007, Suresh 2010, Wells 1996).

In the 1970s, the first construction boom occurred due to the infrastructural developments in the oil-producing countries of the Middle East, South Korea contributing massively to the building activities (Wells 1996) and generating huge subsequent demand for foreign labour (ILO 2001). India's role in the construction market abroad was confined to workers going from Kerala to work in construction in the Middle East (Holmstrom 1984). In the second part of the 80s, the construction market was again picking up; this time, the boom swept through most of Asia. For India, the construction investment volume increased more than ten times by the late 1990s, with a large share taken up by civil construction. The 10th Five Year Plan (2002-2007) indicated the significant role of construction after the 1997 Asian financial crisis. During such financial trouble, the construction sector, in the case of India, was declared as an 'industrial concern' to enable a smooth flow of institutional financing (Anson, Chiang and Raftery 2004). The state repealed the Urban Land Ceiling Act and allotted land for infrastructural development. The 1990s also witnessed the entry of large corporate houses in India like Tata, Reliance, and Godrej into the real estate market, which forced the state to incentivise building construction.

India (and China) emerged as one of the fastest-growing markets of global construction (Buckley *et al.* 2016, Lerche *et al.* 2017, Srivastava and Sutradhar 2016), with millions of internal migrants labouring in the industry (Kumar and Fernandes 2015). The global construction sector is one of the sectors (other than agriculture) where casual workers predominate and primarily comprises migrant labour (Buckley *et al.* 2016, Wells 2017). The construction boom in India witnessed the proliferation of large-scale real estate and commercial construction utilising diverse forms of local and transnational capital relying on a heavy influx of migrant labour through labour sub-

contracting (Buckley 2014, Mody 1996, Prasad-Aleyamma 2017; Shivakumar, Sheng and Weber 1991, Srivastava and Jha 2016). Large construction sites are identified by the long-term duration of the construction process and through the number of labourers working there, i.e., 500 or more migrant labourers working in constructing residential apartments, commercial complexes for office use etc. Most large construction sites accommodate migrant labourers in labour camps, are fenced and deploy security guards for entry-exit from the site/labour camp.

While sub-contracting has emerged as an essential feature of organising the production process in India's large-scale building construction industry, what remains unknown is its politics i.e. struggles shaped by the process of sub-contracting over relations *in* and *of* production. This has implications for examining class formation. While sub-contracting enables the production of large-scale buildings, how does it produce social relations and an experience of such relations i.e. politics of production. It is in this sense that the political apparatus of production in the context of building construction needs to be examined. The chapter aims to answer these questions. How does sub-contracting shape the political apparatus of production in enabling and reproducing the architecture of surplus extraction in building construction? How does the architecture of surplus extraction, taking the case of Bihari migrant labourers working in building construction, shape class formation?

I argue that examining the political apparatus of production enables us to explain the struggles over the extraction of surplus shaped via sub-contracting in building construction. As a result, it enables us to examine labourers' lived experience of exploitation. This production apparatus in large-scale building construction incorporates Bihari migrant labourers, among others, into building construction work. I argue that it is the *thekedari* system, which acts as the political apparatus of surplus extraction in building construction and, as a result, 'configures' class relations, i.e. enables and silences class through dialectical relation with the lived experience of exploitation. The chapter explains the *thekedari* system- how it acts as the political apparatus of production in reproducing relations of the labour process and configuring class relations.

To begin with, I explain the historical trajectory of the *thekedar* and locate the *thekedari* system in the context of sub-contracting in building construction. Following this, I explain how the *thekedari* system acts as the political apparatus of production in building construction in regulating class struggles. Subsequently, I reflect on how the *thekedari* system enables the architecture of surplus extraction and the role of the state in reproducing the same. Further, the chapter outlines the incorporation of Bihari migrant labourers in the *thekedari* system. In the final section, I present an analytical framework for class formation by explaining how the *thekedari* system ‘configures’ class relations. The process of ‘configuration’ is further elaborated in the subsequent empirical chapters.

2.1 Subcontracting in building construction: The historical evolution of the *thekedari* system

Existing literature indicates that building companies owning large-scale building construction sites in India sub-contract different aspects of construction work to individual construction firms or different sub-contractors colloquially called *thekedars* (Lerche *et. al.* 2017, Srivastava and Sutradhar 2016). In turn, *thekedars* mobilise migrant labourers from different regions to work at construction sites. In this way, sub-contracting enables capital accumulation in building construction.

While the sub-contracting in building construction organises the labour process (Srivastava and Jha 2016), I argue that the *thekedari* system, which emerges from a sub-contracting relation rooted in relations between *thekedars* and builders and that of *thekedars* and labourers reproduces relations of the labour process in large-scale building construction. The *thekedari* system shapes the struggles over production relations i.e. the politics of production by enabling and reproducing the architecture of surplus extraction in building construction.

Before expanding on how the *thekedari* system enables and reproduces the architecture of surplus extraction in building construction, I present the historical trajectory of the rise of the *thekedar* and historical iterations of the *thekedari* system beyond and within building construction.

Since the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in India, labour intermediaries, known as the jobber, were colloquially referred as the *sardar*, *mukaddam*, *maistry*, or *dafadaar* in different contexts. They became prominent figures mediating and managing labour recruitment across mills, mines, ports, and plantations (Roy 2008)¹. In Hindi speaking belt comprising the states in India such as Bihar, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Chhattisgarh, labour intermediaries are colloquially addressed as *thekedars* or *thikadars*.

In the early twentieth-century jute mills in Calcutta, *sardars* were identified as the 'cultural agents' who recruited and managed migrant labourers from the same caste, region, villages etc., on the shop floor to serve the interests of mill owners (Chakrabarty 1989). However, Chandavarkar (2008), in challenging the 'culturalist' claims, emphasised the jobber system by situating the jobbers as an agent to control and discipline labour in the production process of textile mills in Bombay. This disciplining remained crucial to organising and reinforcing exploitation in the case of the textile mills (Breman 1974, 2004). Similarly, in the case of plantation labour in Assam, recruiting migrant labour (known as *coolies*) from villages of Eastern India via *sardars*, who were older employees, was introduced. The planters promoted it as a solution to undercut the monopoly of professional labour contractors. This system came to be known as the *sardari* system. The legislation of the colonial state, similar to the case of mills in Bombay, enabled the *sardari* system to secure cheap labour who could be easily disciplined and controlled for plantation work (Varma 2016, Das Gupta 1986, Das Gupta 1992, Sen 2010). Raj and Axelby (2019, p19) indicate that the replacement of professional labour contractors by the *sardari* recruitment system placed significance on the role of the worker-agent. By belonging to the same kinship (i.e. *rishtedari*) as that of Adivasi migrant labourers from Jharkhand, the worker-agent could support and exploit them. This system, in turn, offered significant benefits to the plantation companies.

¹ However, this process of mediating labour recruitment is not specific to India (See Bosma, van Nederveen Meerkerk and Sarkar 2012)

Similarly, the literature on the relations of labour contractors with recruited migrant labourers in the latter half of the twentieth century indicates ‘time-bound attachment’ with the jobber, i.e. *mukaddam* in West India, *maistri* in South India. Such time-bound attachment of migrant labourers took place to work in the construction industry, brick kilns, sugar cane harvesting etc., indicating different degrees and dimensions of debt bondage (Bhukuth 2006; Breman 1996,2004,2010; Breman, Guérin and Prakash 2009; Deshingkar 2022; Jha 2004; Lerche 2007; Mosse *et al.* 2002; Picherit 2012). Such relations of ‘tying in’ labourers indicate the exploitative nature of jobber-labour relations (Breman 1985; Breman, Guérin and Prakash 2009). In this way, in different production contexts, labour intermediation through the jobber, *sardari*, and *rishtedari* systems, as have historically emerged, enabled and reinforced relations of exploitation. This has been possible using ‘cultural’ ties or social relations such as caste, region etc.

Such systems are also visible in the case of building construction. For instance, exploitative labour relations can be found in the *Palamuru* contract labour system which originated in 1930s composed of labourers migrating from drought-prone *Palamur* district (later named Mahabubnagar) to work in building construction in Hyderabad (Olson and Murthy 2000, Picherit 2009), the *dadani* system of contract labour which originated in the colonial times in West Bengal and Odisha to work in building Calcutta metro rail (Bandhopadhyay and Ramaswamy 1985) etc.

Since the rise in the construction of buildings during the 1980s, the construction sector in India has epitomised the contract labour system at different stages of production. The contract labour system has been implemented by labour contractors i.e. *thekedars* by relying heavily on migrant labour (NCEUS 2007; Parida, John and Sunny 2020; Singh *et al.* 2020; Shivakumar, Sheng and Weber 1991; Srivastava and Jha 2016; Srivastava and Sutradhar 2016; Vaid and Singh 1966). Mainly, migrant labourers originate from different regions of India such as Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Odisha, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh etc., which are seen as backward and marked by high levels of poverty and lowest human development (Lerche and Shah 2020) and also subject to natural disasters such as floods, droughts etc., ill-effects of development projects and the absence of employment opportunities (Sinha 2013). Though labour intermediation has enabled the mobilisation and recruitment of migrant

labour in organising exploitation in different contexts of production, the *thekedar*'s role is no longer limited to a labour 'intermediary' who recruits and manages labourers. Instead, the *thekedar* has emerged as an actor from recruiting and managing labourers to organising the production process under the contract labour system (Chandavarkar 2008, De Neve 2001, De Neve 2014).

In this way, the process of capital accumulation in building construction is marked by *thekedari*, i.e., the practice of taking *theka* (contract) for a particular construction work in return for a sum of money from the builder or building company. This is similar to the garment industry in India wherein capital accumulation is seen as a 'joint enterprise' of contracting between builders and *thekedars* (Mezzadri 2016c). A *theka* refers to the contract for work received from the builders by the *thekedars*, who mobilise labourers to work at the construction sites. In turn, the word *thekedari* valorises the significance of a hierarchy of contract for work through a contract for labour in enabling capital accumulation. I have specifically retained the word *thekedari* (and *thekedar*) throughout my thesis to indicate the process of capital accumulation as it places significance on the *thekedar*, the one who gives the *theka*, i.e., the builders and those who perform the *theka*, i.e., the labourers. Do *thekedars* accumulate surplus as well while enabling the organisation of building construction under the *thekedari* system? If so, how? Do *thekedars* shape how labourers experience exploitation, and if so, how? Under what conditions do labourers resist or comply with *thekedars* and builders? These are empirically unknown, and the thesis aims to unpack the politics of production by explaining the *thekedari* system as the political apparatus of production, while enabling and enforcing the architecture of surplus extraction.

2.2 The *thekedari* system as the political apparatus of production

While sub-contracting organises the labour process, I argue that the *thekedari* system reproduces relations of the labour process. In doing so, it produces political effects of the social relations which organise construction work and an experience of those relations which shape struggles over production relations. Following this, the *thekedari* system, in constituting the political apparatus of production, shapes antagonism between labour and capital. The thesis emphasises the significance of the *thekedar*-builder and *thekedar*-labour relations as a set of institutions under the *thekedari*

system that shape the struggles over production relations, i.e. the politics of production in building construction. How does the *thekedari* system constitute the political apparatus of production in shaping struggles over production relations? Before I unpack the *thekedari* system as a 'political' apparatus, I would reiterate, following the first chapter, that the 'political' here is not limited to the ambit of the state. The thesis emphasises the political from the lens of regulating struggle over production relations. That said, the thesis takes the view that the state has a role to play in shaping how the *thekedari* system shapes production relations in enforcing the architecture of surplus extraction in large-scale building construction. I will address the role of the state in the subsequent section.

In examining how the *thekedari* system acts as the political apparatus of production, I situate the *thekedar*, builders and labourers within production relations. Existing literature identifies *thekedars* as either exploitative (Bremner 1996, 2010) or otherwise positioned ambiguously between labour and workplace managers (De Neve 2001, 2014; Guerin *et al.* 2009, Picherit 2018a, Raj and Axelby 2019) in organising the relations of production. In this way, the historical iterations of the *thekedari* system, i.e. the *sardari* (Sen 2010, Varma 2016) or the jobber system (Chandavarkar 2008) which evolved in the context of the mills, mines and plantations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, have served as mechanisms of managing class conflicts. Similarly, in the case of building construction, it is argued that labour contractors are enforced by construction capital, i.e. builders, to disguise the wage relation (Lerche *et al.* 2017, Mezzadri and Srivastava 2015, Mezzadri 2016a, 2016b). As such, *thekedars* are seen to act as a safety valve for worker grievances and restrict the entry of trade unions (Shiv Kumar *et al.* 1991, Van der Loop 1992). This enables builders to tilt the balance of power in favour of capital rather than labour in shaping labourers' structural and associational power (Pattenden 2016b, 2018). This explains the significance of *thekedar*-builder relations in shaping how the *thekedari* system deals with worker grievances. But how do *thekedar*-builder relations shape worker grievances? Do builders ignore worker grievances, or are some grievances acceptable, and why does this happen? These questions indicate the need to examine *thekedar*-labour relations alongside *thekedar*-builder relations in shaping the politics of production.

The *thekedar*-labour relations have their historical origins in degrees of bondage, in which labourers are attached to their *thekedars* for work (Breman, Guérin, and Prakash 2009). Such a relation has been viewed through the lens of a 'moral economy' in which *thekedars* remain obliged to labourers mobilised by them in finding work away from their villages, and labourers reciprocate the same by working for their *thekedar* (Breman, Guérin and Prakash 2009; Chandavarkar 2008). In this sense, *thekedar*-labour relations indicates that the *thekedars* have a moral obligation to guarantee the subsistence needs of their labourers (Scott 1976). However, such moral economy ties indicate the paternal, parental and patriarchal role played by *thekedars* in exercising their domination rooted in social relations of caste, region, kinship, ethnicity, etc., to organise and reinforce exploitation (Breman 1974, Chakravarti 2001a, 2001b; Lerche 1995). This is how guaranteeing subsistence needs of labourers rooted in a moral economy cannot be isolated from the relations of class-based domination, which organise and reinforce exploitation. While this exists, one needs to examine the politics of guaranteeing subsistence vis-à-vis organising and reinforcing exploitation, considering that *thekedars* mobilise labour and co-organise the production process with builders.

Following this, I argue that the moral economy ties between *thekedars* and labourers and the enforcement of *thekedars* by builders for capital accumulation co-constitute the levers of capitalist control under the *thekedari* system. While the existing literature indicates how builders use *thekedars* to enable capital accumulation, how do *thekedars* use (or misuse) moral economy and/or class-based domination in shaping worker grievances and labourers' ability to organise? How does the *thekedari* system shape class struggle?

In answering these questions, the thesis takes the view that class struggle encompasses all such social relations which enable, reinforce and remain intertwined with exploitation, for instance, domination, social oppression, and ethnic discrimination etc (Lerche and Shah 2018). Scott (1976, 1985) identifies class struggle as the 'everyday acts of resistance' such as negotiation, bargaining etc., which are rooted in the realm of 'moral economy', i.e. relations of trust and dependency. The peasants' resistance against their landlords, as Scott (1985) indicates, is the result of a break in the moral economy which constitutes a class struggle. However, Lerche (1995) argues

that class struggle cannot simply be confined to the realm of the moral economy, indicating that moral economy struggles and class struggle can co-exist. Moreover, Lerche (1995) maintains that Scott's 'weapons of the weak', composed of foot-dragging, false compliance etc., are aimed at oppression and are meant to defend the existing structures for 'better' conditions rather than to challenge the same (Scott 1985, p354-370). Further, Lerche (2009) indicates that labour struggles against oppression and wages occur against their labour contractors if not their actual employer (Guerin and Venkatasubramanian 2009, Picherit 2009). However, such labour struggles, I argue, can directly complement class struggle, considering that labour contractors and actual employers compose the *thekedari* system.

While I agree that class struggle and struggles emerging from the violation of the norms of moral economy are separate and can co-exist (Lerche 1995), I indicate that the demands made under a moral economy rubric must be examined to understand its linkages with tolerating, accepting or negotiating the architecture of surplus exploitation. In this way, my research does not delineate or isolate moral economy and class struggles. Instead, it engages with the role the 'moral economy' plays as an element of control in the *thekedari* system in regulating class struggles i.e. both enabling and suppressing, in shaping production politics. Under what conditions does 'moral economy' mute the emergence of class struggle or otherwise facilitate or suppress class struggle? Does the everyday control over surplus extraction result in acts of resistance, negotiation, bargaining etc? Can such acts enable the reproduction of surplus extraction and shape class struggle? Does everyday control also result in collective demand-making exercises under the *thekedari* system? These are empirical questions and are at the heart of how the *thekedari* system regulates class struggle. In this way, the politics of production emerging from the realm of moral economy and those lying outside the realm of the moral economy have an instrumental role in shaping class struggles.

As a result, the *thekedari* system, in acting as the political apparatus of production, uses specific institutions embedded in the architecture of surplus extraction as levers of control to not only secure and obscure the surplus but also legitimise the process of surplus value extraction. The empirical data will show how does the *thekedari* system secure, obscure and legitimise surplus extraction in regulating class struggles.

Below, I present the architecture of exploitation in large-scale building construction to explain how the *thekedari* system enables surplus extraction and produces political effects. To examine this, the thesis applies the theoretical framework on the architecture of surplus extraction in the context of subcontracting in building construction.

2.3 The *thekedari* system in building construction: From subcontracting to the politics of production

As indicated, the *thekedari* system emerges from sub-contracting in large-scale building construction in India. *Thekedars* and builders co-produce the architecture of surplus extraction. Subcontracting different stages of construction work to *thekedars* organises relations of the labour process to enable the production of things, in this case, buildings. But, how do *thekedars* enter into a construction work contract in forming a sub-contracting relation with builders? The fourth chapter sheds light on this question in explaining how the *thekedari* system is constituted as the political apparatus. How do builders exercise control over *thekedars* in reinforcing the architecture of surplus extraction? The final empirical chapter (chapter nine) answers this question. The other four empirical chapters focus on the political effects of the architecture of surplus extraction as explained below.

The architecture of surplus extraction is composed of the organisation and reproduction of the relations of the labour process in large-scale building construction. This occurs through the mobilisation (or reservation), realisation and renewal of labour-power. The *thekedari* system reproduces relations of the labour process in shaping the politics of production.

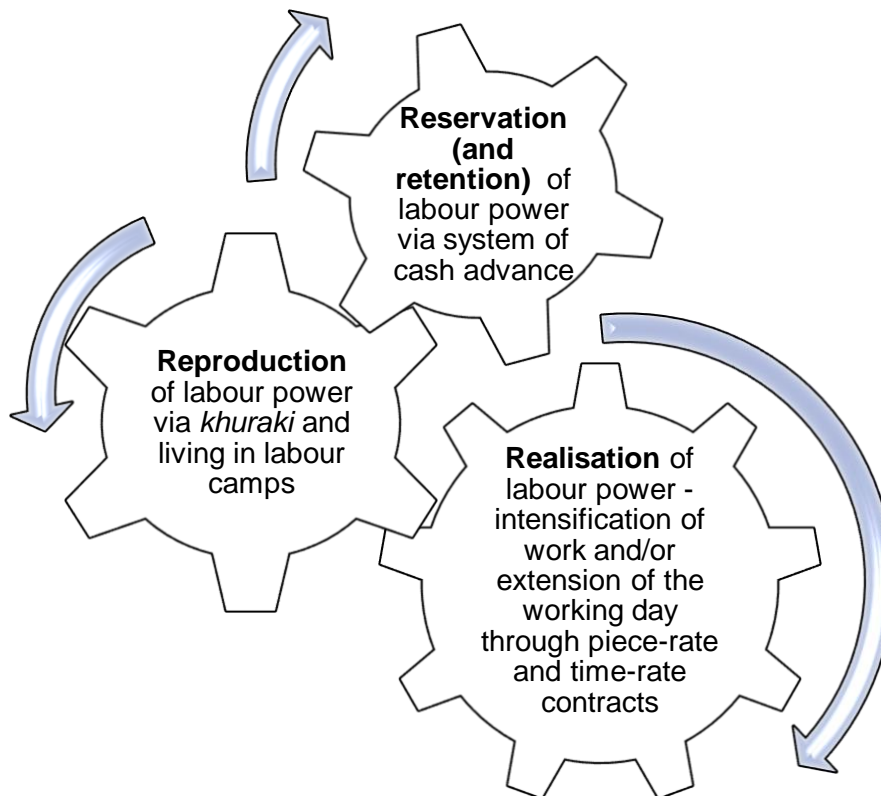


Figure 2.1: The *thekedari* system in building construction

I indicate that the *thekedari* system enables the architecture of surplus extraction in building construction through the mobilisation (i.e. reservation and retention) of labour-power, the realisation of labour-power and the renewal of labour-power. The (historical) cash advance system involves mobilising labourers to reserve and retain their labour-power. Labour-power is realised at worksites through piece-rate (i.e. measured output of construction work) and time-rate (i.e. several man-hours worked) based construction contracts to generate a surplus. To complete the architecture, labour-power is renewed via the payment of weekly subsistence, i.e. *khuraki* to labourers and their accommodation in labour camps. Below, I explain briefly each component of the architecture of surplus extraction in making a case for the political effects of each component.

2.3.1 The system of cash advance: Mobilising (reserving and retaining) labour-power

Thekedars and builders use the historically rooted cash advance system in mobilising, reserving and retaining labour-power of migrant labourers. Recent research on the building construction industry from Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat and Karnataka indicates that *thekedars* or jobbers, as directed by building construction firms, organise labour processes. They do so by recruiting and maintaining a relatively cheap, informal, segmented, and reliable workforce through the system of advancing credit as a mechanism of control over labourers (Jain and Sharma 2019; Pattenden 2012, 2014, 2016a 2016b, 2018; Picherit 2012). An advance is a 'necessary' form of productive investment, i.e. capital needed to ensure surplus can be obtained at construction worksites (Breman 2019, De Neve 1999, Lerche 2007). Employers have used the system of advance, which are mainly interest-free loans since the 1970s-80s not only to attract and retain but also to control and discipline labour at worksites (Banaji 2003, De Neve 1999, Guerin 2013) and to interlock labourers through multiple relations of domination (Mezzadri 2016b).

Thekedars offer advance, and labourers work to pay back the advance. In this sense, advance-based labour relation involves reciprocity and obligations between *thekedars* and labourers, indicating a 'moral economy' which enables labour mobilisation (Scott 1976). For labourers, taking an advance is the best way to address their absolute helplessness or economic compulsions in securing the reproduction needs of their households (Breman 1996, 2010, 2019; Chakravarti 2018, p111; De Neve 1999; Guerin and Venkatasubramanian 2009; Lerche 2007; Mezzadri 2016b; Srivastava and Sutradhar 2016). However, taking an advance is equivalent to paying 'virtual or disguised interest' to the labour contractor, i.e. *thekedar* (Mezzadri 2016b, 2016c). It pushes labourers to work on reduced wage levels (Pattenden 2012). Banaji (2010, p301) indicates that the virtual or disguised interest is surplus value in itself. By doing so, the system of advance enforces exploitation besides enabling the reproduction of labour-power (Banaji 2010, p304). The cash advance system, by allowing labouring households to meet their immediate consumption needs, produces and reserves labour-power based on construction work sub-contracted to *thekedars*, forming the foundation for the architecture of surplus extraction. While the cash advance system

enables surplus extraction, how does the system of advance serve as a tool of the *thekedari* system in shaping the politics of production? This is further discussed in the fifth chapter.

2.3.2 Piece-rate or time-rate work: Realising labour power

In realising labour-power for the construction of buildings, builders organise construction work to ensure time-bound delivery of construction projects (Lerche *et al.* 2017; Shivakumar, Sheng and Weber 1991; Srivastava and Jha 2016; Thompson 1967, Van der Loop 1992). Such a time-bound delivery remains central to the organisation of the labour process in building construction for enabling surplus appropriation. This is made possible by employing a mix of piece-rate work, i.e., based on the work output as agreed in the contract with builders and time-rate work based on the labour headcount (Wetlesen 2016, Jain and Sharma 2019). Apart from piece-rate and time-rate work, measure and pay contract based on output in a specific time and lumpsum contract based on the amount of work or sum of money could also be employed. They enable different stages of construction, viz. a) excavation and preparation of the structure, b) actual building of the structure and c) installation of services such as electricity, plumbing, landscaping, etc. Such work arrangements are critical to the sub-contracting relationship between *thekedars* and builders.

For *thekedars* working on piece-rate contracts, their payments from the builders depend on the 'work done'. In this case, surplus extraction is enhanced by intensifying the working day i.e. more work done in relatively shorter time. However, for *thekedars*, working on a time-rate basis, the 'total number of man hours' decides their payments, leading to an extension of the working day under which migrant labourers work overtime i.e. for 14-16 hours a day. In enabling the realisation of labour-power in building construction, builders exercise control to ensure time-bound delivery of construction projects. How is construction work co-organised by builders and *thekedars*? How is control exercised by builders transferred to labour at building construction sites? The empirical chapters six and seven shed light on these two questions.

2.3.3 Daily reproduction of labour via *khuraki*: Renewal of labour-power

The daily reproduction of labour necessitates the daily reproduction of labourers to renew their labour-power. Besides paying advance to labourers, Breman (1996, 2014) indicates the postponement of wages by providing subsistence expenses to labourers. Labour-power renewal is made possible by providing *khuraki*, i.e. the amount of cash more or less commonly distributed weekly for the daily reproduction of labourers, alongside accommodating labourers in builder-provided free makeshift construction labour camps. Accommodating labourers in labour camps blurs the distinction between work-time and non-work-time by reducing the time labourers take to renew their labour-power for work the next day (Burawoy 1985, Ngai and Smith 2007). Further, it enables surplus value extraction by widening control and discipline over the daily reproduction of labour (Burawoy 1985, Goodburn and Mishra 2023, Ngai and Smith 2007).

The amount paid by *thekedars*' for labourers' subsistence is gradually deducted from the advance taken by the labourer until labour-power needs to be reserved again in 'renewing' exploitative labour relations. In this way, *khuraki*, similar to advance, also serves as a form of productive and reproductive capital in the architecture of surplus extraction. How is control exercised over the daily reproduction of labour, through *khuraki* and accommodation of labourers in labour camps? How does it shape the politics of daily reproduction of labour? The penultimate empirical chapter focuses on these questions.

In this way, the architecture of surplus extraction is enabled through the *thekedari* system embedded in the system of advancing cash to labourers before work, piece-rate or time-rate construction contracts and distribution of *khuraki* alongside labourers' accommodation in labour camps. In co-constituting the reservation, realisation and renewal of labour-power, free accommodation is provided to labourers who would otherwise lose their accommodation if they do not work at the construction worksite or would have to bear expenses on their accommodation outside the construction site. In doing so, the *thekedari* system ties or knits the reproduction of labour-power closely with the production process (Burawoy 1976, 1985) shaping the politics of production.

2.3.4 Role of the state intervention: Reinforcing surplus extraction

The evolution of the *thekedari* system in building construction has been historically mediated by the state, as seen in the case of the jobber system, *sardari* system etc., in the context of mills and plantations. Burawoy (1985, p128) argues that “*the logic of development of capitalism drives the necessity of state intervention but the actual mechanisms of such intervention, for instance, through social insurance and labour legislation, varies from time to time and country to country.*” Burawoy (1985, p125-126) lays significance on the unevenness and the dynamic nature of the actual state intervention shaped by the form and timing of capitalist development. He indicates that state intervention in production performs two functions, firstly, to separate the reproduction of labour-power from the production process and secondly, to regulate production apparatus.

In the case of building construction, through the Building and Other Construction Workers Welfare, the state, albeit in a limited sense, separates the reproduction of labour-power from the production process by reducing workers' dependence on production. However, the *thekedari* system closely ties the daily reproduction of labour power with the production process. How does the *thekedari* system shape welfare for migrant labourers? Secondly, the state intervenes through its legislations and policies on the contractualisation of labour to regulate the *thekedari* system. How does the regulation of the *thekedari* system shape surplus extraction? The thesis answers these questions by highlighting the politics of sub-contracting relations between *thekedars* and builders and that of wage payments and welfare to migrant construction labourers.

Literature indicates that the colonial state in India shaped the mobilisation of labour in serving the interests of mill owners and plantation owners by inventing and supporting the *sardari* system of recruitment of migrant labour through legislation (Chandavarkar 2008, Sen 2010, Varma 2016). Further, the legislations such as Contract Labour Act 1970, and Inter-State Migrant Work Men Act 1979, in the purview of regulating the contractualisation and mobilisation of migrant labour have facilitated the process of capital accumulation in building construction (Mody 1996). Suresh (2010) indicates that the state legislation in India creates flexibility in labour contracts to regulate employment conditions in building construction. The state expects the builders and

thekedars to comply with labour laws concerning the health and safety of workers, their working and living conditions etc. However, it refrains from enforcing the same or does not have the will or the capacity to do so (Mosse, Gupta and Shah 2005; Pattenden 2016a, p77). At the same time, the state, in following the principle of *Ease of Doing Business*, actively discourages labour inspection of building construction sites or otherwise allies with builders in concealing and reinforcing rather than acting upon exploitation (Breman 1996, Mosse, Gupta and Shah 2005; Pattenden 2016a).

Further, builders exercise their influence on the state institutions through builder associations such as the Builders Association of India (BAI), Confederation of Real Estate Developers' Association of India (CREDAI), National Real Estate Development Council (NAREDCO) for enabling capital accumulation in building construction. Through their associational power with politicians, builder associations lobby the state, for instance, in the provision of land and infrastructure needed for construction worksites, labour camps etc., in controlling prices of building materials such as bricks, sand, cement etc. (Pattenden 2012; 2016a, p78-79; Wetlesen 2010, 2016, p87-93). Similarly, labour contractors i.e. *maistries* in South India use their caste and kin connections with politicians and political parties in accessing building construction contracts (Pattenden 2012; Picherit 2012, 2018a, 2018b). Amidst the Covid19 lockdown, builder associations lobbied the state governments to stop the trains migrant labourers could use to go to their home villages (Pushpendra and Jha 2021) to order to retain migrant labourers to work in building construction. Moreover, builders claim compliance or actively resist implementing labour laws in maintaining conditions necessary for surplus extraction (Pattenden 2016a, p78-79).

Literature indicates that state-sponsored social welfare, on the one hand, enables the maintenance and reproduction of labour. On the other hand, it enables labour to make claims on the state instead of capital, thereby reproducing the process of capital accumulation (Roy Chowdhury 2003, Sehgal 2005). Further, Lerche (2009, p76) highlights that welfare funds by the state reinforce informalisation and casualisation instead of addressing the same. The state institution, in this case, Building and Other Construction Workers Welfare Board (BOCW), is expected to utilise the welfare fund generated through a 1% cess deposited by the builders for all construction labourers who register themselves as construction labour, including migrant labourers. However,

it is argued that migrant construction workers do not have access to trade unions for making claims on the state compared to local labour (Mosse, Gupta and Shah 2005; Nayak 2022; Vijayabhaskar 2011; Wetlesen 2016). Further, migrant workers do not have access to social security in their destination (cities) on the grounds of awareness, as was visible in the case of Covid-19 lockdown (Breman 2020, Srivastava 2020a). In addition, they remain discriminated against and excluded through political, administrative and executive processes in accessing welfare (Agarwal 2022). In this way, the state enables the reproduction of migrant labour for capital and curtails its ability to make claims neither on the state nor capital.

Based on existing literature and following Burawoy (1985), I indicate that the state, through its labour legislations, policies and provision of welfare, mediates and reinforces the extent to which the *thekedari* system reproduces the architecture of surplus extraction. Arguably, the architecture of surplus extraction in building construction is reproduced through the absence of the state as an enforcer of its regulations and facilitator of social welfare (Pattenden 2016b, p1814). The thesis shows mechanisms through which the *thekedari* system circumvents the state regulations and how state (non) intervention in building construction strengthens the *thekedari* system in reproducing the architecture of surplus extraction. It does so by focussing on how the state shapes the politics of subcontracting relations between *thekedars* and builders (as indicated in chapter four) and the provision of welfare to migrant construction labourers under the *thekedari* system (in chapter six).

While the *thekedari* system shapes the politics of production through the architecture of surplus extraction and the role of the state, the thesis outlines such politics by taking the specific case of Bihari migrant labourers working under the *thekedari* system in building construction. Below, I outline the incorporation of Bihari migrant labour from the East Indian state of Bihar into the *thekedari* system for building construction work.

2.4 Incorporating Bihari migrant labour into the *thekedari* system

The *thekedari* system, in enabling the architecture of surplus extraction, incorporates culturally specific forms of labour-power embedded in historical and intergenerational

experience of labour migration. Such incorporation of particular forms of labour-power under the *thekedari* system shape the politics of production.

2.4.1 Internal Alieness: The historical lived experience of Bihari labour migration

In the case of India's internal labour migration, migrant labourers from Central and eastern Indian states such as Bihar, West Bengal, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh etc., are identified as the cheapest and most exploited workforce (Deshingkar 2009; Mosse, Gupta and Shah 2005; Shah and Lerche 2020; Srivastava and Jha 2016). Historically, Bihari migrant labourers have been identified as Hindi speaking 'North Indian' migrants (Fazal 2016), up-country migrants or *Hindustanis* (de Haan 2003, Omvedt 1980) or as *Bihari baboo, bhaiyya or bhayeemar* (Morris 1965, Prasad-Aleyamma 2011) originating from the states of Bihar (earlier included the state of Jharkhand) and Uttar Pradesh. This would mean that 'Bihari' labour inhabits a broader geographical or regional origin which would include not only the state of Bihar (and earlier Jharkhand as well) but also the state of, for instance, Uttar Pradesh where Hindi-speaking labourers come from. However, my fieldwork engaged with migrant labourers from Bihar.

As de Haan (2003) indicates, the stereotypical picture of a Bihari is that of a male, unskilled manual labourer. Historically, labourers from Bhojpur region in Bihar were sent to work in the British colonies in Mauritius, the Caribbean and Surinam as indentured labour via labour intermediaries in the early nineteenth century. Accounts of labour history in the early twentieth century indicate that Bihari migrants were brought in to reinforce and later replace initially the migrants from a nearby district of Ratnagiri working in the textile mills of Bombay (Chandavarkar 1994, p129). A similar case in point was that of the colonial tea plantations of Assam when plantation owners turned to mobilise cheap and docile labour from Bihar to initiate an alternate system of labour mobilisation for plantations (Varma 2016).

Studies show that labour migration from Bihar has risen sharply since the 1970s-80s (Datta 2016, IIPA 2010, Jha 2004; Pushpendra and Jha 2018) to cities like Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Hyderabad etc., construction being the primary destination for the

labourers (Srivastava and Jha 2016). Since the construction boom in India, Bihari migrant labour form the bulk of the labour force in large-scale construction in India's major cities (Sinha 2013). Bihari labourers are preferred as cheap, docile and skilled labourers, among others, over the local or intra-state migrant workers in the construction industry (Mosse, Gupta and Shah 2005; Parry 2003, Srivastava and Jha 2016, Pattenden 2018, Shah and Lerche 2020). One can also take note of Bihari labourers migrating by the sight of Bihar-bound trains or labourers being picked up by jobbers from railway stations in the cities (Fazal 2016, Sinha 2013).

While both upper and lower caste Bihari labourers migrate to the cities, it is the historically oppressed castes, lower class Muslims, SCs, STs, OBCs, EBCs and Mahadalits who dominate the rank of labour migrants involved in labouring occupations like construction, security, domestic help, hawkers etc. (Karan 2003, Pattenden 2012, Pushpendra and Jha 2018, Roy 2016). Moreover, while Bihari migrant labourers are valorised for their hard-working abilities, they have been subjected to being the dirty 'other' by the state and the urban middle class (Kumar 2009, Sinha 2013), apart from being socially excluded and politically disenfranchised (Roy 2020). At the same time, Bihari migrant labourers are identified as 'culturally inferior' and subjected to ethnic violence in places of work (Shah and Lerche 2020, Sinha 2013). They have been the victims of stereotyping, xenophobic violence, ethnic attacks, and brutal killings since the history of their migration, which continues until today (Fazal 2016, IIPA 2010, Pushpendra and Jha 2018, Sinha 2013, Verma 2015). Further, Bihari migrant labourers are stigmatised as labourers based on the backwardness of 'region' covering Bihar, Uttar Pradesh etc., and the language they speak (Raj 2020). Such continual acts of state dominance, stereotyping, social stigma and the phenomenon of 'othering' of Bihari labourers have shaped their lived experience of migration. That said, the lived experience of Bihari migrants as labourers epitomises the 'internal alienness' faced by migrant labour within India based on caste, ethnic and regional status (Lerche and Shah 2018). Such an experience embedded in their 'internal alienness' as migrant labourers is reinforced through their stereotyping, discrimination and stigmatisation by 'local' workers (Lerche and Shah 2018, Shah and Lerche 2020). In this way, the labour-power of Bihari migrant labour can be seen and identified as 'culturally specific forms of labour-power' which, as Hall (1986, p24) argues, enables their incorporation into production processes for surplus extraction.

While the historical experience of labour migration from Bihar shapes the internal alienness of Bihari migrant labourers, how does it enable the architecture of surplus extraction? The incorporation of Bihari migrant labourers as culturally specific forms of labour power into the *thekedari* system is reinforced by historical *thekedar*-labour relations, the compulsion of Bihari migrant labourers as 'classes of labour' to find work outside their villages (Bernstein 2007) and the temporality of building construction work.

2.4.2 From Classes of labour to Bihari-ness: Shaping politics of production

The internal alienness of Bihari migrant labour shaped by caste, region and ethnic status, resulting in culturally specific forms of labour power, is reinforced through their historically embedded labour relations. Therefore, one needs to situate *thekedar*-labour relations in the history of caste-class contradictions in Bihar, which signals the roots of the exploitation of Bihari migrant labourers (Chakravarti 2001a, Das 1984, Kumar 2009, Mundle 1979, Prasad 1979). Since 1950s, the era of substantial changes in the agrarian caste-class structure of Bihar was initiated with the abolition of the *Zamindari* (land ownership) system fuelled by *kisan* i.e. peasant-led movements and mediation by the state through its legislations (Mitra and Vijayendra 1982, Sharma 2005). Such land reforms led to the rise of agricultural landless labourers. Literature from parts of Central and South Bihar in the late 1970s, unlike North Bihar, indicates struggles by the landless labourers against the landowning caste. This resulted in agrarian violence between caste armies of landowning upper caste, such as *Rajputs*, *Bhumihars* (in alliance with the state) against that of armies of the lower caste supported by radical left political parties (Wilson 1999). Such struggles led to a rise in the social hierarchy of agrarian (peasant) castes such as the *Yadavs*, *Kurmis*, *Koeris*. While agrarian surplus generated by such castes gradually came to be used for accumulation in building construction (Wilson 1999) via the practice of *thekedari*, the struggles further fragmented the lower castes such as Dalits into Mahadalits, 'reforming' but maintaining the exploitative agrarian structure in Bihar (Sharma 2005, Wilson 1999).

Following such caste-class contradictions in which the roots of exploitation are located, labour migration from Bihar is often seen as a possible opportunity to seek freedom

from the oppressive caste structure of the village. Furthermore, the historical and spatial geopolitics of 'internal colonialism' in Bihar are reinforced through the combined and uneven capitalist development, characterisation of high poverty levels and the lowest human development indices (Shah and Lerche 2020, Carswell *et al.* 2022). This results in labour migration being seen as a necessity for Bihari migrant labourers to find regular work via *thekedars* given the lack of jobs in the state of Bihar coupled with the plight of ecological disasters and Naxal violence (Chakravarti 2001a, Deshingkar and Farrington 2009, Pushpendra and Jha 2018, Sinha 2013). Such conditions specific to Bihar, among other states such as Jharkhand, West Bengal, Chattisgarh, Uttar Pradesh seen as regionally backward and poor, composes the compulsion of Bihari migrant labourers to sell their labour-power by finding regular work outside their village or state to secure their reproduction needs (Bernstein 2007).

In this sense, Bihari migrant labourers form a segment of the wider 'classes of labour', who use "*insecure, oppressive and scarce combinations of employment and self-employment*" to meet their reproduction needs while sharing the overall position of being exploited (ibid, p6) with other labourers working in different production contexts. Most Bihari labourers have a family or generational history of migration from their villages in Bihar to different towns and cities in India, where they worked as wage labourers or self-employed in building construction, brick-kiln industry, truck driving, rickshaw pulling, agriculture, or home-based industries such as bangle-making. However, using combinations of wage labour and self-employed work owing to differentiation in land ownership, they remain net sellers of labour power, indicating the fluidity of labour relations (Lerche 2009; Pattenden 2016a, p23). In this sense, as classes of labour, Bihari migrant labourers remain internally differentiated owing to using different combinations of working on their own land (if available) back in the village and/or selling their labour power for building construction work (Pattenden 2016a).

A majority of India's labourers, including internal migrant labourers, are overwhelmingly found to have insecure means of employment i.e. *kaam* (Shah *et al.* 2017, De Neve 2023). Bihari migrant labourers, as classes of labour working within building construction as skilled, semi-skilled or unskilled labourers, remain 'adversely incorporated' into architecture of surplus extraction via the *thekedari* system (Mezzadri

and Lulu 2018). This is also because the *thekedari* system, emerging from the contractualisation of labour, reinforces Bihari migrant labourers, among others, to work in a 'permanent' state of 'temporality' in building construction work, deepening insecure and oppressive forms of employment, against being able to secure a job i.e. *naukri* (Srivastava 2009, Parry 2013, Carswell and De Neve 2018, Mezzadri and Majumdar 2020).

Irrespective of owning (or not) means of production (primarily, land) in their villages, Bihari migrant labourers, as 'classes of labour,' in building construction have one foot in the city and the other in the village (Bernstein 2007, Breman 1996). Further, the circulation of migrant labourers between their village and workplace enables the process of capital accumulation by cheapening and controlling labour power (Breman 1996, Mezzadri and Mazumdar 2020, Pattenden 2012, Shah and Lerche 2020, Shah *et al.* 2017). In organising production relations via labour circulation, the *thekedari* system organises and reproduces a 'system of migrant labour'. This occurs by separating the maintenance and renewal of labour-power in externalising the cost of social reproduction of labour (Burawoy 1976, Meillassoux 1981) onto family members in the villages. In this way, the *thekedari* system produces cheap labour. The necessity for Bihari migrant labourers to circulate to their villages is not only for the celebration of festivals or to attend marriages, participate in agricultural sowing or harvesting, but also for rest and recovery from the toil and hard work in the cities to maintain themselves (Omvedt 1980). While the cultural specificity of the labour-power of Bihari migrant labourers enables their incorporation into processes of surplus extraction, this compulsion to migrate varies across migrant labourers and their spatiotemporally divided households. Further, the necessity to circulate to their villages for agricultural work is passed on and managed by gender and kinship relations which in turn enable the organisation of exploitation (Mezzadri and Majumdar 2020, Shah and Lerche 2020). In this way, the compulsion of Bihari migrants as classes of labour combine or conjugates with the temporality of work under the *thekedari* system shaping their incorporation into the architecture of surplus extraction.

While Bihari migrant labourers face internal alienation because of their caste, region, and ethnicity, the thesis is concerned with how does this socially embedded understanding of labourers from Bihar reflected through the historical experience of

labour migration as *Bihari* labourers, mean for and/or is deployed in the context of production relations in shaping the politics of production. Mishra (2016) indicates that, instead of identifying themselves as Bihari *mazdoor*, i.e., lower caste labourers (Wilson 1999), labour migrants from Bihar working in shoe-making industry in North-east India identify themselves as *Biharis* rather than situating their labouring background in caste. Moreover, the migration experience over the years for Bihari migrant labourers has led to the valorisation of the dignity of work, making them identify themselves as *Biharis* (Jha 2004, p529; Roy 2013, 2020). This self-identification of Bihari migrant labourers is similar to Rogaly *et al.*'s (2003) research which indicates how Bengaliness, while overlapping with caste, tribe and religion of Bengali migrant labourers, is used politically in employer-worker interactions for claiming dignity and for exercising domination.

However, what remains unknown is how does the identification as *Biharis*, in reifying, defying or diluting rigid distinctions of caste, ethnicity, region, religion etc. in the *thekedari* system shape class formation. Further, how does the identification as *Biharis* relate to how Bihari migrant labourers' work as 'classes of labour' in building construction and experience exploitation under the *thekedari* system. In explaining how does the identification of Bihari migrant labourers as *Biharis* shapes the politics of production and hence class formation, the thesis employs the lens of *Bihari-ness* deployed as a mechanism of exploitation and also as a concrete universal of the lived experience of exploitation (Bourgois 1988, McNally 2015). On the one hand, I use *Bihari-ness*, as a mechanism of enabling and reinforcing exploitation across 'classes of labour' in building construction. Focussing on the architecture of surplus extraction, the thesis uses and interrogates *Bihari-ness* in the context of mobilisation of Bihari migrant labourers (chapter five), producing surplus via the construction of buildings (chapter six and seven) and the daily reproduction of labour (chapter eight). On the other hand, I identify *Bihari-ness* as a 'concrete universal' of the lived experience of exploitation co-constituted by caste-based oppression, ethnic discrimination, and stereotyping resulting in acceptance of and resistance to the architecture of surplus extraction, informing the process of class formation. The thesis provides empirical evidence examining how *Bihari-ness*, composed of internal differences of caste, region, religion, skill, etc., across classes of labour shapes the politics of production, and in turn, class formation.

I now present the analytical framework to examine how does the *thekedari* system in producing the politics of production shape class formation?

2.5 Class formation: 'Configuration' of class relations as an analytical framework

How does the politics of production shape class formation? How do the political effects of the architecture of surplus extraction shape class formation? It is through the configuration of class relations. Configuration results in the emergence and the suppression of class relations, i.e. social relation of exploitation, under the *thekedari* system. Configuration indicates the possibility of class conflicts and class compromise- which is the outcome of the politics of production, not an arrangement of class relations. Configuration of class relations indicates how class relations are accepted, negotiated and resisted both within 'classes of labour' and between labour and capital. Class formation is the process through which 'configurations' of class relations are historically produced, constituted, and transformed.

I argue that the *thekedari* system, in acting as the political apparatus of production, 'configures' class relations for reinforcing the process of capital accumulation. Configuration indicates how the lived experience of exploitation shaped by the *thekedari* system enables or silences the possibility of class conflicts. The process of configuring class relations emphasises how the apparatus of production i.e. the *thekedari* system, by exercising coercion or producing consent, accommodates, alters or reinforces the lived experience of exploitation for surplus extraction.

The key to the configuration of class relations is the role of the political apparatus of production, in this case, the *thekedari* system. The political apparatus of production is constitutive of and determined by specific forms of labour-power rooted in regional and historically exploitative labour relations beyond that of class, for instance, caste, tribe, ethnicity, region, etc. Such a constitution of the political apparatus of production enables the incorporation and reproduction of a system of migrant labour, in this case, Bihari migrant labourers, in the reproduction of the relations of the labour process in building construction.

In reproducing the relations of the labour process, the political apparatus of production secures and obscures the surplus and acts as a mode of naturalising or legitimising relations of the labour process to extract surplus. In this sense, the moral economy of *thekedar*-labour relations serves as an element of control in enabling the reproduction of the relations of the labour process. The apparatus shapes and regulates the politics of the lived experience of exploitation in defending or protecting the architecture of surplus extraction. In doing so, it produces a combination of consent and coercion in composing the lived experience of exploitation and minimising class conflicts. Class struggles are regulated due to this combination, shaping the politics of the lived experience of exploitation. This is where the political apparatus of production plays a crucial role in shaping the process of class formation. In this way, the political apparatus of production, in this case, the *thekedari* system, 'configures' class relations.

At the heart of how the political apparatus of production 'configures' class relations lies the dialectical relation between how exploitation is organised and reproduced and how it shapes the lived experience of exploitation.

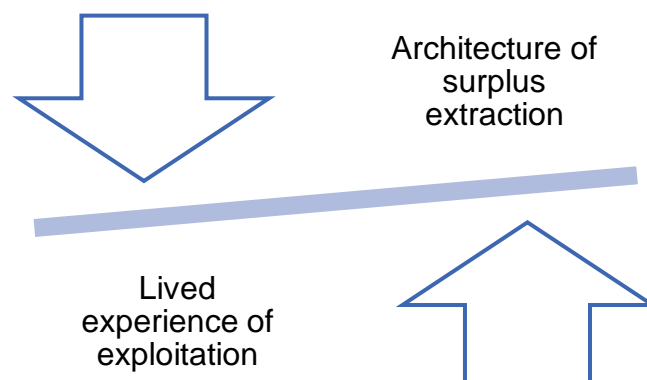


Figure 2.2: Dialectical relationship producing configurations of class relations

I argue that class formation emerges from the dialectical relation between the architecture of surplus extraction and the lived experience of the act of exploitation. It outlines how the architecture of surplus extraction is shaped at the point of production and how exploitation is lived and historically experienced by labour, primarily, but not exclusively, at the point of production (Burawoy 1985, Thompson 1963). Configuration of class relations is the ensemble of all permutations and combinations of class

relations produced as a result of the regulation of class struggle through the 'concrete universals' of the lived experience of exploitation (McNally 2015).

As the thesis indicates, the lived experience of exploitation emerges from the specific ways in which Bihari migrant labourers as classes of labour are incorporated into the architecture of surplus extraction in building construction via the *thekedari* system. How does the configuration of class relations occur in building construction? What are the possible configurations of class relations in the case of Bihari migrant labourers working in the building construction industry? How does the *thekedari* system configure class relations in the case of Bihari migrant labourers working in building construction? I explore these questions in the empirical chapters.

While the lived experience of exploitation emerges from how exploitation is historically experienced *in* the production process, it is also experienced, *through* 'concrete universals' (McNally 2015) i.e. context-specific, historical and contemporary processes which enable and reinforce exploitation, such as region-based stereotyping and stigmatisation, ethnic discrimination etc (Bourgois 1988). As a result, 'concrete universals' of the lived experience of exploitation may be seen as idioms or vocabularies of the experience of exploitation reinforced through caste-class-based oppression, ethnic discrimination, stereotyping etc., for internal migrant labour in India (Raj 2019, 2020). To underline different configurations of class relations experienced by labour, one could start by examining their everyday experience at the workplace and connecting the same or locating the same within broader historical relations of labouring and associated experiences.

Drawing from my research on the everyday lives of Bihari migrant labourers working via sub-contractual labour relations in the building construction industry, I highlight four ways which form an analytical framework for explaining how the politics of production shapes class formation.

1. Constitution of the political apparatus of production through specific forms of labour-power and its incorporation into the production process: The configuration of class relation is visible in the workplace where exploitation occurs, and the political apparatus of production reproduce relations of the labour process. However, I indicate that the process of 'configuration' entails

historical, social relations beyond the workplace, which enable the formation of the political apparatus of production. It involves the historical (and cultural) specificity of labour power, in this case, Bihari migrant labour, which shapes the apparatus alongside the exercise of the balance of power between actors that constitute the apparatus, for instance, *thekedars* and builders. The *thekedari* system in large-scale building construction is composed of the collaboration and negotiation between *thekedars* and builders, which enables the tying of the production process with the reproduction of labour-power. The system enforces the architecture of surplus extraction by enabling the reproduction of the relations of the labour process.

2. Organisation and reproduction of a system of migrant labour: The payments of advance and *khuraki* to Bihari migrant labourers under the *thekedari* system enable the organisation and reproduction of a system of Bihari migrant labour for construction work. It guarantees mobilisation, reservation, retention and renewal of labour-power for production, in this case, building construction and enforces architecture of surplus extraction.
3. Organising construction work and exercising everyday forms of control from workplace to sites of daily reproduction: By organising everyday construction work, the *thekedari* system enables or silences the possibility of class conflicts. In exercising everyday forms of control in the organisation of construction work and reproduction of labour, the lived experience of exploitation is composed of accommodating, negotiating or silencing the interests of labour through coercion and consent. This is visible in everyday acceptance, defiance, negotiation, resistance, and bargaining in working at construction sites and living in labour camps.
4. Reinforcing the architecture of surplus extraction by defending or protecting the political apparatus of production: While *thekedars* aim to secure their surplus, builders undercut the power exercised by *thekedars* in securing surplus by replacing, removing them, delaying/deducting payments by monitoring their work. If builders change the labour process, it alters the functioning of the *thekedari* system. This is because the political apparatus of production is hinged on the labour process. Such control exercised by builders on *thekedars*

shapes class struggle. Different *thekedars* and labourers form alliances to contest builders for issues concerning delayed payments to *thekedars* and meeting reproduction needs of labour such as water, toilets etc. In this case, collusion between *thekedars* and labourers configures class relations. However, Bihari migrant labourers can make collective demands, for instance, subsistence payment, regular work availability, and reproduction needs signalling class struggle. In this way, the *thekedari* system reinforces the architecture of surplus extraction configuring class relations.

2.6 Conclusion

While sub-contracting forms the critical basis for the organisation of the labour process in building construction, in this chapter, I have argued that the *thekedari* system serves as the political apparatus of production in reproducing the relations of the labour process. By enforcing and reinforcing the mobilisation, realisation and renewal of culturally specific forms of labour-power, in this case, Bihari migrant labour, the *thekedari* system organises and reproduces the relations of the labour process. In doing so, it composes the architecture of surplus extraction in the building construction industry. In serving as the political apparatus of production, the *thekedari* system regulates class struggles by shaping the politics of the lived experience of exploitation of Bihari migrant labourers.

Further, the chapter argues that the formation of class as a social relation of the extraction of surplus value is dependent on the dialectical relation between the architecture of surplus extraction and the lived experience of the act of exploitation, i.e. how the architecture of surplus extraction is shaped at the point of production and how the act of exploitation is lived and historically experienced by labour, primarily, but not exclusively at the point of production (Burawoy 1985, Thompson 1963). While the lived experience of exploitation emerges from the architecture of surplus extraction *in* the production process, it is shaped *through* the 'concrete universals' of exploitative experience. This enables incorporating culturally specific forms of labour-power into the architecture of surplus extraction.

In shaping the politics of the lived experience of exploitation, the *thekedari* system regulates class struggles to produce configuration of class relations. I have outlined four key ways in which class formation is enabled through the configuration of class relations in case of Bihari migrant labour working in building construction i.e. the constitution of the political apparatus of production through specific forms of labour-power, the organisation and reproduction of a system of migrant labour, the exercise of everyday forms of control from worksites to sites of daily reproduction and the reinforcement or reproduction of the architecture of surplus extraction through the defence or protection of the political apparatus of production. I explain the configuration process in the empirical chapters. In the next chapter, I outline the methodology used for the research.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The research aims at examining the process of class formation. It studies the lived experience of exploitation of Bihari migrant labourers working in the large-scale building construction industry in Hyderabad, India. It employs theoretically informed case study research as its research design.

To narrow down the case in terms of its design and ascertain the possibility of access, I chose construction sites for the study by visiting different construction sites, building rapport with key informants etc. I collected evidence on how exploitation is organised in building construction and how Bihari migrant labourers experience this exploitation. I used direct observation, semi-structured, in-depth, and key-informant interviews. However, my presence in the field as a PhD student from Bihar and how Bihari labourers made sense of my presence at the construction sites and labour camps enabled evidence generation (Maskara 2021). During the Covid-19 lockdown, my research moved to the cyber field (Sinha 2021); however, before the lockdown, I managed to travel to the villages of migrant labourers in Bihar.

To produce knowledge, the research uses Burawoy's (1991, 1998) extended case method, which draws on the principles of reflexive science. Reflexive science values dialogue and engagement with theory and research participants, as opposed to positive science, which valorises detachment and distancing of the researcher. Following the principle of reflexive science to 'extend out' from the case, I used the iterative method of reading and reflecting critically on the field notes with the existing theory.

I begin this chapter by explaining my research design and the selection of construction sites for studying the case. Further, I outline the techniques employed for gathering the evidence needed, including the everyday fieldwork and my experience of examining class visible in my positionality as a researcher. Subsequently, I shed light on moving from explaining data to producing knowledge using field notes.

3.1 Research design: A theoretically informed case study research

The research employs case study research as the mode of inquiry. Yin (2018, pp 15) defines the case study as an empirical method to investigate a real-life phenomenon in a context where the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not evident. Studying a case is the method of inquiry (ibid) by taking a case(s) as the usual unit of inquiry. In my research, the phenomenon to be examined is the process of class formation, taking the exploitation of Bihari migrant labourers working in India's building construction as 'the case'. By examining production relations in the building construction industry, I explain the specific conditions and mechanisms of class formation through the production and reproduction of the lived experience of exploitation of Bihari migrant labourers. In this way, the case is a potential case of class formation (Gerring 2004). In my fieldwork, I collected evidence on how the lived experience of exploitation of Bihari migrant labourers is shaped in the context of production relations, in this case, building construction.

My choice of research design which employs a case study as the research method, is guided by earlier classic case studies on class formation in the case of the English working-class (Thompson 1963), factory workers in the United States, Zambia, Hungary, Russia (Burawoy 1985) etc. The case study method has produced workplace ethnographies studying labour relations and labour processes in industrial relations and sociology (Edwards and Belanger 2008, McGovern 2020). The research employs ethnographic approaches, i.e. techniques for gathering evidence and developing theory through ethnography. However, I do not intend to present an ethnography of 'a building construction site' (Swider 2015). Instead, I present an ethnography of production relations focussing on how the architecture of surplus extraction is enabled and reinforced for examining the process of class formation.

However, the techniques used and the narrative construction employs what Willis (2000) calls theoretically informed ethnographic approaches (Burawoy 1998; Snow, Morrill and Anderson 2003). Willis (2000, p112-119) highlights what a theoretically informed ethnographic study looks like and explains, "*A very important consideration for me here is that the preparation for and entry to the field is, unrecognised or not, some kind of intervention into debate, an attempt to grapple with a puzzle* [which, in

case of my research, is to examine how do Bihari migrant labourers working in building construction form a class?]......*this brings along with it, implicitly or explicitly, some sort of theoretical confession, a world view within which the puzzle is meaningful. This ethnographic imagination takes us very far from an empiricist standpoint or a self-assumption of a general ethnographic authority. Of course, the point of engaging in fieldwork, what impels you to face its difficulties, dilemmas and jeopardies, is to give yourself the chance of being surprised, to have experiences that generate not wholly prefigured in your starting out positions. But it is in many ways the ‘theoretical confession’ and type of originating puzzle that sets up this possibility. You cannot be surprised unless you thought that you knew, or assumed, something already, which is then overturned, or perhaps strengthened or positively diverted, or fulfilled in unexpectedly elegant ways.*”

Drawing from Willis (2000), the research design, instead of lying in a theoretical vacuum, is motivated by prior theory to examine the process of class formation. Further, the fieldwork process has been aware of some of the fallacies of ethnographic methods, as explained by Burawoy (2013), who indicates an inadequate reflection of theory. In acknowledging the challenges of using ethnographic approaches to the contribution or an inadequate reflection of theory, I draw from Snow, Morrill and Anderson (2003), who indicate three possible ways ethnography contributes to theory. I find these ways helpful to study class formation. First, theoretical discovery, i.e., allowing the empirical data to expose the theory. The second is the theoretical extension, i.e., broadening a particular theory's relevance to various empirical contexts. Finally, theoretical refinement, i.e., modifying existing theoretical perspectives by extension or using ‘unique’ case material to ‘restructure’ theory.

For my research, I use the ‘unique’ case of Bihari migrant labourers working in building construction to examine class relations. While the exploitation of Bihari migrant construction labour as a case to be studied for examining class formation might appear to be a unique and biased selection, such a deliberate selection of research cases has also been made before in the studies on affluent workers (Goldthorpe *et al.* 1967) or selection of particular industrial centre (Lockwood 1966) in explaining production relations (Burawoy 1979, 1985). Moreover, the purpose of my research is not theoretical discovery through the grounded theory method rooted in positive science

employed for analytical generalisation (Eisenhardt 1989, p533; Snow, Morrill and Anderson 2003; Yin 2018). Instead, my research aims to generalise from the particular by choosing a unique case for theoretical relevance (Burawoy 1985, p17).

The research employs Burawoy's (1991) extended case method, which lies between theoretical extension and refinement, to produce knowledge (Snow, Morrill and Anderson 2003). Using the extended case method, I broaden the relevance of class formation. It is done by modifying existing theoretical perspectives on class (i.e. theoretical refinement) using 'unique' case material, i.e. the lives of Bihari migrant labourers working in building construction, to restructure theory.

In terms of research techniques, the research employed direct observation, semi-structured and in-depth interviews, key-informant interviews, etc. The research study, on the one hand, is conscious of the advantages and biases of each research technique, as Burawoy (1991) admitted, and on the other, is aware of the choice and claims of superiority of one technique over another (Burawoy 1998, Sieber 1973). At best, the research study aims to acknowledge the same by engaging with such techniques and looking at their appropriate use in the proper context and time.

3.2 Selecting and accessing construction sites to study the case

Through initial visits to different construction sites run by local, regional and global construction firms in the city of Hyderabad, a rapid assessment of the scale and stage of the construction was done to gather information on migrant labourers. This exercise also enabled me to gauge the possibility of accessing the construction sites. Research on the working conditions of labourers at construction sites indicates that getting access to the sites is quite challenging, considering that it requires prior permission from builders (Kumar and Fernandez 2015, Srivastava and Sutradhar 2016, Wetlesen 2010). However, I tried to build rapport with Bihari migrant labourers at the construction sites or through their contractors by hanging around construction sites repeatedly to identify and interact with key informants who guard access (Bowers 2019, Swider 2015). Hence, there was no fixed protocol for accessing the construction sites, which depended on the local context, such as the level of security at the site. However, the aim was to try and avoid the channel of access which restricts the longer duration of

my access to labourers, for instance, by meeting the builders or taking official permission to enter the site.

Based on these visits, the two construction sites chosen differed in terms of capital investments, number of labourers working, nature of contracting relation between builders and *thekedars*, ways of labour mobilisation either via labour gangs or individual labourers, and accommodation of labourers within or outside work site. Hence, for the study, an embedded single case study design was chosen in which exploitation of Bihari migrant labourers at the two construction sites served as embedded units of analysis.

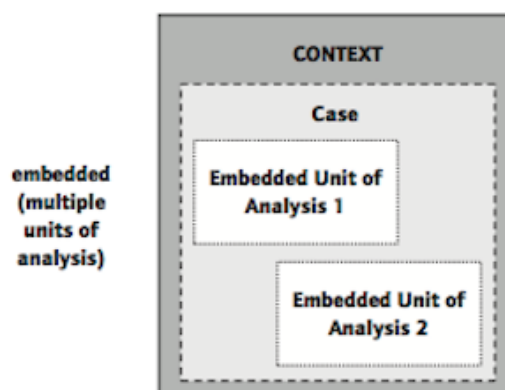


Figure 3.1: Basic type of designs for case studies (Source: Yin 2018, pp 48)

At site A, run by Rishabh Builders and Developers (name changed), chosen for my fieldwork, 80 G+2 residential villas, each of 4500 square feet, were being constructed by a locally reputed builder by sub-contracting different stages of construction directly to multiple *thekedars* from Bihar mostly on a piece-rate basis, i.e. based on the measurement of the work done which was referred to as 'measurement-based work'. Rishabh Builders have developed 8-10 real estate properties in the vicinity over the last 5-7 years, comprising villas and apartments. Migrant labourers from Bihar, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh were working at the site and were accommodated within the premises of the site.

Beyond selecting site A, I visited 3-4 construction sites (referred as private limited companies by *thekedars* and labourers) run by global construction firms. I narrowed it down to a construction site B sub-contracted to BSS Construction and Real Estate Pvt Ltd (name changed) as the principal contractor, one of the global construction contracting companies. Six building towers, each of 22 floors, were being constructed

to serve as offices for the rapidly expanding IT sector in Hyderabad, wherein 2000 migrant labourers from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, West Bengal, MP and Chhattisgarh were working. In terms of the stage of construction, a few floors in each tower were constructed. By interacting with labourers from Bihar and Jharkhand at the BSS site, I gathered that they, along with other labourers, were working on a time-rate basis or what was called a 'supply' basis, i.e. the number of man-hours of labour worked on a day.

3.2.1 From *encounters* to building *rapport* in the field

I visited the Rishabh worksite on different days to enter the site and the labour camp by befriending the security guards or some labourers or possibly having an encounter with any *thekedars*. I was enlightened about a slight distinction between a labour camp (i.e. of Rishabh's) and a labour colony depending on the number and duration of construction projects. Addressing spaces where labourers are accommodated as labour colonies indicated the relatively long duration of construction projects by building companies, for instance, 8-10 years, unlike spaces referred to as labour camps which are relatively meant to accommodate labourers for a shorter duration of construction projects, say 4-5 years. Rishabh Builders and Developers have their labour camp on the construction site, where the labourers can stay temporarily. In contrast to the Rishabh Builders camp, migrant labourers were transported by bus from the worksite to the BSS Real Estate labour colony located at a distance. BSS Real Estate site was addressed as a labour colony, whereas labourers at Rishabh's worksite called their accommodation a labour camp but not a colony. However, both colonies and camps are temporary spaces of accommodation constructed for labourers.

I visited the BSS site at different intervals to gauge access to Bihari migrant labourers, *thekedars* etc. Given the layout and surroundings of the construction site, I gauged a good possibility of repeated interaction with labourers. Though the site was guarded, labourers used to exit the site at different points of the day, enabling me to have conversations. However, what caught my attention during my visits to the BSS site was that labourers working at sites run by G & S Construction adjacent to BSS had their camps located next to the site. Knowing this, I took a short tour of the labour

camps near the cluster of construction sites run by G &S Construction, Himsagar Construction etc.

Most of these labour camps, three of which I visited, were run by G&S and Himsagar Construction. One could identify the camps based on the colour of the tin sheds, blue one by G&S, green and white by Himsagar, organised in different rows called blocks viz. A, B, C, D, E, F, and so on, with each block having 15-20 rooms accommodating between 10-15 labourers each, a total of roughly 1500-2000 labourers. These camps were located on hilly tracts of land near the worksites for which one had to go uphill. I saw a few labourers resting in the camps during the afternoon while a few took showers near the open wells constructed for that purpose. Though I managed to get a glimpse of the labour camps during the afternoon, I was only allowed entry into them if I knew any labourer or their munshi or *thekedars*. However, what was becoming clear was that entry to labour camps was as tricky as getting access inside the worksites. A visitor is much more likely to be caught by security guards at the entrance of the labour camp during either morning or afternoon on weekdays. However, during evenings on weekdays and afternoons on Sundays, when labourers return to the labour camps, it becomes easier to enter them.



Figure 3.2: Labour camps/ colonies
(Source: Photographed by the author, 2019)

Labour camps for global construction firms were constructed in otherwise highly inaccessible locations close to the construction sites, unlike Rishabh Builders. From my visits to the labour colonies like BSS, I gathered that access to labour colonies is heavily guarded and controlled. This is done through security guards from Bihar, West Bengal, Assam and Odisha who surveil the labour camp, similar to the sites. Each visitor needs prior permission to enter the labour camp. A gate pass is issued by the labour-in-charge, after which the visitor needs to enter their contact details in the

Visitor Register each time they visit. However, I could repeatedly visit the labour camp without any gate pass or permission. Though the security guards enabled my site access, I was sometimes denied access when builders inspected the site. I was told that my presence would create a problem for the security guards, who allowed me to enter the site without a gate pass or any written permission from the builders to enter the site. On such occasions, I refrained from entering the site to avoid causing any harm to the security guards. This way, I could select and access construction sites and labour camps by building rapport with security guards, *munshi*, *thekedars*, labourers etc. However, they also controlled my access to sites.

3.3 Collecting evidence: Of consent, techniques and field encounters

Through repeated encounters at the construction site, migrant labourers, security guards, and *thekedars* were made aware and 'informed' about my research. However, consent taken to do the research was oral instead of being 'formalised' on paper or written to protect the interests and identity of research participants. More importantly, oral consent enabled the development of a relationship between the researcher and the researched, i.e., Bihari migrant labourers, *thekedars*, *munshi*, security guards etc., which allowed me to access the sites and labour camps.

By repeatedly visiting site A and site B and their labour camps, I started to collect evidence on the everyday lives of Bihari migrant labourers in the context of production relations, in this case, building construction. The potential ways of introducing my research to gain access were to present it as a study on labour relations in construction/ study on the everyday life of construction workers etc., instead of asking labourers about their problems in working for a *thekedar*. Though I wanted to approach and talk with the *thekedars*, I was also constantly aware and keen to visit the site in the absence of the *thekedars* to ask questions that were otherwise not possible in the presence of the *thekedars*.

Further, being a Bihari PhD student who has lived in Bihar, travelled to different villages in Bihar, is familiar with local languages etc., enabled me to connect quickly with *thekedars* and labourers from Bihar. It enhanced the possibility of my initial access

to construction worksites and continued association with labourers through conversations beyond my research.

3.3.1 Everyday fieldwork: techniques and positionality

I employed a few techniques to collect evidence on the lived experience of exploitation of Bihari migrant labourers in building construction. My frequent, almost everyday presence at the worksite and labour camp was a key research technique. I was mainly interacting with *thekedars* and labourers. However, I had few interactions with building site officials and security guards. Interviewing or interacting with builders could result in losing site access, so I had to refrain from interacting with builders deliberately.

My presence as a researcher of, what Breman calls, bourgeoisie vintage (Saith 2016), who geographically belongs to the same region as the migrant labourers from Bihar, invited many questions. Such questions were about my research and why I was interested in doing the research by spending my money in London at such a time and age. I must say I was not able to satisfy them with my answers. Though I iterated the purpose of my presence at the worksites and in the labour camps, some *thekedars* and labourers still asked the same question about my research every time I visited the site and labour camp. In doing so, I was identified as everyone but a researcher examining class. For instance, I was seen as an aspiring and potential *thekedar* who is learning how to do *thekedari*, a caretaker of the children of migrant labourers at the worksite, a teacher to discipline labourers and their way of living in the labour camp, a doctor who provided basic health services to migrant labourers working at the site, a government official from the labour department who drops in to ensure quality checks, safety of labourers etc, a secret employee of the builder, a *thekedar's* friend or for that matter, a salesman who sells mobile recharge vouchers and cell phones or otherwise drugs for sexual pleasure for labourers, a labour inspector or a welfare officer who was inspecting working conditions of labourers etc. Such assumptions of my role proved fruitful in generating evidence on the lived experience of exploitation of Bihari migrant labourers working in building construction. Being Bihari allowed me to use the local languages used by labourers and comprehend its localised inflexions alongside establishing a degree of 'fellow feeling'.

Beyond deploying my positionality in generating evidence, among the specific techniques used, I employed direct observation at building sites and labour camps alongside thinking about the possibility of undertaking participant observation. Direct observation was used to understand the interactions between *thekedars* and labourers, observe everyday construction work, living conditions in labour camps etc. Burawoy (1998) indicates that participant observation as a technique comprises the study of people, in this case, Bihari migrant construction labour, in their own time and space by locating their everyday life in its extra-local and historical context. My repeated encounters at the site and labour camp with Bihari migrant labourers throughout the working day and outside fulfilled what participant observation enables, i.e., the immersion in participants' day-to-day activities. However, such an immersion was limited to observing activities and being unable to 'participate' in construction work.

Nevertheless, a fair amount of rapport was built with Bihari labourers at the worksites by spending time with them, buying groceries, sharing meals with labourers at their homes, travelling with them in the buses from the worksite to the labour camp etc. Though after four to five months of fieldwork, the possibility of being a participant observer did arise, I was conscious of the risk of losing access to research sites and being reported to the police. While the ethics of fieldwork call to not harm the research participants, indulging in activities that may potentially cause harm to the researcher should also be considered. However, the possibility of participant observation was both bleak and risky. Nevertheless, the ethnographic accounts on working-class culture (Willis 2017), anthropological accounts of labour and global forms of industrial capitalism (Breman 1996, Hann and Parry 2018, Holmström 1984, Parry 2003, Sanchez 2012, Sanchez and Strümpell 2014) etc. have been instrumental in thinking how to observe, what to observe, what to ask, when to ask etc. Specific to research in the construction sector, accounts of struggles of migrant construction labourers and their working conditions at building construction sites (Jain and Sharma 2019; Pattenden 2012; Picherit 2012; Wetlesen 2010, 2016), ethnography of migrant construction workers in China (Swider 2015), study on class, gender and ethnicity in the construction industry (Thiel 2012) have been useful to engage with. During my immersion in the field, I could travel to a few villages in Bihar to 'follow' Bihari labourers (Picherit 2012, 2018a, 2018b), examining how the *thekedari* system extends to the

village in reinforcing surplus extraction. In this way, my research question examining production relations led to 'multi-sited' fieldwork (Marcus 1995).

Besides direct observation, I conducted a few key informant interviews to understand the operation of the construction site, the *thekedari* system etc. I engaged in repeated rounds of interaction and conversations with *thekedars* in general and those employing Bihari migrant labourers apart from labourers in general and those from Bihar. I interviewed labourers, *thekedars*, and security guards, taking in-depth and semi-structured forms with a life focus approach (Locke and Lloyd-Sherlock 2011). However, I did not immediately jump into conducting interviews. For instance, my first interview with Mansur *ji*, a *thekedar* from Bihar, happened after two months of repeated visits to the site and labour camp.

Further, I do not have a count of the number of interviews I conducted with *thekedars*, labourers at worksites and labour camps. This is because of the repeated rounds of 'informal' interactions that I had at different points in time with *thekedars* and labourers across six months. Some of those interactions lasted for 10mins while others for around an hour or more. Interviews were, however, recorded with prior permission from the *thekedars* and labourers.

I used flashcards to write my prompts for the interview. As and when possible, I also employed oral histories, which have been widely used to engage with worker agency questions in factories (Dutta 2016, Parry 2016). During my fieldwork, I also attempted ice-breaking conversations similar to focus group discussion (FGD) through the game of Jenga. Labourers used to play Ludo, a board game played by four players, in the evening for 'timepass' after finishing their work. However, by introducing Jenga, a board game which more than four players could play, I intervened in how labourers passed their time in the labour camp. It was designed to yield collective insights from labourers on their experience of exploitation. In organising the game, I pasted prompts on small pieces of paper on the wooden blocks of Jenga. Some prompts were who is a labour inspector, remembering my village, a bad *thekedar*, a labourer's power, records of labourers' wages etc (for more, please see Appendix 2). Taking turns, each labourer removed a wooden piece and shared their thoughts on the prompt. On one occasion, during the game, a *thekedar* also shared his insights on the prompts. He

gauged that the game was ‘political’ and iterated that I had carefully planned all the prompts to elicit specific responses from the labourers.



Figure 3.3: Prompts on Jenga wooden pieces (left, centre) and Playing Jenga with labourers in Rishabh labour camp (right) (Source: Photographed by the author, 2019)

The following table gives a brief timeline of my fieldwork.

| Description | Oct 2019 | Nov 2019 | Dec 2019 | Jan 2020 | Feb 2020 | March 2020 | April 2020-Aug 2021 |
|--|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|------------|---------------------|
| Field visits to select and access potential construction sites | | | | | | | |
| Direct observation at sites and camps, hanging out with labourers, semi-structured/key informant interviews, oral histories etc. | | | | | | | |
| Travel to home villages of Bihari migrant labourers and return to desk during Covid-19 lockdown and travel ban | | | | | | | |
| Fieldwork continued on the ‘cyber’ field | | | | | | | |

Table 3.1: Timeline of my Fieldwork

Indeed, as a researcher, I faced some of the usual challenges in gathering evidence during fieldwork, for instance, mobility between the two construction sites, availability and willingness of labourers and *thekedars* to talk with me etc. However, the everyday encounters – routine but necessary, exciting, critical, challenging yet helpful, surprising

but significant and yet unsuccessful- shaped my positionality alongside using techniques for gathering the evidence.

My fieldwork was disrupted due to the Covid-19 lockdown. However, my research moved from the physical to the 'cyber' field to maintain continuity.

3.3.2 From physical to the 'cyber' field: Disruption by Covid-19 to continuity

During the Covid-19 lockdown, techniques otherwise used in fieldwork between Oct 2019 to March 2020 were no longer possible. I could neither visit the construction sites nor the labour camp, having been locked down in London after a short visit before the impending lockdown. This meant a change in the research techniques being used. Though the lockdown disrupted the relationship built over six months, I tried to maintain a relationship between myself and the research participants. In light of the withdrawal of migrant labourers from working in the city to going back to their villages or demanding to do so, Sinha (2021) indicates the 'presence' of the working class in the 'cyber field'. In this sense, my fieldwork moved to the 'cyber field'; in my case, WhatsApp served as the social media for telephonic calls and exchanging information via photos, videos etc.

I continued video calls with the *munshi* of one labour gang at the BSS site, as very few Bihari migrant labourers had smartphones to facilitate video calls. Further, I could not continue meeting with *thekedars* or labourers at Rishabh builders. Most *thekedars*, amidst the lockdown and post-lockdown, either switched off their mobile phone or avoided my calls. In this way, the lockdown did disrupt the relationship that was otherwise built through my presence on the field. Through WhatsApp audio and video calls from the site, room in the camp, the household in the village, or the agricultural land, my research continued. However, I had to filter evidence relevant to my research from the images and videos sent to me on my Whatsapp. For instance, the log book of advance taken by labourers, images of the work site, payment requests, orders and receipts generated showing man-days of work were beneficial. However, I also received news articles about Naxal attacks and images of dead Naxals in villages of Gaya, Covid-19 news on Bihar, statistics on vaccination of migrant labourers, greetings on religious festivals and public holidays such as new year, republic day etc., selfies of labourers and their family in the village, sharing invitations of funeral

ceremonies, videos highlighting the pride of Hindu religion, motivational quotes, jokes, TikTok videos on love, romance, Covid-19 lockdown videos of police atrocities etc. Though I had collected sufficient data useful to craft an argument to write the thesis before the announcement of the lockdown, the WhatsApp communication proved useful in filling some of the gaps in the data collected.

All encounters in the field and the 'cyber field' defined, produced, disrupted and distorted my relationship with Bihari labourers and *thekedars* at the construction site in observing, asking and interacting with class relations. How I could make sense of the data was nevertheless a challenging task, something which I now turn to. Before explaining the construction of the narrative from the field notes, I would first outline the underlying science that guided the production of knowledge.

3.4 From explaining data to producing knowledge: Dialogue as reflexive science

The case study as a method of inquiry has been subject to critiques and concerns about its usefulness as a method in general. In particular, the misunderstandings of case study as a method concerns questions related to generalisation (Flyvbjerg 2006, Tight 2010, Verschuren 2003). Yin (2018) indicates that a case study is an in-depth investigation of a real-life phenomenon within the real-world context in which the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not evident. Context plays a crucial role not only in shaping the research question but also in the process of answering the research question by gathering the necessary evidence.

Burawoy (1991, p31) refers to Katz's (1983) "4R's" principles of reactivity, reliability, replicability and representativeness of research as prescriptive tenets of positivist science. Reactivity indicates that researchers should avoid distorting the world they are studying. The reliability principle is about the necessity of a data selection criterion. Social scientists should be able to replicate the results of research done by another researcher. This is the principle of replicability. Lastly, representativeness indicates that what we study should represent a part of the whole. Burawoy (1991, 1998) indicates that the tenets of positivist science either ignore or otherwise try to minimise or control the effects of context on the research findings. This is achieved by valorising

the detachment and distancing of the researcher from the subject of study (Burawoy 1998). However, the techniques adopted for my fieldwork were far from detaching or distancing me from the research participants (Maskara 2021).

My fieldwork at building construction sites resulted in some degree of intervention into the 'setting' of the construction site, particularly the everyday lives of Bihari migrant labourers working in masonry and shuttering work at Rishabh Builders and BSS Real Estate, violating the first R, i.e., reactivity. Secondly, in not following particular research tools for each day of my fieldwork, i.e., the use of a specific questionnaire, and instead employing conversations, and interactions with Bihari labourers, their *thekedars*, the building site managers etc., my fieldwork violated the second R, i.e., reliability. Thirdly, my fieldwork does not enable the replicability of my research, violating the third R, considering my findings are intricately connected to my positionality. However, it would be beneficial to learn how my findings change or do not change if someone else does the same research. Lastly, how representative of labour was my observations on Bihari migrant labourers? I focussed on Bihari migrant labourers working in masonry and shuttering at two construction sites, which may not qualify for representation of Bihari migrant labourers in building construction, let alone migrant labourers in general. This indicates a violation of the fourth R. All these criticisms are undoubtedly valid and indicate the limitations of my fieldwork from the tenets of positivist social science.

However, in following Burawoy (1991, 1998), I am inclined to engage with reflexive science principles. Reflexive science values engagement with knowledge, not detachment, under positive science (ibid) to explain the empirical phenomenon. Burawoy (1991, p20-21) indicates that “*reflexive science starts out from dialogue, virtual or real, between observer and participants, then embeds such dialogue within a second dialogue between local processes and extra local forces that in turn can be comprehended only through a third, expanding dialogue of theory with itself.*” Arguably, reflexive science aims to improve or reconstruct existing theory, in this case, class formation and not establish a definitive truth through statistical generalisation about an external world (Burawoy 1985, 1991, 1998).

Unlike positivist science, which limits or is limited by effects of context, reflexive science is shaped through contexts of interview (intervention), of respondent's interpretation of the question (process), of the external field as the conditions of existence of the locale within which the research occurs (structuration) and of the social situation over the individual (reconstruction). The research employs Burawoy's (1991, 1998) "extending out" from the case as a method, which relies on the principles of reflexive science to build theory. Burawoy (1991) indicates that "*the extended case method applies reflexive science to ethnography to extract the general from the unique, to move from the "micro" to the "macro," and to connect present to the past in anticipation of the future, all by building on pre-existing theory.*" This theory reconstruction takes place through dialogue with local processes, social forces and pre-existing theory by reflecting on the evidence gathered. The theory is essential to each dimension of the extended case method as it guides interventions, constitutes situated knowledge into social processes, and locates those social processes in their wider context of determination (Burawoy 1998, p21). The four extensions entail incorporating the effects of context into the analysis, i.e., the intervention of the observer into the participant's life, locating the individual in social situations, the role of external social, political and economic forces and the effect of dialogue among observers as the scientific community. However, all four extensions that form the extended case method are limited by the *power* effects between the scientist and the subject of study (Burawoy 1991, 1998). Such power effects are visible in the scientist dominating subjects of study and being dominated by them, interests of scientist and that of the participants subject of study being silenced, objectification of social forces as external and natural, and the normalisation of complex situations to fit a theory (Burawoy 1998, p22-24). In the following section, I explain how these extensions shaped by the effects of context and power apply to my research.

3.4.1 From fieldnotes to narrative to reconstructing theory

My research is focused on the lived experience of exploitation of Bihari migrant labourers in building construction to examine the process of class formation. However, it cannot be isolated from the context abstracted at different levels, i.e. from the chosen construction site to large-scale construction in India. Further, the broader historical

trajectory of capitalism shaping conditions of exploitation etc., produces context effects on the research.

The first effect of context, i.e., the intervention of the observer in the participant's life, calls for extending the observer to the participant. In this case, my repeated, routine, expected and unexpected field encounters intervened in the lives of Bihari migrant labourers working under different *thekedars* at construction sites. I gathered field notes of my daily encounters – conversations, observations, interviews etc.- in the local language, i.e., Hindi, and recorded the interviews wherever possible. In reporting my empirical data, I have used pseudonyms for all *thekedars*, labourers, names of building companies, construction sites etc. Apart from this, all personal identifiers have been removed from the data collected. I reflected on the field to identify patterns and themes and produced thematic field notes, which I analysed for examining class formation. I followed the logic as shown below.

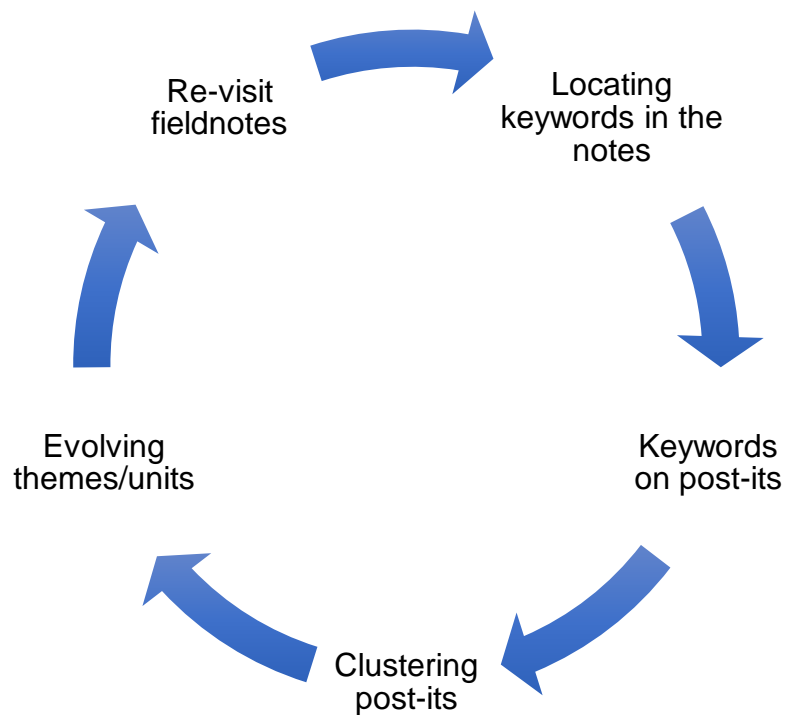


Figure 3.4: Iterative logic of identifying, selecting and eliminating themes for analysis

For instance, themes or keywords produced in the first iteration of critical reflection of field notes, informed by theory, were clustered around advance, *khuraki*, wages,

thekedari, mobilisation of labour, labour and the *thekedar*, labour and the village, labour in the city, labour and *thekedari* etc.

The second effect of context demands an analysis of the interaction with the individual not isolated from social situations, i.e. the extension of observations over space and time. All my observations gathered from two different construction sites over five months presented the production and reproduction of the lived experience of exploitation of Bihari migrant labourers working in building construction. In my analysis, I tried to locate the everyday situations and observations at the level of social processes, in this case, the organisation of exploitation in the context of large-scale building construction. This is where I examined the exploitation of Bihari migrant labourers under the *thekedari* system. In visiting existing literature on the exploitation of migrant labourers in building construction, tea plantations, garment industry etc. and specifically that of Bihari migrants in the case of India, I was able to formulate and analyse how exploitation is organised and reproduced through the *thekedari* system in large-scale building construction in India. This enabled me to revisit the thematic field notes to aggregate and refine the themes produced earlier in the first iteration of reflection to examine the organisation of exploitation.

The third effect of context indicates that interviews cannot be isolated from external social, political and economic forces. Instead, they need to be extended from process to forces, in this case, exploitation in building construction embedded within the historical and contemporary processes of capital accumulation. By revisiting relevant literature, I drafted theoretically informed field notes in the third iteration of critical reflection, which provided general guidance to explain class formation.

The final effect, i.e. situation effect, regards theory as emerging not only in a dialogue between participant and observer but also among observers now viewed as participants in a scientific community. This is where I brought the theoretically informed field notes into conversation with literature on class formation, eliminating some of the data that was not useful as evidence. This iteration led me to formulate the architecture of surplus extraction in large-scale building construction as the theoretical framework and the role of the *thekedari* system as the political apparatus of production in configuring class relations. While the transition from one extension to the other, as

described above, appears to be chronological, each extension of dialogue is in constant conversation with the other till the time theory is reconstructed.

However, all four extensions mentioned above were limited by the *power* effects between me and the research participants, i.e. *thekedars*, labourers, *munshi*, security guards at construction sites etc. (Burawoy 1991, 1998). For instance, in my daily visits to construction worksites and labour camps, I faced the domination of the security guard in commanding my routines of visiting or not visiting the site or the labour camp. At the same time, my frequent, if not constant, presence at construction sites and labour camps during different times of the working day and on Sundays was interrogated. My absence from the worksite and labour camp was also questioned to enquire about the reasons for not visiting the site. Moreover, my visits to the construction sites were seen as a 'time pass', sometimes belittling the purpose of the research. A few labourers made small demands for money as well.

By intervening in the lives of Bihari migrant labourers, as much as my positionality enabled the generation of evidence, it also shaped the everyday situation and observations. This was visible in the special arrangements labourers made for me to eat food in the labour camp, providing me uninterrupted access to the sites and camp etc. My presence in the field also set some expectations of writing and publishing about the lives of Bihari migrant labourers in building construction. For instance, the security guard at the Rishabh site constantly checked if I had finished writing my book.

In cautiously unpacking the *thekedari* system through which *thekedars* secure surplus, I experienced moments when my questions to the *thekedars* concerning labour exploitation were not answered, ignored, justified or otherwise challenged. For instance, *thekedars* justified that doing *thekedari* was their 'business' through which they earned a lot of money and that labourers would be unable to work at the sites if not under *thekedari*. In other cases, they denied exploitation by framing it through relations of reciprocity and trust. In these ways, the effects of power limited the four extensions.

Burawoy (1998) further indicates that reflexive science, by reflecting on dialogue and intersubjectivity, seeks to reduce, if not eliminate, the effects of power in the production of knowledge. One way to achieve this is by talking and listening to research

participants, coming out of preconceived ideas (Breman 2010), and remaining critically engaged in constant dialogue with existing theory (Burawoy 1991). However, I agree with Burawoy (1991, p44) that science exists in a state of continual revision.

3.5 Conclusion

In my research, I located my findings on how exploitation is organised under building construction situated within the social forces of capitalism in India. However, treating the social forces as external and natural could appear deterministic as these forces are subject to change, such as the reorganisation of production relations during the Covid-19 lockdown (De Neve *et al.* 2023; Maskara 2023).

By examining production relations in the building construction industry, I explained the specific conditions and mechanisms of class formation through the production and reproduction of the lived experience of exploitation of Bihari migrant labourers. My research aimed not to generalise the evidence gathered to 'discover' theory but to extend and refine the existing theory. Using ethnographic techniques to 'extend out' from the case of Bihari migrant labourers working in building construction, the research emphasised dialogue with theory at each stage of the research process. By using principles of reflexive science, the research has theoretically extended and refined the study of class formation.

Chapter 4: Entering a Construction Work Contract: A *Thekedar's* Prospects of Accumulation

In enabling and reproducing the architecture of surplus extraction in the case of large-scale building construction, the *thekedari* system co-constitutes the organisation and reproduction of the relations of the labour process. How does the *thekedari* system co-constitute the organisation and reproduction of the relations of the labour process in large-scale building construction? I explore this question empirically in this and subsequent chapters. This is done by examining how the *thekedari* system empirically organises and reinforces relations *of* production and relations *in* production in configuring class relations. In this chapter, I explore the question - How are relations *of* production organised through the *thekedari* system? How do *thekedars* and builders enter into a sub-contracting relationship? How does the sub-contracting relation shape the *thekedari* system in producing politics?

Answering these questions is the central aim of this chapter, as it outlines the specifics of how the sub-contracting relation is organised in building construction work and how it enables capital accumulation. It is known that the building construction sector in India is embedded in sub-contracting different stages of construction work to *thekedars* (Lerche *et al.* 2017, Prasad-Aleyamma 2017, Srivastava and Sutradhar 2016). However, what is unknown is how *thekedars* enter into a sub-contracting relationship to enable their prospects for accumulation. In early accounts of labour migration and within the Indian labour history, the role of *thekedars* has primarily been seen as an intermediary for enabling the mobilisation and recruitment of labour (Breman 1996, Roy 2008). Further, in enabling the organisation of relations *of* production, the literature identifies *thekedars* as exploitative (Breman 1996, 2010) and positioned ambiguously between labour and workplace managers (De Neve 2001, De Neve 2014, Guerin *et al.* 2009, Picherit 2018a, Raj and Axelby 2019). How does this positioning of *thekedars* as exploitative yet ambiguous shape the political apparatus of production? How do a *thekedar's* prospects of accumulation under the sub-contracting relation orient the *thekedari* system as the political apparatus of production? The chapter aims to address these gaps in the existing literature by examining the organisation of relations *of* production through the *thekedari* system.

The *thekedari* system comprises the relations of production, which enable the pumping out of surplus at construction worksites through the mobilisation, realisation and renewal of labour-power. I argue that the relations of production, i.e., relations that enable the extraction of surplus, are shaped by collaboration and negotiation between *thekedars* and builders. This takes place by *thekedars* finding construction work at 'appropriate' construction sites under specific conditions of production and reproduction, which enable the realisation and renewal of labour-power. However, the *thekedars'* prospects of capital accumulation in the *thekedari* system are shaped by their initial capital, knowledge, skills and ability to mobilise specific forms of labour-power to work in building construction. Further, the conditions of production and reproduction shaped by the builders determine how worksites become 'appropriate' for *thekedars* to accumulate a surplus. In this way, *thekedars* and builders enter into a sub-contracting relationship in building construction. Following this, the politics of the work order in defining the terms and conditions of construction work enables the 'joint enterprise' of capital accumulation (Mezzadri 2016c). It conceals the specifics of exploitation by making selective use of state legislation. Through these mechanisms, the sub-contracting relation shapes the balance of power between *thekedars* and builders. Further, the specific conditions of production and reproduction at 'appropriate' worksites shape the exercise of control in everyday construction work in securing, obscuring and legitimising surplus. In this way, the sub-contracting relation shapes the *thekedari* system as the political apparatus of production.

Drawing from fieldwork data gathered by visiting different building construction sites and interviewing *thekedars* and labourers² in Hyderabad in India, the chapter focuses on how *thekedars* and builders enter into a sub-contracting relationship in building construction. Such processes take place *before* the organisation of everyday construction work. The chapter explains how *thekedars* secure construction contracts from builders under specific production and reproduction conditions to enable their

² Interviewing builders would have also been helpful; however, as mentioned in the methodology chapter, it is not risk-free from researching labour issues. I tried not to directly face the builders even though construction site managers often saw me as a friend of some *thekedar* on the site who was probably learning how to enter *thekedari*.

accumulation prospects. Following the presentation of the empirical data and its links with relevant literature, the chapter discusses the organisation of the sub-contracting relation under the *thekedari* system. In the discussion, the chapter highlights key contributions to literature and indicates how class relations are configured. The chapter concludes by reiterating the argument and providing directions for the subsequent chapter. While this chapter aims at the sub-contracting relation, the next chapter emphasises the mobilisation of migrant labourers, in this case, Bihari migrants, to work in building construction. In doing so, it complements this chapter in discussing the formation of the *thekedari* system as the political apparatus of production.

4.1 From sub-contracting to the *thekedari* system: Shaping the politics of production

Sub-contracting organises the labour process in building construction. Under the practice of *thekedari*, the different stages of construction work comprising excavation and preparation of the structure, i.e., the first stage, the actual building of the structure, i.e. the second stage and installation of services such as electricity, plumbing, landscaping etc., i.e. the final stage at a construction site are subcontracted to multiple *thekedars* or construction firms in enabling capital accumulation (Van der Loop 1992, Lerche *et al.* 2017, Srivastava and Sutradhar 2016).

In terms of the sequence of the actual building construction, reinforcement steel work and shuttering is used first for the structure and elevation (i.e. vertical pillars as columns and horizontal pillars as beams) of the building. The construction of columns indicates elevation while the construction of beams indicates each elevation floor. This is followed by constructing each floor through concrete work after which masonry work, i.e., bricklaying and plastering, can occur. The actual building of the structure includes

civil construction work such as reinforcement steelwork or bar-bending³, shuttering work⁴ and masonry⁵, concrete work⁶ (Van der Loop 1992).

| Order of work | Sequence of organisation of construction work for a residential villa/apartment/office complex | Method |
|--|--|--|
| Initial stage (Initial layout for structure & elevation) | Earthwork & excavation (one time) | Machine and labour |
| Second stage: Actual building structure (recurring) Sequential for each villa or each floor in case of a multi-storey building | Reinforcement of steelwork and shuttering for structure and elevation | Labour intensive spread over months |
| | Concrete works for column, slab, and beam for structure and elevation | Mostly machine but operated by labourers |
| | Bricklaying & Plastering (repeated for each villa/floor) | Labour intensive spread over months |
| Final stage | Electrical, Plumbing (repeated for each villa/floor) | |
| | Granite works, waterproofing, painting (repeated for each villa/floor) | |
| | Landscaping | |

Table 4.1: Organisation of the sequence of stages of construction

At large construction sites, around 500-2000 migrant labourers from Bihar, Jharkhand, UP, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, West Bengal etc., work through their *thekedars* for most of the critical stages in civil construction work, viz. masonry and concrete work, reinforcement steelwork, shuttering work (Lerche *et al.* 2017, Srivastava and Jha 2016). At sites relatively smaller, where up to 100 labourers work, *thekedars* source

³ Reinforcement steelwork or bar-bending is used to construct pillars by using steel bars bent to reinforce the structure of the building.

⁴ Shuttering work requires the setting up the wooden planks or steel plates that provide a mould for the concrete and support it until its set. Shuttering happens only after bar-bending or reinforcement steel work but before concrete works can be undertaken.

⁵ Masonry in building construction comprises brick layering and plastering using brick, cement, sand and water to make walls.

⁶ Concrete work is largely referred to constructing the floors in a building by placing a hardened mixture of cement and water (prepared either manually or by concrete mixing machines) as rectangular slabs.

labourers from the daily labour stands i.e. *nakas* or *addas* in the city (ibid). Construction sites which operate over a relatively longer period of time rely on migrant labour, rather than local labour (Wetlesen 2016, Pattenden 2016b, 2018).

In large-scale building construction, the builder, i.e. the construction contractor or company often addressed as the principal contractor, is situated in a chain of sub-contracting arrangements for building construction work. The surplus builders accumulate depends on the client and the control exercised by builders over the sub-contracting process further down the hierarchy wherein each stage of building construction is contracted to different *thekedars* or construction firms. My findings indicate that *thekedars* not only enable the organisation of building construction work but also secure surplus in the production process (Buckley 2014, Chandavarkar 2008, De Neve 2001, 2014; Mody 1996, Prasad-Aleyamma 2017, Shivakumar, Sheng and Weber 1991; Srivastava and Jha 2016). Further, a *thekedar* can undertake one or more than one construction contracts at the same or different construction worksites.

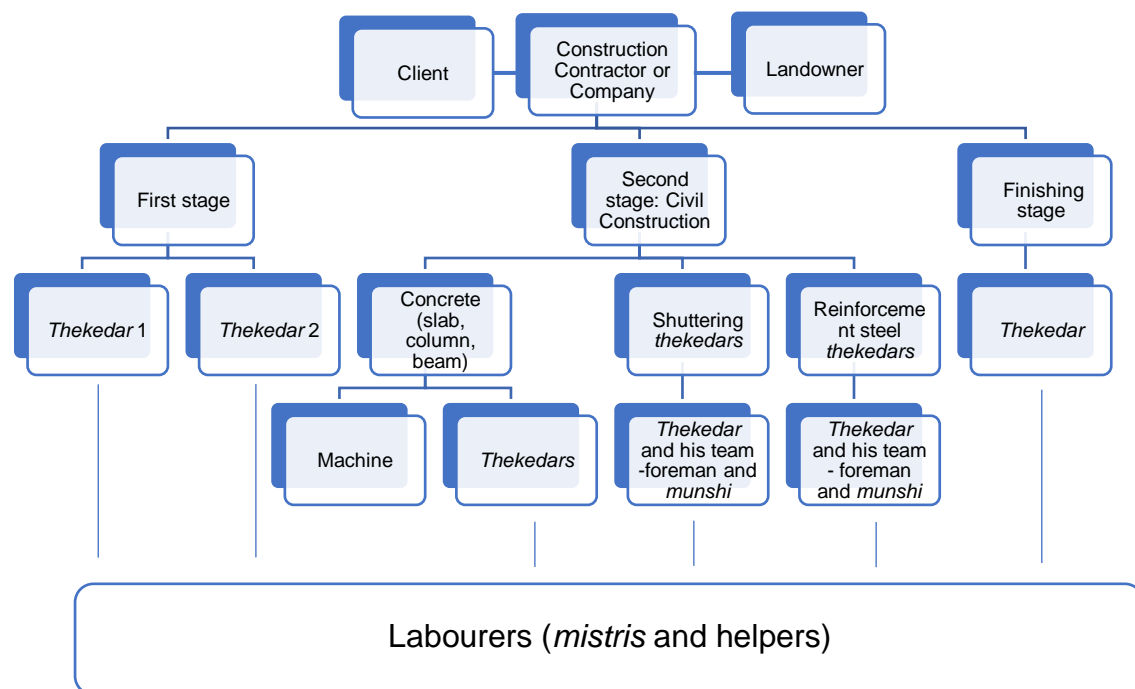


Figure 4.1: Sub-contracting in building construction (Source: Lerche et al. (2017))

Following the figure above, each *thekedar* usually employs a foreman and a *munshi* (i.e. an accountant) on a monthly salary who are paid salaries at the end of each month. While the foreman's primary role is to ensure the completion of tasks, the role of the *munshi* is to raise payment invoices to builders for a *thekedar's* share in the surplus. Depending on the nature of construction contract undertaken by *thekedars*, it may happen that roles of a foreman and *munshi* are played by the same individual. In this way, the foreman and *munshi* shape the organisation of the production process under the *thekedari* system and remain central in enabling a *thekedar's* share in surplus generated in building construction. Labourers at construction sites comprised of different classes of labour such as *mistris* who were identified as skilled labourers and helpers as semi-skilled or unskilled labourers who were also addressed colloquially as '*lebar*' in my interactions with *thekedars*, *mistris*, foreman, *munshi* and helpers (Sargent 2018). Further, a *thekedar* accesses building construction work when builders know more about their *mistris*, foreman and *munshi*. In this sense, a *thekedar's* labour network, consisting of different classes of labour such as foreman, *munshi*, *mistri* and helpers remain central to a *thekedar's* prospects of surplus accumulation. In subsequent chapters, I will shed more light on the roles of foreman and *munshi*, apart from *mistris* in exercising control over labour (See section 5.2.1) and that of *mistri*-helper relationship in the organisation of construction work (See section 6.1.1 onwards).

Given the sequence of organisation of construction work and hierarchy of subcontracting from builders to *thekedars*, how do *thekedars* shape their prospects for accumulation in entering into a sub-contracting relationship with builders in large-scale building construction? The following sections aim to answer this question.

4.1.1 Becoming a *thekedar*, accumulating surplus: Capital, construction work and labour contracting network

To understand how a *thekedar* can accumulate capital in building construction, it is essential to understand how one becomes a *thekedar*. How do *thekedars* use social relations in shaping their prospects of accumulation in building construction?

Mansur *ji*⁷(name changed), a *thekedar* from Bihar, came to Hyderabad in 1991 while working in metal fabrication. But from 2004 onwards, he started taking civil contracts for building construction. When asked how he got into contracting, he said it's a generational work: '*khaandani kaam hai.*' When Mansur's family came to Hyderabad, there were only three to four big construction companies. He stressed that the first cement construction started in Durg in Central India, where his relatives' received contracts for construction work.⁸

Alam *ji* (name changed), another *thekedar* from Bihar, has been in Hyderabad since 2004. He was learning the work of granite as a hand technician until 2006. After 2006, he worked as a *kaarigar* i.e. a skilled labourer. Earlier, until 2009, he used to get construction work on a petty contract basis⁹ and then he started working as a contractor with his brother and brother-in-law and got some ideas from his friends.

Sanjay *ji* (name changed) worked as a foreman for six to seven years in a reputed construction firm in Bangalore since 2004. He was working on a salary of ₹10,000/month, which rose to ₹30,000/month. He studied in a government school in his village. He then fled to Jammu and Kashmir, where he learnt the job. He became a contractor last year and thought of starting *thekedari*.

I asked Pramod *ji* (name changed) how he became a *thekedar*. Pramod Paswan was a teacher in his village between 1997-2011. He shared about his history of health issues that he was facing, due to which he stopped teaching. He decided to come to the city through his village connections and illiterate labourers coming to Hyderabad. He has sites running in two different areas of Hyderabad. He has taken the contract for brickwork and plastering. [Pramod *ji* was hesitant to disclose any further information on how he became a *thekedar*]

One *thekedar* in the village sold his DJ (disco jockey) to start work at a construction site by mobilising a few labourers from the village. In the last five years, the system of *thekedari* has expanded in his village in Gaya district of

⁷Ji is used as a sign of respect, mostly in the East Indian states of Bihar and Jharkhand

⁸Parry (2003, 2014) writes about the construction industry in Durg, where he mentions Bihari Muslims as masons. Coincidentally, Mansur *ji* knew a lot of *thekedars* who worked in the steel town in the 1990s.

⁹ A petty contract is another level of sub-contracting when the job given to a *thekedar* is further sub-contracted to a skilled labourer.

Bihar. Slowly *thekedars* in the village started working in the city in big construction companies. I was told that Domri village is the hub for *thekedars* and that they have earned a lot through *thekedari* having 10 acres of land but only five mouths to feed in the family: '*dus bigha zameen hai, paanch vyakti hai, kitna khaenge, baaki toh bechenge na.*' Even though the number of *thekedars* in Domri village has reduced from 45-46 to around 30, the village still serves as the hub for *thekedari* in construction.

My empirical findings indicate that *thekedars* could be former labourers, foremen or *munshi* in building construction or those who have worked in salaried jobs in the construction industry and climbed up the ladder by saving or investing their surplus into building construction (Mezzadri 2016b, Picherit 2009). During my interviews, I gathered that a large number of *thekedars* from Bihar in building construction belong to the land-owning (dominant) caste, such as *Rajputs, Zamindars, Bhumihars*, upper-caste Muslims etc., who have historically invested their surplus from agriculture into building construction to do *thekedari* (De Neve 1999, Mezzadri 2016b, Rogaly 2003, Wilson 1999). At the same time, a few labour migrants from the upper middle caste (also known as peasant caste), such as *Yadavs, Kurmi* or those from the *baniya* (business) caste, have also become *thekedars* by investing capital and accumulating surplus. However, I also came across *thekedars* from lower castes who started *thekedari* as an alternative with initial capital from their savings. In some cases, as indicated above, Dalit castes, such as *Paswan*, have switched from previous occupations to accumulating capital in building construction (Prakash 2009, 2012). This indicates that *thekedars* are from different castes (Chandavarkar 1994, Mezzadri 2016b, Picherit 2009). For some *thekedars*, entering the construction industry is easy, but it may differ for others. Why is it the case? How does it enable *thekedars* to accumulate?

On asking what it takes to become a *thekedar* or do *thekedari*, Alam ji, highlighted that *hunar* (skill), *pehchaan* (contact) and *punji* (capital) – all of them matter. He added that specific to the kind of work in construction-bricklaying, plastering, granite, shuttering, steel etc. one needs to have proper knowledge and information about the market to find new work.

“Jis line mein hai uska top class ka hunar hona chahiy, market mein jo kaam ho raha uski jaankaari ho. Link hona jaruri hai kaam lene ke liye, pehchaan jaruri hai. Kaam lene ke liye link jaruri hai. Road pe jakar

khade hone se kaam nahi milta, koi kaisa hai nahi hai uska pata kaise chalega.”

Alam *ji* commented that it takes around three to four years to become a *thekedar*, but if someone is lucky, even in six months or one year, it is possible to become one.

Posing the question of who could become a *thekedar*, a shopkeeper in the village market whose shop I frequented indicated that one needs to have money to start *thekedari* and to get hold of at least two to four labourers to build trust, after which labourers will come running to the *thekedar*: ‘*ek baar vishwas ho jaega phir toh aadmi daur jaega.*’ In a brief conversation with a *thekedar* from Madhya Pradesh involved in shuttering work at a large construction site, I gathered *thekedars* need knowledge to nurture labourers: ‘*labour ko kaise paalna hai iske liye dimaag chahi.*’

Speaking on the system of *thekedari* with one of the labourers from Bihar, Udit (name changed), working for Mansur *ji*, related it to the functioning of a grocery store wherein three different kinds of capital are maintained- one for providing cash in advance of the work to the labourers, second for *khuraki* which is provided for labourers’ weekly subsistence and the third for emergency or contingency purposes in case companies delay the payments or otherwise do not pay the labourers.

“Sir, ye jo thekedar line ka kaam hota hain, ye kirana ke dukaan jaisa hai. Teen punji rakhta hai thekedar. Ek punji jo mistri aur helper ko pehle de deta hai advance bol ke, doosra punji rakhta hai khuraki jo ki hafte hafte milta hai aur teesra punji rakhta hai emergency ki agar company paisa nahin diya toh thekedar ko bharna hota hai.”

Mansur *ji* suggested that without a buffer amount of ₹2-5 lakh, one cannot sustain in *thekedari* by relying on the builder's payments. Apart from capital, he highlighted the significance of knowledge not just about the work but also about allotting work to labourers.

“Jab tak ke liye paisa nahi rakh sakte tab thekedari nahi kar sakte. Company dega toh main kar loonga aisa nahi hai. Apna paisa hai tabhi karo, jab company dega tab dega.... (...) Ye contractor line mein ek cheez pata hona chahiye... knowledge rakhna padta...target rakhna padta ki kisse kaun kaam ho sakta. Iska kaam usko bol diye toh nahi karega. Isliye ye pehle apne ko pata hona chahiye. Jo kaam jise nahi aata use wo kaam bataye toh nahi karega na wo. Wahi kaam diya jata hai jo ho sakta.”

The above excerpts indicate the significance of knowledge/information about finding construction work, using contacts (*jan pehchaan*) in building a contracting network to access work, and skills of knowing construction work in becoming a *thekedar* in building construction (Bhukuth 2006, Breman 1978, De Neve 2001, Sargent 2019). Beyond information of available construction work, contracting network and skill of doing construction work, a *thekedar* requires an initial outlay of capital composed of advance, *khuraki* and emergency funds. Mansur *ji* indicates that initial or reserve capital could lie between ₹2-5 lakh, which resonates with Prakash's (2009, p221) work in the case of labour contractors in the brick kiln industry. For most *thekedars* who belong to the upper caste or those with their roots in families practising *thekedari* over a while, having access to an initial capital is relatively easier than *thekedars* who move up the ladder to become one. Though some *thekedars* sometimes mobilise an initial capital through the generational patterns of accumulation, it is not necessary that a *thekedar* might always have this 'reserve capital'. However, the capacity of a *thekedar* to mobilise capital is crucial (Guerin *et al.* 2009, p247). For instance, under conditions of the pandemic, some *thekedars* had to raise capital through borrowing/credit from local moneylenders in the market, in fact, from Self-Help groups in the villages on interest rates of only 1%.

The outlay of capital is central to mobilising and retaining a 'trusted' network of labourers in continuing to accumulate (Mezzadri 2016b). The knowledge of mobilising and nurturing 'trusted' labourers and information on availability of construction work sourced through contracting networks are crucial for a *thekedar* to start and continue *thekedari* (Mosse, Gupta and Shah 2005; Picherit 2009). The contracting networks of a *thekedar* comprise building site engineers, foreman, *munshi* etc. which enables them to access construction work contracts. As indicated earlier, a *thekedar* accesses building construction work when builders know more about their *mistris*, foreman and *munshi* – who can meet work targets, which is why they are important for a *thekedar's* prospects of accumulation. Picherit (2018b, p9) indicates that while labour intermediaries use their contracting network with politicians to access construction contracts, it may not yield expected returns to *thekedars*. In my fieldwork, although *thekedars* used their political connections back in their villages in Bihar, it was limited to accessing legal documents for undertaking construction contracts in the city (see

Section 4.1.3). However, I did not come across *thekedars* using political connections in the city of Hyderabad to access construction work contracts. This brings back the emphasis on the crucial role of capital, knowledge of available construction work and network in accessing construction contracts for a *thekedar* to be able to accumulate surplus. Moreover, the skills and the know-how of organising everyday construction work defines the ability of a *thekedar* to accumulate surplus.

Explaining the chain system of *thekedari* to me, Maksood Ali (name changed), one of the *thekedars* from West Bengal, indicated that those who own the plot of land sell it to the client or give it on lease and the client, in turn, hands this over to Project management company who further hand it over to *thekedars* for different stages of construction work. After our conversation for about an hour, he disclosed his name and said nobody else would give me more detailed information on *thekedari* than he did. [In my interviews with different *thekedars*, as in this one, I was always seen as a potential *thekedar*; as a result, some *thekedars* hesitated to disclose information about doing *thekedari*.]

The above excerpt indicates that a *thekedar's* prospect for accumulation is also shaped by his ability to 'gatekeep' information from other potential or actual *thekedars* within the *thekedari* system (Pattenden 2011). The *thekedars* I encountered during my fieldwork have been into building construction (and sometimes with the same building firm) for at least five years and managing multiple worksites in the same or different cities. Migrant labourers address these *thekedars* as *bada* (big) *thekedars* who have been in the building construction trade for a long time and have established their contracting networks.

Sonu *mistri* (name changed) met me as I spoke with other labourers. He shared his *thekedar's* monthly earnings and iterated that his *thekedar* does nothing in the village. Their main *thekedar*, Ram Singh (name changed), who is from their village and whom they call *bada* (big) *thekedar*, had one foreman working under him who later became a *thekedar*. Sonu commented that *thekedars* from his village who belonged to the same family had become millionaires, though they had long been *Zamindars*.

Regarding material conditions, big (*bada*) *thekedars* hold significant surplus capital or deploy large numbers of labourers in contrast to small (*chota*) *thekedars* who hold relatively little capital or have a relatively lesser number of labourers. Moreover, most

big *thekedars* own property and invest different portions of their money, for instance, in new construction site contracts, sponsoring cricket matches, building temples, buying land etc in their villages, for exercising and sustaining their wider class-based dominance (Prakash 2009, p208). This indicates the extent of power *thekedars* can exercise in securing their prospects for accumulation.

The prospects of accumulation for *thekedars* depend on their initial outlay of capital drawn from their caste positions, knowledge of available construction work and experience of working as a *thekedar*, contracting network and *thekedar's* ability to exercise class-based dominance in reproducing their labour networks. How does mobilising migrant labour enable a *thekedar's* labour network and his prospect for accumulation?

4.1.1a Preferring migrant labour over *naka* labourers

In preferring migrant labourers over *naka* labourers hired from the labour stands in the city to work at large construction sites, builders externalise the costs of reproduction resulting in 'super exploitation' of migrant labourers (Burawoy 1976, Meillassoux 1981, Lerche and Shah 2018, Shah *et al.* 2017). Further, migrant labourers belong to regions which are 'backward' and face 'internal colonialism' due to unequal regional development (Carswell *et al.* 2022, Shah and Lerche 2020). The *thekedari* system incorporates cheap labour originating from different regions within India who can meet the time-bound delivery of building construction. In my visits to different construction sites in Hyderabad, I found migrant labourers from Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, Chhattisgarh etc.

Building construction firms in the city of Hyderabad gradually replaced local labourers hired from daily labour *nakas* with migrant labourers, mainly from Bihar, UP and Jharkhand, but also from Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, Chhattisgarh etc., sourced and mobilised by *thekedars* (Lerche *et al.* 2017; Shivakumar, Sheng and Weber 1991; Srivastava and Jha 2016). In a meeting with trade union members, I asked about the hiring practices of migrant labourers by the construction builders.

Citing an example of a big construction site of a well-known builder [Rishabh Builders and Developers worksite, my fieldwork site], union members shared

that once a contractor had 70 local labourers working at the site. He indicated that when the local labourers stopped the construction work, builders mobilised migrant labourers from Bihar, UP, Jharkhand etc., to work at the site. He added that for once, they allowed labourers from Bihar to work at the site, and after a year, all the local labourers from Andhra Pradesh and Telangana were wiped out. The builder gave construction contracts at reduced wage rates to labourers from Bihar, who then captured the site. He added that local labourers have been getting only petty construction jobs for five years. However, the big construction works are handed over to those from Bihar.

“Humne unko kaam karne ko diya toh ek saal ke baad saare Telangana ya Andhra ke labour bache hi nahi, sirf Bihari labour... Panch saal pehle kam aaye labour...aaj poora site capture kar liye ye Bihar waalon ne...builder bolte ye labour das rupaye mein kar rhe tum bhi karo...local labourer ko chota mota kaam milta, bada bada kaam Bihar waale karte.”

The union members further commented that the big builders and even small plot owners having small sites also want to build their houses at lower prices and hence look for cheap labour, especially those from Bihar.

A trade union member praising *mistris* from Andhra Pradesh commented that in construction work, Bihar and UP labourers do not know about the quality of work and its standards and aim at finishing the job as fast as possible given the demands of large-scale building construction, unlike the slow rate of work by local *mistris*.

“.... Kaam mein kuch bhi fark nahi rehta, kaam mein UP Bihar waalon ka khokla kaam hai, local log ka kaam standard hai. Bihar waale direct sukha maal daal ke maal daal dete hain phir buildings mein crack aata hai. Humne unko samjhaya bhi kaise kaam ka standard hota toh wo bolte ki unko kaam jaldi hona, idhar ke style se kiya toh kaam slow hota, aadmi ko bhi takleef hota, pehle cement, phir kaala maal phir sukha maal...pani acha mila ke maarte toh acha rehta, Andhra mistris sabse badhiya hai..”

While large scale building construction sites organise construction work by mobilising migrant labour from different regions of India, what matters to builders is cheap labour rather than the origins of labourers and their preference for labourers who can finish work faster. As indicated, migrant labourers from Bihar, UP and Jharkhand are preferred as cheap, docile and skilled labourers over the local or intra-state migrant

workers in large-scale construction industry (Mosse, Gupta and Shah 2005, Pattenden 2018, Srivastava and Jha 2016), to meet the time-bound delivery of large-scale building construction. Accordingly, to meet the targets of sub-contracted work, *thekedars* exercise caution in choosing migrant labourers for enabling their share in the surplus. At big construction sites, *thekedars* who prefer labourers from daily labour *nakas* are not considered experienced and hence are seen as relatively 'new' to the practice of *thekedari*. *Thekedars* indicate that usually *naka* workers are hired for loading/unloading building materials such as brick, sand, cement etc. or landscaping work, i.e. beautifying the construction area with trees etc., but not in the actual building of the structure such as concrete work, shuttering, reinforcement, masonry etc, dominated by migrant labourers.

Mansur *ji* was telling Pandey *ji*, a relatively new *thekedar*, not to get workers from labour *nakas* or *addas*, come what may; otherwise, he would be unable to do *thekedari*. He also reminded Pandey *ji* to avoid mobilising labourers from the *naka* as they follow their time schedules of a working day starting at 10 am. If one argues, they will get a few workers to protest at the site.

“Local lebar idhar site par nahi aate hain. Aaram se 10 baje aayega, time se pehle chala jaega. Jyada bole toh 2-4 aadmi ko lekar aayega basti se. jisko khaane ko nahi hai who bhi bolega- jeene ko aaye yahan humare upar rubab mat dikhao.”

I started talking with a friend of Shahid *ji* (Mansur *ji*'s brother), a *thekedar* from Hyderabad. On asking about hiring workers who find work through labour *nakas*, Prasanna commented that *naka*-based labourers are useless, do not know how to work and will decide if they want to work. He pointed out that he had given *theka* to Shahid, so it was up to Shahid to pay them as he wanted. Prasanna further commented that for him, it does not matter from where the labourers come, be it from Bihar or UP or any other place. But he did not prefer *naka* workers, as they demand more wages and do not understand the work well.

The *thekedars* claim that the relatively lower skills of *naka* workers, control exercised by the workers in demanding relatively higher wage rates etc., are considered detrimental to the completion of large-scale building construction sites. Following this, I argue that *naka*-based labourers threaten the accumulation prospects of *thekedars* at large-scale construction sites.

This indicates that specific forms of labour-power enable the architecture of surplus extraction in building construction (Burawoy 1976, Ferguson and McNally 2015, Hall 1986). While large-scale building construction sites rely on migrant labour from different regions of India as against *naka*-based labourers, for *thekedars*, it matters how they select their labourers in order to enhance their share of surplus. In mobilising migrant labour, it is not only the *thekedar* but the foreman and *munshi* who participate in the mobilisation of labour (Prasad-Aleyamma 2009). The ability of *thekedars* to mobilise migrant labourers from different regions in East and Central India to work in building construction shapes their prospects of accumulation. Further, *naka*-based workers diminish the ability of *thekedars* to exercise their control over the organisation of everyday construction work. In the next chapter, I elaborate more on the mobilisation of labourers and *thekedar's* ability to reproduce labour networks in enabling and reinforcing surplus extraction.

As indicated, mobilising migrant labourers is crucial for *thekedari* and surplus accumulation by *thekedars*. However, a *thekedars'* ability to secure construction work is enabled or constrained by the conditions of production and reproduction of labour as organised by builders (De Neve 2014, Mezzadri 2016c).

4.1.2 Securing surplus via '*appropriate*' worksite: Conditions of *production* and *reproduction*

By choosing and negotiating to enter into a sub-contracting relationship with builders at an 'appropriate' construction worksite, *thekedars'* enable their accumulation prospects. The site is deemed 'appropriate' for the *thekedar* to accumulate surplus negotiating for specific production conditions. It is also 'appropriate' in enabling the daily reproduction of labour. How does a site become 'appropriate' for *thekedars* to secure surplus?

The *thekedars'* planning for finding new worksites is driven by the possible market price that a potential building construction project would fetch, the sequence in which the builders organise construction work, the daily wage rates and the possibility for labourers to work overtime. Such projects enhance the *thekedar's* potential of securing a greater proportion of surplus.

Mansur *ji*, a *thekedar* for masonry work at Rishabh Builders construction site, was trying to find work in other areas in the city where most construction was happening. In finding new work, he stressed the importance of the area and plan of the building under construction based on which payments are decided, as smaller flats are usually much more profitable than more extensive flats.

“Area aur plan dekhna padta...chote hai flats ya bade flats hai...bade flats ka rate kam milta hai but project site 1 (name changed) ka bada flat ka project hai lekin rate acha mil raha...”

He then explained the possibility of getting higher payments by finding work in relatively newer construction projects run by the same building contracting firm nearby. He further commented that he looks forward to working in newer construction ventures, or else he will have to work at lesser rates and pay less daily wages to the labourers. He added that the daily wages of labourers also increase from one project to the other; hence, working at older rates might be difficult for his labourers.

“Purana rate mein kaise karenge...labour ka bhi rate badh jata hai...har project ka rate different rehta hai.”

Mansur *ji* further pointed out that villa projects are good for customers but not for *thekedars*. In the villa projects, separate similar buildings are constructed, whereas, in multistorey apartments, the construction of one building with several floors takes place. In the actual building of the structure, reinforcement steelwork and shuttering are used for structure and elevation (i.e. vertical pillars as columns and horizontal pillars as beams), followed by building each floor through concrete work, after which masonry work can occur. He was contracted for masonry work in 14 villas, and the 66 villas were subcontracted to other *thekedars*. Explaining the logic, he pointed out that instead of getting concrete work done sequentially for each villa, the builder decided to pour concrete (a mixture of cement and water) via concrete pouring machines for all 80 villas. To fulfil the builders' target, a *thekedar* must gather the correct number of labourers to complete the bricklaying and plastering for the contracted number of villas. On the other hand, for vertical high-rise apartments, the same group of labourers can perform brickwork and plastering since each floor is constructed in a sequence, unlike in parallel, in the case of a villa.

During my conversation with Mohan *thekedar*, I asked him if it was easy to find a new worksite. He shared that a member of a contracting company came looking for workers and approached him at the site. However, he calculated that he would

not be able to make a good profit on such a site if the company did not permit overtime. Labourers who come from their villages are looking for overtime to be able to earn. He commented that even though the company agreed to offer overtime (OT) to his labourers, unlike the usual eight hour/day wages, he received ₹150 per labourer less than what was offered at another site.

“Wo site mein sirf aath ghante ka kaam de raha tha, humko bara ghanta wala kaam chahiy tha. Kyunki labour gaon se bahar aakar agar OT nahi karega toh koi fayda nahi. Wo bola ki OT kar dega lekin humko ₹150 kam de raha tha per labour isiliye kaam nahi liye.”

The above excerpts indicate that the potential for a higher profit margin for a *thekedar* is driven by planning based on the market and the organisation of construction work. Although the same kind of worksite could fetch a higher profit margin for *thekedars* who have been into shuttering work, it may not yield a good return for a *thekedar* who is into masonry work. Further, the choice of the site also depends on the daily wage rates offered at the site by the builders, which enable *thekedars* to decide the wage rates for labourers. The conditions of production, the organisation of building construction work by builders, the daily wage rates and the legitimization of overtime for migrant labourers enable *thekedars* to secure their share of surplus in their search for ‘appropriate’ worksites.

4.1.2a Negotiation for measurement or supply-based construction work

Beyond the type of building projects, i.e. villas or multi-storeyed apartments, the work arrangement under production conditions is also central to a *thekedar*'s accumulation prospects in building construction. Builders often subcontract reinforcement steelwork, bar-bending, shuttering, and masonry on a supply or measurement basis, depending on the sequence of the construction work, to ensure the timely completion of construction projects. Building contracting firms use a mix of piece-rate, time-rate, measure and pay and lumpsum contract arrangements with different *thekedars* in subcontracting. This enables capital accumulation by achieving the goal of time-bound construction delivery (Lerche *et al.* 2017; Shivakumar, Sheng and Weber 1991; Srivastava and Jha 2016; Van der Loop 1992).

In my fieldwork, I found two critical ways builders subcontract the second stage, i.e., building the structure to *thekedars*: piece-rate and time-rate contracts (Khurana 2017).

A piece-rate contract by a builder is based on the measured output of the task *thekedars* deliver, for instance, measurements of the area constructed or the volume of material used. A piece-rate contract is also widely known as measurement-based work. However, a time-rate contract depends on the total number of daily man-hours spent on the site determined by a total headcount of *mistris* and supervisors (both identified as skilled labourers) and helpers (often identified as semi-skilled or unskilled labourers). Following this, a time-rate contract is also known as supply work or supply-based work. The payments by builders to *thekedars* on a piece-rate basis are based on the measurement of the work output delivered by the *thekedars* based on the contract. The payments to *thekedars* on a time-rate basis of work consist of the total number of man-hours worked, which depends on the number of labourers 'supplied' by *thekedars* to work every day on the site.

Though builders subcontract work through different arrangements, they set the daily work targets for the *thekedars*. *Thekedars* earn relatively higher profits in undertaking measurement-based or piece-rate contracts than supply work. However, what is crucial to organising measurement work is the availability of skilled labourers and the provision of building materials, which is, however, controlled by the companies.

Munchun *ji* (name changed), a foreman whose *thekedar* has been contracted to undertake shuttering work on a time-rate basis, looked quite sad and dejected one evening at the tea shop, my usual hangout place opposite the construction site. On asking about the matter, he started sharing that he sent someone to check a new work site of the same company near the airport. He has been searching for new sites. He said that the wages the company was giving would not be enough for a *thekedar* to make profits. The company would give ₹380 per helper, out of which ₹350 would go as wages to the helper. He has too many workers, but no work is available. Some of his workers were roaming here and there and pressurising him as work was unavailable. He shared that the company wanted the *thekedars* to work on a measurement basis. But Munchun mentioned that his *thekedar* would be unable to make profits on a measurement basis.

I wondered why it was the case as most of the *thekedars* with whom I had interacted so far wanted to take work on a measurement basis. Munchun *ji* commented that there is profit in shuttering work on a measurement basis, in which payments to *thekedars* are based on the output measured through the volume of material used for shuttering. However, BSS building company

controls the access to building materials regulating its wastage to check how *thekedars* use the material. Moreover, the responsibility of accessing the material to avoid wastage is put on the labourers. As a result, he loses out labour time of four helpers in fetching just one sheet of plywood from the premises of the construction site as compared to construction sites where building material is stored and located well for access. To add to this, one needs to be conscious about not wasting the material given by the company.

“Pehle company bolega ki haan hum material dega lekin baad mein kahega aare jao na doondh ke lao material kya natak laga ke rakha hai. Site ke andar se lana hota hai. Ek material lane ke liye Chaar helper lag jata hai. Acha, measurement mein material dega jaise ply dega aur bolega ki usko kaatna nahi pura ply lekar aao, usko dhodne mein time chala jaega mera.”

Further, he commented that in shuttering, they profit from plywood as a material that can be cut and easily wasted. But, in most building construction, steel plates are used because their *thekedar* does not prefer to take contracts on a measurement basis. He added that no *thekedar* would succeed on a measurement basis in BSS site as the firm does not have all materials.

Building contracting firms or companies control the timely availability and access to building materials in construction work, such as shuttering, reinforcement steel work, etc. It impacts a *thekedar's* potential to secure surplus on piece rate work. This is because the payments to *thekedars* are linked to the output of work done in a given time. Any delay in the availability of material results in delayed output of work and hence payments. Further, in measurement-based contracts, *thekedars* may lose their profits when building materials, project plans etc, are delayed by the building company. Some *thekedars* may, for these reasons, prefer time-rate-based constructs to secure their share of surplus based on the daily headcount of labourers at the site.

Builders subcontract stages of construction to different *thekedars*. However, they look for *thekedars* (who could be from Bihar) who can accept work at relatively lower rates.

Speaking with a union member on the *thekedari* system in building construction, he gave an example of a labour sub-contractor, Babu (name changed), who had taken some cement work at ₹150/sq. ft on a measurement basis. However, when an engineer told the builder that he could get a contractor for just ₹90/sq. ft, the builder removed Babu, so he went into depression and died. All the big builders

Babu could work for have passed on to *thekedars*, mostly from Bihar. Babu had to stop contracting.

However, a *thekedar's* choice of supply or measurement-based work is not only shaped by the control exercised by builders. It is also determined by the relative ability of *thekedars* to exercise everyday forms of control over the organisation of building construction work for surplus extraction.

Sonu *mistri* from Bihar, works through his *thekedar* from his village in shuttering and bar-bending for a well-known construction firm on a measurement basis. He commented that a *thekedar* has more profits in taking labourers on supply (time-rate) basis as *thekedar* does not need to bother about the work being done. However, he added that in a supply-based contract, a day's work could take four days to complete: '*supply wala mein je kaam ek din mein hote wo 4 din mein karte.*' In taking contracts on a measurement basis, he highlighted that both *thekedar* and labourers earn profits, unlike in supply, wherein only the *thekedar* makes profits. Complementing Sonu *mistri*, other labourers standing at the tea shop near the construction site highlighted no tension in measurement work as their *thekedar* pays them accordingly. However, on a supply basis, their *thekedar* would have to take signatures from different people to process their payments, which is quite challenging.

In another encounter at the drinking water bay of BSS site, I met with a group of labourers from Jharkhand who had come down from the 15th floor of the under-construction building to drink water. On asking them if a *thekedar* would take a contract on measurement of work rather than on the headcount of labourers, one of them responded that a *thekedar* might have problems in undertaking measurement-based work because a helper might earn wages equivalent to three days in just a single working day.

“Thekedar theka par kaam nahi leta hai, square foot mein thekedar ko problem hai kyunki helper ek din mein teen hajri bhi kar sakta isiliye supply mein leta hai, aath ghante mein ₹1200 kama sakta hai.”

He explained that a *thekedar* does not perform measurements but instead focuses on large sites where the number of labourers determines payment present daily.

The above excerpts show that only the *thekedar* profits from working on a supply basis. However, in measurement-based contracts, *thekedars* make profits and labourers can earn higher wages. By working on a supply basis, *thekedars* secure

their share of the surplus in construction work by ascertaining a fixed number of labourers to work for a while. Further, in considering ease of accessing payments, it is indicated that, unlike measurement-based work, *thekedars* sub-contracted on supply-based work need to follow a particular documentation process to receive payments from builders. Primarily, large construction sites are targeted by *thekedars* which subcontract construction work on a supply basis, because of which, *thekedars* can be assured of the availability of work from the builders.

Though both *thekedars* and labourers can make profits in measurement work, *thekedars* exercise their discretion in controlling the possibility for labourers to earn extra wages unless builders demand urgent work. On the contrary, it also indicates that in undertaking supply-based construction work, *thekedars* wield relatively greater control on labour by limiting the possibility for labourers to earn more than the daily wages. In the choice of measurement or supply-based work undertaken by *thekedars*, the role of the foreman and the *munshi* become quite crucial in shaping the everyday labour control and discipline in organising construction work for securing surplus (Prasad-Aleyamma 2009). Such a choice determines the extent to which the *thekedars* can use their power in shaping the *thekedari* system as the political apparatus of production. Based on these factors, *thekedars* choose 'appropriate' worksites on a supply or measurement basis for accumulating surplus.

4.1.2b Building companies and *thekedar's* surplus: Payment practices

In enabling a *thekedar's* accumulation prospects, the type of building company and its payment practices matter. Among the well-known construction firms operating different worksites in the city from which I chose my fieldwork sites, i.e. Rishabh and BSS, I visited different construction sites run by four nationally and globally known building companies registered as private limited companies – which I call Company X, Company C, Company D, Company E. References to more companies in construction were made during my conversation with *thekedars*, *munshi*, foremen and labourers in making comparisons when it comes to paying *thekedars*. I was made aware of the difference in payment practices between private Limited companies like BSS Construction and Real Estate Pvt Ltd., which are into building construction, (Company B), and builders like Rishabh Builders and Developers (Company A), which take land

on lease, build apartments and sell them. Such differences shape the mechanisms through which *thekedars* find ‘appropriate’ worksites for construction work, considering the payment practices of builders.

A *munshi* from Chhattisgarh highlighted that even though wage rates for labourers are relatively lower in BSS, than in other companies such as E, he is assured of receiving his payments in BSS-run construction sites, unlike in other companies (a reference to company Z), where he was removed from work without receiving money from the builders. He further iterated that BSS thinks more about its labourers and their maintenance than payments because a *thekedar* is treated with respect when they go to the company office to ask for payments. Finally, he added that companies X and B are international companies governed by the share market and they are reputed and show respect to *thekedars*.

“BSS company mein rate kam deta hai baaki company jaise E usme rate acha deta hai. BSS ek company hai lekin wo aadmi ke maintenance ke upar paisa kharch karta hai, aadmi par focus karta hai, paisa par nahi. Late bhi hua toh paisa toh milega wo paisa nahi maarega lekin doosra company mein jyada deta lekin paisa ka guarantee nahi, thekedar ko dhakal dega, Jaisa ki hum company Z mein labour ko daale the, usme paisa nahi mila, kam se kam ₹70-80000 nahi mila. BSS mein paisa mil jata, unke office mein jaenge toh bahut ijat se baat karega, wo clear bolega ki abhi paisa nahi hai lekin wo dega. Company X ka kya hai share market upar niche hoga wo bhi bolega lekin unka share market ke upar depend karta. BSS ka bhi share market hai, international company hai.”

In my conversation with Maksood Ali, a *thekedar* from Malda district in West Bengal, about his frustration with delayed payments from BSS, he pointed out that, unlike other companies where payments to *thekedars* are released every 15 days, the irregular release of payments from private limited companies such as BSS impacts the subsistence payments (i.e. *khuraki*) made to their labourers.

“Pvt Ltd company late se dete lekin dete hain ekkathe lekin doosra company mein 15 days mein paisa clear karta hai. Chhote mote thekedar ko kaam karne mein aasani hota hai, do hafte beech mein khuraki mil jata hai waise companies mein lekin yahan khuraki bhi nahi deta.”

To offset the impact, *thekedars* need to maintain a relatively higher reserve capital to pay subsistence to labourers. Further, Shatrughan *thekedar* from Bihar highlighted that it was December, and the building contractor had not released

their payments since October, because of which he was planning to reduce the number of labourers from his gang at the site.

“Paisa nahi diya hai October mahina ka bhi, aur ab December aa gaya, teen se char mahine se nahi mil raha payment, ye pagaad mil jaega tab yahan aadmi kam kar denge.”

Frustrated with his building contracting company, he abusively mentioned that there are better companies to work for. Abusing company C for which he is working, Shatrughan *thekedar* commented that companies A, B and D are much better to work for.

The above excerpts indicate that choosing an ‘appropriate’ construction site among different building companies enables a *thekedar’s* accumulation prospects. However, the companies can also impose constraints by delaying payments to *thekedars*. Prasad-Aleyamma (2017) indicates that delaying payments is used by builders as an accumulation strategy and as a tool to retain labour-power. In the understanding of *thekedars*, builders who run their companies as private limited (Pvt Ltd.) companies operate differently from those who are not, given the difference in the wage rates and frequency (or delays) in payments made to *thekedars*. Generally, *thekedars* look for contracting firms that disburse payments to *thekedars* at least once a month.

Moreover, they benefit from those contracting firms, which also pay a lumpsum amount of money for managing the subsistence expenses of labourers. In doing so, the variation in payment practices enables builders to accumulate surplus and control the *thekedar’s* share of surplus necessary to retain labour-power. However, *thekedars* who maintain a relatively large capital can still accumulate surplus through the *thekedari* system.

Arguably, the control exercised by builders in enabling and constraining *thekedar’s* prospect of accumulation shapes the *thekedar’s* exercise of everyday control in the organisation of the labour process. The hierarchy and sharing of control between *thekedars* and builders and between *thekedars* and labourers arise when working in measurement or supply-based contracts shaping the *thekedari* system as the political apparatus of production. In chapters six and seven, I elaborate more on the exercise of control under the measurement and supply-based contracts by taking the case of

Rishabh Builders and Developers (for measurement-based work) and that of BSS Construction and Real Estate Pvt Ltd (for supply-based work).

4.1.2c Securing construction work: 'appropriate' sites for enabling daily reproduction of labour

Tied to securing a construction contract under specific production conditions and mobilising specific forms of labour-power is the reproduction of labour-power. Living arrangements of labourers in labour camps form another central component of the *thekedari* system in large-scale building construction (Burawoy 1985). Labour camps are makeshift accommodation spaces provided by builders free of cost to the *thekedars* for accommodating migrant labourers. Beyond accommodating migrant labourers in camps alongside providing water, electricity and other facilities, for instance, for food preparation, builders provide or facilitate health services, daily provision stores, transportation for labourers to worksites/labour camps etc. Further, accommodating labourers in labour camps reduces the cost incurred by *thekedars* for labourers' everyday accommodation considering that builders provide the necessary space for living. However, the cost borne by builders in providing necessary arrangements for accommodating migrant labourers is met by offering reduced daily wage rates for labourers.

Bringing out the distinction between *naka* workers and migrant workers, trade union members commented that the problem faced by *naka* workers was paying monthly rent for their room, spending on their children's education, transport etc. However, migrant labourers did not pay any rent or water/electricity bill or spend on transport or their children's education.

“Idhar labour ka room ka rent, bachchon ka padhai hai... bahar ke labour ka room ka kiraya nahi rehta, transport nahi rehta, pani bill nahi rehta, current bill nahi rehta, koi kharch nahi unko sirf khane ka kharch hai..bachchon ka bhi kharch nahi kuch bhi..Apna idhar bachche ko school jana aur uska transport bhi dena...yeh hi major problem hai.”

Unlike *naka* labourers, migrant labourers living in labour camps is tied to the production process. For instance, if migrant labourers lose their job, they lose accommodation. Accommodating migrant labourers in labour camps reduces necessary labour time, i.e. the time taken to renew labour-power, and relatively

increases the possibility for surplus labour time, i.e. time spent in producing a surplus. This tying of working with living legitimises the extraction of surplus in the case of migrant labourers and shapes the political apparatus of production by expanding the realm of control.

Following this, the ability of *thekedars* to secure a construction contract is further shaped by the conditions of the daily reproduction of labour.

One of the labourers from Jharkhand further highlights that he knows company X but not BSS, which he currently works for. Pointing out the difference between the two companies on account of the care they show towards their labourers, he expresses that company X cares for and bears the risks for its labourers whereas company B does not: *‘Company X mein thoda sa dard hoga poor risk company ka hai lekin company B ka aisa nahin hai.’*

A *mistri* who had worked for a regionally known construction company in Hyderabad highlighted that safety gear is necessary at such sites. However, at this site, there are no facilities from the company.

Meeting a group of labourers who are painters from Bihar indicated that one of the labour camps in Vijayawada [a city located 300 miles from Hyderabad], was a *‘heavenly’* worksite where labourers were cared for and asked about their problems.

“Vijayawada jaisa company mein Labour camp ko swarg bana ke rakhta hai, dekhbaal karta hai, labour se puchte rehta hai kya problem hai aaj kaam par kyun nahi aaye.”

The idea of ‘good’ building companies ‘caring’ for labourers was quite common among migrant labourers at large construction sites of well-known building companies. This is similar to Besky’s (2014) work on tea plantations in India in which tea pluckers distinguish between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ planters owing to their ‘care’ for labourers. While this ‘care’ from the building company appears from a ‘moral’ reciprocity or obligation-based relationship between builders and labourers, I suggest that the builders’ exercise of care directly relates to enabling the daily reproduction of labour to reinforce surplus extraction. Kalb’s (1997) research on workers at the Philips bulb factory indicates that ‘company care’ through housing and other arrangements served to reinforce surplus extraction. In this way, the labourers’ thinking of ‘good’ or ‘bad’ building companies is shaped by the conditions for their daily reproduction provided

by building firms, such as good living facilities, good safety gear, proper arrangements for accommodation etc. Such arrangements at worksites and labour camps legitimise the conditions which enable the daily renewal of labour-power for surplus extraction (Burawoy 1976, 1985).

The cost borne by builders in providing necessary arrangements for accommodating migrant labourers is met by offering reduced daily wage rates for labourers. Further, accommodating labourers in labour camps reduces the cost incurred by *thekedars* for labourers' subsistence. In this way, the surplus is secured, obscured and legitimised by tying production conditions with reproduction under the *thekedari* system (Burawoy 1985). Following this, I argue that the element of 'care' exercised by builders for migrant construction labourers visible in their willingness to work at 'appropriate' worksites needs to be seen as means of obscuring and legitimising the process of surplus extraction. Such tying of 'everyday work with everyday living' further shapes the exercise of control in organising the labour process and reinforcing the *thekedari* system as the political production apparatus. I discuss the exercise of control over the daily reproduction of labour via labour camps in chapter eight.

4.1.3 From a sub-contracting relation to a 'work order': State legislation and its politics

In choosing an 'appropriate' worksite, one of the crucial ways the sub-contracting relation between the builders and *thekedars* gets shaped is through the 'work contract' or 'work order'. The *thekedars* and builders enter into a sub-contracting relation which outlines the specific terms and conditions of the construction work. Though there are unwritten or informal contracts in the case of building construction, large-scale building construction by regional/global construction firms prefers entering into a 'formal' contract. It is argued that the state reproduces capital accumulation by refraining from enforcing its legislation (Mosse, Gupta and Shah 2005; Pattenden 2016b). However, I indicate that capital accumulation is also enabled by the presence of the state visible in builders' selective compliance with state legislations which secures and conceals the specifics of accumulation by builders and *thekedars*. A work order/contract from the builders and procuring labour license under the Contract Labour Act 1970 instead of the Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act 1979 results from such selective compliance.

Following this, some well-known building companies/builders prefer to set out the terms and conditions of the contract legally on a piece of paper by asking for Vendor Code from the *thekedars* to undertake the assigned work. A vendor code is legal eligibility for *thekedars* to access construction work by acting as a sub-contracting firm. The *thekedars* obtain it by registering themselves with the builders and providing necessary information.

Shatrughan *thekedar* indicated that the building company itself makes a vendor code. For the work order to come through, conversations with Maksood *thekedar* at BSS suggested that a *thekedar* quotes their wage rates for their male and female labourers based on their skill for 12 hours, along with providing a cancelled cheque, Permanent Account Number card, Aadhar Card, GST certificate, if necessary, Provident Fund Declaration Form etc. The quotation is approved, becoming a work order with the necessary terms and conditions. 1% Tax Deducted at Source (TDS) is deducted, which can be recovered later. Following this, a vendor code is assigned to the *thekedar*.

Thekedars indicated that a vendor code enables a work contract but also indicated that a vendor code may not be necessary. For instance, among the *thekedars*, BSS Construction and Real Estate Pvt Ltd., in the city of Hyderabad, had the reputation of being receptive to *thekedars* who could gain easy entry to find work, possibly sometimes without the need for a vendor code and yet remain assured of being paid for the work done.

A sample work order of ₹19 lakh for shuttering work is given below, which details the terms and conditions of the contract, payment structure etc. Most *thekedars* were quite reluctant to show their work contracts.

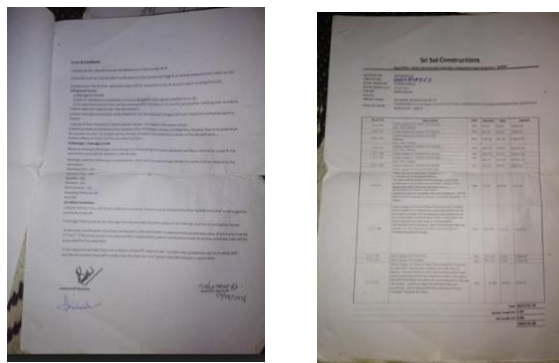


Figure 4.2: Sample work order for shuttering work
(Source: Photographed by the author, 2019)

The sample work order outlines the details of the construction work to be performed by the *thekedar*, along with the daily rates of wages applicable for labourers. It sets the terms and conditions of construction work contracted on a piece-rate or time-rate basis, along with timelines and rates of pay for the *thekedars*. In this way, the work order sets the proportion of surplus secured by both the *thekedars* and builders. However, builders exercise their control by preparing a work order with some *thekedars* while ignoring others.

My interview with a *thekedar* at a site constructing 40 villas revealed that not all building companies prefer to prepare a work order. Secondly, not all contractors at a site receive a work order: '*sab company nahi banata hai work order. Agar 100 contractors hai toh usme se do, teen ke paas rahega.*' Wondering if the work order was made before starting, I asked him, to which he remarked that, ideally, a work order should be taken from the start day of the work. However, companies decide which *thekedars* should receive work orders and which should not.

“Actually jis din kaam chaalu hota us din se work order lena. Lekin ye log kya karta jisko acha lagta usko deta aur jisko unko satana hai unko aaj kal aaj kal karte rehta aur ghumate rehta. Company ko work order banakar dena mein problem hai. Company X (name undisclosed) mein sabko work order milta. Wo agar work order nahi dega ton company badnaam ho jaega, world level ka company hai.”

The *thekedar* added that in reputed companies, all *thekedars* receive work orders. Mansur *ji* mentioned a company could file a case against a *thekedar* based on the work contract as it is printed on a legal document.

Possessing a work order enables *thekedars* to exercise their control over builders, provide credibility to the *thekedar*, and reproduce their ability to accumulate surplus in the *thekedari* system. In differentiating among *thekedars* at a worksite, builders fragment the potential solidarity between *thekedars* and instil competition among them.

Apart from the vendor code required to prepare a work order, the labour license procured from Labour Department (which is needed in case a *thekedar* mobilises more than 20 labourers under Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act 1979) is also something *thekedars* constantly mentioned in their interviews. The labour license defines the relation between *thekedars* and labourers, not the work order between *thekedars* and

builders. *Thekedars* do not necessarily need a labour license to start work at the sites, though proving that a *thekedar* is legally eligible to mobilise labour would be needed.

Regarding a labour license, Shatrughan *thekedar* (name changed) shared that companies do not prefer to ask for labour licenses from the *thekedars*, who are usually addressed as vendors for work purposes. Labour license usually made in the home village of the *thekedar* varies depending on the amount of the work contract. Building companies fear to ask or demand labour licenses from the *thekedar* as it reduces the profit for the company.

“Labour license apne gaon se PWD [Public Works Department] se banwana hota hai, license kahin ka kahin chalta hai, teen quality ka license hota hai, paisa ka overturn dekh kar, 25 lakh, 50 lakh iss tarah se hai. License rehta hai toh company thoda darr ke rehta hai, isiliye labour license lena nahi chahta kyunki usko ghata hai.”

On inquiring about the labour license, he added that his uncle holds a labour license. However, the company would not demand the same as it reduces the profit for the company given that it cannot pay *thekedars* in cash and must also pay taxes to the state.

“Chacha ji ka license hai labour ka lekin company license nahi chahega kyunki company ka kharcha badh jaega...humlog ko govt ko koi hisab nahi dikhana padta...license mein phir cash nahi cheque payment hota wagherah wagherah, bahut saari baatein hoti hai.”

Mansur *ji* showed me his work order which details the work to be carried out by the vendor, i.e. the *thekedar*.

A *munshi* from Chhattisgarh at Site B highlighted that a company does not ask for a license number from a *thekedar* as having one is unnecessary to start work. However, it is needed for showing the police whenever needed.

“Thekedar ka rehta hai labour license jo apna state mein banate hain, yahan bhi ban sakta hai, advocate banata hai. Company license number nahi maangta hai, license hona sirf police ke liye rehta hai lekin company mein kaam ke liye license nahi lagta.”

The interview excerpts indicate that labour license, which is made in the home villages of the *thekedars*, on the one hand, increases the expenditure for the builders who need to pay taxes to the state. On the other hand, a labour license extends legal rights to the *thekedars* to challenge building companies in the future on issues of wages for labourers, their daily reproduction etc. While *thekedars* used their caste-

based connections with village level government officials for procuring labour license as their legal eligibility to mobilise labourers, I did not come across *thekedars* using their connections with political officials or parties in the city of Hyderabad to be able to access construction contracts. That said, *thekedars* are indeed 'men with connections' (Picherit 2009) who use their caste-based identity with other *thekedars*, to expedite procurement of labour license. However, by avoiding asking for or accepting a labour license, builders relegate the *thekedars* as self-employed and sidestep any responsibility for labourers (Singh *et al.* 2020, Srivastava and Sutradhar 2016). At the same time, for *thekedars*, it becomes challenging to access payments in cash in case they furnish their labour license. Moreover, in interviews with officials from the labour department, I gathered that the *thekedars* take labour licenses under the Contract Labour Act, 1970 instead of the Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act, 1979, as a result, there is no mechanism to keep track of such contractors. In this scenario, a labour license does not appear in most construction worksite contracts and is a win-win scenario for both the building company and the *thekedars*. In this way, the politics of asking or not asking for labour licenses shapes the balance of power between *thekedars* and builders and secures their share of the surplus.

Field findings indicate that both written and unwritten contracts enable surplus accumulation. However, the difference lies in the specific ways, i.e., through vendor code for preparing a work order and/or labour license in which surplus extraction is obscured and secured by both builders and *thekedars*. In this way, the builder-*thekedar* sub-contracting relation for construction work, enacted and performed through 'legal' documents (Suresh 2010), reinforces the political apparatus through the sub-contracting relation. I argue that preparing a legal work contract based on vendor code from a *thekedar* does not indicate the absence of exploitative labour relations. Instead, it conceals the mechanism through which *thekedars* and builders share the surplus not by evading but by complying with state regulations.

4.2 Discussion

In organising relations of production under the *thekedari* system, the sub-contracting relation in building construction is shaped by *thekedars'* prospects of accumulation in securing construction work. The prospects of accumulation for *thekedars* depend on

their initial outlay of capital, knowledge of available construction work, experience of working as a *thekedar*, contracting network and their ability to mobilise specific forms of labour-power by exercising class-based domination. Further, the ability of *thekedars* to accumulate by securing construction work at ‘appropriate worksites’ is both enabled and constrained by the conditions of production, i.e. piece-rate and time-rate based work as laid out by builders and conditions of reproduction of labour. Such conditions of production are reflected in the type of construction work, the building company and their payment practices, the organisation of building construction work by builders, the daily wage rates and the possibility for overtime for migrant labourers etc.

Further, the element of ‘care’ reflected in living arrangements offered by ‘good’ building companies needs to be seen as means of obscuring and legitimising the process of surplus extraction (Besky 2014, Burawoy 1985). In this way, *thekedars* and builders enter into a sub-contracting relationship in building construction. Moreover, I argue that preparing a legal work contract based on vendor code does not indicate the absence of exploitative labour relations. Instead, it conceals the mechanism through which *thekedars* and builders share the surplus not by evading but by complying with state regulations. In this way, capital accumulation is also enabled by the presence of the state visible in renowned builders’ selective compliance with state legislations.

The constitution of the sub-contracting relation in the *thekedari* system is the foundation for configuring class relations in the case of building construction. It stems from the collaboration and negotiation between *thekedars* and builders in shaping the *thekedari* system as the political apparatus of production. The chapter contributes to the existing literature on sub-contracting by arguing that the sub-contracting relation, in enabling, concealing and legitimising surplus extraction, defines the perimeters of control and discipline in the organisation of construction work. The hierarchy of control between *thekedars* and builders shapes the relative balance of power in shaping the *thekedari* system as the political apparatus of production. However, the political apparatus is also shaped by the relative ability of *thekedars* to exercise control over labour in negotiating for measurement or supply-based work.

Moreover, the politics of preparing a work order between *thekedars* and builders orients the political apparatus by enabling and concealing surplus extraction. Further,

the political apparatus of *thekedari* is not limited to ‘the *thekedar*’ who is otherwise seen as exploitative (Bremner 1996, 2010, 2014) or squeezed between labourers and workplace managers (De Neve 2001, De Neve 2014, Picherit 2018a, Raj and Axelby 2019). Instead, the apparatus is enabled via the mechanisms through which construction work is secured to form a sub-contracting relation between *thekedars* and builders. Further, the apparatus extends to the contracting networks of *thekedars* comprising foreman and *munshi* etc., for securing surplus. In this way, the sub-contracting relation under the *thekedari* system organises relations of production and configures class relations.

4.3 Conclusion

The chapter began by asking these questions: How are relations of production organised through the *thekedari* system in building construction? How do *thekedars* and builders enter into a sub-contracting relationship? How does the sub-contracting relation shape the *thekedari* system as the political apparatus of production?

In this chapter, I have argued that the relations of production are formed through the collaboration and negotiation between *thekedars* and builders. However, it is shaped by the *thekedar*’s prospects of accumulating capital. The *thekedars*’ prospects of accumulating capital depend on their initial outlay of capital, knowledge of available construction work, contracting network, skills and experience of working as a *thekedar* and the ability to mobilise migrant labour to work in building construction. Such prospects are further shaped by builders from different regional and global companies who organise different stages of building construction work on different contractual arrangements, prefer migrant labour over *naka* workers, set up payment processes for *thekedars* and negotiate on wage rates for labourers, check *thekedar*’s credibility through the site engineers and offer enabling conditions for daily reproduction of labour etc. Based on this information which *thekedars* often gatekeep, *thekedars* secure particular kinds of construction work at ‘appropriate’ construction sites under specific conditions of production and reproduction laid out by builders.

Further, the sub-contracting relation between *thekedars* and builders reflected in the ‘work order’ defines the terms and conditions of construction work and enables the

'joint enterprise' of capital accumulation (Mezzadri 2016c). While the 'appropriate worksites' enable *thekedars* to secure their share of the surplus, surplus extraction is concealed through the absence of written contracts in the case of some builders and through 'the performance' of legal paperwork in formalising 'work orders' with builders. Further, the specific conditions of production and reproduction at 'appropriate' worksites, in enabling the securing, obscuring and legitimising of surplus, shape the exercise of control in the organisation of everyday construction work. Through these mechanisms, the sub-contracting relation shapes the balance of power between *thekedars* and builders in defining *thekedars'* prospects for accumulation and shaping the *thekedari* system as the political apparatus of production.

As indicated, the mobilisation of specific forms of labour-power is central to the *thekedar's* prospect of accumulation by enabling the architecture of surplus extraction. I highlight the case of mobilising and incorporating Bihari migrant labour to work in building construction in the next chapter. Using cash advance as a political tool, *thekedars* and labourers exercise relative control in enabling surplus extraction and configuring class relations. Moreover, the next chapter complements this chapter in informing the formation of the *thekedari* system as the political apparatus of production.

Chapter 5: The Politics of Advance: Mobilising Bihari Migrant Labourers in the *Thekedari* System

The *thekedars* and builders organise the *thekedari* system by entering into a sub-contracting relation for building construction work. But how does the *thekedari* system enable and reproduce the mobilisation of labourers for surplus extraction? This chapter aims to outline one of the key tools of the political apparatus of production, i.e. the system of advance and its politics of mobilising, reserving and retaining labour-power in reinforcing class relations.

As discussed in the earlier chapter, mobilising specific forms of labour-power is central to a *thekedar's* accumulation prospects in building construction. Existing research indicates that *thekedars* recruit and maintain a cheap, docile and reliable workforce by paying advance to labourers (De 2017, 2020; Jain and Sharma 2019; Pattenden 2012, 2016a, 2016b, 2018; Picherit 2012). The system of advance has been viewed mainly in the sense of producing free or unfree labour relations, i.e. degrees of labour bondage or otherwise a continuum of degrees of labour freedom, in forming exploitative labour relations in the global economy (Barrientos *et al.* 2013; Breman 2007; Breman, Guérin and Prakash 2009). In the Indian context, debt-based relations through advancing cash to labourers in enabling exploitative labour relations can be found in the brick-kiln industry, construction industry, garment industry etc. (Bhukuth *et al.* 2006; Breman 1996,2004,2010; Breman, Guérin and Prakash 2009; Jha 2004; Lerche 2007; Mosse *et al.* 2002; Picherit 2012). However, the existing literature on advance has paid little attention to the politics of advance in organising surplus extraction. Mezzadri (2016b, p132) indicates that reproducing labour networks is vital to a *thekedar's* business. How does the mobilisation of specific forms of labour-power through the system of advance enable the reproduction of labour networks to secure surplus? How does it shape class relations? The chapter aims to answer these questions.

Through this chapter, I indicate that the *thekedari* system enables and reproduces the mobilisation of labour-power through the politics of the system of advance. By giving cash in advance to mobilise and retain labourers, *thekedars* enable the relations of

the labour process for surplus extraction. The system of advance operates through the mutual interaction of a 'moral economy' relationship between *thekedars* and labourers; and the exercise of class-based domination by *thekedars* (Scott 1976, Lerche 1995). This mutual interaction, I argue, shapes the system of advance as a political tool in reproducing labour networks for reinforcing surplus extraction. This occurs by mobilising 'core' and 'trusted' labourers, negotiating the reservation of labour power and regulating the system of advance. It produces consent and defiance among Bihari labourers composing the lived experience of exploitation. As a result, *thekedar*-labour relation remains fragile and contested (Chandavarkar 2008), given the power labourers can wield in the advance-based relation. In this way, using the system of advance as a political tool shapes the lived experience of exploitation in reinforcing surplus extraction. The chapter contributes to the literature on debt-based exploitative labour relations by emphasising the politics of the system of advance in enabling and reinforcing class relations.

I draw on the empirical data related to the system of advance that I gathered during my interviews with *thekedars* and labourers at different construction sites in the city. The chapter begins by outlining the incorporation of Bihari migrant labour into the *thekedari* system. Further, the chapter outlines the ways in which Bihari migrant labourers are tied *in* and *through* advance. It highlights the politics of mobilising 'core' and 'trusted' labourers, negotiation in the reservation of labour power, and how *thekedars* regulate the system of advance by building their reputation as a 'good' *thekedar*. Subsequently, the chapter discusses the findings and contributions, followed by a short conclusion.

5.1 Incorporating Bihari migrant labour into the *thekedari* system

What conditions shape the incorporation of Bihari migrant labour into the *thekedari* system in building construction? Why do Bihari migrant labourers work for a *thekedar*? Field findings indicate that Bihari migrant labourers, as classes of labour, highlight their compulsion resulting from their helplessness i.e. *majboori* to migrate from Bihar to find work and perform labour i.e. *mazdoori* in the cities.

Having understood about my research study, a *thekedar* from Bihar shared that the main problem in Bihar was no factory, and no urban development, hence labourers of Bihar migrate: '*Bihar se labour ka palayan hota raha hai.*' He added that if in a village there are four *bighas*, i.e. acres of land and 4500 labourers, then labourers have nowhere to go: '*ab agar gaon mein char bigha zameen aur 4500 labour hoga toh labour kahan jaega.*' He further highlighted that; it was the problem of a lack of private investment and private sector jobs in Bihar.

I asked Afzal *mistri* if, in Bihar, lesser work was available compared to the cities. He commented that even though work is available, it is not available regularly in Bihar. He said that some people still work in Bihar apart from getting involved in agricultural activities; however, at home, one tends to spend a lot of money, but in the city, one could work, earn and save.

“Bihar ka log jo karne wala hai wo wahan kaam karhi raha hai. Kheti bhi dekhta hai ghar ka aur bahar kaam bhi karta hai. Lekin ghar pe kya hai, aaj paisa aayega aur phir kharch ho jaega. Bahar log kaam karke bachat kar sakta hai.”

Another *mistri*, affirming Afzal *mistri*'s response, remarked that apart from the irregular availability of work in the village, they find it challenging to work for longer hours, tend to take a holiday and end up spending the money they earn in the village.

“Gaon mein kaam milta hai, lekin mahina mein regular nahi hai. Aur wahan jyada der kaam nahi kar paate hain, gaon mein maza nahi aata hai, chutti maar dete hain. Jo bhi paisa aata hai wo kahan kharch ho jaega pata nahi chalta.”

The compulsion of Bihari migrant labourers to migrate from their villages for work is about the regularity of work, their ability to work hard outside their villages, work for longer hours and to save money by earning in the cities. Findings indicate that the compulsion of Bihari migrant labourers to work away from their villages is addressed by working under production relations organised by the *thekedari* system in building construction work.

I asked for a *samosa* during the evening break at kiosks outside a cluster of construction worksites. I explained my study to a group of labourers I was sitting with. I asked them if they could work without a *thekedar*. They responded by saying there is no guarantee or hope from the building company about the labourers' work as the company only trusts the *thekedar* and the *thekedar*, in turn,

trusts the company. However, labourers are left to fend for themselves, which is why a *thekedar* who can provide timely money to labourers is needed. He further iterated that the *munshi* takes care of the labourers as mostly *thekedars* stay in the village.

“Company ko koi asha nahi rehta humare kaam karne ka, company ka bharosa thekedar pe aur thekedar ka bharosa company pe, labour ko koi aata pata nahi. Thekedar hone se paisa extra mil sakta hai. Thekedar toh gaon mein rehta hai yahan sab kuch munshi sambhalta hai.”

On asking a group of labourers from Bihar about the benefits of having a *thekedar*, they said they could get money anytime they wanted. Secondly, if they had to go home anytime, they could do so freely, which was not possible if they were working in a company without a *thekedar*.

Continuing my conversation with a group of migrant labourers, I asked what benefit they have from a *thekedar*. One of them responded to me explaining a situation that if a labourer has worked for two months and wants to go back to his village, he can go but only if there is a *thekedar* who can give some money to travel otherwise entire responsibility of health, care, money etc would fall on labourers.

“Maan lijiyega do mahina kaam kar liya, ab gaon jana hai, bhaada lekar gaon mein thekedar se paisa le lenge, bina foreman aur thekedar ka toh labour ka baans ho jaega kyunki saara jimmedari labour ka ho jaega-beemari, paisa sab kuch dekhna hoga, thekedar ke paas paisa hai toh humko kabhi bhi paisa mil sakta hai, yahi fayda hai.”

The above excerpts show that in accumulating surplus, *thekedars* offer the possibility of guaranteeing work to Bihari migrant labourers, providing them with money, and enabling them to circulate to their village. Further, the following excerpts illuminate how labourers cannot be mobilised to work in building construction without the *thekedari* system.

I asked if they did not have a *thekedar*. They said that without a *thekedar*, they could not get a job. The *munshi* added that on having a *thekedar*, they are at a loss as they are paid relatively less. However, one reiterated that a permanent job is better than working for a *thekedar*. He added that he would not need a *thekedar* to work for if he had the necessary skills and money as his foundation. However, only a permanent job which is otherwise very difficult to get, would enable him to build that foundation, save up and get rid of the *thekedar*.

Labourers pointed out that the company will always want labourers to work at cheaper rates which is why they call labourers like them. The *munshi* added that the company provides the *thekedar* with reduced wages per labourer, so it was difficult for *thekedars* to pay the labourers considering *thekedars* have to pay taxes to the government as well because of which *thekedars* are not able to save.

“Thekedar ko hi company nahi deta hai toh wo labour ko kahan se de paayega, GST cut ho jata hai wagherah wagherah. Usko bachat nahi hai.”

I asked one of the labourers what he thinks about migrant labourers not having a *thekedar*. He responded that labourers would benefit from not having a *thekedar*; however, companies would not hire labourers directly. He iterated that there was a difference in the way *thekedars* and labourers think and that most *thekedars* want to operate in the private sector, unlike being involved in government projects, giving an example of a project concerning building an international stadium in Bihar.

“Labour ke paas agar thekedar nahi hai tab labour ko fayda hai lekin company direct labour ko nahi dega uska form hai contractor ka, bina contractor ke labour ko kaam hi nahi hai. Thekedar aur labour ke soch mein bhi antar hai, sara thekedar sab private mein hi aata hai. Government ke construction mein usko kam fayda hai. Bihar mein Rajgir mein ban raha international stadium. Mera dost lena chah raha wahan thekedari lekin mushkil ho raha usko.”

Field excerpts indicate that the labourers are aware of the problems in working for a *thekedar* and how surplus extraction occurs within the *thekedari* system. However, Bihari migrant labourers legitimise working for a *thekedar*, being compelled to seek regular work to meet their survival needs, inability to find a permanent job and the limitations of working under the *thekedari* (Carswell and De Neve 2018, Mezzadri and Majumdar 2020, Srivastava 2009).

The above excerpts indicate the compulsion-circulation-temporality of working in building construction that incorporates Bihari migrant labourers into working for a *thekedar* under the *thekedari* system. In working for a *thekedar*, Bihari migrant labourers have the guarantee of work and money despite being conscious of the problems of working for a *thekedar*. Though such a relationship could be seen as a patron-client relationship between a *thekedar* and a labourer, it enables surplus extraction through the *thekedari* system. I argue that it is not the *thekedar* who

guarantees work to labourers, as a *thekedar* is situated within the production relations. Instead, the organisation of production relations under the *thekedari* system guarantees construction work to Bihari migrant labourers while organising the architecture of surplus extraction. This is because such a relationship of guarantee of work to labour is intertwined with the guarantee of labour-power for enabling surplus extraction in building construction (Guérin 2009). For the same, *thekedars* mobilise, reserve and retain labour-power central to the architecture of surplus extraction in building construction. This is enabled via the system of cash offered in advance of starting to work at construction worksites.

5.2 Tying Bihari migrant labourers *in* and *through* advance: Mobilising labourers, retaining labour-power

In working for a *thekedar*, building construction work is guaranteed to migrant labourers. Further, the cash advance system enables the incorporation of labourers into the architecture of surplus extraction through the mobilisation and reservation of their labour power. The system of advance, mainly interest-free loans, has been used by employers since the 1970s-80s not only to attract and retain but also to control and discipline labour (Banaji 2003, De Neve 1999, Guérin 2013). Recent work from building construction indicates the prevalence of the system of advance serving as an element of control in recruiting and maintaining a cheap, reliable workforce (De 2017, 2020; Jain and Sharma 2019; Pattenden 2012, 2014, 2016a, 2016b, 2018; Picherit 2012).

Bihari migrant labourers are tied to a *thekedar* before the construction work through cash advance payment. However, the system of advance is not specific to a *thekedar*. Instead, it is central to the *thekedari* system in which *thekedars* (including the foreman and the *munshi*) and builders participate in mobilising labourers for reserving labour-power. Some building construction companies could initiate or support the advance, as in the 1990s (Olsen and Murthy 2000). In the case of the power loom industry in South India, De Neve (2001) indicates that advance was even given by factory owners themselves, not the *maistry*. However, when *thekedars* invested their surplus into building construction, they started to possess the initial capital otherwise provided by

building companies. In the case of Covid-19 lockdown, building companies also provided the initial capital to *thekedars* for enabling the 'return' of migrant labour from their villages to construction worksites.

Before the year 2000, Mansur *ji*, who has been working as a civil labour contractor in the city of Hyderabad for the last 20 years, highlighted that the builders or companies released some capital as advance to the *thekedars* for mobilising labourers. However, later the generation of capital was also passed on to the *thekedars*, who had to provide an advance to labourers.

Such capital generation for an advance is a reinvestment of the *thekedars'* profits based on work done at the construction sites. Moreover, the builders shape the *thekedars'* prospects of accumulation, and the necessity for *thekedars* to release advance to labourers is further shaped by *thekedar*-builder relations.

In my conversation with a *munshi*, I asked the question about the problems faced by *thekedars* in the *thekedari* system. The response was that the *thekedars* are compelled to release advance to their labourers given that there are payment delays from the builders, which would lead labourers to leave working for the *thekedar*. Advance is also used to meet the emergency needs of labourers.

“Labour ko advance dena padta hai, kabhi kabhi char mahina bill rok deta hai lekin labour ko toh payment dena padta hai, emergency mein labour ko paisa dena hota chahe kuch bhi ho.”

The accumulated capital with *thekedars*, with or without support from builders, is used for providing cash advance to labourers. In this way, the *thekedars* and builders have (historically) collaborated in shaping advance-based exploitative labour relations. Following this, the system of advance needs to be situated within production relations organised by the *thekedari* system.

The system of giving an advance by *thekedars* is seen as one of the forms of productive investment in labour. It sets the foundation for extracting surplus in building construction. It is a portion of the initial outlay of capital that a *thekedar* releases to labourers to start working at construction sites which also enables labourers to meet their immediate needs of reproduction back in the village (Breman 2019, De Neve 1999, Lerche 2007). The cash given in advance to labourers by their *thekedar* guarantees regular building construction work to the labourers. At the same time, it

also guarantees the availability of labour-power for enabling *thekedar's* share in the surplus from building construction work. As a result, labourers remain obliged to their *thekedar* and vice-versa. In this way, the system of advance is within a 'moral economy' relation between *thekedars* and labourers (Scott 1976). However, in appearing as a give-and-take relationship of dependency, the system of advance interlocks labourers into surplus extraction by reserving and retaining labour-power (Mezzadri 2016b). Further, the very act of accepting an advance serves as an element of control in inserting Bihari migrant labour into specific conditions of construction work.

Speaking with a few people in the source village market over tea, I gathered that many *thekedars* send labourers to work by attracting them through advance, because of which they remain bonded. Despite labourers fighting with their *thekedar* they are easily lured by another round of advance and hence expose themselves to be exploited being compelled to do so.

“Mazdoor ko bandhua bana leta hai, jhagda kar ke chod dega aur thoda advance phir se thekedar diya ki bas mazdoor khush aur chal diya kaam par, mazdoor apan shoshan khud karwata hai, lebar kya karega majboor hai.”

The above excerpts indicate that it is profitable for *thekedars* to offer an advance to labourers to reserve and retain labour-power for securing a share in the surplus in building construction work. However, even though labourers are bonded by taking an advance, as indicated, they do not remain bound to their *thekedar* (Breman, Guérin and Prakash 2009; Devi 1981; Lerche 1995). Instead, Bihari migrant labourers use their Bihari-ness to negotiate and fight with their *thekedars*. However, they remain complicit in their exploitation by accepting an advance. This complicity intertwined with negotiation composes the lived experience of exploitation of Bihari migrant labourers. How does the system of advance serve as a political tool in mobilising labour-power and shaping class relations? I examine this question in the following sections.

5.2.1 The politics of mobilising 'core' and 'trusted' Bihari labourers

Giving cash in advance to labourers enables their mobilisation for building construction work. However, under what conditions does this mobilisation through cash given in advance take place? Who is mobilised via advance and who is not, and why? The

existing literature on the mobilisation and recruitment of labour focuses on the significance of primordial ties comprising village, caste, kinship, friendship etc. (Breman 1996, Chakrabarty 1989) being embedded in relations of trust, loyalty and proximity (Guérin *et al.* 2009, Picherit 2009). However, I examine how useful or detrimental are such primordial ties in developing a labour network composed of classes of labour such as foreman, *munshi*, *mistris* and helpers in reproducing a *thekedar's* prospect of accumulation.

Although *thekedars* are mainly from the area of origins of migrant labourers (Breman 1996, Lerche 2007), Bihari migrant labourers may be mobilised by *thekedars* outside Bihar, for instance, that of Bengal, Odisha etc.

I came across 15 workers from Bihar at a tea shop next to the labour camp working for a *thekedar* from Odisha. Most of them were *mistris*. They shared that earlier, they were working under a Bengali *thekedar*; however, because of some issue, they left him and joined the *thekedar* from Odisha. They said that Bihari labourers do not necessarily need to work under *thekedars* from Bihar. However, they added that whichever *thekedar* gives them money on time and trusts them, they work for him. Their *thekedar*, who is not from Bihar, has even given them ₹50,000 as advance only because of trust.

“Jahan paisa theek se diya, time par diya uske saath kaam kar lete hain. Humlog ko 50,000 advance bhi diya hai. Vishwas hai tabhi na diya 50,000.”

Sonu *mistri* added that if the *thekedar* is from the same village in Bihar, there is a particular advantage as the labourer's household can receive money, which did not happen when he worked for a Bengali *thekedar*. He commented further that he does not choose to work for a *thekedar* outside his village.

“Gaon ghar ke thekedar rahe ke fayda ee chhiye ki kakhnio paisa chhod ke chal jaebe toh gaon mein mil jate. Thekedar motorcycle se ghar e ghar rupya daal ke chal jaate. Yahan bagal mein Bengali thekedar ke paas kaam karliye pehle lekin paisa ke liye aaj kal karte karte 5-6 mahina baad paise delke. Bahari thekedar ke paas nahi khate ke hai, apun gaon ke rahe ya aas paas ke toh theek rahe hai, doosar gaon wala ke paas kaam nahi jamte.”

Though some Bihari labourers may be keen to work for *thekedars* from their village, others may work for *thekedars* who can be trusted irrespective of being Bihari, Bengali

etc. What matters to Bihari labourers is the payment of advance owing to trust which does not necessarily hinge on ties of or affiliations with caste or regional identity etc. This indicates that Bihari migrant labourers use their Bihari-ness in preferring to be mobilised to work in building construction for certain kinds of *thekedars*. This is in contrast to Picherit's (2018a, p10-12) research in building construction in which Dalit *thekedars* interlock Dalit labourers by mobilising their common identity of Dalitness, in which Dalits across the divisions of classes of labour have little to no bargaining power. However, Bihari labourers as classes of labour in building construction deploy Bihari-ness, defying their caste or regional ties, to negotiate the mobilisation of their labour-power by *thekedars*. Incorporating trust, mutual obligations and reciprocity in mobilising a trusted group of labourers indicates the significance of the 'moral economy' (Scott 1976), in enabling prospects of capital accumulation. However, Bihari migrant labourers emphasise the trustworthiness of a *thekedar* over their caste and regional identities (Ballet, Bhukuth and Guérin 2007; Bhukuth 2006).

Further, *thekedars* are keen to look for 'trusted' migrant labourers who can develop the *thekedar's* labour network in enhancing their accumulation prospects (Picherit 2009). However, the act of *thekedars* offering advance to mobilise 'trusted' labourers is carefully thought by *thekedars* as it shapes their ability to form and reproduce their labour network in securing their surplus.

One *munshi* from Bihar commented that giving advance to the labourers is tied with an acquaintance (*parichay*), relation (*jaan pehchaan*) and trust (*bharosa*) either developed through labourers themselves or their acquaintances – who could be their *munshi*, foreman or their fellow labourers as well.

One of the labourers commented that in Bihar, *thekedari* is rooted in the kith-kin relationship: '*Bihar mein yahi hai, sala ka sala, mama ka mama, bhai ka bhai, behnoi kie wo.... wagherah wagherah.*'

Discussing advance with one of the *thekedars*, Alam *ji*, from Bihar, he mentioned that if someone has been doing work regularly and is from the same village, he does not have a problem giving advance. Around seven of his 12-15 labourers are Alam's family members. His labourers are mobilised within a maximum of 40km from his village in Vaishali district in Bihar. Almost half of them have worked for him for seven to eight years. Most labourers are from the same village, and about seven are related to Alam *thekedar*.

Ram *ji mistri*, who is from Sahebganj, in Bihar, is unrelated to Mansur *ji*. Recalling how he came to work for Mansur ‘*bhai*’, he said he got work through his uncle: ‘*Mera mausa jo hai wo thekedar ke gaon ka hai, usse mila humko kaam.*’

A *thekedar* says he would prefer someone from his village who does not drink and knows the work. He does not take labourers who drink. Giving an example of rotten potatoes, he said each rotten potato should be thrown out else it will ruin the whole bag of good potatoes.

The above interview excerpts from *thekedars* indicate that mobilisation of Bihari migrant labourers is based on acquaintance, relation and trust (Guérin *et al.* 2009, Picherit 2009). Such labourers can be mobilised from the home village of the *thekedar* or otherwise through kin-based relations. Trust, family and kin-based ties help mobilise and reserve labour-power as reflected by referring to the *thekedar* as *bhai*, i.e. brother (De Neve 2008; Breman, Guérin and Prakash 2009). However, *thekedars* are keen to find able-bodied, healthy labourers who can work at the site or have had some experience working at construction sites. It is argued that recruiting within the same village, caste, or kin does not necessarily build loyalty or trust, making disciplining labour problematic (De Neve 2008, Picherit 2009). Though languages of morality, caste and kin-based ties underlie the mobilisation process (Bhukuth 2006; Bhukuth, Ballet and Guérin 2007), *thekedars* prefer to select labourers who are trusted to work hard and at the same time, easier to discipline. *Thekedars* may go beyond their origin or home villages to find ‘trusted’ labourers. Further, this is likely when mobilising labourers from the same village poses a collective threat to the *thekedar*’s ability to accumulate.

Pramod *ji*, a *thekedar* explained that *thekedars* mobilise labourers from different villages in Bihar so that they cannot run away as a group, as Bihari labourers have a quality of leadership. He indicated that if *thekedars* mobilise labourers from the same village, then Bihari labourers, unlike those from Chhattisgarh, will demonstrate their leadership in forming a group, collectivising and running away.

“Dekhiye, agar ek hi gaon se labour laega thekedar toh wo group banakar bhaag jaega. Wo unite ho jaega. Isiliye bhi ki Bihar ke labour mein ek leadership quality hai jo baaki labour mein nahi hai, jaise ki

Chhattisgarh ka labour le lijiye udaharan ke taur par. Bahut se bahut ek district se laega thekedar lekin alag alag gaon se.”

The collective power exercised by Bihari labourers from the same village may challenge the reproduction of labour networks. *Thekedars* use their knowledge and information to avoid mobilising Bihari labourers who show the potential of using their ‘weapon of the weak’ in leaving and running away from one *thekedar* to the other (De Neve 1999, Scott 1985). In this sense, retaining not only any Bihari labourer but ‘trusted’, hard-working and docile Bihari labourers is critical to reproducing a *thekedar*’s labour network.

In mobilising trusted, hard-working and docile labourers, *thekedars* do not prefer Bihari migrant labourers based on their caste or religious identity. This is reflected through the surnames, i.e. *Bharti, Vishwakarma, Paswan, Bhuiyan, Yadav, Chowdhury, Thakur, Kumar, Prasad, Sav, Bhumiya, Rajputs, Paswan/ Dusadh* of labourers as recorded in the register of advance and triangulated through empirical observations.

During my short stay in the home villages of Bihari migrant labourers in the Gaya district of Bihar, I met Jitender, the labourer who took me to the homes of other labourers in his village. He mentioned that labourers were recruited from all hamlets (*tolas*) of *Thakur, Bharti, Yadav, and Harijans* which were the different upper and lower castes in the village. So irrespective of belonging to the upper or lower caste, all labourers worked for Vasudev *thekedar*.

Mansur *ji*, a Muslim *thekedar* from Bihar, mobilised Hindu and Muslim Bihari *mistris* and helpers. Muslims labourers were from his near and extended family. The Hindu labourers belonged to upper and lower castes such as *Bhumiya, Rajputs, and Paswan/Dusadh* (Dalits from Bihar). They were recruited from villages near Mansur *ji*’s home village in Muzaffarpur district in Bihar. Alam *ji*, another Muslim *thekedar* from Bihar has 18 Hindu and Muslim labourers working on granite fittings at Rishabh’s site. Many of the labourers working for Mansur *ji* and Alam *ji* have been consistently working for their *thekedars* for building construction in the city over the last nine to ten years.

The above excerpts indicate that the system of advance does not necessarily select labourers based on their caste, religion, etc. However, the varying amounts of advance offered to Bihari labourers is indicative of the role of caste and kinship ties in shaping the *thekedar*’s ability to form and reproduce his labour network. Looking at the data

gathered from advance registers with the *munshi* working for Vasudev *thekedar*, most of the Bihari migrant labourers have been given an advance by their *thekedar*. The variation in the amount of cash advance offered by the *thekedar* to their labourers indicates different ‘price-tags’ attached to labour-power resulting in an unequal, differential mobilisation and commodification of labour-power (Mezzadri 2016a). At the same time, it also indicates different degrees of trust and loyalty between *thekedars* and labourers (Guérin *et al.* 2009, p249).

| Amount of advance | Labourers |
|--------------------------------|-----------|
| Less than ₹5000 | 32 |
| ₹5000- ₹10000 | 17 |
| ₹10000- ₹20000 | 10 |
| ₹20000- ₹40000 | 5 |
| More than ₹40000 | 3 |
| Total (approx.) ₹700000 | 67 |

Table 5.1: Advance taken by Bihari labourers working for Vasudev *thekedar*
(Source: Register of advance shown by the *munshi*, 2019)

The table indicates that a *thekedar* has offered ₹7,00,000 in advance. Eight out of the 67 labourers have a relatively higher advance than others i.e. more than ₹20,000. More than half of those working for Vasudev *thekedar* have a relatively lower advance i.e. less than ₹20,000. These eight labourers comprise the *munshi*, foreman and some *mistris* (skilled labourers) and helpers (unskilled labourers), who form the ‘core’ set of labourers for the *thekedar* in enabling surplus extraction. In enabling access to construction contracts, core and trusted workers are vital to a *thekedar*’s prospects of accumulation and in turn enabling surplus extraction. Some of these labourers are relatives of the *thekedar*, some from his own family or kin, or from the same caste, religion and village who form the core and trusted group of labourers. Such labourers have historically worked in building construction for the same *thekedar* or a different one. Owing to their ties with the *thekedar* and their ability to work, the core and trusted group of labourers are seen as more reliable, better skilled and with a better bargaining power with *thekedars* than the other labourers. This set of labourers reproduce a *thekedar*’s labour network enabling a share in surplus. A *thekedar* may often refer to such ‘core’ group of labourers as ‘permanent’ labourers.

Regarding advance, a *thekedar* from Bihar mentioned that some workers who take advance and do not like being instructed or supervised by the *thekedar*, work enough to pay off the advance and leave work. However, other workers who have been permanent and working with him take advance but may or may not pay it off through their work and instead ask for more advance.

Sonu *mistri* added that they could exercise their demand from their *thekedar* asking for a heavy sum of advance such as ₹1-2 lakh given that they consider themselves to be working ‘permanently’ for their *thekedar*.

“Permanent khate chhiye na aahun ke paas, toh advance toh kee 1 lakh, 2 lakh rupaiya advance dete.”

As indicated, some *mistris* i.e. skilled labourers who identify themselves as ‘core’ or permanent labourers can exercise their power in making demands from their *thekedar* concerning regular work, advance etc. However, the state of permanence of *mistris* is indicative of the retention of their labour-power for a longer period of time through a higher amount of advance. Such a network consisting of foreman, *munshi*, *mistris* and few helpers, who identify as permanent, enables hierarchies of labour control in reinforcing surplus extraction. In being given a relatively higher advance, a foreman and a *munshi* constitute the chain through which a *thekedar* operates at the construction worksite (Guérin *et al.* 2009; Pattenden 2012, 2016b) by labouring at the construction site alongside *mistris* and helpers. In this way, skilled abilities of the core and trusted labourers and their caste, kinship ties with *thekedars* are deployed as an element of labour control in organising the daily construction work for getting the work done. Further, such labourers share accommodation spaces in labour camps with other labourers based on skill and their caste-based ties. Moreover, the core and trusted group of labourers are seen as examples of hard-working Bihari labourers, invoking a sense of duty and discipline among other labourers (Picherit 2009). This is how Bihari-ness of a core and trusted group of Bihari labourers, reflected in their skill and social relations with *thekedars*, is constituted as a mechanism enabling exploitation by widening perimeters of labour control. In this case, Bihari-ness reifies social relations of caste, religion, and kinship ties between *thekedars* and Bihari labourers in forming a core and trusted labour network.

Apart from working alongside labourers, the foreman and *munshi* also perform specific roles for securing a *thekedar*’s share of surplus. For instance, while the foreman works

alongside labourers, his role is also to ensure the progress of everyday construction tasks (Wetlesen 2016, Pattenden 2016b). Similarly, while the *munshi* may also work at the construction sites, he is responsible for preparing and settling payment invoices from builders, based on foreman's observations and reports of tasks completed, and in turn managing wage payments to labourers. In this way, by using the system of cash advance in forming a core and trusted labour network and deploying the languages of morality of caste, village and kin-based identities, *thekedars* interlock labourers in forming and reproducing their labour network and extending hierarchies of labour control (De Neve 2005, 2008; Mezzadri 2016b, Picherit 2009, Raj 2023, Shah *et al.* 2017).

Apart from the core group of labourers who have a relatively higher amount of advance, a *thekedar* may also have labourers who do not take an advance. I also came across 25 out of 40 Bihari migrant labourers working for Vasudev *thekedar* who did not take advance.

Rajiv *munshi* working for Vasudev *thekedar*, highlighted that there are labourers who have not taken any advance from the *thekedar*, and are hired on monthly wage earnings, with subsistence amount deducted every week. He indicated that such labourers do not need immediate money to meet any family expenses to be mobilised to work. He also commented that they are more likely to move from one *thekedar* to the other and that they cannot be held captive to the *thekedar*.

Speaking with a few Bihari migrant labourers who were working for a *thekedar* without any advance, they indicated that without advance, they can get slightly better daily wage rates and ask the *thekedar* to settle their accounts every month.

As indicated, labourers who do not take an advance may not need any money for their immediate reproduction in the village. This also emerges from the internal differentiation of Bihari migrants as classes of labour in building construction. Such labourers can easily switch from *thekedar* to the other to earn better daily wage rates. Though the system of advance differentially mobilises and reserves labour-power in producing core and trusted labourers and others, this differentiation among labourers may limit their solidarity enabling a *thekedar* to reproduce his ability to accumulate surplus (Picherit 2009, p268). However, as I will indicate further in subsequent sections that Bihari labourers can mobilise their Bihari-ness in disrupting a *thekedar's*

ability to accumulate surplus. This is why a *thekedar* remains morally obliged to the core and trusted labourers, considering that they enable the reproduction of labour networks for capital accumulation.

In this way, deploying the languages of the morality of caste, village and kinship-based relations in differentially commodifying labour-power through the system of cash advance enables the formation of labour contracting networks. This is visible in the 'core or permanent' and trusted labourers formed by a *thekedar* through the mobilisation of labour-power. Bihari-ness of core and trusted labourers, reflected in their skill and social relations with *thekedars*, is deployed for extending labour control in enforcing exploitation.

5.2.2 Negotiating the reservation of labour-power: Availability of labour, work and wage rates

The mobilisation of 'core' and 'trusted' labourers determines the ability of *thekedars* to reproduce their labour networks using the system of advance. Further, *thekedars* follow different rules in giving advance- timing, amount etc., to reserve labour-power depending on the availability of construction work and that of labourers. The act of releasing advance by *thekedars* happens on a rolling basis, either in lumpsum or gradually (Guérin *et al.* 2009). This is because it is shaped by the demands of daily work at the construction worksites, the nature of sub-contracting relations and the seasonal availability of labour back in the villages.

Regarding advance taken by labourers and its impact on their journeys for work, Pramod *thekedar* shared that unless work is available at the worksite, they are not called to the work site.

“Haan advance leta hai, gaon toh kabhi bhi ja sakta. Koi do mahine, chh mahine rehta hai. Udhar se phone karega toh agar yahan kaam nahi hai toh bol dete hai rukne.”

Talking about advance being given to labourers, Sanjay *ji*, a *thekedar*, who has worked and stayed in Bangalore and Delhi, says that he needs to provide travel fare and around ₹5,000-10,000 needs to be given at the worker's home. Then, the workers come here and work to realise the advance. Suddenly, he just got a call. One labourer had called him from his village to join his labour gang and, if

he could receive an advance, to come to Hyderabad. Sanjay promised to send him ₹6,000 by the weekend, and then he could travel to Hyderabad.

However, Bihari migrant labourers who are also agricultural labourers in their village demand higher advance from the *thekedar* for reserving their labour-power during the agricultural harvest season. Such demands for higher advance which stem from their relative position as classes of labour doing agricultural work shape *thekedars'* ability to reserve labour-power. In this way, Bihari-ness rooted in classes of labour is deployed by for negotiation of labour-power under the *thekedari* system.

Speaking with one of the *mistris* in his village in Bihar whom I had met in the city, I gathered that *thekedars* had started to give travel fare and advance to mobilise labourers who could return to work at the sites after the festive season was over (celebrating Holi in March): ‘...*phagun mahina khatm hone ke baad nikal jaega, lekin koi na koi mard ghar par rehta hai, chahe babuji ya chahe aur koi.*’

Radhe *mistri* commented that during the season of Hindu marriage, a *thekedar* might have to give ₹20,000, ₹50,000, even ₹1-2 lakhs etc., as advance to retain labour-power considering the expenses incurred on marriage.

With regards to his *thekedar* and practice held more commonly across the villages in the vicinity, one of the *mistris* from Bihar elaborated on some rules of distribution of travel fare/advance with regards to work commitment of labourers: four months of work means both sides (i.e. from village to worksite and return) travel fare, three months means only one side fare, but those who come back within one month would not get any travel fare for any side but those who stay longer than six months would get one set of new clothes in addition to the travel fare.

For *thekedars*, retaining their labour-power for building construction work is necessary. However, the seasonality of a Bihari labourer who works in building construction and as an agricultural labourer impacts the ability of *thekedars* to retain labour-power. Further, the need for mobilising Bihari labourers during the marriage or festival season increases their ability to demand relatively higher advance from *thekedars*. However, *thekedars* devise perks and practices of offering advance, such as travel fare to construction sites, based on the period labourers can commit to working at the site (Picherit 2009). Breman, Guérin and Prakash (2009) discuss the ‘time-bound

attachment' of the system of advance not only in the case of the construction industry but also in the brick kilns, sugarcane industry etc. The *thekedars* use the time-bound attachment as a political tool in exercising their control over labourers for the duration of doing construction work. In this time-bound control over labour, *thekedars* offer much advance for retaining labourers. However, Bihari migrant labourers also use the seasonality of the time-bound attachment to bargain with the *thekedar*.

Beyond the availability of construction work, using the system of advance as a political tool is further hinged on and compounded by the nature of the sub-contractual relation, i.e., measurement or supply work. The nature of the work contract determines the number and the kind of labourers needed to be mobilised and reserved by the *thekedars*. In turn, this dictates the amount of advance a *thekedar* can offer Bihari migrant labourers or would be willing to, considering the profit margin expected by the *thekedar*.

In terms of taking an advance, Ranjan *thekedar* working on a supply basis, added that since a *thekedar* also needs workers, even if the worker asks for an advance of, say, ₹50,000, the *thekedar* might agree to pay irrespective of the kind of labourer. In urgent work, what matters for a *thekedar* is to get the work done. Hence neither the advance matters nor the type of labourer.

Mansur *ji*, sub-contracted for masonry work on a piece rate basis, commented that it was only because of quite a heavy amount of advance given to his *mistris* and helpers from Bihar that they have managed to continue working else. There is no guarantee and high chance they would switch to working for another *thekedar*. He continued saying: '*labor ki koi guarantee nahi hai, ek thekedar se doosre ko chale jaenge..jo tike hue hain unpar khoob sara advance hai.. kisi ke upar 1 lakh, kisi ke upar ₹50,000, ₹60,000 ya ₹70,000 etc.*'

There is no fixed amount of advance as one labourer could receive or ask. However, it could be as little as ₹3,000 to as high as ₹1,00,000. However, in urgent work or festive seasons, labourers are likely to receive a relatively higher advance to meet their expenses for reproduction. Bihari migrant labourers negotiate the system in times of seasonality and urgency of construction work. In this way, different classes of Bihari migrant labourers in building construction use the system of advance as a political tool in negotiating the reservation of their labour-power. In doing so, Bihari migrant

labourers mobilise their Bihari-ness in making specific demands in the architecture of surplus extraction.

5.2.3 Building a reputation as a 'good' *thekedar*: Producing consent in regulating advance

How and why do *thekedars* regulate the system of advance? In accepting an advance, Bihari migrant labourers consent to work at relatively lower wage rates. However, labourers can still escape working for their *thekedar* (De Neve 1999, Guérin *et al.* 2009) to work at relatively higher wage rates for another *thekedar*. Moreover, one labourer could take a sum of advance from two *thekedars* in labour mobilisation. *Thekedars* strike checks and balances on such behaviour to strengthen their labour network. They follow mechanisms to regulate the system of advance to build their reputation as a 'good' *thekedar*. How does this building a reputation shape the lived experience of exploitation?

In accepting an advance from *thekedars*, Bihari migrant labourers consent to work at reduced wage rates. While *thekedars* offer advance to retain Bihari migrant labourers, it reduces the daily wage rate relative to those labourers who fetch work from the labour *nakas* or do not take advance from *thekedars*. Interviews at construction sites indicate that multiple *thekedars* within the same kind of work, such as masonry or shuttering or in different works, offer different amounts of advance to their labourers, because of which the daily wage rate differs even for the same work at the construction site.

Speaking with one of the experienced *mistri* who has been working for Mansur *ji* for the last 15 years, I gathered in giving an advance though the *thekedar* charges no interest. A 'virtual' interest is returned by the daily work of a *mistri* who works on a relatively lower daily wage rate, i.e. ₹550/day, instead of being paid ₹700/day, the daily wage rate of a *naka*-based *mistri*. The *mistri* indicated that a *thekedar* will want to pay advance to attract a labourer and get away with paying relatively lesser wages. In advance, there is bondage (*bandish*); otherwise one might get a better daily wage rate.

On asking about the wage rate otherwise in the city, I was told that at the labour adda, labourers earn quite well. However, one *mistri* pointed out that they make

a relatively lesser daily wage because of the advance they need to pay back to the *thekedar*; however, they are free to ask for more advance from their *thekedar*.

“Hum toh pehle hi khoob advance le lete hain, 20,000-30,000 rupayya advance liye hue hain, toh bas kaam karke woh dheere dheere kat jata hai. Jab jarurat pade tab thekedar paisa deta hai.”

On comparing mobilising labourers from the *naka* vis-à-vis from the villages, Mansur *ji* commented that there is no regularity in finding work through the *naka*, unlike working at big sites where there is no issue of accommodation or expenses towards food. He gave an example of the irregularity of finding work through the *nakas*, which, even though fetching a higher wage rate, might yield relatively lesser incomes for the labourer over the week. He added that labourers working at these sites are paid somewhat less than *naka* labourers. However, they are likely to receive an advance if and when needed and are assured of daily work. He explained saying *naka* labourers usually find work only for two or three days a week, for which they are paid ₹800/day, amounting to ₹1,600 to ₹2,400 per week. However, migrant labourers working at the site work for all six days are paid ₹400 to ₹500 per day, amounting to ₹2,400 to 3,000 per week.

“Adda se kaam lene jaenge tab rahenge kahan, phir unko rent par room lena hoga. Kabhi haftah haftah kaam nahi milta hai, kabhi haftah mein do ya teen din mila. Daily adda par jao, kaam mila toh mila nahi toh wapas aana padta. Lekin yahan toh fix hai na. Daily kaam milega, paisa time pe milega, Haan yahan paisa kam milta hai, kabhi 20-25 hajar laga inko toh wo bhi milega. Union ke rate se koi worker kam mien bhi kaam karte toh koi jyada mein bhi karta hai. Kya hai ki adde par maan lijiye ek week mein do ya teen din kaam mila aur use ₹1,600 se 2400 mila lekin koi agar use chh din kaam dega toh wo bolega ki ₹400 ya ₹500 din ka, mein kaam karo ₹2400 se ₹3000 mil sakta hai..bahut saari baat hoti hai.”

The above excerpts indicate a clear relationship between the amount of advance taken by Bihari labourers and the applicable daily wage rates in working at construction sites. In accepting the reduced daily wage rates, Bihari migrant labourers pay ‘virtual’ interest to the *thekedar*, which is surplus in itself, reinforcing their exploitation (Banaji 2010, Guérin 2013). Bihari migrant labourers legitimise taking an advance on the grounds of the guarantee of regular work by their *thekedars* and the ability to exercise their power in demanding more advance from the *thekedar* (Mohapatra 2009). However, they know the motives of the *thekedar* to get away by paying relatively lesser

daily wage rates to labourers by instilling the need to ask for more advance. By tying Bihari migrant labourers (differentially) in advance of, but in relation to, construction work, a surplus is extracted and legitimised through reduced daily wage rates.

Though consent to working at reduced wage rates shapes the lived experience of exploitation, receiving an advance does not curtail the ability of labour to negotiate with *thekedars* (De Neve 1999, 2005). It is possible that labourers who have taken advance from one *thekedar* may switch working to another *thekedar*, showing their defiance in not working at reduced daily wage rates (De Neve 1999, Guérin *et al.* 2009). Moreover, it is possible that after taking an advance, some labourers could run away with the same and not turn up at worksites to work. During my fieldwork, the *thekedars* were cautious and hesitant to connect me with other *thekedars*. This was because they feared that I might pass on the information of the wages of their labourers to other *thekedars*, resulting in labourers switching to work for the other *thekedar*.

During my interview with a *munshi* from Chhattisgarh, he commented that with only an increase in wages by ₹10, labourers might switch from one *thekedar* to the other; however, if offered wages suit the labourers, they will continue to work for the same *thekedar*: ‘.....Labour ek *thekedar* se doosre *thekedar* ke paas ja sakta, ₹10 bhi koi badhakar dega wo chala jaega, lekin kisi ka agar ek *thekedar* ke paas jam gaya toh wo nahi jata.’

The above excerpts indicate the relative power exercised by labourers who work for a *thekedar*. They indicate the different modes of defiance of Bihari migrant labourers in using the ‘weapons of the weak’ while working for a *thekedar* and defiance aimed at demanding higher wage rates.

Moreover, under the advance-based relation, Bihari migrant labourers consider it their right to demand the continued availability of work in working for a *thekedar* (Mohapatra 2009) and hence hold *thekedar* responsible in situations where labourers might have to sit idle in having no work. In this way, Bihari migrant labourers who have taken an advance feel relatively less disposable and replaceable by their *thekedar*, as they can exercise their relative power in demanding work and not sit idle. In this way, Bihari labourers use their Bihari-ness rooted in the advance-based relation in demanding work. On the other hand, *thekedars* fear that in the likelihood of labourers remaining

idle, they would return to the village, making it difficult for *thekedars* to retain labourers. Additionally, *thekedars* fear that if Bihari labourers, whose labour-power has been reserved by paying cash in advance, are not allowed to circulate to the villages, they will not return to work later at the building sites. In turn, the possibility for *thekedars* to secure their share of the surplus in building construction work would be reduced. In this sense, *thekedars* are keen to minimise the idle-time of their labourers.

Continuing my interview with Baiju *ji*, a *thekedar* from Bihar, he added that usually, a worker goes to their village after every 4-5 months. Still, they are free to go otherwise as well. If they are not allowed to go even once, they won't return next time.

I asked a few *mistris* if they knew where they would work once their work at the site finishes: '*Kya aapko pata hai yeh site ke baad kahan jaenge?*' One of them immediately responded that a new site is fixed by their *thekedar* about three months before work ends at the current location: '*Kaam ek site par khatm hone ke do se teen mahine pehle doosra site fix ho jata hai. Site milega na. Jo humara thekedar hai wo bataega.*' I wondered if they had a moment where at one site, work was getting over but they had no clue about work at another location. The response was that it was impossible that they would have to sit idle as *thekedars* operate five to six different worksites: '*Aisa kaise ho sakta hai, aisa nahi ho sakta. Builder hai na, woh ek site lekar nahi chalta hai, paanch ya chh site lekar ghoomta hai.*

In regulating the system of advance, *thekedars* conceding to the demands of their labourers to circulate to their villages or for regular work reproduces their labour networks. Lerche (1995), drawing from the case of bonded labour relations in Eastern UP, indicates that granting concessions through a 'moral economy' in exploitative labour relations enables the generation of consent. In this case, it means *thekedars* need to grant some concessions, for instance, regular construction work, circulation to their villages etc., for reinforcing class relations. In this way, producing consent by granting concessions shapes the politics of the lived experience of exploitation of Bihari migrant labourers. They find themselves 'free' to circulate to their villages alongside exercising their demand for regular construction work.

Further, generating consent through concessions under the system of advance enables building the prestige and reputation of a *thekedar* which reproduces trust and

loyalty for his labourers (Picherit 2009, 2018a). A 'good' *thekedar* offers labourers regular work, payments etc., but may or may not belong to the same village or caste as that of the labourers (Guérin *et al.* 2009, p247-248; Sargent 2019). Further, a 'good' *thekedar* is willing to offer more advance to the labourers as and when needed but is also able to regulate the same through his word of mouth, network and connections (Guérin *et al.* 2009, p247-248; Picherit 2009).

On hearing about my study, one of the labourers shared that there are two kinds of *thekedar* - good and bad. Bad ones run away with the money they owe to the labourers, and such *thekedars* are the ones the government should catch hold of.

Hanging out at the tea shops near the construction sites, during my conversation on advance with some workers, one commented that they are free to ask for a higher advance anytime if they continue to work overtime or double duty.

“Sharma ji [thekedar] paisa theek se deta hai, aise bolta hai chalo beta ye kaam kar do. Advance kabhi bhi mil jaata hai koi dikkat nahi hai. Sharma ji bolta hai ki double duty karo, kamane aaye hain toh double karo, shaam ke chh ya saath baje free rehte hain thoda chai naasta ke liye.”

They are on duty till 11 pm, after which they head back to their room.

'Bad' *thekedars* in the village could resort to using violence in retrieving their advance or charging interest on their advance from the labourers hired from their village or not paying their labourers. However, those with a reputation as a 'good' *thekedar* would remain quiet and cause no harm to their labourers. In the same way, labourers may also use their force upon the 'bad' *thekedars* who do not pay the labourers on time etc. This is reflected in how *thekedars* devise strategies to make labourers repay the advance taken in case the labourer has not worked at the site. This does not mean that *thekedars* coerce the labourers to take an advance.

In cases when a labourer leaves working for a *thekedar* and has outstanding advance against which the labourer has not worked (for instance, the sum could be around ₹30,000 taken by individuals in the same household), a *thekedar* does not have a problem or does not reveal the issues he is facing. This is because if the *thekedar* demands the money by any physical means, it sends a bad name to other labourers who don't work for the *thekedar*, affecting his potential of accumulating surplus through building construction. In other cases, if the

advance is from the same household, other family members could work and earn the advance paid by the *thekedar*.

I was sitting with Jitender, a labourer working for *thekedar* from Domri village, in Gaya, Bihar, at the local shopkeeper's wooden bed kept outside the shop by the main road. Two *thekedars*, well-known in the village, dropped by to buy something from the shop. Suddenly Jitender stopped talking, was quiet and slightly lowered his head. Later I asked him what had happened. He mentioned that he still has to repay one of the *thekedars* his outstanding advance. I asked him if he was worried that the *thekedar* would question him, to which he confidently smiled and said that even though he feels ashamed of having not repaid the advance he had taken, the *thekedar* would not say anything to him: '*Nahi, thekedar kuch nahi bolega. Gaon ka hain na, roj milna hota hai. Haan humko thoda sharm aata hai ki uska paisa liye hue hain.*'

In fact, 'good' *thekedars* do not exercise force in case labourers switch working from one *thekedar* to the other in having taken an advance. Employing coercion would classify *thekedars* as 'bad' *thekedars* in the labour contracting networks diminishing their potential to find 'loyal and trustworthy' labourers and, in turn, reducing their prospects of accumulation. Labourers as well build their trust and loyalty for *thekedars* as 'good' labourers by being content in working without complaining, showing respect to their *thekedar* etc. (Picherit 2009, p269; 2018a), which enables *thekedars* to accumulate.

Moreover, *thekedars* use their reputation as 'good' *thekedars* to reproduce their labour networks by not offering an advance to labourers and still being able to mobilise labourers by paying workers on time even during delayed payments from builders.

I asked Sonu *mistri* if an advance was compulsory for *thekedars* to give to their labourers. He commented that it was not the case. He gave an example saying for his *thekedar*, Satyanarayan Singh, who has 200 labourers from Bihar working for him, workers even come without advance or travel fare as he pays the workers on time irrespective of the delay in payments by the company/builders. They also added that he would even send his labourers by flight in emergencies.

However, only those 'good' *thekedars* with a large surplus can pay labourers on time amidst delayed payment by builders. For instance, in the above case, Sonu *mistri* identified Satyanarayan Singh as a millionaire in his village. Being a 'good' *thekedar*,

in this case, indicates that one may still mobilise labourers without giving an advance. Inserting Bihari migrant labourers into production relations without being coerced into taking an advance indicates the close intertwining of the moral economy of advance with the exercise of class-based power. Moreover, ideas of the goodness of a *thekedar* emerge from a sense of morality. However, a 'good' *thekedar* uses his class-based power to persuade labourers to work overtime in agreeing to offer more advance and reinforcing class relations. Bihari labourers challenge this class-based power. I came across three to four *mistris* who left working for Mansur *ji*, considered a 'good' *thekedar*.

Afzal *mistri*, who was Mansur *ji*'s maternal uncle and worked for him, mentioned that if his *thekedar* did not give him money on time, he would not return to work again for him and would then find a new *thekedar*.

“Agar thekedar mujhe time par paisa nahi dega, ghar bhejne ke liye ya khane ke liye paisa nahi dega, tab main doobara uske paas kaam nahi karunga. Main doosre thekedar ke paas kaam karunga.”

Labourers from Chhattisgarh who were working for another contractor but had been taken up by Mansur *ji* had also come to ask for their weekly expenses. These two labourers abused their earlier contractor as he always scolded them for anything and everything. They were unhappy with their contractor as he wanted work to be done quickly. Dinesh *mistri* narrated an incident in which Mansur *ji* had labourers from Chhattisgarh who had switched working under Mansur *ji* to a Telugu contractor owing to delayed payments from Mansur *ji*.

“Ek kissa hua ki Mansur ka labour jo Chhattisgarh ka tha who sab Telugu wale thekedar ke paas chala gaya, double paisa de raha tha. Woh labour log ka 10 se 12,000 rupaiya nikal raha tha lekin Mansur bola ki dete hain dete hain, phir woh sab chhod diya.”

Despite having worked for five to six years with the same *thekedar*, *mistris* who were a part of the *thekedar*'s core and trusted group of labourers were no longer loyal to him and switched to working for another *thekedar*. This happened after the working hours were intensified and stricter mechanisms on the quality of work were imposed on the *mistris* and helpers. Labourers could likely switch from one 'good' *thekedar* to the other in search of advance and looking for overtime, a better wage rate or otherwise dignity and respect as a Bihari labourer (Roy 2020). In this way, Bihari-ness, invoked through the demand of dignity and respect emerges from the lived experience

of exploitation of Bihari labourers. However, by binding trusted and loyal labourers to their contracting network, 'good' *thekedars*, generate consent through concessions to reorient class and caste-based oppressions in reinforcing exploitation under the *thekedari* system. In this way, being 'good' as a *thekedar* legitimises and deepens their ability to oppress labourers. For instance, though Bihari migrant labourers switched to working for or searching for a better *thekedar*, there was a possibility for their return to the old and good *thekedar*. In this way, switching from one *thekedar* to the other in building construction aims to defy or challenge the paternal authority of *thekedars* (Chakrabarty 1983). However, such 'weapons of the weak' strengthen the exploitation-oppression nexus under the *thekedari* system (Chakravarty 2001b, Lerche and Shah 2018).

In regulating the system of advancing cash for building construction work, Bihari migrant labourers consent to work at relatively reduced wage rates. However, by mobilising their Bihari-ness, they demonstrate their defiance against or negotiation with *thekedars* by switching from one *thekedar* to another, demanding regular construction work or more advance. Such a combination of consent and defiance composes the politics of the lived experience of exploitation. Avoiding coercion in regulating advance enables *thekedars* to build their reputation as 'good' *thekedars* in the *thekedari* system. However, reputation as a 'good' *thekedar* has the ability to reorient mechanisms of oppression by producing consent through granting concessions in reinforcing surplus extraction.

5.3 Discussion

The production relations under the *thekedari* system in guaranteeing regular construction work enable the incorporation of Bihari migrant labourers into building construction. This takes place by mobilising Bihari migrant labourers in guaranteeing the availability of labour-power for surplus extraction.

The mobilisation process entails caste and kinship-based recruitment through the contracting networks of *thekedars* (Prasad-Aleyamma 2009). For *thekedars*, retention of labour-power is central to their accumulation. To be able to do so, most *thekedars* are keen to offer advance, however, to selected labourers. Moreover, some Bihari

labourers may not take advance from their *thekedar* to avoid being controlled by the *thekedar*. However, caste, village and kinship ties are deployed to form and maintain a 'core' and trusted pool of workers by offering relatively higher amounts of advance (De Neve 2008) to selected labourers. Alongside the core and trusted labourers, the *thekedar* may have a few who work without taking an advance. Such a process of mobilising a trusted network of labourers by differentially commodifying labour-power reproduces the labour networks of *thekedars* (Mezzadri 2016b). Apart from enabling the mobilisation of labourers, the significance of core and trusted labourers is to enable the hierarchy of control in the everyday construction work by serving as examples of hard-working Bihari labourers, and invoke a sense of duty among labourers (Picherit 2009). This is how Bihari-ness of a core and trusted group of Bihari labourers, reflected in their skill and caste, kinship ties with *thekedars*, is constituted as a mechanism enabling exploitation by widening perimeters of labour control. In this way, the differentiation process among labourers in giving advance and deciding its amount is integral to reproducing a *thekedar's* ability to accumulate surplus. However, by mobilising Bihari-ness, classes of Bihari labourers as construction labourers negotiate the reservation of their labour power by demanding advance based on seasonality of agricultural work. Further, it enables the organisation and reproduction of a system of migrant labour. As a result, the system of advance constitutes another component of the *thekedari* system which serves as the political apparatus of production.

In organising and reproducing a system of migrant labour, both *thekedars* and labourers exercise relative control in using the system of advance as a 'political' tool in reinforcing class relations. The lived experience of exploitation of Bihari migrant labourers is composed through their consent to and defiance of exploitative labour relations. However, in regulating the system of advance, *thekedars* exercise caution in coercing labourers over their demand to circulate to their villages or restraining them from switching from one *thekedar* to the other for work. Whilst the reputation of 'good' *thekedars* is embedded in a moral and economic relationship, *thekedars* use it to reproduce their labour networks enabling and widening their class-based domination. Though *thekedars* from Bihar in building construction mainly belong to the upper caste and exercise their class-based domination through caste-based and patriarchal modes of oppression, class-based domination is also exercised by the lower caste *thekedars* (Chakravarti 2001a; 2018, p9; Chari 2004; Picherit 2009; Olsen and Murthy

2000; Rogaly 2003). The class-based domination exercised by *thekedars* enables them to build their reputation as 'good' *thekedars*, reproduce labour contracting networks and reinforce surplus extraction. Beyond serving as an element of control, *thekedars* use the system of advance as a political tool to reproduce their labour network and develop their reputation as a *thekedar*, enabling their prospects for accumulation. At the same time, Bihari migrant labourers can use their Bihari-ness in disrupting a *thekedar's* prospects of accumulation.

Existing literature indicates that those who offer the advance, in this case, *thekedars* exercise their power and control in shaping the exploitative labour relation. However, my findings suggest that as classes of labour, Bihari migrant labourers exercise relative power over *thekedars* in accepting or not accepting an advance (De Neve 1999). This differentiation in commodifying labour-power is central to enabling *thekedars* to accumulate. At the same time, developing a core and trusted labour network can expand the apparatus of thekedars to exercise control in everyday construction work. I indicate that the advance-based relation is constituted on 'moral economy' grounds as it valorises the mutual and reciprocal relation between *thekedars* and labourers (Scott 1976). In this way, the system of advance initiates a mutual agreement, a kind of give-and-take relationship between *thekedars* and labourers in building trust and dependence (Bhukuth, Ballet and Guérin 2007; De Neve 1999, 2005; Guérin 2009) through the mobilisation and recruitment of labour for building construction work. However, the advance-based relation legitimises, preserves and reinforces the process of surplus extraction (Guérin 2013). In this way, the politics of the system of advance configures class relations.

5.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that the system of advance serves as a political tool in configuring class relations. The *thekedari* system enables and reproduces the mobilisation of labour-power through the politics of the system of advance. The compulsion of Bihari migrant labourers to secure their reproduction needs makes them compliant to exploitation and, at the same time, capable of navigating their exploitative labour relations. This is visible in the Bihari-ness emerging from classes of labour in building construction. The system of advance operates through the mutual interaction

of a 'moral economy' relationship between *thekedars* and labourers; and the exercise of class-based domination by *thekedars* (Lerche 1995, Scott 1976). This mutual interaction, I argue, shapes the system of advance as a political tool in reproducing labour networks for reinforcing surplus extraction. This occurs by mobilising 'core' and 'trusted' labourers, negotiating the reservation of labour power and regulating the system of advance.

By giving cash in advance to mobilise and retain labourers, *thekedars* enable the relations of the labour process for surplus extraction. Though the advance-based relation indicates mutual trust and dependency between *thekedars* and labourers, it does not curtail the ability of labourers to negotiate with *thekedars*. This is demonstrated by labourers switching from one *thekedar* to the other, running away from working for a *thekedar* to a better one, negotiating, or demanding a relatively higher amount of advance in renewing the labour relation, indicative of how Bihari labourers mobilise their Bihari-ness in negotiating the architecture of surplus extraction. However, exercising demands for regular work, higher advance or switching to work for a different *thekedar* produces consent and defiance among Bihari labourers composing the lived experience of exploitation. As a result, *thekedar*-labour relation remains fragile and contested (Chandavarkar 2008), given the power labourers can wield in the advance-based relation. In this way, using the system of advance as a political tool shapes the lived experience of exploitation in reinforcing surplus extraction.

Beyond the mobilisation of labour-power for building construction work, the realisation and renewal of labour-power complete the architecture of surplus extraction under the *thekedari* system. The following chapter explains how class relations are shaped by the organisation of the relations in production, i.e. the realisation of labour-power in building construction work.

Chapter 6: Organising Construction Work in the *Thekedari* System

The sub-contracting relation between builders and *thekedars* and the reproduction of a labour network of Bihari migrant labourers through the system of advance composes the *thekedari* system as the political apparatus of production. But how do *thekedars* and builders organise everyday construction under the *thekedari* system for enabling and reinforcing surplus extraction? How does it configure class relations?

Answering the above questions is the central aim of this chapter. In the recent literature, both in the building construction industry (Mosse *et al.* 2002, Srivastava and Jha 2016) and beyond, such as garments, the role of the *thekedar* has emerged as central to organising the process of production (Chandavarkar 2008, De Neve 2014). In recent scholarship, in the case of the garment industry, the *thekedar* not only meets the demands of the production process but also secures a share in the process of surplus extraction (Mezzadri 2016b, 2016c). While literature is available on the labour process in building construction (Jain and Sharma 2019; Lerche *et al.* 2017; Shivakumar, Sheng and Weber 1991; Srivastava and Jha 2016), what remains unknown is how the organisation of everyday construction work by *thekedars* and builders enable the securing and obscuring of surplus? The chapter aims to fill this gap in the literature.

I argue that surplus extraction is enforced by subcontracting construction work on piece and time rates and by deploying, valorising and controlling Bihari-ness as a culturally specific form of labour-power in building construction. However, the surplus remains concealed in recording the work and calculating wage payments by legitimising differential wage rates for labourers. The builders exercise control over the labour process by organising the sequence of construction work subcontracted on piece rate and time rate work. Surplus extraction is enabled by organising tasks for *thekedars* by fragmenting the building construction process. Following this, the *thekedar*, foreman and *munshi* organise the everyday tasks under piece-rate and time-rate work at the site.

Further, differential wage rates for labourers based on skill and incorporating specific forms of labour-power enable securing surplus. However, a surplus is obscured in recording and calculating wages by withholding and deferring the payments. In this way, the organisation of the everyday construction work alongside deploying, valorising and reinforcing Bihari-ness configures class relations.

The chapter starts by providing a framework for securing and obscuring surplus in the *thekedari* system by organising construction work based on time. Further, it explains the difference between the organisation of measurement-based and supply-based construction work as distinct modes of surplus extraction and highlights the extent of surplus accumulation. Subsequently, the chapter indicates how Bihari-ness is valorised, deployed, and controlled to enable different modes of surplus extraction. Following this, the chapter pays attention to securing and obscuring surplus by calculating wage payments and builder's records of work, wage payments etc. Before concluding, the chapter provides a discussion based on the empirical findings and indicates vital contributions.

6.1 Securing, obscuring and legitimising surplus: Time-based organisation of construction work

In sub-contracting different stages of building construction work for the realisation of labour-power, time is central in defining and controlling the terms and conditions of exploitation in building construction work (Lerche *et al.* 2017, Sargent 2018, Srivastava and Jha 2016). This notion of time guides the organisation of everyday construction work in enabling surplus extraction.

Surplus extraction in building construction occurs through subcontracting building construction work on a piece-rate and time-rate basis. In Marxian terms, processes through which surplus value is extracted in piece-rate and time-rate work happen in absolute and relative terms. Absolute surplus value means the extension or the prolongation of the working day for labourers, i.e. the necessity for labourers to work overtime. However, the relative surplus value indicates the curtailment of the necessary labour time, i.e., the time labourers take to reproduce themselves. In building construction, the surplus is extracted in absolute and relative terms. While

work intensification is at the centre of piece-rate or measurement-based work, it is the extension of the working day crucial to time-rate or supply-based work.

The builders subcontract the second stage of construction work on a piece-rate and time-rate basis to different *thekedars* at a construction worksite. Migrant labourers primarily work in a labour-intensive stage of building construction. The extraction of surplus in construction work is secured through the hierarchy of builders, *thekedars*, foreman and *munshi*, who organise and regulate the tasks on a piece-rate and time-rate basis. The builders set the daily or weekly targets for the construction activities and fragment the tasks for different *thekedars* at the construction site sub-contracted on a piece-rate or time-rate basis in enabling their share of the surplus.

Further, the records of the daily work or the work output as per the work order indicate the process and extent of surplus extraction. The calculation of payments to the *thekedars* by the builders and wage payments to the labourers by the *thekedars* indicate the process of securing and obscuring surplus. The builders display 'fixed' daily wage rates that apply for the payments made to the *thekedars* at the construction site based on the skill of migrant labourers, i.e. skilled, semi-skilled or unskilled. However, this daily wage rate enables *thekedars* to secure their surplus by entering into a sub-contracting relation at an 'appropriate' worksite based on which wage rates for labourers are decided.

I gathered that the wage rate for *mistri* hired from the *naka* was ₹900/day or more in Hyderabad. However, wage rates for contractual *mistri* at the site varied between ₹ 500 - 900/day. Dinesh *mistri* commented on the wage rates, stating that according to government regulations, labourers receive ₹600, while *mistri* is paid ₹1,000. However, workers working on such rates would work only for a fixed time.

“Sarkari rate ke hisab se yahan labour ka 600 rupaiya aur mistri ka 1000 rupaiya hai; lekin woh sab ka time fix rehta hai, jyada kaam nahi karta hai, time se aayega aur time se jaaeyga.”

Mansur *ji* further commented that when *naka*-based labourers come to work at large construction sites, they cannot demand wage rates applicable at the *naka*. For instance, if the daily wage rates for *naka*-based *mistris* and helpers for bricklaying and plastering are ₹700 and ₹500, respectively, they cannot demand the same wage rates when they work for *thekedars* at construction sites such as

Rishabh's. Instead, they would get ₹500 and ₹300 respectively. This is because *thekedars* fix the daily wage rates at such construction sites depending on the wage rates fixed by the builders.

In calculating wage payments to labourers, the system of differential wage rates is applicable at a construction site which is decided by *thekedars* (Guérin *et al.* 2009). The builders offer, what I call, an 'asking wage rates' for *thekedars* to secure surplus, which is negotiated by *thekedars*. However, I found no 'fixed' wage rate at a construction site applicable for labourers. It is not 'fixed' even for the same kind of work at the same skill level for the same *thekedar*. Instead, the daily wage rates are shaped by production relations under the *thekedari* system. The daily wage rates applicable to skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled labour could differ depending on the nature of construction sites, type of construction work, i.e. masonry or shuttering, and modes in which surplus is extracted, i.e. piece-rate or time-rate. It is further guided by the contract between builders and *thekedars*, which defines the terms and conditions of payments for the construction work.

In urgent construction work, it may be possible to negotiate wage rates. Moreover, the wage rates for labourers could differ across Bengali and Bihari *thekedars* and even among Bihari migrant labourers who work for the same *thekedar*. The daily wage rates are also shaped by the advance taken by labourers, which differentially commodifies labour-power setting the basis for differential exploitation (Mezzadri and Majumdar 2020). Further, the calculation of daily wage depends on the advance and weekly subsistence, i.e. *khuraki* offered by *thekedars*.

In this way, the daily wage rates are 'differentially' applied or 'variably fixed' for culturally specific forms of labour-power and legitimised under specific conditions of production and reproduction, in this case, the *thekedari* system (Hall 1986, Mezzadri and Majumdar 2020, Prasad-Aleyamma 2017). Such a system enables securing surplus in building construction. However, the surplus remains obscured through the terms and conditions of the work contract between *thekedars* and builders, records of work and by advancing and deferring wage payments (Breman 1996, 2014; Guérin *et al.* 2009). Below I explain the significance and differences in the work organisation under the piece-rate and time-rate basis for enabling surplus extraction.

6.1.1 Surplus Extraction in measurement-based construction work

In organising masonry work at the site run by Rishabh Builders and Developers, builders allocated a specific number of villas for masonry to *thekedars* from Bihar. By specific division of the number of the buildings to different *thekedars* on a piece-rate basis, the builder can monitor the progress of the work, and *thekedars* can secure their share of the surplus. 14 of the 80 villas under construction were subcontracted to Mansur *ji* from Bihar and his brother Shahid *ji* for masonry work. In measurement-based construction work, a *thekedar's* payments from the builders depend on the output of work done to secure surplus. The measured work output is central to securing a surplus in measurement-based construction work. To achieve the same, the foreman and *munshi* of the *thekedar* organise the everyday tasks by allocating daily targets to *mistris*, i.e. skilled labourers and their helpers.



Figure 6.1: Construction Site A – Rishabh Builders and Developers
(Source: Photographed by the author, 2019)

6.1.1a Organisation of masonry work

I asked Mansur *ji* about planning the daily work in masonry for the villas contracted by the builders. A *thekedar*, as Mansur *ji* highlighted, needs to possess the knowledge and set targets for daily work. However, the *munshi* organises, supervises and manages the daily work at the site as instructed by the *thekedar*. My ongoing conversation with the *thekedar* was suddenly interrupted by the *munshi*.



Figure 6.2: Masonry work at Rishabh's site
(Source: Photographed by the author, 2019)

Ahmad *munshi* came to discuss *mistri* and helper distribution with Mansur *ji* for transporting sandbags to the villa, where a cement mixture was needed for plastering. The *thekedar* got irritated and told him to see the work available for the *mistris* and then think accordingly to get helpers but not do the reverse just because you have extra helpers waiting to get work for the day. Later, additional labourers can be put to some other work.



Figure 6.3: A helper transporting bricks (left); and Brick laying and plastering by *mistris* (centre and right) (Source: Photographed by the author, 2019)

The *thekedar's* response indicates that under piece-rate based work, *mistris* are allocated work based on the work requirement according to which helpers receive work. To meet the targets, the *munshi* closely supervises the work of the helpers to support the work of *mistris*. *Mistris* require helpers in a 1:2 or 1:1 ratio (Srivastava and Jha 2016). In piece-rate-based work, the availability of work for the day shapes the distribution of work to labourers, i.e. *mistris* and helpers, to finish the work on time.

Ahmad *munshi* highlighted that he has to keep an idea for allocating work to *mistris* and helpers. But if there is any problem in the quality of work, then the *munshi* has to intervene. He said the task is based on his mind, '*ye poorā mind*

ka kaam hai.' Giving an example, he highlighted that in case the *seth* [referring to the *thekedar*] gives him a target, then according to his understanding, he puts in 4 *mistris* for some work. He asked me to observe the scaffolding structure being prepared for the day the helpers were seen transporting the iron rods. Looking at the helpers building the scaffolding, he commented that till the time scaffolding happens, it is not considered to be 'work' unless *mistri* has been able to do some plastering for the day: '*Jab tak scaffolding structure banega, tab tak kuch nahi hua. Thekedar bolega koi kaam nahi hua. Tabhi kuch hoga, jab mistri plastering karega.*' I could sense that the *munshi* was pushing the helpers to transport the rods faster so the structure could be made sooner.

The above excerpt suggests the significant role played by the *munshi*, who also serves as the foreman in this case, in organising and controlling tasks for *mistris* and helpers.

On asking Afzal *mistri* (name changed) if labourers receive a daily target to finish work, he replied in the affirmative. He added that those *mistris* who can earn fast could complete their work in two hours. However, those earning slowly could not finish the same task in eight hours. "*Haan, daily ka target milta hai, usi mein jo fast kamane waala hai wo jaldi kar leta hai, slow wala thoda time leta hai. Jitna kaam diya utna karo aur chutti karo, ab chahe koi us kaam ko 2 ghanta mein kar de aur koi 8 ghanta mein bhi nahi kar paye.*"

In piece-rate work, 'work is considered to be done' only when the *mistri* can produce the output by finishing the task as instructed and on time with support from helpers. The rate at which *mistris* finish the assigned work is of significance. The availability of work rather than labour-power and the 'rate at which work is done' defines the organisation of everyday work under piece-rate contracts that shape surplus extraction. This is because a *thekedar's* payment is linked to the timed output of work as outlined in the terms and conditions of their contract with builders. To ensure surplus is secured, work is intensified. As a result, labourers may work more than the 'working day' of eight hours or less to finish the work on time.

6.1.1b Surplus accumulation in measurement work

The payments to *thekedars* on piece-rate work depend on the contracted construction work output. The rate at which work is done is central to *thekedars* receiving payments from the builders. Mansur *ji* showed me his work contract of ₹80 lakhs. Under the

agreement, different stages of masonry work were paid differently; hence, *thekedars* calculated profit and loss at each stage.

Mansur *ji* commented that he was incurring losses at certain stages of construction but making profits in other stages within masonry works. For instance, Mansur *ji* was paid ₹120/sq. ft for constructing concrete slabs [a hardened mixture of cement and water in a rectangular form used for each floor in a building] for each villa measuring 4500sq.ft, wherein the company bears the cost of concrete material. Flipping through the contract pages, Mansur *ji* mentioned that he would not show it to his competitor [safe to say that I was not a potential competitor]. He commented that he has been bearing heavy losses as work started much after the agreement was made and that the contract rates for the work order were finalised at ₹30/sq. ft less than he had expected. He further remarked that he did not incur losses in constructing four concrete slabs for the ground, 1st, 2nd and 3rd floors with a profit of ₹40,000 for each slab. Though he could profit ₹2.5 lakh for building one villa, he was, however, only making a profit of ₹1.6 lakh (₹40,000*4) because of the reduced contract rates.

“Bahut loss ho raha...kaam baad mein chaalu kiya agreement pehle kar liya, builder ₹30 per sq. ft kam paise de raha, slab dhaalne mein loss nahi hai, ground floor mein loss nahi hai, char slabs mein ₹40,000 profit...aapse jhooth nahi bol raha apne dhandhe wale ko yeh nahi batate...villa ka 1st, 2nd and 3rd floor ko milakar lagbhag ₹1.5 lakh profit aata lekin asal mein ₹2.5 lakhs aana chahi, log ke upar extra kharch hota hai...bahut saari baatein hoti hai...bahut kuch sochna padta hai. 10% margin toh nahi ke barabar hai...wo toh kharche mein chale jata hai.”

Mansur *ji*'s emphasis on incurring loss indicates the extent of surplus that could be accumulated further. Further, there is no record of daily work. However, records of the work outputs are kept to receive payments from builders. Mansur *ji* further indicated that he could have earned a higher profit if only the rates at which the contract was finalised was ₹150/sq. ft. Moreover, he noted that the builder offered him the contract at reduced daily wage rates, because of which he had to pay lesser daily wages to the labourers.

The excerpt indicates the hierarchy through which wage rates work at the construction site, obscuring the accumulated surplus. Further, Mansur *ji* showed his contract that mentioned all terms and conditions and the wage rates of *mistri* and helpers. However,

I noticed different wage rates at the worksite, even within the same kind of work and working for the same *thekedar*.

The wage rates for *mistris* and helpers working at large construction sites such as site A were relatively lower than that of the *naka*. For instance, a *mistri* could receive ₹600/day, but another could receive ₹450/day. Another *mistri* commented on the reduced wage rates that since they initially take a lot of advance ranging between ₹20000- 30000 from the *thekedar*, they work to pay it off. The *thekedar* gives them *khuraki* close to ₹1000 every week.

“Hum toh pehle hi khoob advance le lete hain, 20,000 se 30,000 rupayya advance liye hue hain, toh bas kaam karke woh dheere dheere kat jata hai. Jab jarurat pade tab thekedar paisa deta hai. Waise har shanivaar khuraki milta hai ek haftah ka, samajhiye ₹1000 lagbhag.”

The relatively lower and differential wage rates offered by the *thekedar* are legitimised based on the advance taken. Further, it enables *thekedars* to secure their share of the surplus. In this way, the surplus is secured in piece-rate work. Surplus is obscured in measurement work, as *thekedars* are paid on work outputs, but labourers receive daily wages.

In piece-rate work, *thekedars* are concerned with maximising the output of construction work to finish the allocated work in time. The *thekedars* earn different amounts of surplus from *mistris* and helpers as it is the rate at which work is done at the sites which enable *thekedars* to secure their surplus. In this arrangement, *thekedars* are keen to not simply maintain but enhance their share of the surplus to maximise the output in a shorter time. How does the organisation of work for securing surplus differ in time-rate work?

6.1.2 Surplus Extraction in supply-based construction work

The total daily hours worked at the site is central to surplus extraction in supply-based work. A *thekedar's* payments are linked to the hours worked by *mistris* and helpers. At site B, six building towers, each of 22 floors, were being constructed for offices in the IT industry. Around 40-50 *thekedars* worked on a supply basis only in shuttering (or centring) and bar-bending, also known as reinforcement steel work.



Figure 6.4: Construction Site B (BSS)

(Source: Photographed by the author, 2019)

6.1.2a Organisation of shuttering work

Shuttering work requires the setting up the wooden planks or steel plates that provide a mould for the concrete and support it until its set. In large-scale building works for residential and commercial purposes, mostly steel plates/rods/sheets are used for shuttering instead of wood, plywood or timber. Hence, in the construction stage, shuttering depends on the steel work done by labourers and is also the foundation before concrete work can occur.

A *thekedar* mobilises carpenters (i.e. *mistris* working with wood or steel for shuttering) and helpers at the site. Both foreman and *munshi* employed by the *thekedar* oversee labourers' shuttering work and manage their daily living, respectively. *Thekedars* who are subcontracted construction work on a supply basis are mainly absent from the worksite, considering that payments are based on the headcount of labourers. Based on what the site engineer instructs, the foreman hired by the company instructs the

foreman of the *thekedar* to plan and allocate the work among his labourers. Both foreman and *munshi* are directed as per the engineer and his drawing.

To a mason from West Bengal, I asked the question of planning the work at the site by putting labourers of two different *thekedars* into one activity. He highlighted that if the work is about cleaning and housekeeping, which mostly requires unskilled labour, it does not matter if labourers of more than one *thekedar* are put into one activity. However, if the work involves any skill, such as shuttering, steel work, etc., labourers of different *thekedars* are not put into one activity in a particular area. Every area to be built at BSS has an in-charge and an engineer. Each *thekedar* for one work (also called activity for the day) gets a separate area of work, and in one given area of work, labourers of more than one *thekedar* do not work. However, within one area, there might be different *thekedars* for different stages of work. Daily, the foreman (or *munshi*) organises labourers into different gangs based on the area-wise work as allotted by the engineer. He said that workers are allotted based on the work requirements.

The above excerpt indicates that the area allocated within the site is critical to determining work put in by labourers working for the same *thekedar* in construction that requires skills such as shuttering, steel work etc. It also suggests that only the labourers of the same *thekedar* can work within the same area as allocated by the site engineer. At BSS, since labourers work for different *thekedars* on a supply basis, a daily organisation of work is required at the site, enabling builders to keep track of work done by labourers of each *thekedar*. Organising labourers to work in the desired area is the task of the *munshi*; however, overseeing the work being put in is undertaken by the foreman.

I asked the labourers about the daily work planning done by the *munshi*. Rajiv *munshi* said that the building company staff or engineer, based on the drawing of the building, lets the *munshi* know how many labourers (carpenters and helpers) would be required in a particular area based on which the *munshi* manages the labour allocation.

“Sahab log, staff log, engineer log kaam batate rehta hai aur bolte rehta hai mujhe ki kidhar kitna aadmi chahiy usi hisab se hum set kar dete hain.”

Further, I asked if he also rotates the labourers daily from one area to the other. He replied that if he rotates, say, any of the four labourers put to work in an area, it would be detrimental to the work's progress as the labourers' rotation would confuse them, and they would daily have to be told what needs to be done.

“Ek jagah shuttering kar raha agar 4 labour toh doosra din usi ko daalenge tab na wo kaam ko aage badhaega nahi toh kisi aur ko daalenge toh usko phir se sab kuch batana padega. Confuse ho jaega labour.”

In supply-based work, work is considered completed after a certain number of labourers have worked 8 hours, or 12 hours including four hours overtime, indicating the significance of the ‘total number of man-hours worked’. However, daily work is planned by building site engineers and supervised by the *thekedar*'s foreman. The foreman distributes the work to the *mistri* and helper in a 1:2 or 1:1 ratio. The *thekedars* working on time rate accumulate surplus based on the daily headcount of labourers, i.e. carpenters, supervisors (foremen) and helpers and the number of hours they work at the site.

| Time-based organisation of construction work | Piece-rate | Time-rate |
|---|---|--|
| Basis of organisation | Measurement of the output | Supply, i.e., headcount of labour |
| Payment from builders to <i>thekedar</i> | Measured output of work done as per contract | Total number of man hours per labourer |
| The everyday organisation of construction work | Availability of work, not labour-power | Availability of labour-power |
| When is work done? | When <i>mistri</i> produces the output | When 12 hours are over |
| Overtime | Depends on the <i>thekedar</i> | Yes (4 hours every day) |
| Modes of surplus extraction | Intensification of work for which labourers need to do more work in less time | Extension of the working day for which labourers need to work overtime |

Table 6.1: Piece-rate and time-rate modes of surplus extraction (Source: Fieldwork data)

The availability of labour-power to the duration of work defines the organisation of everyday work under time-rate contracts. For the same, *thekedars* ensure the daily

headcount of labourers and increase the total number of hours worked, i.e. by doing overtime to receive their daily payments. By fragmenting daily tasks at worksites to plan and organise everyday construction work, builders enable *thekedars* to work on a time-rate basis to secure their share of the surplus. In time-rate contracts, it is the daily headcount of labour which is of significance to surplus extraction. How does this enable surplus accumulation in supply work?

6.1.2b Surplus accumulation in supply work

Surplus accumulation by *thekedars* in supply work depends on the total number of man-hours worked and the difference between the daily wage rates applied by the builder and the rates at which *thekedars* pay the labourers. Further, keeping records of labourers, their attendance, etc., to generate an invoice for the work completed daily gains extreme importance for a *thekedar* to secure his share of the surplus. How does the system of recording the daily work occur in supply-based work?

At the site, I noticed that every *thekedar's munshi* had two books given by the contractor - one with a red cover and one with a blue cover. I gathered that one was the Daily Labour Report (DLR), and the other was the Supply Slip (SS). DLR is a report of the daily headcount of labourers (skilled/unskilled), which has a unique ID number of the labourers. Supply Slip is proof of the work done at the site based on the hours worked. Daily Labour Report (DLR) sheet is as per site location. However, Supply Slip (SS) is unique to an activity completed daily in the designated area of work on the site. The SS shows the duration of work done by a specific group of labourers to finish the activity. DLR and SS comprise the paperwork done under supply work to prove the daily work done and the daily headcount of labourers. In a day, munshi could fill more than one SS depending on the number of activities completed, but only one DLR suffices for the day. DLR and Supply Slip are signed duly by Supervisor, Area-wise Engineer, Site Construction Manager, Planning, Commercial and Admin/Accounts for recording work done and processing payments.

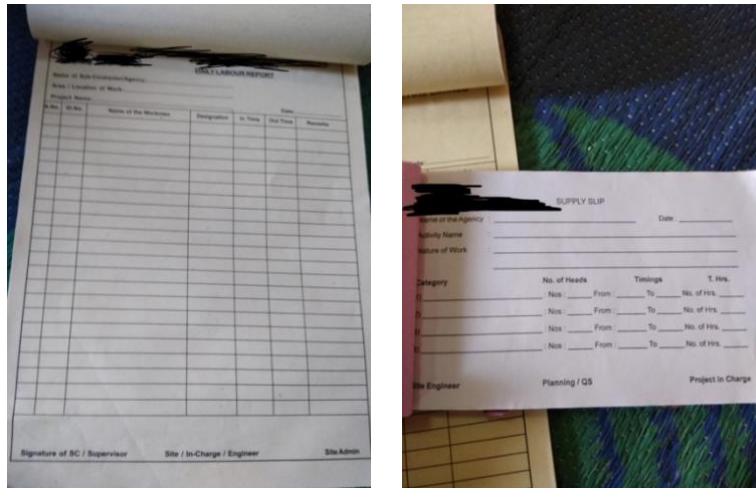


Figure 6.5: Daily Labour Report (DLR) (left); and Supply Slip (SS) (right)
(Source: Photographed by the author, 2019)

DLR is submitted on the same day by around 10-11 am (with only the in-time of the workers). Supply Slip is submitted the next day around 10-11 am (which has the out-time of the workers). DLR is matched with the gate entry record of punching by the labourers for the correct headcount of labourers. The entry and exit timings of labourers are necessary for *thekedars* to provide evidence to the builders on the total number of hours worked. This makes the role of *munshi* crucial in ensuring the same. To not lose their profits, the *munshi* colludes with engineers and security guards, providing false attendance for labourers who do not come to the site for work. In this way, the *thekedar* earns the daily wages for such labourers from the builders but does not pay the labourers.

A labourer highlighted the new facial recognition system for logging worker attendance at the building site entrance. He mentioned that "punching" or performing a biometric scan at the main entrance was solely for record-keeping purposes. He indicated that a *thekedar* earns a lot considering that engineers do not argue with *thekedars* or labourers if they take signatures for the wrong daily headcount of labourers. Engineers fear that *thekedars* might leave the work and withdraw their labourers from the site.

“Punching hai bas record kewal in aur out dekhta hai. Contractor ko bahut fayda hai. Engineer bhi jyada dimag nahi lagata hai, aadmi kam bhi raha toh sign maar deta hai. Agar chir chir karega engineer toh thekedar bhaag jaega aur agar labour ko jyada toka taki kiye toh labour chala jaega.”

If a security guard created a problem in the false punching process, then a *thekedar* would bribe him with ₹500. He highlighted that despite helpers being unwell, their *thekedar* would get them to the site to punch in their details. It was common that each *thekedar* had five to ten labourers absent from work daily.

“Thekedar punching marwaega jarur chahe helper beemar ki kyon nahi ho, helper ko bukhar hai toh bhi usko lekar aayega punching maarne ke liye, sabko maloom hai punching hota hai, daily panch se das aadmi chutti maarta hai.”

It was commonly observed that *munshis* use ghost entries to maintain their *thekedar*'s surplus when working on a supply basis, even if labourers do not show up for work. Further, the daily labour report from all *thekedars* is consolidated to produce weekly labour reports for each labourer. A sample outline is given below.

| Region: Hyderabad | | | | Site name with code | | | | | | Date: | |
|--------------------|-----------------------|-------------|-----------|-------------------------|----------------|--------------------|---|------------|----------------|-------------|--------------|
| Contractor temp ID | Labour ID card number | Labour Name | Online ID | Week 1 Day 1 - Day 7 | | | Cumulative for the month W1+W2+W3+W4 | | | Worker type | Skill type |
| | | | | No of days | Work hours (8) | Overtime hours (4) | No of days | Work hours | Overtime hours | | |
| X | 123 | | | 7 | 42 | 18 | | | | Mistri | Skilled |
| | | | | | | | | | | Helper | Unskilled |
| | | | | | | | | | | Supervisor | Semi-skilled |
| | | | | | | | | | | | |

*Table 6 2: Consolidated Weekly Labour Report (from DLR)
(Source: Based on an interview with a thekedar)*

Following the process for entering the daily work record in DLR and SS, *munshis* generate invoices to receive payments from the builders. For each date, the total number and distribution of labourers, i.e. carpenters, helpers and supervisors (who are the foremen), is listed along with the total number of hours (11 hours including overtime except Sundays which is for five hours) worked. The same is calculated for the month to generate an invoice for payments. A sample invoice and its format is shown below.

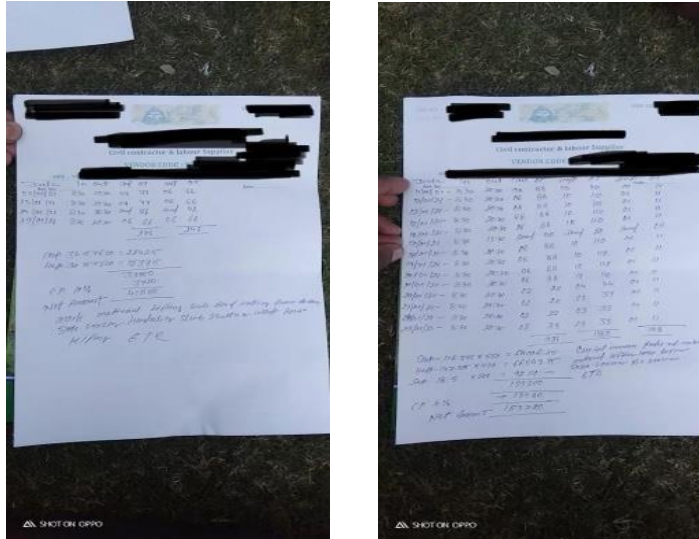


Figure 6.6: Sample invoices generated by thekedars for the builders (Source: Photographed by the munshi, 2020)

For each man-day worked, i.e. 8 hours, a *thekedar* receives ₹550-560 per carpenter, ₹500 per supervisor (which accounts for the salary of the foreman and *munshi*) and ₹450 per helper by the builder. However, the *thekedar* pays ₹400 per carpenter, ₹350 to a supervisor and ₹300 to a helper, thereby gaining a profit of ₹150-250 per labourer per day at the site. I gathered that *thekedars* working on a supply basis could accumulate between ₹4000-5000 per labourer in a 30-day working period. I was reminded of Pandu *ji* security guard, who said that a *thekedar* having labourers work at the site siphons off ₹150-200 per labourer per working day. However, the foreman and the *munshi* receive a monthly salary of ₹16000-17000, whereas a couple of skilled carpenters or close relatives of the *thekedar*, who form the core network of labourers, may also receive a monthly salary. For carpenters, helpers and supervisors, the total number of hours is calculated for the month, then divided by eight to calculate the number of man-days worked. For instance, if the total number of hours worked by carpenters across the month were 1400 hours, then the total man-days would be 175. Hence a builder would pay ₹550*175 man-days = ₹96,250 for carpenters who worked for Vasudev *thekedar* in one month. On average, a *thekedar* working with eight carpenters, ten helpers and one supervisor could generate an invoice of up to ₹3lakh per month. For instance, in the invoice shown above, the *thekedar* has been working with five carpenters and four helpers, i.e. nine labourers, for a month, generating a bill value of ₹2,06,000.

| Date | In time | Out time | No. of carpenters | OT | Helpers | OT | Supervisors | OT |
|------|---------|----------|-------------------|----|---------|----|-------------|----|
| | | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | | |

Table 6.3: A sample format for a monthly invoice by thekedar on supply-based work
(Source: Based on Figure 6.6)

Thekedars are keen for labourers to work overtime since it enhances their surplus. As a result, *thekedars* accumulate a surplus between ₹4,000-5,000 per labourer in 30 days. For instance, if a *thekedars* works with 25 labourers at one construction site, *thekedars* would earn a profit in the range of ₹1,00,000-1,25,000 per month.

In time-rate-based work, *thekedars* are concerned with maximising the number of man-days of work at the construction site to finish the construction. Under supply-based work, the *thekedars* are concerned with maintaining their share of the surplus as their payments depend on the headcount of labourers. The difference in the daily wage rates provided by builders and the wage rates at which *thekedars* pay labourers, coupled with the total number of labourers, indicates the extent of surplus that *thekedars* can accumulate.

6.1.3 Valorising, deploying and reinforcing Bihari-ness

How does mobilising Bihari migrant labourers to work in building construction enable surplus extraction? I argue that class relations are configured by valorising, deploying and controlling Bihari-ness as the ability of classes of Bihari migrant labourers across caste and religious locations, in enabling surplus extraction via measurement and supply based work in building construction.

Bihari migrant labourers valorise themselves as construction labourers. As indicated earlier (see section 4.1.1a), builders prefer migrant labourers from Bihar, UP and Jharkhand, among others, for their skill and ability to work fast. This indicates incorporating the culturally specific form of labour-power of Bihari migrant labourers into the *thekedari* system (Hall 1986).

In a conversation with Bihari labourers on the availability of regular work in their states, one of them added that if work is available in Bihar and Jharkhand, then companies in the cities constructing buildings would not survive as then they would not have labourers: '*Sir, ek baat hai. Yadi Bihar aur Jharkhand mein kaam ho, toh idhar company mar jaega. Sirf rupya ke bal par hai ye log, inke paas aadmi nahi hai.*' They said that the company will always want labourers to work at cheaper rates which is why they call labourers like them. They added that all major cities are functioning because of labourers from Bihar and Jharkhand. They commented that one would find labourers from Bihar and Jharkhand almost everywhere: '*jahan najar ghumaye wahan Bihar aur Jharkhand ka aadmi milega.*' They said they have not seen local workers speaking Telugu working at the sites.

Having understood about my research study, one *thekedar* from Bihar, praising Bihari labourers, said that without Bihari labourers, urban development is not possible and that people are jealous of Bihari labourers who are the pivots for urban development. Yet, they are considered inferior despite not committing crimes like robbery to make a living.

"Bina Bihari ke urban development nahi ho sakta. Urban development ka jack hai Bihar ka labour phir bhi log Bihari labour ko inferior samajhta hai." They will do work and earn properly, in a proper way. 'Chori aur dakaiti nahi karega, he will do anything and everything but not chori aur dakaiti. Jealousy hai Bihar ke labour se."

As *thekedar* and *munshi* from Bihar claimed that the women of Bihar would not work in building construction: '*Bihar ka ladies idhar site par kaam nahi karta.*' I asked another *thekedar* at a different worksite if he had female labourers from Bihar. He strictly said no and added that women from Bihar would rarely work in building construction: '*Bihar ki mahila aangan ke bahar hard work karne jaise building banana ke kaam mein nahi jaati hai.*'

The above excerpts valorise all male Bihari migrant labourers to work in construction at relatively cheaper rates whilst being stigmatised as 'culturally inferior' labourers. In not allowing women from Bihar to work in large-scale building construction, Bihari migrants legitimise an all-male Bihari migrant workforce in building construction, reinforcing surplus extraction. Further, an all-male workforce externalises the social costs of the reproduction of labour onto women (Burawoy 1976, Meillassoux 1981). In this way, it enables the intensification of construction work by incorporating specific forms of labour-power.

Further, Bihari migrant labourers valorise their ability to work in specific stages of construction, particularly in the actual building of the structure, i.e., the second stage of construction comprising masonry, shuttering and steel work.

At another site, I asked if there were no Bengali labourers in shuttering work, given that most labourers from Bihar were doing shuttering. He replied that for all the days, Bengali labourers have been into cleaning work because they would not know about working in shuttering or steelwork: '*sab din se Bengali sab jhaadu maarne waala kaam kar ke, shuttering sariya ke kaam kayna howe hai ki jaante u sab.*'

In this way, Bihari migrant labourers valorise their ability to do specific construction work, unlike fellow migrant labourers working at the building construction site. This creates ethnic hierarchies of working in building construction, doing masonry work, shuttering, steel work etc. (Bourgois 1988), in relation to Bengali migrant labourers.

The valorisation of the ability to work is reinforced by the need to work under an advance-based relation with *thekedars* to pay back the advance taken. Srivastava and Jha (2016, p33) indicate that several Bihari migrant labourers working in building construction in New Delhi were long-term circular migrants who worked for the same *thekedar* or a different one. Aleyamma (2017, p167) indicates that labourers attached to *thekedars* must make the most of their time as construction projects keep moving. I argue that the internal differentiation as classes of labour and triad of compulsion-circulation-temporality shapes such use of time for Bihari labourers to continue 'performing' while doing manual work, i.e., *majdoori*, within the *thekedari* system (Waite 2005, Shah *et al.* 2017). In my fieldwork, I came across labourers from the districts of Gaya, Muzaffarpur, Ranchi, Godda, Palamu, Nawada, Samastipur in the state of Bihar. Most of the Bihari labourers, as classes of labour in building construction i.e. *mistris* and helpers in my fieldwork, were Hindus and belonged to upper-caste (i.e. landowning castes such as *Rajputs, Bhumiyyar, Thakur, Kumar, Yadav, Chowdhury, Sav, Vishwakarma*), lower-caste and Dalit backgrounds (i.e. relatively landless labourers such as *Bharti, Paswan/Dusadh, Bhuiyan*). Muslim *thekedars* from Bihar (such as *Mansur ji, Shahid ji, Alam ji*) mobilised both Dalit Hindu and landowning Muslim labourers who were from close kin relations. While specific caste groups of labourers such as *Vishwakarma*, have been identified as skilled construction

labourers, I did not find any clear causality between their caste-religious locations and their ability to work in specific stages of building construction and under piece-rate/time-rate based construction work.

In this way, Bihari-ness indicates the valorisation of the ability of all male Bihari migrant labourers, across caste, region and religious locations, to work as classes of labour i.e. *mistris* and helpers under the *thekedari* system in building construction. Bihari-ness, as the ability of male Bihari migrant labourers, across caste, region and religious locations to work in building construction is deployed as a mechanism of organising surplus extraction through piece-rate and time-rate work. In choosing piece-rate or time-rate kind of contracts offered by builders under the *thekedari* system, *thekedars* from Bihar remain inclined to find work on a piece-rate basis for enhancing their surplus within a short time. This stems from the ability of Bihari migrant labourers to be able to work faster as compared to Bengali migrant labourers.

On explaining the nature of the contract *thekedars* have with the building contracting company, Mastakam Ali highlights that *thekedars* who have Bihari labourers are not at a loss even if they work for 8 hours, unlike the Bengali migrant labourers who work for him. If builders want the work to be finished in 12 hours, Bihari labourers can complete the work in 6-7 hours. He commented that in comparison with Bengali labourers, the builders extract more work from Biharis in a shorter time. This happens by handing out contracts on a piece-rate basis to *thekedars* who have Bihari labourers, which is a win-win situation for both the company and the labourers.

“Bihar waale se jyada kaam company nikalega Bengali log se agar Bihar waale ko theka diya jaega. Company kahega ki 12 ghanta mein itna kaam kar do aur chutti karo. Labour log 12 ghanta ke kaam ko 6-7 ghante mein kar deta hai. Company aur labour dono khush rehta hai.”

The mobilisation of Bihari migrant labourers as compared to Bengalis and local labourers (from Andhra Pradesh) to work on piece-rate basis, enables *thekedars*' to secure a higher share of the surplus. In this sense, Bihari-ness also depicts the ability of Bihari migrant labourers to work fast. Following this, I argue that Bihari-ness can be deployed under the *thekedari* system as a measure of exploitability in distinct modes of surplus extraction. One could attribute the ability of Bihari migrant labourers in working fast to their skill in contrast to other migrant labourers. Srivastava and Jha

(2016, p32) indicate that Bihari migrant labourers are more skilled than others. However, I argue that the skill of Bihari migrant labourers is embedded within the modes of surplus extraction i.e. piece-rate and time-rate work. As a result, Bihari *thekedars* indicate the necessity of finding the right mix of skilled labourers, i.e., *mistris* and helpers, for piece-rate and time-rate-based work for enabling surplus extraction.

Munchun *ji* added that workers who work on a measurement basis are different from those who work on a supply basis. He explained that for work on a measurement basis, one needs skilled carpenters and fast-working helpers who are dedicated to their work and roam around the site doing nothing.

“Measurement par kaam karne ke liye aadmi hai mera paas, uske liye heavy carpenter chahiye, tez tarar helper chahiye. Nahi toh jo labour idhar udhar ghoomega usse measurement pe kaam nahi hoga.”

Munchun *ji* commented that if labourers working on a supply basis are asked to work on a measurement basis, they become pleased and have electric current flow through their bodies to work as they could earn relatively higher daily wages in less time.

In time-rate work, Mastakam Ali added that labourers work very slowly and are eager to finish early to return to the labour camp. In doing so, the labourers take it for granted that the *thekedars* must pay them irrespective of finishing the work on time.

“Nahi toh kya hai, company mein supply wala labour dheere dheere kaam karta hai chahe wo Bihar ka ho, Bengal ka ho, Jharkhand ka ho, aisa lagega ki khana nahi khaya hai labour. Room se aane ke liye jaldibaji nahi karega gaadi pakadne ke liye, doosra teesra bus ka intajaar karta hai sochta hai ki thekedar toh paisa bharega na.”

The above excerpts indicate that a *thekedar's* ability to secure surplus on a piece-rate or time-rate basis is linked to how they can deploy the skill of Bihari migrant labourers under specific work conditions. I came across Bihari migrant labourers at the BSS site working on a supply basis who were working slowly. However, I also came across Bihari migrant labourers who, under piece-rate contracts, were finishing work equivalent to 3-4 days in just one day. Following this, I argue that Bihari migrant labourers are controlled to deploy their skills in relation to piece-rate and time-rate work under the *thekedari* system (Burawoy 1979, p81-86). Bihari migrant labourers

are coerced to work slowly under supply work but work fast on piece-rate basis. In this way, control over deploying their skill shapes the lived experience of exploitation.

The figure of the 'Bihari' migrant labour as a culturally specific and gendered form of labour-power is constructed, deployed and valorised for enforcing surplus extraction (Hall 1986). This is enabled by deploying Bihari-ness. While *thekedars* deploy Bihari-ness based on piece-rate and time-rate based work, Bihari labourers use their

Such a system of deploying Bihari-ness, composed of the differences in skill, caste, region, religion etc., as a mechanism of exploitation in building construction work configures class relations (Burawoy 1976, Ferguson and McNally 2015, Lerche and Shah 2018).

The surplus is secured by controlling and deploying Bihari-ness in building construction work. How is surplus obscured?

6.1.4 Politics of doing *hisab*: Withholding and deferring wage payments

The payment of wages to migrant labourers in building construction, often known as *hisab karna*, i.e. the act of settlement of accounts, happens either monthly or subject to the payments from builders to the *thekedars*. In this sense, the payment of wages is withheld. Instead of a daily wage paid by the *thekedar* to the labourers, it is deferred. The withholding and deferring of wage payments are central to securing and obscuring surplus (Breman 1996, Parry 2014, Prasad-Aleyamma 2017).

The accounts of labourers are settled by deducting the total advance taken by the labourer from the accrued daily wages, less weekly subsistence. The *thekedars* provide weekly subsistence expenses, i.e. *khuraki or kharchi*, at the end of the working week to individual labourers for their daily reproduction, i.e. expenditures on food, clothing, phone recharge, liquor etc. In this sense, payment of wages emerges from how the reservation and realisation of labour-power are tied to the renewal of labour-

power. *Khuraki* is an element of the system of advanced and postponed wage payments although it is meant for the renewal of labour-power.

A labourer's *hisab* for a month = Total earnings[±] minus Advance taken
[±]Total earnings = (Number of days worked * Daily wage rate) minus
total *khuraki* for 4 weeks

Box 6.1: A labourer's hisab for a month

The amount paid by *thekedars* for labourers' weekly subsistence is gradually deducted from the advance the labourer takes until labour-power needs to be reserved again, following which exploitative labour relations are 'renewed'. A *thekedar* distributes a similar amount of weekly subsistence to all the labourers irrespective of the hierarchy of their work. The payment of *khuraki* serves to postpone the payment of wages to labourers (Breman 1996, 2014). When labourers have received weekly *khuraki* by working enough to realise the advance, *thekedars* either 'settle' the transaction, i.e. by doing *hisab* or/and reserve labour-power by offering further advance.

Having a conversation with a *mistri*, I asked him if *mistri* and labourers keep their record about how much *khuraki* they get weekly, to which he responded that they usually maintain records and then settle the account with their *thekedar* by deducting weekly *khuraki* from the advance taken. However, if a labourer has worked less than the advance taken, they continue to work more until the advance is settled.

“Haan hum apna maintain karte hain. Tabhi baad mein keh sakte hain ki hamra itna paisa nikal raha hai. Agar humara thekedar ke paas girta hai toh humko aur kaam karna padta hai.”

Settling the accounts, i.e. *hisab karna* as an exercise, could renew the relationship between *thekedars* and labourers by allowing labourers to ask for more advance. Alternatively, it could also end the relationship between *thekedars* and labourers. However, a *thekedar* can decide to do *hisab* for labourers based on how the builders release payments to the *thekedars*. When labourers plan to return to their village with some savings or otherwise plan to quit working for the *thekedar*, they ask their

thekedars to do their *hisab*. In this way, calculating labourers' wages, i.e., doing *hisab*, is a political act shaped by builders' payments to retain labour-power.

Mansur *ji* mentioned that he gives the labourers whatever *khuraki* they want. [Mansur *ji* had limited the *khuraki* to a maximum of ₹1,000/week]. However, as an example, he commented that for paying *khuraki* to 40 labourers, a *thekedar* needed to maintain a capital of ₹40,000 per week: '*40 labour hai thekedar ke paas toh usko 40000 har haftah dena hota hai isiliye usko poonji chahiye.*' On the labourer's *hisab*, he mentioned there are no monthly accounts; instead, every four, five, or even six weeks, *hisab* can take place depending on the company's payments. However, he added that does not mean the payment to labourers for their *khuraki* will not happen if the company delays the payment. For example, he explained that if he had already calculated the wages for a labourer for a week and the labourer needed ₹10,000, he would have to immediately offer the money without waiting for payment from the company.

“Jaise ki aaj hisab ho gaya haftah ka, lekin agar kal labour ko 10000 rupya chahiye toh dena padega. Aisa nahin hai ki uska hisab hoga payment aayega tabhi dena hai. Hisab baith kar nahi karte, jab paisa chahiye le lo...”

On asking about labourers not being paid their full wages, he mentioned that if he pays them in full, they will spend everything and would not be left with anything to send home: '*poora payment yahan de diye toh sab yahan kharch kar lega, ghar mein kya jaega.*'

The act of doing *hisab* is controlled by the *thekedar*. An accumulation strategy is employed by not paying labourers their outstanding wages. (Prasad-Aleyamma 2017). Further, withholding payments of wages serves as a disciplining tool in which labourers need to ask or negotiate to settle their wage payments. *Thekedars* justify the withholding and deferral of wage payments on the basis of enabling labourers and their households to be able to save rather than spend money. By legitimising the system of *hisab* as a discipline, *thekedars* retain labour power and shape the social reproduction of labourers in maintaining the architecture of surplus extraction. In this way, *thekedars* withhold and postpone wage payments to secure and obscure surplus. Following sections detail how *hisab* is done for Bihari migrant labourers working in the *thekedari* system.

6.1.4a Calculation of wage payments: a labourer's *hisab*

Irrespective of labourers working for *thekedars* on piece-rate or time-rate work, payments to labourers are calculated based on daily wage rates. How does a *thekedar* calculate the payments for labourers?

Rajiv *munshi* indicated that he maintains six different kinds of registers for recording attendance and payments made to labourers viz. labourers' monthly attendance register to record daily attendance of labourers and number of hours worked in a day, cash in/out register to keep track of money withdrawn from *thekedar's* account to pay labourers, labourers' monthly *khuraki* record to record amount of weekly subsistence given to each labourer for their subsistence, register of advance taken by labourers which is also maintained by the *thekedar*, monthly payments and attendance record (i.e. muster card) for each labourer. Three of these records are shown below.



Figure 6.7: Monthly payments record (left); Labourer's attendance (centre); and Record of *khuraki* (right)

(Source: Photographed by the *munshi*, 2021)

| Arrival date | Joining date | Name of the labourer (and father's name/village) | Present/Absent for each day | Weekly <i>khuraki</i> for four weeks | Earnings = Wage rate * No. of days present (Total-absent) | Amount due = Earnings- <i>khuraki</i> -advance taken |
|--------------|--------------|--|-----------------------------|--------------------------------------|---|--|
| | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | |

Table 6.4: A sample format for keeping monthly records of labourers
(Source: Based on an interview by the author with a *thekedar*)

Rajiv *munshi* explained the wage calculation system as follows: for each labourer number of daily hours of work is recorded, and every eight hours worked is marked as P (present), i.e. one *hajri*. However, 12 hours of work (including an hour-long lunch break) is marked P₃, equivalent to ₹375, i.e. wages for 8+3 hours of work, which means ₹300 for eight hours. Accordingly, for the whole month, the hours worked by each labourer are recorded on their muster card, which includes half a day's wages for labourers. The weekly subsistence for each labourer is recorded in the *khuraki* register. At the end of the month, a labourer's attendance card is checked, and the total number of Ps is calculated by dividing the total number of hours worked by eight. For instance, if a labourer, in this case, a helper, has worked for 277 hours a month, including overtime, it means he has worked for $277/8 = 34.625$ days in 30 days. The wage rates for overtime are the same as for a typical working day. Rajiv *munshi* added that a labourer could not go beyond working for 36 days in a month in supply-based work. The total *khuraki* paid to the labourer in the month was ₹4000, i.e. ₹1000 weekly. Hence, wages due to the labourer for the last month = ₹ (34.625 days*300/day) - ₹4000 = ₹6387.50. Advance taken by the labourer could be further deducted from the wages due if the labourer wants to settle the accounts, i.e. do their *hisab*; otherwise, the next accounting cycle would start the following month. It is also possible that the labourer demands an advance from the *thekedar*. Furthermore, the *munshi* added that payments to those labourers who have yet to take an advance are calculated solely based on the number of hours they have worked and the amount of weekly subsistence taken. Calculating wages above is one example of a labourer who did not take an advance from the *thekedar*.

| Particulars | Rate | Duration | Total |
|--|---------------------|--------------------------|---|
| Daily Wages earned (1) | ₹300/day for helper | 34.625 days [±] | ₹10,387 |
| <i>Khuraki</i> (2) | ₹1,000/week | 4 weeks | ₹4,000 |
| <i>Total earnings</i> (3) = 1-2 | | | ₹6387.50 |
| Advance taken (4) | | | ₹0 |
| <i>Hisab</i> = 3-4 A labourer's <i>hisab</i> for a month = (Number of days worked*Daily wage rate -Total <i>khuraki</i> for 4 weeks) - Advance [±] 277 hours worked (11 hours for 25 days) 8 hours = 1 day of work | | | ₹6387.50 Positive value indicates the <i>thekedar</i> owes to the labourer |

Table 6.5: A sample calculation of *hisab* for a Bihari helper

Another example indicates the calculation of wages for a Bengali migrant labourer who is a *mistri*, receiving ₹500 as the daily wage rate but ₹300 as weekly *khuraki*. The *mistri* had taken an advance payment of ₹11,500 but had yet to fulfil their work responsibilities, resulting in a debt of ₹8,000 owed to the *thekedar*.

| Particulars | Rate | Duration | Total |
|--|-----------|-----------------------|---|
| Daily Wages earned (1) | ₹500/day | 9.5 days [±] | ₹4,750 |
| <i>Khuraki</i> (2) | ₹300/week | 4 weeks | ₹1,200 |
| <i>Total earnings</i> (3) = 1-2 | | | ₹3,550 |
| Advance taken (4) | | | ₹11,500 |
| <i>Hisab</i> = 3-4 A labourer's <i>hisab</i> for a month = (Number of days worked*Daily wage rate -Total <i>khuraki</i> for 4 weeks) – Advance [±] Binod worked for 5P i.e. 5 full days and 3P ₄ i.e. 4.5 days | | | ₹-8000 Negative value indicates the labourer owes money to the <i>thekedar</i> |

Table 6.6: A sample calculation of a Bengali labourer's *hisab*

As explained above, the maintenance of precise records for labour attendance and payment calculation indicates the extent to which surplus is generated under supply-based work. Labourers also maintain their records to know the number of hours they have worked. The records are held by the *munshis* in case of contention from

labourers and by labourers to challenge the *munshi* for miscalculating their wages (Guérin *et al.* 2009, p248).

While surplus extraction differs under piece-rate and time-rate-based construction work, it remains concealed through the system of differential daily wage rates, records of work and the politics of doing *hisab* for labourers.

6.1.5 Of builders' wage reports and labourers' welfare payments

Surplus is also secured and obscured through compliance and non-compliance with legal regulations and the social security-based deductions from the wages of migrant labourers. The builders' compliance with legal regulations is visible in the wage registers of building companies showing relatively higher daily wage rates paid to labourers and further claims the payment of social security, i.e. Provident Fund (PF) for labourers.

A sample monthly payslip statement issued by the building company G&S Construction which runs site C is given below, which erroneously indicates a rate of daily wages of ₹795 per day (8-hour work) against a skilled labourer and ₹654 per day against an unskilled labourer, including necessary deductions of ₹1526 and ₹1256 towards payment of Provident fund (PF) for each labourer.

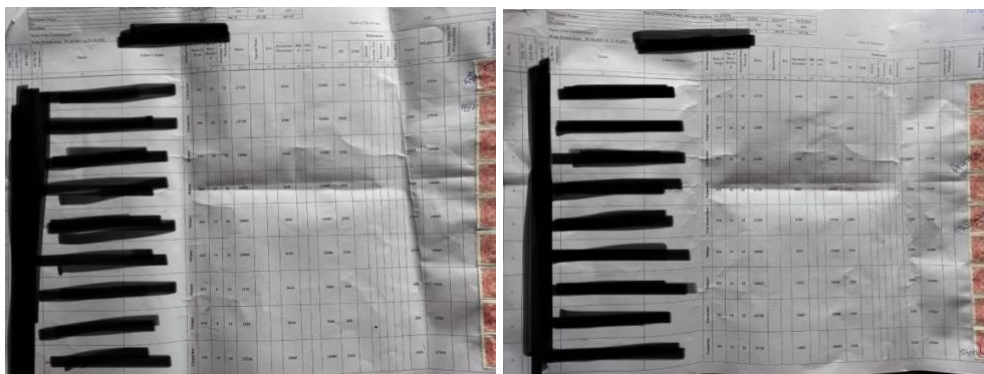
The image shows two side-by-side photographs of a wage register book. Each page contains a grid with multiple columns and rows. The grid is used for recording wages and deductions. Some of the entries in the grid are obscured by thick black horizontal bars, likely for privacy or to redact sensitive information. The paper appears to be a standard ledger or account book.

Figure 6.8: A sample wage register book (Source: Photographed by the *munshi*, 2021)

I gathered that the building company calculates payments for work hours and overtime hours separately; otherwise, the company will face problems from the labour department. A company cannot show a day's duty of 12 hours. At the same time, I did not come across labourers talking about Employee State Insurance (ESI) scheme or Provident Fund (PF) deductions from their wage earnings which they could retrieve

later. I had similar interactions with *mistris* working on a measurement basis in shuttering work at another worksite who were entitled to PF, and ₹1200 was deducted from their account each month, and they were not aware of how to get their money back.

Interacting with a group of *mistris* from Bihar, a *mistri* indicated that the labour card is only for the company to deduct PF, an amount between ₹1000-1200/month, which a labourer cannot get back: '*Labour ka card sirf PF ke liye hai, Mahine ka lagbhag ₹1000-1200 cut hota hai, lekin humko wo cut kiya wala paisa wapas nahi milta hai.*' According to him, they were informed that their Provident Fund money would be deposited into their account once they turn 60. Dejectedly, one labourer shared that they did not have the means or knowledge of the process to access the PF as '*pardeshi*' foreigners in the city who did not understand the local language.

“Sir, humlog ke paas saadhan hi nahi hai paisa nikalne ka. Ye pardes hai sir kya karen. 2-4 roj idhar udhar ghooma toh paisa kharch ho jaega. Humara bhasa bhi yahan nahi samajhta hai.”

The above excerpt indicates that Bihari migrant labourers experience internal alienness as migrants within a country caught up in the politics of accessing social security. As indicated, a builder secures surplus by deducting social security payments for labourers. However, for migrant labourers, accessing social security payments is full of bottlenecks (Agrawal 2022, Breman 2020, Srivastava 2020b) as compared to *naka* labourers (Mosse, Gupta and Shah 2005; Nayak 2022; Vijayabhaskar 2011, 2017; Wetlesen 2016). For this reason, *thekedars* indicate that Bihari migrant labourers would not allow deductions for their social security payments. As a result, *thekedars* do not comply with regulations for social security. Further, this non-compliance is justified by *thekedars* on the basis of the 'temporality' of working for a *thekedar*.

Regarding registering labourers for Building and Other Construction Workers Welfare Board (BOCW), Mansur *ji* added that his labourers are not permanent and that their availability to work is not guaranteed; hence he would not take a risk: '*labour regular rahenge tabhi card banega, temporary hai ye aise mein utna risk kaun lega, bahut saari baat hoti hai.*' He pointed out that he was interested in getting insurance done for all workers. However, his labourers needed to be more knowledgeable to allow deductions to be made from their earnings to be

put for their social security: '*workers ek rupya cut nahi karne dega...suppose kisi ka 500 rupiya mehine cut ho raha, phir govt bhi daalta lekin labour ko itna knowledge nahi hai...wo bolega mera paisa kha liya.*'

In this way, ensuring compliance and non-compliance with state regulations concerning wage registers and social security payments for labourers enables securing and obscuring surplus in production.

6.2 Discussion

The time-based organisation of construction work shapes the relations in production in building construction. The time-centred organisation of construction work enables securing surplus under piece-rate and time-rate work. For organising relations in production in the case of building construction, builders subcontract different stages of construction work on a piece-rate or time-rate basis to *thekedars*. Through piece-rate and time-rate-based work, labour-power is realised at the worksites and surplus extraction is enforced.

The builders control the hierarchy of organising construction work based on piece and time rate-based work contracts. *Thekedars*, through their foreman, organise the daily construction work on a piece-rate or time-rate basis. Under piece-rate work, targets for *thekedars* are organised by builders based on the contractual output of construction, i.e. finishing particular sets of work in a given period. For instance, bricklaying in five villas in one month is the output target for *thekedars* to receive payments from the builders. However, in time-rate work, builders allocate the daily construction work for each *thekedar* so that no two *thekedars* can work simultaneously in the same building construction area. In this way, the organisation of construction tasks at the worksite remains fragmented (Pattenden 2016b); however, such fragmentation of the tasks enables each *thekedar* to secure surplus.

Builders define daily wage rates at the site to enable surplus extraction based on skill. However, the actual wage rates paid to labourers by *thekedars* differ based on piece-rate or time-rate based work, stage of construction, i.e. early stages of the building or finishing stages, nature of construction work, i.e. masonry, shuttering etc., and the amount of advance taken by the labourer. The system of differential wage rates used

at a construction site fragments labour based on skill and legitimises the categories of skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled labour. In this way, the organisation of work on a piece-rate and time-rate basis and the system of differential wage rates enables differential degrees of exploitation.

Surplus extraction in building construction work is enabled by incorporating Bihari migrant labourers. The ability of Bihari migrant labourers to work predominantly as male Bihari labourers in construction under the *thekedari* system is valorised, deployed and controlled as a culturally specific and gendered form of labour-power. It is reflected in their Bihari-ness, which I argue is deployed as a measure of the exploitability of Bihari labourers. Bihari-ness is legitimised by labourers on the grounds of doing *mehnat*, i.e. hard work and by creating 'ethnic hierarchies' in building construction work (Bourgois 1988). However, it is reinforced by the *thekedar* and his 'core' group of Bihari labourers using the moral idioms of hard-working Bihari labourers who have come to the city to earn. Such a system of deploying and controlling Bihari-ness as a culturally specific and gendered form of labour-power by constructing, using and reinforcing 'regional' and 'ethnic' identities configures class relations (Bourgois 1988, Ferguson and McNally 2015, Lerche and Shah 2018).

However, apart from being secured, a surplus is obscured through the calculation of wages, i.e. doing *hisab* to settle the account for labourers and a system of recording work under piece-rate and time-rate based work. The *hisab* is done by calculating the accrued daily wages based on the number of *hajris*, i.e. attendance for the number of hours worked and deducting the same from the advance and weekly subsistence taken. However, *hisab* indicates the withholding and the deferring of payments, obscuring surplus under the *thekedari* system. A study of the records of daily work (in supply) or work output based on the work order and methods of calculating wages provides evidence for securing and obscuring surplus. This further occurs through builders' reports which comply with, instead of evading labour legislation and (non-) compliance with social security payments for labourers.

The chapter contributes to the literature on the organisation of relations in production in building construction (Jain and Sharma 2019; Lerche *et al.* 2017; Shivakumar, Sheng and Weber 1991; Srivastava and Jha 2016) by indicating the significance of

time-based hierarchical organisation of construction work. In building construction, the relations in production are organised by builders and *thekedars* to secure and obscure surplus. Time is central to the organisation of construction work by builders, shaping piece-rate and time-rate work. Further, the chapter indicates that the culturally specific forms of labour-power are valorised, legitimised and deployed in configuring class relations. In sub-contracting the construction work to *thekedars*, the builders organise the sequence of construction work for the time-bound delivery of construction projects and fragment the construction to secure surplus. However, how work is recorded under piece-rate and time-rate work are different, shaping different mechanisms of securing surplus and resulting in differential degrees of exploitation. In both time-rate and piece-rate-based work, the sub-contracting relation between the *thekedars* and builders use mechanisms of differential wage rates, recording of work and calculation of wage payments which enable, support and reinforce the process of surplus extraction in 'configuring' class relations.

6.3 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that the time-based organisation of everyday construction work alongside deploying and valorising Bihari-ness enables and secures the process of surplus extraction. However, the surplus remains concealed through legitimising differential wage rates for labourers, recording work, and calculating wage payments. The builders exercise control over the labour process by using differential wage rates for labourers based on skill, recording work under supply work, and organising tasks for *thekedars* by fragmenting the same in different site areas. Moreover, deploying, valorising and controlling Bihari-ness as the relatively skilled ability of Bihari migrant labourers enables surplus extraction in building construction. It is enabled by the *thekedar* and his 'core' group of labourers.

Further, surplus extraction is secured by using differential wage rates in recording and paying *thekedars* based on their work contract with the builders. However, though the builders use the differential wage rates, the surplus is also obscured in legitimising differential wage rates, recording and calculating wage payments based on daily wage rates, advance and *khuraki* for labourers by the *thekedars*. The sub-contracting relation between builders and *thekedars* enables organisation and extraction of

surplus by organising relations of the labour process. How does the *thekedari* system exercise control over the 'working day' in reproducing the relations of the labour process? I examine this question in the following chapter.

Chapter 7: Everyday Control at Building Construction Worksites

The organisation of work for the realisation of labour-power enables the social relations *in* production, i.e., relations of the labour process, in this case, relations between builders, *thekedars* and labourers. But how does the *thekedari* system reproduce the relations of the labour process in reinforcing surplus extraction? How does the exercise of control at worksite shape the lived experience of exploitation in configuring class relations?

Answering the above questions is the central aim of this chapter. Existing literature has paid attention to the significance of the *thekedar* in exercising different forms and mechanisms of control for organising the production process (De Neve 2001, Jain and Sharma 2019, Pattenden 2016b, Picherit 2012). However, how the exercise of the everyday form of control is central to a *thekedar's* share of surplus has received little attention. Further, how the exercise of control in the labour process shapes and is shaped by the lived experience of exploitation remains relatively unknown. Reflecting on the exercise of control at worksites alongside its effects on the lived experience of Bihari migrant labourers enables us to understand the relative power of *thekedars* (De Neve 2014, p1304) in configuring class relations. The chapter aims to fill this gap in the literature.

I argue that the functioning of the *thekedari* system at the construction site reflected in the exercise of 'everyday' forms of control over the working day configures class relations. Further, the 'everyday' forms of control over surplus labour time exercised at worksites are hinged on the labour process, i.e., the organisation of tasks on a piece-rate or time-rate basis. The exercise of control indicates the extent to *which* *thekedars* can secure surplus by ensuring or intensifying the rate at which work is done. However, the forms of control over the working day are shaped by the time-based organisation of construction work in building construction. It is reflected in the negotiation for intensifying work, work or rest for labourers on Sundays, entry/exit for the working day, breaks during the working day, working for an extended number of hours or circulation of labourers to their village etc. Exercising control in measurement

and supply work enables or silences the possibilities of bargaining and contestation between *thekedars* and Bihari migrant labourers. As a result, the lived experience of exploitation for Bihari migrant labourers is composed of a dynamic combination of subtle coercion and overt consent in minimising class conflicts. Class relations are configured because of the emergence of bargaining and negotiation between *thekedars* and labourers and the combination of coercion and consent through the control exercised for securing surplus. In this way, exercising control under the *thekedari* system reproduces relations of the labour process in configuring class relations.

To begin with, the chapter outlines the role of the everyday in shaping the forms of control over the working day in reinforcing surplus extraction under the time-based organisation of work. Following this, it lays down forms of control over the daily rate and target of work in measurement-based contract and the routines of the working day in supply work. Subsequently, it outlines the politics of regulating work on a Sunday, doing or demanding overtime, negotiating petty contracts and navigating its politics. Further, the chapter highlights the regulation of labour circulation as another realm of control for surplus extraction. In elucidating the findings, the chapter then provides a discussion indicating key contributions and a brief conclusion.

7.1 Controlling time-based organisation: Measurement and supply work

Time is central to the exercise of control and disciplines of work in capitalism (Thompson 1967). Following Marx, the control over the necessary and surplus labour time enables and reinforces the process of surplus extraction (Burawoy 1985). As a result, for a *thekedar* working on a piece-rate basis, 'daily work is considered to be done' only when there is an output, for instance, walls of a room plastered, bricklaying for a room done etc. However, what is crucial for surplus extraction is not only the measurement of bricklaying and plastering done by the *mistris*, but also the rate at which it is done. It determines the terms and conditions of the *thekedar's* payments from the builders. However, in undertaking shuttering work on a supply basis, work is considered to be done based on the number of man-hours worked by *mistris* and

helpers. This difference in 'work being done' under piece-rate and time-rate-based construction contracts shapes the 'everyday' forms of control exercised by *thekedars* to secure surplus. In supply-based work, control ensures the number of man-hours spent by labourers at the site. However, in measurement-based work, the rate at which work is done is controlled daily.

I use the word 'everyday' in the sense of the dynamic rhythms, repetitions and routines (Lefebvre and Levich 1987) of exercising forms of control over the 'working day', i.e. in reproducing the relations of the labour process. Though the everyday forms of control hinge on the labour process (Burawoy 1985), control is exercised through the hierarchy of builders, *thekedars* and their 'core' labour network comprising foreman, *munshi* etc. Such an exercise of control produces and reproduces a lived experience of exploitation. The following sub-sections indicate the exercise of control under measurement and supply work and how the same is negotiated, navigated, bargained, or contested by labourers.

7.1.1 Regulating the daily rate of work in measurement-based contract: *mistri*-helper relation

One of the ways through which everyday form of control is exercised under measurement work is to monitor and maintain the rate at which the daily target of work is completed by *mistris* and helpers. In ensuring work is done under measurement work contracted by builders to the *thekedars*, monitoring the work rate becomes important as it shapes the frequency at which *thekedars* receive payments from the builders. In doing so, it enables surplus extraction and regulates the exploitability of labourers. In this sense, the relations in production are controlled by the *munshi* or the *thekedar* by exercising coercion or producing consent to enhance the intensity at which work is done to accumulate surplus (Burawoy 1985).

Under piece rate contracts, the *thekedars* organise construction tasks for *mistris* and assign them with helpers based on the availability of work. In meeting the desired work rate, daily work targets are assigned by the *munshi* (who acts as the foreman) to the *mistris*. However, the *mistris* could choose the piece of work that they would want to finish for the day.

I asked Ajmal *mistri* (name changed) about the selection of *mistris* for work allocated by the *munshi*. He highlighted that some are senior *mistris*, but some are junior based on the speed with which they do the work. On choosing a piece of work, he commented that *mistris* think about the allocated work and could even ask other *mistris* to swap it.

“Mistri apna dekh leta hai kaun sa kaam use ho jaega apna dimag laga ke bolta hai, lekin agar koi nahi kar pata toh phir doosra mistri karta hai.”

The above excerpt indicates the significance of ‘completing’ the work as allocated by finishing the work in the desired time or faster than expected. Keeping in mind the rate at which *mistris* do the work, the *munshi* may not offer work to all *mistris* in case urgent work is needed, even if they are available for work at the site.

However, for *mistris* to meet the daily targets and the rate at which work is done, helpers are needed. *Mistris* perform bricklaying and plastering while helpers transport building materials such as bricks and sand, prepare cement mixture etc. *Mistris* works with selected helpers to synchronise the rate at which they can finish a task (Thompson 1967). However, if the *mistri*-helper relation is not in sync, it impacts the daily work rate. I did not come across caste-based organisation of construction work by the *munshi*, although *mistris* used the morality of kinship ties in selecting helpers.

In my fieldwork at Rishabh’s, I found one helper for two *mistris*. In measurement work, ‘work is done’ only when the tasks allocated for the day finish. If helpers delay the transportation of the required number of bricks or sand and cement to create the mixture needed for plastering, *mistris* would have to continue waiting, which decreases the rate at which work is done. In other cases, less availability of helpers reduces the work rate, affecting the daily target or could even lead to work being stopped temporarily. To ensure the rate at which work is done, a *thekedar* searches for replacement labourers from other *thekedars* on the site. At the same time, the *munshi* and *thekedar* coerce the existing helpers by commenting on their speed and working skills.

Mansur *ji* headed towards the respective villas contracted for masonry work and saw two helpers from Chhattisgarh, borrowed from another *thekedar* at the site, were transporting sandbags to the villa’s second floor. He observed that one of

the two helpers was arrogant and did not listen to his supervisor [*munshi*]. He explained to them that a helper should ideally lift up to 100 bags of sand in 4-5 hours. He commented that they did not know the skill of lifting, which led to a small discussion that a helper could lift only 30-40 bags in 4-5 hours. The *thekedar* remarked that sometimes when needed, one needs to put in extra effort and have the bodily strength to finish the task.

“Kabhi kabhi jarurat padta hai toh kaam karna padta hai. Aisa nahi keh sakte ki humse nahi hoga. Kaam karne ke liye taakat bhi chahiye.”

The above excerpt shows that *thekedars* expect helpers to work at a certain speed under a measurement-based contract. This indicates that, following the control over the rate of work, both *mistris* and helpers need to use their skills not only to work to meet the daily target but to work fast. This matters to *thekedars* because their payments from the builders under measurement work are linked to the outputs within a particular time (Jain and Sharma 2019, Sargent 2019). Further, it matters to the builders because the rate at which bricklaying and plastering takes place shapes the labour process in further stages of building construction. The field findings indicate that *mistris* and helpers are subtly coerced to follow a particular intensity at which work needs to be done under the measurement-based *thekedari* system. In this way, the exploitability of *mistris* and helpers is kept under close observation while monitoring the daily rate and targets of work.

7.1.2 Everyday routines of the working day in supply work: entry/exit, shifts and break

In supply-based work, the everyday routines of the working day are significant, considering that the number of work hours determines a *thekedar's* share of the surplus. I argue that the everyday routine of entry/exits, working shifts and breaks during the working day are central to extracting surplus in time rate, also known as supply work.

At BSS, labourers worked in three shifts of 8, 12, or 14 hours. This means that the working day varied depending on the shift, starting at 8:30 am and ending at 5:30 pm, 9:30 pm, or 11:30 pm, with a lunch break included. Additionally, there was a night shift starting at 9 pm for workers.



Figure 7.1: Labourers waiting to enter a construction site at 8.30 am

(Source: Photographed by the author, 2020)

Labourers working for *thekedars* on supply must prove their presence at the site for their shift, for which their attendance is recorded. This is done through facial biometric scans (also called the ‘punching’ system) at the entrance of the site latest by 9.30 am. The security guard at the biometric scan terminal ensures the process and informs the *munshi* if any labourer misses or skips the scan. Ensuring the entry of all labourers is crucial for a *thekedar* working on a supply basis for the correct daily headcount of labourers.

As the working hours start in the morning by 8 or 8.30 am, labourers get their first break for drinking water at 11.30 am. Labourers are then given a one-hour lunch break at 1 pm which is not paid for by the company.



Figure 7.2: Labourers during their break at BSS

(Source: Photographed by the author, 2020)



*Figure 7.3: Cooks transporting lunch for labourers to BSS (left); and labourers unloading food containers from truck (right)
(Source: Photographed by the author, 2020)*

Around 12.30 pm, a few water tankers came, followed by many buses filled with lunch baskets. I gathered that the buses come from the respective labour camps with food. I saw lunch baskets in big vehicles and labourers carrying them on their shoulders. Seeing this, the labourer I was conversing with responded that lunch was coming for more than 800 labourers. Most *thekedars* organised and ran community kitchens in their labour camps. His *thekedar*, who had 200 labourers working at two sites run by BSS, had employed two people to cook food, for which the builders paid their wages.

“Alag alag thekedar apna apna mess ka room bana diya, do aadmi sirf khana banana ke liye rakha. Humara thekedar 200 admi rakha hai, do alag alag site par.” One could see labourers having their meals sitting on heaps of sand or stones or inside the basement of the worksites.”

By providing lunch at the sites, *thekedars* and builders reduce the time labourers spend preparing food, thus enhancing their surplus labour time. In the evening, between 5-6 pm, labourers are seen to have tea and snacks during the evening break in the kiosks outside the work site. As soon as labourers finish working for the day, around 7-7.30 pm, they queue up to catch the bus to their labour camp after undergoing a facial biometric scan.

The everyday routines of the working day in supply-based work are focussed on the number of man-hours worked. Such routines in terms of timings of work, the entry, exit and breaks of labourers control the necessary and surplus labour time in reinforcing surplus extraction.

7.1.2a Consuming *khaini* as an act of disciplining labour: taking breaks

For maintaining the rate at piece-rate work in masonry at Rishabh's, the *munshi* observes the working rhythm of labourers. During the working day under measurement or supply work, Bihari migrant labourers, among others, take a break to consume *khaini* (tobacco), apart from their usual lunch break. It temporarily interrupts the rhythm of the work. However, labourers find it necessary to consume tobacco to regain their bodily energy.

Taking a break, two *mistris* started to have *khaini*, i.e. a form of tobacco from Bihar. I could see the labourers working on flooring in the villa, sitting down to consume tobacco. I asked Lalan *mistri* (name changed) if they had the same tobacco as other labourers. He replied, with pride, that the tobacco of Bihar is much stronger and that the one consumed by those labourers from Chhattisgarh was useless: '*Bihar wala jyada dumdar hota hai, jo humlog khate hain. Ye log ka bekar hai.*' I was asked if I had *khaini*. I said that I did not consume any form of tobacco. Lalan replied that if they do not consume *khaini* their mind will not work: '*Sir, humlog toh nahi khaenge tab dimage kaam nahi karega.*' Another *mistri* added that *khaini* needs to be taken for timepass and for labourers to regain strength. He commented that those who do not consume *khaini* keep earning [working], but those who consume can take breaks. He further added that in his village, someone from *Bhumiyar* caste [an upper caste] taught labourers how to consume *khaini*; otherwise, they would have to continue working without a break.

“Jo khaini nahi khaata hai wo kamate rehta hai nahi toh jo khae, wo dum dhar leta hai. Humlog ke idhar bhumiyaar hai wo sikhata tha ki [khaini] nahi khaega tab jo khaega wo tumse kaam karwaega, isiliye tum bhi khao aur timepass karo.”

While consuming *khaini* is a common cultural characteristic for Bihari migrant labourers, it acts as a work discipline. During the working day, Bihari labourers pause their rhythm of work to regain their bodily energy, motivation, and attention to work by

consuming *khaini* at different intervals over the day. The *munshi* also joins the labourers by participating in consuming *khaini*. Following this, labourers explain it as a tactical move by the *munshi* to discipline or to keep an eye on the labourers at the construction site.

Similarly, at the BSS Real Estate site, migrant labourers working on supply-based work take intermittent breaks. They clearly distinguish that those from Bihar, UP and Jharkhand take *khaini*, but those from Bengal smoke a regional form of cigarette, i.e. *beedi*. However, it is indicated that the purpose of consuming *khaini* or smoking *beedi* is the same i.e., to regain strength.

A few labourers from Bihar and Jharkhand were seen to have tobacco (*khaini*). Asking if any engineer or the supervisor from the company would have a problem, they highlighted that *khaini* enables them to pass their time and freshen their mood. They added that the labourers manage to have *khaini* during work hours, but only the site safety in charge catches them and warns them not to consume tobacco. They further commented that most of the labourers from Bengal smoke *beedi* but those from Bihar, UP and Jharkhand chew *khaini*.

“Khaini se time pass ho jata hai aur mann fresh ho jata hai. Sahab kuch nahi bolte agar hum khaini khaate hain. Kaam karte karte beech mein bhi khaini ke liye samay nikaal lete hain. Safety wala pakadta hai beedi peene waale ko aur khaini khaane waale ko. Waise toh Bengal wala beedi peeta hai jyaada, khaini toh Bihar/Jharkhand/UP wala khaata hai.”

By consuming *khaini*, Bihari migrant labourers exercise their right to ‘pass’ the time alongside regaining their bodily strength to resume work (Waite 2007). Such breaks to ‘pass’ the time apart from lunch breaks are permitted as the *munshi* may also join them during the breaks. However, such an act of ‘time pass’, is also used to discipline labourers in regaining their strength to continue working fast in measurement-based work (Thompson 1967). However, in supply work, labourers use *khaini* to ‘pass’ the time and to work slowly. In this way, consuming *khaini* serves as an element of control over the work rate whilst disciplining the work rhythm.

Beyond the daily rate and target of work and the working day’s routines, control under measurement work encompasses regulating the work on Sundays, labourers’ overtime or working on a holiday, etc.

7.1.3 The politics of regulating working on Sundays and doing ‘overtime’

Apart from ensuring the daily rate and rhythm of piece rate work, everyday construction work is intensified to meet the daily targets. This could involve working on a Sunday as overtime and working overtime on a weekday. However, Sunday is also seen as a day of rest and recuperation to renew labour-power indicating that the ‘working day’ has limits (Marx 1976). Moreover, after receiving their weekly subsistence on Saturday or Sunday, labourers organise their daily reproduction, finish their domestic tasks, and drink liquor. As a result, some labourers may not want to work on Sunday¹⁰. Though *thekedars*, on a piece-rate basis, do not coerce labourers to work on Sundays, it is in their interest if labourers work on a Sunday at the desired speed. However, under supply-based work, *thekedars* can secure their surplus irrespective of labourers going to work on Sundays by entering their false attendance.

For labourers willing to work on a Sunday for overtime, the allocation of work on a Sunday is regulated by *thekedars* and builders. In this way, working on a Sunday as overtime is another realm of control and discipline for surplus extraction under the *thekedari* system.

7.1.3a Working on Sundays and looking to work ‘overtime’

The foreman or *munshi*, as directed by the *thekedar*, chooses to allocate work on Sundays to helpers to finish the necessary preparatory work i.e., transporting cement or sandbags, bricks, etc. This enables *mistris* to start working on Monday morning. Labourers may earn a full-day wage by only working half a day on a Sunday. However, this incentive may result in *mistris* and helpers deliberately not working at the desired rate during the week to be able to work ‘overtime’ on a Sunday. Being conscious of such tactics employed by *mistris* and helpers, the *munshi* organises work to be done on Sundays at a relatively higher speed.

¹⁰ In the next chapter, I explain the topic of weekend drinking as an element of control.

Explaining the logic of allocating work on Sundays, Ahmad *munshi* highlighted that there is no particular timing as it depends on how soon they can [*mistris* and helpers] finish the task allocated. Ahmad *munshi* added that if a labourer resisted the allocated work for a Sunday, he would not be forced to work on Sundays.

In another observation, I met a helper, Mohan (name changed), grumbling about not being given any work on Sunday and instead being asked to work at a greater speed on weekdays. Looking at me, he said that unless the *munshi* allocated work for him on Sundays, he would not come to work out of his own will: '*Humko munshi kaam nahi dega toh bina kaye apne marzi se hum kena karwe.*' I looked at the volume of sand he was asked to transport. He told me it was just one bag; likewise, he had to transport six bags on Sunday, which he thought was much work for one day. He dejectedly commented that one helper could charge ₹50 for each sack, and for seven to eight sacks, one could earn ₹350-400. However, labourers work only half a day, usually on Sundays and earn full wages.

“₹50 leta hai ek bori chadhane ka, 5 bori ka hua ₹250. Lekin ye reti 7-8 bori se kam nahi. Sunday ko toh labour log 4-5 ghanta hi kaam karta hai aur full hajri milta hai, kyunki chutti ka din kama rahe hain na.”

In selecting helpers to be offered work on a Sunday, some may be given work on a Sunday. The *munshis* use the allocation of work on a Sunday to gauge the speed with which a helper works during the week. In this case, the *munshi* expects Mohan to transport 8-9 sacks of sand. But Mohan thinks about the possible wages transporting bags on a per-bag basis would otherwise fetch. To do so, Mohan looks for a better daily wage rate in the evening by 'moonlighting' their *thekedar*.

While talking with the *munshi*, I could hear a few helpers-Mohan and the 'replacement' labourers from Chhattisgarh, conversing with the other *thekedar* for keeping them at work during the night. One of them approached Ahmad *munshi* and said he would ask the *thekedar* to give him overtime work for lifting sacks of sand by being paid per sack lifted to the villa's second floor.

I asked the *munshi* if labourers had no work during the day since they wanted to work at night. The *munshi* said that these helpers do not work during the day, seek holidays, and then in greed, seek work during the night: '*din mein kaam nahi karta, chutti kar leta hai, aur phir raat mein lalach se kaam khojta hai.*'

Further, the *munshi* said he was also a labourer once and had travelled that road; hence, he knows how the body resists working the following day after working at night. However, the labourers argued that they did not get work during the day

even though they were there. Hearing this, one of the labourers said he was only talking with the other *thekedar* about the rates he would be paid: '*main sirf baat kar rha agar rate nahi patega toh main nahi karega na.*' The *munshi* then politely warned the other *thekedar* from stealing his labourers. He also highlighted the *thekedar* not to make the labourers greedy for money, else Mansur *ji* might get angry. The *munshi* further commented that it is a healthy practice for *thekedars* not to steal somebody else's labourers on the site.

The excerpts indicate the helpers' attempts to find overtime work during the evening at a relatively better wage rate by working for another *thekedar*. However, the *munshi* warns a relatively 'new' *thekedar* attempting to 'steal' his labourers. The response by the *munshi* indicates that *thekedars* exercise their control and discipline over labourers who are otherwise unable to meet the daily target and the rate at which work needs to be done. In this way, *thekedar* or their men, i.e., *munshi*, control the usual working day, its rate and rhythms and the mechanism of offering overtime in piece-rate work. However, helpers exercise their power in negotiating or challenging the same.

Under supply-based work, *mistris* and helpers work overtime during the week for 12 hours a day. However, working on Sundays on supply work is controlled by the builders. If builders have organised urgent construction tasks, the *thekedars* deploy all their labourers to work for half the working day, i.e., up to four hours. However, my findings indicate that, unless urgent, labourers in supply-based work don't necessarily need to work on Sundays.

I asked Rajiv *munshi* if all the workers go to work on Sundays at the site. He said that not all labourers go to work as there is no compulsion to join work on Sundays, but those who join are free to work for how much time they want. Usually, they get wages equivalent to half a day; however, only those who have punched in at the main gate.

With no noise coming from the site, Shatrughan *thekedar* commented that when there is no noise, it does not seem like any work is happening there. About working on Sundays, he added that he fills in the attendance for his labourers for each Sunday even though most of his labourers do not work on Sundays. Very few labourers of different *thekedars* work half a day on Sundays.

"Hum aate hain Sunday ko, register maintain karta hai labour ka toh hum hajri bhari dete hain labour ka, lekin labour Sunday ko kaam nahi"

karta hai. Bahut se bahut alag alag thekedar ka 2,4,6,10 labour aayega, sab aadmi nahi aata hai. Sunday ko half hajiri hai.”

Thekedars working on a supply basis do not force labourers to work on Sundays or if sick. It is because the *munshis* enter ‘false attendance’ of labourers through ‘ghost entries’ in the biometric punching system to secure their share of the surplus. Those labourers who work on Sundays and have filed their attendance manually or through the biometric punching system are paid half a day as overtime for four hours.

The politics of regulating work on Sundays and working overtime as a realm of control and discipline is intricately linked to securing surplus by *thekedars* and the need for labourers to rest (Burawoy 1985). Securing the surplus on a Sunday is relatively easier in the case of supply work owing to the system of false attendance. Given this, unless urgent, *munshi* does not coerce labourers to work on a Sunday. However, labourers consent to work on Sundays given the possibility to earn extra wages, and working overtime is legitimised by *thekedars* on supply work. Under measurement work, *thekedars* or their *munshi* use the allocation of work on a Sunday as a disciplining mechanism to check the rate at which work is done and to gauge labourers’ ability to be exploited. A labourer could earn a day’s wage by working half a Sunday. Keeping this in mind, the *munshi* exercises coercion over helpers who tactically work slowly during the week or look for work at better daily wage rates in negotiating or challenging the control.

Under both measurement and supply work, *thekedars* limit any degree of interruption to the process of capital accumulation to secure timely payments from the builders. In this sense, the lived experience of exploitation is generated by coercing labourers to work at a greater speed or otherwise overtly consenting to work on Sunday and working overtime. However, labourers attempt to find work at a better daily wage rate in challenging the control exercised. In this sense, the lived experience of exploitation comprises bargaining, contestation, coercion and consent, which configure class relations.

How do *thekedars* regulate the rate at which *mistris* do their work in measurement work beyond a Sunday? When do *thekedars* give overtime and why?

7.1.4 Negotiating for 'petty contracts': the politics of earning *hajri*

Given the urgency from builders to finish tasks, *thekedars* offer work on petty contracts to their selected *mistris*. Through a petty contract, *thekedars* can secure their share of the surplus in a shorter period, given that the work is completed faster than usual by the *mistris*. Such a contract enables *mistris* and the helpers they choose, to earn wages equivalent to more than one working day within one day, i.e., a higher number of *hajris*.

In its literal sense, one *hajri* is equivalent to a day's work of eight hours. Under piece-rate and time-rate work, daily wages are paid to labourers for working 8 hours which is counted as one *hajri*, i.e., a labourer has earned wages for a day. However, in the case of petty contracts, *hajri* acquires a political meaning. One *hajri* is considered equivalent to an estimated amount of work that needs to be completed by a labourer (*mistri* and helper) in an 8-hour working day. Although the *thekedar* estimates a piece of work to be completed in a particular time, the expected time to complete the work is negotiated between the *thekedar* and *mistris*. This indicates that obtaining a petty contract involves a process of negotiation between *thekedars* and *mistris*. For instance, a *thekedar* estimates that plastering the walls of one room in one villa requires two *mistris* working over a day, i.e. each *mistri* gets one *hajri*. However, it could be finished by one *mistri* in one day by working fast, indicating that the *mistri* could ask for two *hajris*. Such negotiations between *mistris* and *thekedars* shapes the politics of earning extra wages in intensifying surplus extraction.

The language of earning *hajri* was quite prominent among Bihari migrant labourers working for *thekedars* on a measurement basis. Petty contracts are only central to measurement work since *thekedars* are keen to show the builders their work output in a relatively shorter period of time. In this way, a *mistri* can ask for 1.5 *hajri*, two *hajri*, 2.5 *hajri*, and three *hajri* in a single day when he negotiates with the *thekedar* to finish a piece of work in a particular period. In supply work, a labourer can also earn wages for more than a day within a single day. However, there is a limited possibility for a petty contract in supply work as *thekedars* aim to enhance their surplus by retaining labourers to work more hours rather than to finish work quickly.

The system of negotiating for *hajris* regulates how *thekedars* can deploy Bihari-ness as the ability of skilled Bihari labour to work fast as a mechanism of surplus extraction. How does the negotiation for extra *hajris* take place under measurement work?

Mansur *ji* requested Afzal *mistri* [one of the best *mistris* known for his ability to work fast] to work on Sunday, which he denied immediately. Afzal suggested that if Mansur *ji* gives him the building on contract, he can think of working. To this, Mansur *ji* asked him to go and have a look at the villa and give him an estimation of how many man-days [1 day is 8 hours of work] would be required. During this time, the *thekedar* calculated that it would require around 12 *mistris* to finish plastering for the three-floor villa. Lastly, Afzal *mistri* could negotiate for the payment of 14 *mistri* (Four sides of the wall = Eight *mistris*, three sides = Six *mistris*) and 14 helpers for finishing the task in one day, after which all would be getting double *hajri* (equivalent to two days' work). Mansur *ji* was least bothered if Afzal could get the task done with fewer *mistris* or labourers; in either case, Afzal would get the payment for 14 *mistris* and 14 labourers. After this conversation about the contract for plastering one villa, *thekedar* tried to convince Afzal to work on Sundays with one other *mistri* and a helper. *Thekedar* added that if the *mistris* can work on Sundays, he is also ready to give double payment. Afzal was still refusing to work on Sunday. Later, he dejectedly agreed when the *thekedar* asked him to work on the coming Sunday as the following Sunday would be Diwali. The negotiation process for offering a petty contract to Afzal *mistri* lasted approximately 25 minutes.

The above field excerpt indicates the coordination of interests between *mistris* and *thekedars* wherein *mistris* can earn more, and *thekedars* can enhance their share in the surplus extracted. Following Thompson (1971) and Scott (1976), Sargent (2019) argues that the system of *hajri* is limited to exploitation that takes a moral economic form. However, I argue that the system of *hajris*, which appears as a moral, economic transaction, intensifies surplus extraction through negotiation-based consensus between *thekedars* and *mistris*. Through the system of earning extra *hajris*, Bihari migrant labourers working on a piece-rate basis are subject to a relatively higher degree of exploitation than those working on a supply basis. Moreover, this exploitation passes on from the *mistris* to the helpers. In accepting a petty contract from the *thekedar*, it is the head-*mistri* who 'chooses' helpers to finish the construction work as agreed under the petty contract (Sargent 2019). Under the system of *hajris*,

building construction work is intensified, and exploitation is affected through the hands of the *mistri*, rather than the *thekedar*, as the *mistri* is responsible for finishing the work fast (Marx 1976).

But I gathered that not all *thekedars* want to give more *hajris* to their *mistris*, and not all *mistris* accept *thekedar's* offer for more *hajris*. Why? This is because the system of *hajris* also serves to regulate the exploitability of *mistris* and helpers. The *mistris* are conscious of the *thekedar* using a petty contract as a regulatory mechanism to check how fast a *mistri* works to gauge his skills. By using their Bihari-ness rooted in the historical *thekedar*-labour relations, skilled Bihari labourers like Afzal who are seen as the core and trusted labourers of the *thekedar*, can often deny the petty contracts offered by their *thekedars*. As a result, a *thekedar* needs to have experience offering a petty contract to his *mistris* to curtail their ability to bargain for more *hajris* than needed.

Mansur *ji* highlighted that usually, a worker would avoid taking a petty contract as otherwise they will be asked to work faster on their daily wages. He further added that he does not have a requirement to allocate work on *theka* even if it is urgent though he says that the requirement is to increase staff so that work gets done faster.

Afzal *mistri* highlighted that the contractor frequently asks him to work on Sundays to complete unfinished work. The contractor pays him ₹600 for the day instead of ₹500, as he is the only one capable of meeting the target. He added saying *thekedar* also keeps a watch on labourers who is weak and who can finish the work faster.

“Thekedar bhi dekhta hai na ki kaun kamjor hai kisse ho sakta hai. Dono thekedar ke paas sabse fast kaam mera hai, jo main kar doonga who kisi se nahi hoga. Rate sabse tej hai mera, 600 hai mera baaki ka 500 hai.”

By gauging the speed of a *mistri* after accepting a petty contract from the *thekedar*, the *mistris* fear that the *thekedar* may coerce them to work faster daily, i.e., on a typical working day at the daily wage rates. One of the *thekedars* told me that a *mistri* could earn up to 55 *hajris* (days of wages) in just 30 days by working for a *thekedar* on a measurement contract. However, up to 36 *hajris* can be earned in shuttering work on a supply basis for 30 days. The *mistris* could be reluctant to accept work on petty contracts continually. In this way, Bihari-ness is deployed by labourers to regulate the

system of earning *hajris* and enable bargaining and negotiation on the intensification of work for surplus extraction. However, *thekedars* exercise their subtle coercion in intensifying construction work through petty contracts. In this way, the politics of earning *hajris* comprises consent and coercion and indicates a possibility of conflict in shaping the lived experience of exploitation of *mistris* and helpers.

7.1.5 Controlling labour circulation: managing disruption to work

The *thekedari* system organises and reproduces the system of migrant labour by splitting the maintenance and renewal of labour-power between the city and village and ensuring a connection between the two (Burawoy 1976, p1059). It regulates and controls labour circulation to reinforce surplus extraction (Jain and Sharma 2019). Seasonal labour circulation in the Indian context allows migrant labourers to take a break from working in the city and resting in the villages, enabling capital accumulation processes (Breman 1996, Omvedt 1980).

Bihari migrant labourers usually circulate between their home villages and the worksites in March-April and Oct-Nov to celebrate Hindu festivals such as Holi, Diwali, *Chhath* Puja, and marriage festivities and for agricultural harvesting. In terms of seasonality, the festive season, the season for marriage, and the time for agricultural sowing or harvesting coincide. Those Bihari migrant labourers who are Muslims usually go in April-May to celebrate Eid and other agricultural seasons.

Regarding their circulation to their village, labourers mentioned that during festivals, they need to go back and attend the weddings of their friends, family and relatives. One of the labourers added that those practising agriculture ensure sufficient food grain stock for the whole year. When it came to weddings, he explained that in the villages, the time after the Holi festival is considered auspicious for wedding ceremonies: '*Jiska kheti hai wo jata hai, ek saal ka khana wahan jama kar ke wapas aa jata hai. Dehat mein Holi ke baad lagan hai shaadi vyah.*' One added that the auspicious time for wedding ceremonies starts in January and goes on until April. Some prefer to hold ceremonies early, and others hold the same towards the end of the auspicious time.

“... dekhiye lagan toh Magha mahina se chaalu ho jata hai, vaisakha tak chalta hai lagan. Koi usme lagan shuru hone ke time par shaadi karta hai toh koi aakhiri mein.”

The *munshi* commented that the ones who do not have money usually hold the wedding ceremonies towards the end of the auspicious time so that they can save until then.

“Jiske paas paisa nahi hai, wo toh jab lagan ekdum last hone wala hoga tabhi karega na shaadi, thoda bahut kama bhi lega. Lekin jiske paas paisa hai uske liye lagan hamesha hai, har mahina mein lagan hai.”

He further responded by saying it was essential to attend wedding ceremonies of family members in and around the village; otherwise, they would not reciprocate. Hence, labourers need to attend wedding ceremonies with their families. However, he added that those who do not have to attend weddings plan their trip to the village accordingly.

“Baisakh [April] mein, chaautha mahine mein, shaadi ka lagan hai tab jaega labour, jisko nahi hai shaadi ka kuch wo phalgun mein jaega [February]. Gaon mein ek doosre ke ghar pe shaadi par nahi gaya toh wo log bhi nahi aayega humare idhar kisi bhi shaadi par. Lekin idhar thoda bahut kama ke jaaega na.”

Bihari migrant labourers circulate to their villages, given their social obligation to attend marriage celebrations to maintain their *izzat*, i.e. honour (Chakravarti 2018, p219). Further, they circulate to ensure food grains for the household. However, the migrant labourer himself doesn't need to perform these functions. Instead, these functions are carried out by gender and kinship relations in the household over generations (Gidwani and Ramamurthy 2018, Meillasoux 1981, Mezzadri 2016a, Rogaly 2003, Rogaly and Rafique 2003, Shah and Lerche 2020). Further, the necessity for Bihari labourers to circulate depends on the availability of cash savings for labourers to take back home.

Afzal *mistri*, narrating his family situation back in his village in Bihar, commented that he goes home to his village every five to six months, but this time he will only go in March if he earns at least ₹20,000-25,000.

On asking when they would go home, *mistris* working in shuttering, said there was no fixed time. I asked if they go home during the sowing season to sow the crop. The *mistri* responded by saying that one would not leave the possibility of earning wages of ₹1,000 per day in the city to go and sow crops in the village when one could manage sowing by hiring labourers to work on the field or utilising available household labour.

“Yahan daily ka ₹1,000 chhod ke dhaan lagane nahi jaenge. Wahan ghar par log labour leke manage kar leta hai. Sab ke ghar mein ek ek aadmi rehta hai.”

One of the *mistris* said that people who don't engage in farming typically don't visit their village. However, he also added that they stay for one to two months when they go: *'humlog jab jaate hain tab ek se do mahina uahan rahte hain aaram se.'*

The above excerpts resonate with the existing literature indicating that labourer's possibility of earning wages in the city takes precedence over going to the village even in the seasons of agricultural sowing or harvesting (Mezzadri and Majumdar 2020, Mezzadri and Srivastava 2015). In this sense, returning to the villages is seen as a site for rest. However, it is subject to a labourer's earnings from construction work. Further, labourers evoke a sense of separation between their time *spent* working at worksites for wages in the cities and their time *passed* in the villages for rest, leisure etc. (Thompson 1967, emphasis mine). In this way, labour circulation is regulated by Bihari migrant labourers through the role of gender and kinship relations across spatiotemporally divided households and the necessity for labourers to earn and save in the city.

However, the circulation of labourers poses 'temporal' challenges to *thekedars* by potentially disrupting the construction rate at the worksite, especially when the work is urgent. In measurement work, when the everyday construction work is slow, and *thekedars* have 'extra' labourers on the site, they may ask labourers to return to their villages. Alternatively, if labourers have been mobilised to work, they are only called to the site once work is available. *Thekedars* working on supply, i.e., time-rate, lose their daily share of surplus when labourers return to their villages given the reduced headcount of labour from the work site. However, *thekedars* working on a measurement basis lose the rate at which work is done without labourers.

To address the challenges, the *thekedars*, working on piece-rate and time-rate contracts, look for 'replacement' labourers from the villages in Bihar. Further, *thekedars* control the labourers' return to their villages by not allowing all labourers to leave work. Such control is exercised by persuading labourers to work by employing the 'moral' language of working hard in the city to be able to save. Further, the weekly

subsistence, i.e., *khuraki*, is regulated to manage the circulation of labourers to their village for holidays or festivals etc. Moreover, *thekedars* working on a piece-rate basis, organise the everyday construction work in relation to the circulation of labour, for instance, by deciding who can leave for their villages and who cannot.

On asking Mansur *ji* if he faced a shortage of labourers during Diwali and Chhath Puja, he responded by saying that he never faces a shortage of labourers as they remain the same during the festive season in which labourers go home and return after a couple of months having harvested their crop and celebrated the festivals.

“Mere paas koi kam nahi hota, jitna hai utna rahega. Abhi ek do din mein aur bhagega, dekhiye kuch admi kam ho gaya. Kal se lekar shanivar tak admi nikalte rahega. Ek se do mahina ke baad aayega sab. Is season mein admi nahi badhta hai, jitna hai utna rahega. Chhath karke dhaan kat kar aayega December, January etc. kabhi bhi jisko jaisa sohaliyat hua.” [Bihari migrant labourers working for Mansur *ji* who are Muslims do not travel to Bihar in the Hindu festive season].

Later on, one evening during the distribution of weekly subsistence, Mansur *ji* announced that most labourers would be allowed to go home only in March for Holi and not for Diwali and *Chhath*, which was to be celebrated in the current month.

Mansur *ji* added that only four or five of his labourers would be going in this month to celebrate Diwali. I presumed their work was almost over at the site as they were primarily involved as *mistris* for bricklaying, and no bricklaying task was left at the site.

Another labourer, Ramu and his wife negotiated with the *thekedar* to go home for Diwali and *Chhath Puja*. However, the *thekedar* told him that this was not the right time to go home with his wife and kids since his house had been destroyed due to the floods. He promised that he would send him home for Holi during March, as he wants him to stay back, given the urgency of the construction of the villas.

I asked Rajiv *munshi* what would happen if all the workers wanted to go home for Holi. In response, he explained that it is not feasible for all labourers to leave simultaneously because the *thekedar* needs to be notified 15-20 days in advance to ensure that replacement labourers can be arranged from the village.

“Aisa ho hi nahi sakta ki sab labour ek saath jae, aur waise bhi thekedar jaane nhi dega. Thekedar ko 15-20 din pehle batana padta hai ki main jaane wala hoon phir wahan se labour bhejta hai thekedar.”

He added that those who do not go home celebrate Holi in the labour camp.

The above excerpts indicate the *thekedar's* decision to select periods for labour circulation or limit their frequency of circulation to avoid disruption to the construction work. During the periods of circulation, work at the sites does not stop as *thekedars* ensure that not all the 'regular' labourers remain absent from the worksites or otherwise arrange for 'replacement' labourers or otherwise substitute labourers from the construction site. In legitimising labourers working at the site using 'moral' languages of earning and saving in the city to rest in the village, *thekedars* generate consent among labourers to stay back at the site. However, coercion is visible in work intensification in case of a shortage of helpers due to labour circulation. Further, *thekedars* may delay doing a labourer's *hisab* to control his circulation to the village.

Though *thekedars* control the circulation of labour to their villages, they remain mindful of coercing labourers not to circulate. This would result in *thekedars* losing their labourers and their prospects for accumulation. As discussed earlier, working under the *thekedari* system enables Bihari migrant labourers to 'freely' circulate to their villages. Moreover, Bihari migrant labourers who have taken a cash advance from the *thekedar* find it easy to circulate to their village as they can return to work.

Some labourers wanted to return to their villages in Bihar on the 28th or 29th of February for Holi on March 10th. However, the *munshi* asked them to wait an extra week to leave with others because they hadn't informed the *thekedar* about leaving early.

“Areey aaj kyun jaa rahe ho, agla Sunday ko jao nahi toh 28th-29th Feb tak jao aur bhi aadmi log ja raha toh saath mein chale jaana. Waise bhi thekedar se baat nahi hua hai na?”

Hearing that they needed to inform the *thekedar*, one of the labourers commented that it was not *sarkari naukri* (government job), so there was no need for any such permission to be taken from the *thekedar*. To this, Rajiv *munshi* immediately responded that the *thekedar* had permitted him to allow only one worker to leave the camp that Sunday and the rest would only leave in the next week.

About labourers' going to the village, another *munshi* who works in shuttering explained that the labourers have the freedom to leave and return to their village whenever needed. He explains that if restrictions are imposed on their

movement, they may refuse to come back to work and might blame the contractor for not allowing them to go home in case of emergencies.

“Unko mana nahi kar sakte, bandish nahi hai, bandish kiye toh dobara aayega hi nahi. Wo bolega ki emergency mein humko jaane nahi deta hai.”

The circulation of Bihari migrant labourers forms an enabling condition for labourers to work under the *thekedari* system in building construction. Labourers exercise relative power in returning to their villages, but the circulation is regulated, controlled, and managed by the *thekedar*. This is done to ensure that the rate of everyday construction work is not affected or disrupted to secure surplus.

The lives of Bihari migrant labourers remain stretched across spatiotemporally divided households (Rogaly 2003, Shah and Lerche 2020). However, the potential to circulate to villages is subject to their cash savings from construction work and their gender and kinship relations back in their villages. This enables labourers to stay back and continue working as per the work rhythms. However, when circulation disrupts a *thekedar's* surplus, they use substitute labourers from the site or mobilise 'replacement' labour from the villages. While *thekedars* remain conscious of the demands by labourers to go to their villages, they generate consent among labourers to continue working at the site or otherwise exercise coercion by intensifying construction work.

7.2 Discussion

The everyday forms of control over the working day are hinged on the labour process, i.e., relations in production which enable the realisation of labour-power in the *thekedari* system. It is shaped by the time-based organisation of work, i.e. measurement and supply work. The control over the working day is visible in the intensification of work, i.e., the speed with which work is done and/or extension of the working day, i.e., the number of man-hours worked (Jain and Sharma 2019, Marx 1976). For supply work, control is meant to increase the number of man-hours worked, but in measurement work, it is meant to increase the speed at which labourers, i.e., *mistris* and helpers, complete their daily targets. The forms of control at worksites are

exercised by monitoring the daily rate of work, regulating working on a Sunday, doing overtime, negotiating for petty contracts, going home etc.

The field findings indicate that both *mistris* and helpers are subtly coerced to follow a particular intensity at which work needs to be done under the measurement-based *thekedari* system. In taking a break, Bihari migrant labourers consume tobacco for their bodily energy (Waite 2007). It is seen as a disciplining act by the *munshi* in pausing the rate at which works takes place (Burawoy 1985, Thompson 1967).

Further, regulating work on Sundays and working overtime is intricately linked to securing surplus by *thekedars* but with the need for labourers to rest (Burawoy 1985). Under supply-based work, the *munshi* legitimises overtime work and working on Sundays on account of working in the city to earn and that it is crucial for *thekedar's* share of the surplus. Moreover, labourers consent to working on Sundays and doing overtime on a weekday. It enables labourers to earn extra wages by working overtime. However, securing a surplus on a Sunday is relatively easier in the case of supply work owing to the false attendance of labourers. Given this, unless builders deem work urgent, *munshis* do not coerce labourers to work on Sundays. Unlike supply-based contracts, getting to work 'overtime' or on Sundays in measurement work is not a 'given' as the *munshi* or the *thekedar* determines it. Labourers try to find overtime work at a better daily wage rate if their *munshi* or *thekedar* does not offer it. *Thekedars* or their *munshi* use the allocation of overtime work on a Sunday as a disciplining mechanism to check the rate at which work is done and to gauge labourers' ability to be exploited. As a labourer could earn a day's wage by working half a Sunday, the *munshi* exercise coercion over helpers who tactically work slowly during the week and look for work at better daily wage rates. This way, working on Sundays and asking for overtime is regulated under measurement work. The lived experience of exploitation comprises coercing labourers to work at a greater speed or otherwise overtly consenting to work on Sunday and doing overtime on a weekday.

Moreover, the system of offering petty contracts to *mistris* in measurement work for earning more *hajris* intensifies the rate at which work is done. However, petty contracts are limited in supply-based work, which depends on the number of man-hours worked, tilting the balance of power towards the *thekedar* with little scope for negotiation by

labourers. Sargent (2019) indicates the system of *hajri* as a moral economy of remuneration. However, I indicate that *mistris* deploy Bihari-ness in bargaining and negotiating for *hajris* regulating the exploitability of *mistris* and helpers. The politics of earning *hajris* comprises consent and coercion and indicates a possibility of conflict in shaping the lived experience of exploitation of *mistris* and helpers.

The regulation of labour circulation under the *thekedari* system, in organising and reproducing a system of migrant labour, serves as another realm of everyday control over the organisation of work (Burawoy 1976, Meillassoux 1981, Shah *et al.* 2017). The circulation of labourers is regulated to meet the time-based targets of construction work. This occurs through the *thekedar's* cautiously exercising coercion in stopping labourers from going home and the generating consent among labourers to continue working at the site. When circulation disrupts a *thekedar's* surplus, they either use substitute labourers from the site or mobilise 'replacement' labour from the villages to maintain labour-power availability. While *thekedars* remain conscious of the demands by labourers to go to their villages, they exercise coercion by intensifying construction work. However, labourers consent to continue working to save cash before leaving for their villages (Mezzadri and Srivastava 2015). This is further enabled by the role of gender and kinship relations in organising agricultural sowing or harvesting activities or attending marriage celebrations etc., in the village (Mezzadri and Majumdar 2020, Shah and Lerche 2020). In this way, labour circulation is regulated to control the disruption to capital accumulation.

The chapter contributes to the literature on everyday forms of control in the workplace in reinforcing surplus extraction. In reproducing relations of the labour process, everyday forms of control over the 'working day' shape and are shaped by the lived experience of Bihari migrant labourers through the *thekedari* system. Class relations are configured through everyday bargaining, contestation, and negotiation between *thekedars* and labourers at worksites in intensifying rate of work, earning *hajris* through petty contracts, working on a Sunday, doing overtime, taking a break to consume *khaini*, going home etc. In negotiating the exercise of control which regulates their exploitability, Bihari migrant labourers deploy their skills politically in relation to the time-based organisation of work by working fast or slow. In regulating the exploitability and intensity of surplus extraction, potential class conflicts that can disrupt *thekedar's*

share of surplus are averted through subtle coercion and overt consent in exercising control. The politics of the lived experience of exploitation, composed of subtle coercion and overt consent, contestation and bargaining, reshape how the control works on an everyday basis under the *thekedari* system in configuring class relations.

7.3 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that the everyday forms of control exercised over the working day under measurement and supply-based work configure class relations. Control over the working day is exercised by intensifying, i.e., increasing the rate at which construction work takes place or by extending the number of man-hours worked. However, control remains contingent upon the possibility of *thekedars* securing their share of surplus alongside keeping in mind the limits to the working day. In this sense, the *thekedari* system exercises forms of control by tying the ability of *thekedars* to secure surplus with the necessity for labourers to rest.

The forms of control are visible in monitoring the rate of work completed, the negotiation for intensifying work through petty contracts, working or resting on Sundays, taking breaks during the working day, working for an extended number of hours, circulation of labourers to their village etc. Such forms of control enable or silence the possibilities of bargaining and contestation between *thekedars* and Bihari migrant labourers, for instance, in case of negotiating *hajris*, working on a Sunday etc. However, in regulating exploitability and surplus extraction, potential class conflicts are disrupted through a dynamic combination of subtle coercion and overt consent in exercising control under the *thekedari* system. As a result, the emergence of bargaining and negotiation between *thekedars* and labourers and the combination of coercion and consent amidst the control exercised for securing surplus configure class relations. In this way, exercising control under the *thekedari* system reproduces relations of the labour process in reinforcing surplus extraction and configuring class relations.

How does the *thekedari* system reproduce relations of the labour process by extending the arms of everyday control to labour camps, i.e., for renewing labour-power? How

are class relations shaped by the lived experience of exercising control in the labour camp? I answer these questions in the next chapter.

Chapter 8: Everyday Control on the Daily Reproduction of Labour

The accommodation of labourers in labour camps is central to the architecture of surplus extraction. It serves as the 'extension' of control over necessary labour time. While the exercise of everyday forms of control at the worksites is for the realisation of labour-power, it is the daily reproduction of labour which is also controlled under the *thekedari* system for reinforcing surplus extraction. How does the *thekedari* system reproduce relations of the labour process by exercising control in labour camps? How does the lived experience of exercising control at labour camps shape class relations?

Answering the above questions is the central aim of this chapter. Burawoy (1985), taking the case of the early nineteenth-century textile mills in Russia and the U.S., examined how control has been historically exercised over labour. It is argued that the accommodation of labourers in 'company houses', barracks or cubicles enabled the mechanisms of everyday control in reinforcing surplus extraction by regulating or curtailing labourers' necessary labour time (Burawoy 1985). The accommodation of labourers tied the production process with the reproduction of labour-power with or without the state's intervention. Through the temporary accommodation of labourers in camps, everyday control was exercised by subjecting labourers to moral policing, surveillance and discipline through the system of fines and vigilance by the police. In addition to these, controlling provisions provided to labourers, their leisure pursuits, religion, sexual relations etc., were employed for reinforcing surplus extraction (ibid, p92-105). Similar forms of coercive control were exercised in the case of labour hostels or the compounds for migrant labourers working in South African mines (Van Onselen 1976). Moreover, in relatively recent literature, the accommodation of labour into 'dormitories' has been discussed in the case of China. It has been examined as a systemic and spatial strategy of labour control for subsidising the living cost of labour in terms of wages, accommodation and consumption (Ngai and Smith 2007, Pun and Chan 2013, Smith and Pun 2006).

What underlies the accounts of accommodating labourers in barracks, cubicles, compounds etc., is the exercise of 'coercive' control over production and reproduction to reinforce surplus extraction. However, in the case of the *thekedari* system,

exercising control via labour camps is shaped by the necessity for *thekedars* to secure their surplus by meeting Bihari labourers' specific needs for their daily reproduction. It shapes how combinations of coercion and consent is produced in controlling the daily reproduction of labour under the *thekedari* system.

I argue that control, discipline and negotiation in the daily reproduction of Bihari migrant labourers shapes combinations of coercion and consent. It composes the lived experience of exploitation in configuring class relations. The levers of control and discipline entail the cost-free accommodation of Bihari migrant labourers in labour camps, which ties the production process with the reproduction of labour-power. Such levers of control over the daily reproduction of labourers are reflected in weekly subsistence, i.e. *khuraki* paid by *thekedars* to labourers, *thekedar*-centred organisation of rooms based on hierarchies of work, arrangements to prepare or/and eat food for dietary needs, weekend drinking, sexual relations etc. Further, the cohabitation of migrant labourers serves to discipline the daily reproduction of labour by legitimising Bihari migrant labourers' morally and culturally superior way of living in the labour camps.

To begin with, I outline the accommodation of Bihari migrant labourers in BSS and Rishabh builders' labour camp. Following this, I explain the control exercised by *thekedars* over labourers, however, negotiated by Bihari migrant labourers when it comes to the organisation of rooms in the labour camp and specific daily reproduction of labour. Further, I situate the disciplining and legitimisation of weekend drinking in the labour camp, indicating a 'way of life' for Bihari migrant labourers and their access to health services. Following this, I highlight the control exercised by builders and *thekedars* to discipline the masculinity of migrant construction labourers, in avoiding sexual abuse. In the final section of my empirical data, I indicate the scope of control in labour camps, including the processes through which Bihari migrant labourers legitimise their way of living by stigmatising Bengali migrant labourers. I discuss the findings in the subsequent section and reiterate the argument in the conclusion.

8.1 Enabling and controlling the daily reproduction

By tying the production process with the reproduction of labour-power in building construction, the *thekedari* system controls the necessary labour time. In doing so, it

subsidises the living costs for labourers. This occurs by paying subsistence to Bihari migrant labourers complemented by their rent-free accommodation in labour camps. This subsidises the living cost of labourers in the production process. Further, staying in labour camps is also legitimised by *thekedars* and Bihari migrant labourers for not having to pay rent and to be able to live as male construction labourers in the city.

I asked one of the *mistris* from Bihar if they had rented out rooms in the city: ‘*aap log bhaade/kiraya par room liye hue hain kya?*’ No, was the response. One added that they would have to unnecessarily pay the rent for the room like the *naka* workers. Hence, they were better off being at the campsites and moving wherever the work went.

Alam *ji* commented that labourers would often consume *paan* (betel leaf) and *gutkha* (tobacco) because it was impossible to get a room outside. He further added that earlier, the builders made labour camps, but now it is the labourers who need to construct them.

“*Wo kabhi paan khaenge, gutkha khaenge idhar udhar thook denge, isi kaaran se bahar ghar dene se mana kar dete hain. Pehle labour camp bana ke milta tha, lekin ab khud se room banana hota hai.*”

I asked if the labourers do not stay in rooms outside the site. Alam *ji* shared that house owners have issues in letting rooms to bachelors which is why labourers stay on the site: ‘*bachelor ko room dene main yahan dikkat karte hain, isiliye room khaali karte karte mere log thak gaye. Tab se ye log site par rehte hain.*’

The above excerpt indicates that a male migrant labourer's 'way of living' is not acceptable in accommodation spaces outside labour camps. I argue that this specific 'way of living' indicates specific forms of the daily reproduction of migrant construction labourers. Accommodating Bihari migrant labourers, among others, in labour camps enables labourers to negotiate for specific forms of daily reproduction. However, it enables the exercise of control over the necessary labour time of labourers to reinforce surplus extraction shaping their lived experience of exploitation.

8.1.1 Controlling and negotiating daily reproduction: Rooms, *khuraki* and food consumption

How is the daily reproduction of Bihari migrant labourers controlled and negotiated?

The starting point to control daily reproduction is the organisation of rooms for labourers and paying *khuraki*, i.e., weekly subsistence expenses to labourers. Before we examine the same, I would like to highlight Rishabh and BSS labour camps briefly.

Rishabh Builders and Developers have their labour camp on the construction site itself, where the labourers can stay temporarily. They provide spaces for the workers to build their temporary accommodation. The building company operates two to three construction sites. Each site accommodates its labourers within the premises. Once the construction is completed, the temporary accommodations are removed. The labourers start working at 8 am and take a lunch break at 1 pm, returning to work by 2 pm. I first entered the labour camp during the labourers' lunch break. I noticed that each room had a kitchen for the migrant workers to cook their food. Additionally, the rooms had toilets and access to a deep well for water.



*Figure 8.1: Construction labour camp at Rishabh Builders and Developers
(Source: Photographed by the author, 2019)*

A quick conversation with Dinesh *mistri* revealed the daily routine of labourers working for Rishabh Builders and Developers in the labour camp. Labourers start their day as early as 4 am to finish their daily chores like using community facilities for bathing and washing clothes. They then prepare breakfast and lunch in a shared kitchen inside their room. Before heading to work at around 8 am, they eat one of the meals they prepared. After finishing work between 5-6 pm, they return to camp to prepare and eat their dinner. They spend time chatting with their fellow labourers and watching movies before sleeping, so they can wake up early the next day.

In contrast to the Rishabh Builders camp, migrant labourers were transported by bus from the worksite to the BSS Real Estate labour colony located at a distance. BSS labour colony accommodated migrant labourers working at five to six different construction sites run by BSS in the vicinity. BSS labour colony has existed for the last eight years, accommodating over 2000 labourers. Three to four labour colonies of a few other building companies were located near the BSS labour colony.



*Figure 8.2: BSS Real Estate Pvt Ltd. Construction labour camp
(Source: Photographed by the author, 2019)*

The building company, BSS Real Estate Pvt Ltd, provided a pre-fabricated room structure to accommodate migrant labourers. Moreover, unlike Rishabh builders, the BSS labour camp also facilitated the cooking arrangements for labourers by providing spaces for *thekedars* to set up community kitchens. The labour colony had a few grocery and provision stores run by the *thekedars*. In addition, builders provided bus services for transporting labourers and cooked food between worksites and labour camps. Labourers catch the bus at 7 am to start working at their respective sites from 8 am and return to their camp around 8 pm, after which labourers on the night shift catch the bus.

8.1.1a Organisation of rooms in labour camps

Ensuring the living arrangements of labourers is one of the central responsibilities of the *thekedars*. However, it is facilitated by building firms which provide land, supplies for electricity, water, construction of rooms etc., for accommodating labourers either on site or at a distance.



Figure 8.3: Sample room in BSS colony (Source: Photographed by the author, 2019)

A typical room size in the labour colony varies and can accommodate anywhere from eight to 30 labourers. Yet, some rooms that are supposed to hold only 15 labourers may end up accommodating 25 instead. However, at Rishabh's labour camp, only three or four labourers could share a room or hutment because of the relatively smaller size of the room.

In organising the rooms, labourers of different *thekedars* were strictly not accommodated in the same room in the labour camp. The allotment of rooms is decided by the labour-in-charge officer employed by the building company. Only labourers of the same *thekedar* would be accommodated in the same room. For instance, a few *mistris* could stay together in a room, and helpers could stay separately. However, *mistris* and helpers working on piece-rate-based construction work could stay together.

In the case of Rishabh Builders worksite, I found that labourers shared rooms based on caste, kinship and religious beliefs or otherwise based on village ties. For instance, Hindu and Muslim *mistris* or helpers did not stay together in the same room in the labour camp. In this way, arrangements of rooms could be divided along the lines of caste, kinship and religion. Though *thekedars* do not coerce labourers into choosing rooms based on these social ties, a few *mistris* were seen to occupy the same room as that of the foreman and *munshi* which shaped control over daily reproduction of labour, as indicated in further sections. Nevertheless, builders control the organisation of rooms for Bihari migrant labourers by limiting labourers of one *thekedar* to one room.

8.1.1b Paying *khuraki* for organising food consumption

Beyond organising rooms, *thekedars* provide *khuraki* to labourers weekly for their expenses on food and other necessities, enabling the renewal of labour-power. In this way, *khuraki* commodifies the subsistence needs of labourers in organising the daily reproduction of labour. The weekly subsistence amount includes their food expenses, aside from covering expenses incurred on tea and snacks through the week, liquor, phone recharge etc. In this way, the daily reproduction of labour is organised through the payment of *khuraki*.

I argue that the mechanisms through which labourers meet their specific dietary needs are shaped by the control over arrangements for daily reproduction and the amount of weekly *khuraki* distributed to labourers. The mechanisms could be preparing food in the shared room-kitchen organised by labourers or eating in community kitchens run by *thekedars*. At the BSS colony, which accommodated around 2000 migrant labourers across five to six construction sites, most *thekedars* set up and run community kitchens or messes for their labourers within the labour camps. The kitchens are organised by buying the vessels needed for cooking, recruiting cooks and their helpers, choosing the weekly menu, and procuring food grains from grocery shops run by the *thekedars*. Further, builders provide daily wage payments for cooks and maids depending on how many labourers they cook food for. However, at the Rishabh labour camp, all migrant labourers prepare their food and organise their kitchen inside their rooms with the *khuraki* they receive.

The amount of *khuraki* shapes how labourers meet their specific dietary needs. For instance, *thekedars* from Bengal and Chhattisgarh offered only ₹300-600 as *khuraki* to their labourers and additionally provided food through the community kitchens run by the *thekedar*. For the same, labourers paid a portion of their *khuraki* back to the *thekedar*, enabling surplus accumulation through organising daily reproduction. In this way, *thekedars* control the food choices for their labourers by providing a relatively lower amount of *khuraki* and running a weekly or monthly fee-based community kitchen. However, *thekedars* offered a relatively higher amount of *khuraki* to labourers from Bihar. This is because, unlike other migrant labourers incorporated into the *thekedari* system, Bihari migrant labourers are keen to prepare their food. For instance, *thekedars* fixed ₹700 to ₹1000 for Bihari migrant labourers as their weekly

allowance. The amount of weekly allowance or *khuraki* given by the *thekedar* (or the *munshi* in case of the absence of the *thekedar*) further shapes the organisation of the kitchen, planning and buying groceries, sharing of expenses among roommates, making choices about what to eat etc. On average, Bihari migrant labourers spend 50-60% on food by organising and running their kitchens inside the rooms.

In mentioning that 32 community kitchens run in the labour camp, Gopal, labour camp boss at BSS, immediately added with a smile that Bihari migrant labourers cook their food themselves as they eat *roti/chapatti* frequently in their meals: '*wo Bihari aadmi jyada khud se khana banata kyunki wo log roti khata hai.*'

Bihari migrant labourers, unlike other migrant labourers, do not prefer to eat in the community kitchens for reasons of preferring a certain kind of food, i.e. *roti* (flatbread made from wheat) over rice, considerations of quality and preparation in clean and hygienic conditions. They are free to prepare what they want, and their food choices are not constrained or determined by their *thekedar*. However, the amount of *khuraki* paid to labourers does organise and control their choices.



*Figure 8.4: Distribution of kitchen in rooms occupied by Biharis
(Source: Photographed by the author, 2019)*

To prepare their food in the labour camps by setting up kitchens inside their rooms in small groups of 5-6 co-labourers.

I could see three or four gas stoves inside the BSS colony in one room occupied by Bihari labourers. The labourers indicated that 17-18 labourers stayed in the room and organised three mini kitchens in groups of five or six labourers. On asking about the gas stoves, one of the labourers highlighted that they do not like eating in the mess as three times they would have to eat rice. One said he (and others) requires *roti* for at least one meal daily. He added that they do not like the food cooked in the community kitchen as it upsets their stomach.

“Khana bhi pasand nahi padta hai hum sabko. Mess mein humlog ek mahina khana khae toh pet mein gas ban gaya. Khana bhi acha nahi lag raha tha. Haan ye mehnga pad gaya bartan shartan lene mein. Abhi raashan paani layenge bas. Room mein humlog 17-18 aadmi hai, 6-6 aadmi ka karke khana banta hai. Bada room hai, nahi toh bahut load ho jaega ek aadmi par khana banane ka.”

The above excerpts indicate a difference in dietary needs of Bihari and Bengali migrant labourers working in building construction. Marx indicated that the natural wants of labourers for their daily reproduction, such as food, clothing etc., may vary according to climate and physical conditions and that such wants are the product of historical development. Thompson (1963) also indicates that the standards of the diet of an English labourer were different from that of an Irish migrant labourer. Such differences indicate the specific and concrete ways in which the daily reproduction of labour takes place in the labour camps. In this sense, Bihari-ness indicates concrete and specific ways in which Bihari migrant labourers meet their specific dietary needs by choosing to organise their daily food compared to other migrant construction labourers.

However, meeting specific dietary needs every day by cooking and organising the kitchen intensifies their necessary labour time.

During a conversation about life in the city, a Bihari *mistri* mentioned that cooking food could be challenging, especially since they are accustomed to having cooked food readily available in their village. In contrast, living in the city requires double the effort, as one has to prepare meals themselves. This means more work and less time to rest.

“Khana banana ka mehnat hai yahan -gaon mein sab bana banaya milta hai, gaon mein aaram hai aur yahan par utna hi mehnat, double mehnat hai.”

The burden of daily reproduction increases on a Sunday when labourers need to arrange groceries for the week after receiving their *khuraki*. In doing so, labourers do not work on a Sunday to clean their rooms for the week, rest, receive their *khuraki* and cook their food. Cooking their food before and after work intensifies the necessary labour time for Bihari labourers. *Thekedars* from Bihar may advise Bihari labourers who find cooking burdensome to eat at community kitchens run by Bengali *thekedars*.

On asking Rajiv *munshi* about labourers' food, he commented that preparing food is hard work and not easy. He added that around 40 of his labourers eat in

the mess a Bengali woman runs, and only 10 make their food: *'Khana banane ka bhaar bahut bada hota hai, aasan kaam nahi hai. Isiliye hum toh 40 labour ka paisa de dete hain mess mein, khana mil jata hai.'*

One of the labourers eating in the mess run by the Bengali woman shared about his difficulty of not getting *rotis* to eat. He dejectedly commented on his fate that brought him here and expressed his disappointment about being in a place where he could only eat rice for breakfast and not even a single *roti*: *'Kahan aa gaye hain sir, kaun karm mein aa gaye hain, roti ka darshan nahi ho pata hai. Subah mein bhi chawal deta hai.'*

The excerpt indicates that the *munshi* pays a proportion of the *khuraki* of labourers to the Bengali woman running the mess. During my conversation with a labourer, I learned that Bihari labourers may be suggested to eat in a communal mess to save time on cooking and reduce necessary labour hours.

Alternatively, some 'big' *thekedars* from Bihar, with a large amount of capital or a large number of labourers, for instance, with 100 to 200 labourers, may also run community kitchens to meet the specific dietary needs of Bihari migrant labourers. Such a mechanism enables *thekedars* to control the surplus labour time and intensify construction work by relieving labourers from the burden of cooking. Most *thekedars* from Bihar and Jharkhand do not run community kitchens because of the capital needed for initial investments to start the kitchen and the need to cater to a large group of labourers they have at the site etc. Moreover, *thekedars* fear that Bihari migrant labourers might run away anytime back to the village.

According to some labourers I was speaking to, a *thekedar* in Vijayawada they knew had spent ₹7,000 on purchasing equipment for organising the kitchen to provide food for Bihari labourers. However, his group of 60 labourers from Bihar gradually stopped working by running away from the job sites, which resulted in a financial loss for the *thekedar*.

"Hota hai sir lekin thekedar raji nahi hota hai utna bada bada bartan ke liye. Bolta hai kab marzi tumlog bhag jaega. Ek kissa hua tha Vijayawada mein. 60 aadmi ke liye banta tha dheere dheere kar ke sab labour bhaag gaya aur thekedar 7000 rupiaya kharch kiya tha usko bartan bech kar ₹2000 nikla, isiliy thekedar ko ghata ho gaya."

Bihari migrant labourers switch from working for one *thekedar* to another for better daily wage rates. *Thekedars* who are conscious of their labourers leaving work refrain

from taking the risk of investing in organising community kitchens. However, I did come across a Bihari *thekedar* who organised the kitchen for their labourers by employing cooks from their villages.

Sonu *mistri's* *thekedar* runs a mess that serves chapatis twice a day and rice with fish or meat twice a week for approximately 100 workers. Their kitchen employs three cooks and one helper who start making *rotis* in the afternoon and continue until late evening. Sonu mentioned that the *thekedar* spent about two lakhs on kitchen utensils. I asked if I could visit their canteen.



Figure 8.5: Cook from Bihar making rice
(Source: Photographed by the author, 2019)

On my visit to the canteen, I was told that if a cook knows how to drain the water of the rice, only then he is a certified and skilled cook. I also gathered that some labourers prefer chicken while others prefer fish, so the cook needs to plan the menu accordingly. The person I spoke with mentioned that he and his workers are looking to hire a cook from Pune, who was from a neighbouring village (about 50kms away) to his own. He said he would speak to his *thekedar* because the cook they are interested in asked for a salary of ₹10,000/month.

I gathered that Bihari *thekedars* who worked on a piece-rate basis might intensify construction work by *also* organising community kitchens and meeting the dietary needs of Bihari labourers. This way, *mistris* and helpers could work for longer hours at the site and at a greater speed without worrying about cooking food. For this reason, Bihari labourers consent to eat in the *thekedar*-run kitchens. As a result, they return 50-60% of their *khuraki* to the *thekedar*. For instance, Bihari labourers received ₹1000 as *khuraki*, but returned ₹500 immediately to the *thekedar's* cook. By organising

community kitchens and paying *khuraki*, *thekedars* continue to accumulate surplus alongside enabling the intensification of surplus extraction.

The payment of *khuraki* and the control over the arrangements of daily reproduction of labour shapes the mechanisms through which Bihari labourers meet their dietary needs, indicating Bihari-ness as a concrete and specific way of daily reproduction. In this way, Bihari migrant labourers have relatively greater control over the organisation of food consumption, unlike labourers from Bengal, Chhattisgarh etc. However, it intensifies the necessary labour time for Bihari labourers. *Thekedars* from Bihar find it risky to set up community kitchens given the large investment needed and the fear of labourers switching to work for another *thekedar* or returning to their villages. However, *thekedars* with large capital or around 100-200 labourers may run community kitchens for Bihari labourers to intensify surplus extraction. For this reason, Bihari labourers consent to eat in the kitchens. In this way, control over necessary and surplus labour time and the amount of *khuraki* shapes Bihari migrant labourers' ability to meet their specific dietary needs.

8.1.1c Negotiating *khuraki* for daily reproduction

The weekly subsistence allowance given by *thekedars* is used by Bihari migrant labourers for their food consumption, liquor, phone recharges etc. How and why do *thekedars* regulate the amount and the use of *khuraki*? Though a *thekedar* fixes the amount of *khuraki* to be given to all their labourers each week, labourers may still negotiate the same with their *munshi* or *thekedar*. If the builder delays payments to or the *thekedar* has insufficient capital, labourers might receive less than the fixed amount as *khuraki*. In any case, the amount of *khuraki* is regulated by the *thekedar* and is used to discipline labourers to minimise disruption to the process of surplus extraction.

I reached the labour camp on a Sunday in February 2020. The weekly distribution of *khuraki* to the labourers was yet to begin in the next few minutes. The workers started coming to Rajiv *munshi*'s 'office cum room'. As soon as we finished talking, workers who had not gone to work on Sunday started to come in at the beginning.

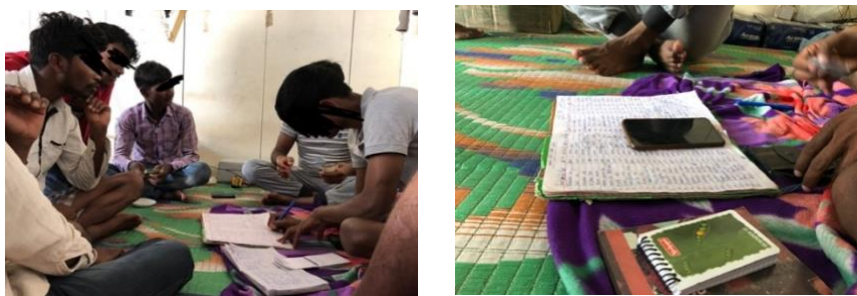


Figure 8.6: Distribution of weekly subsistence to Bihari labourers (left); and Records of weekly subsistence (right)
(Source: Photographed by the author, 2019)

Rajiv *munshi* clarified that no worker would receive more than ₹1000 for their *khuraki*. When one worker requested ₹2000, the *munshi* advised him to speak with the *thekedar*. Another worker asked for ₹1000 to recharge his phone, but the *munshi* denied the request immediately. A worker who had previously received ₹700 returned asking for ₹2000 because his father demanded it. The foreman suggested that he and his father discuss it before requesting any amount. The *munshi* repeatedly reminded workers to avoid making noise in their rooms after drinking liquor. He appreciated those who did not ask for extra money during the week and stated that he did not have permission from the *thekedar* to give additional funds. The *munshi* also commented that some labourers falsely use illness or alcohol as a reason to ask for more *khuraki*. He emphasised that workers should not use their poverty to demand more *khuraki*.

“Koi bimari keh ke lete hai, koi daaru ke liye leta hai, wo sab ke liye beech mein paise dene ka aadesh nahi hai humko lekin phir bhi hum dete hain. Humko itna bhi garibi mat dikhaye.”

One of the labourers, Vasudev, negotiated with the *thekedar* directly, requesting to increase his *khuraki* from ₹1,000 to ₹1,500. Another labourer, Ramji, asked for ₹2000, and the *munshi* spoke with the *thekedar* on his behalf. However, Ramji became agitated, demanded his payment directly from the *thekedar*, and asked him to clear his payments immediately. Another worker asked for significantly more *khuraki* to buy clothes, but Rajiv *munshi* irritatedly told him to borrow his clothes: *'le ja humar kapda le jao, le jao, hum pehan be nahi kari, le ja kapda humar.'*

Another worker came to the *munshi* asking for ₹1,000 to buy a mobile phone. The *munshi* offered his own mobile phone but told the worker that he would be given only ₹600-700 as *khuraki*. The worker could return to his village if he didn't want to accept the offer. The *munshi* then called a few workers to collect their *khuraki*, including those in other rooms. Only 11 workers had come to

collect their *khuraki*, and around 40 were still waiting. Shambhu *ji* asked for ₹1,000 to refill his gas cylinder, while Manoj *ji* asked for the same amount but was convinced by the *munshi* to take less. Another worker asked for ₹500, and the *munshi* was glad that it was a relatively lower amount than other labourers. The labourer also mentioned that his son had opened a hair-cutting salon in the labour camp, and he might earn around ₹1,000 on Sundays, so he may not need too much *khuraki* over the week.

The *munshi* warned the labourers against gambling or card playing and offered a ₹1,000 *khuraki*, with the caveat that only ₹500 would be given the following week if they were gambling it all away. One worker needed extra money to pick up his brother from the railway station, but the *munshi* was sceptical of his excuse. If a worker demanded more, the *munshi* would show him the register and explain that the funds were limited. The *munshi* filled out the muster card to keep track of workers and only distributed them after *khuraki* was handed out. During the distribution and the conversations, there was background noise from a ceiling fan and a movie playing on a mobile phone, but the process was still enjoyable with laughter and jokes. The *munshi* even took a photograph of the *khuraki* distributed to send to the *thekedar*.

The above observation, and similar ones encountered during the fieldwork, clearly expose the strategies and methods used by Bihari labourers in negotiating their weekly subsistence allowance. This is indicative of how Bihari-ness is deployed in negotiating daily reproduction of labour. However, the negotiation for *khuraki* by different labourers needs to be situated in the politics of doing *hisab*, under which *thekedars* withhold or defer their payments. By negotiating for their *khuraki*, albeit differentially, as some may confront the *thekedar* but others may not, Bihari labourers find an opportunity every week to negotiate the system of withholding and deferring payments. However, the *munshi* uses 'moral' languages of negotiation and persuasion in distributing *khuraki*. Such languages are hinged on the 'rules' laid out by the *thekedar* to give less money to those who drink or/and gamble to discipline their reproduction.

Further, the duties of labourers and disciplines of living in the labour camp are invoked by the *thekedar's* core and trusted labour network, i.e. foreman, *munshi* and a few *mistris* in the process of distribution of *khuraki*. In this way, *thekedars*, *munshi* and foreman use parental and paternal ways of disciplining labourer's demands. This is how coercion by *thekedars* and labourers' consent to *khuraki* shapes the lived

experience of exploitation of Bihari migrant labour in the process of organising daily reproduction.

8.1.2 Weekend drinking: regulating and legitimising *but* not prohibiting

Apart from spending their *khuraki* on food, Bihari migrant labourers, among others, spend money on drinking, particularly weekend drinking, which usually starts on a Saturday evening. The negotiation for *khuraki* by Bihari migrant labourers happens not only to spend on food but also on liquor. For *thekedars*, regulating a labourer's drinking is crucial to surplus extraction. I argue that weekend drinking at the labour camps is not stopped or prohibited; instead, it is legitimised and regulated to discipline the daily reproduction of labour (Thompson 1967, Varma 2016).



*Figure 8.7: Labourers drinking liquor near labour colonies of different construction firms
(Source: Photographed by the author, 2019)*

After toiling at worksites for a week, drinking liquor, instead of being seen as a health hazard, is considered a necessary ritual every Saturday evening and Sunday. However, for some migrant labourers, including Biharis, drinking may occur at the end of each working day rather than only at weekends. Although stigmatised, the ritual of weekend drinking is seen as a necessary stimulant for working in building construction (Thompson 1963, 1967; Varma 2016, p148). Henceforth, weekend drinking in labour camps is disciplined instead of being banned or encouraged by the builders or the *thekedars*.

When asked about the types of labourers who do construction work, Gopal had some comments. He shared that it's not always a good line of work because various types of people are attracted to it. Some people who are ashamed of working in their village, those who are illiterate, and even those who have committed crimes or have substance abuse issues can be found working in construction. Gopal also mentioned that while he would usually drink tea in the morning, some labourers would drink liquor and call their wives on weekdays until they used up their earnings from their *employers*.

“Ye line acha line nahi, bahut tarah ka aadmi aata hai, gaon mein kaam karne ke liye sharam lagta, anpadh aur bekar admi hai. Khoon kharabi karne wala admi bhi aata, gaanja peene waala bhi aata, janm se daaru peeta, acha admi nahi aata yeh sab kaam mein. Subah hum chai peete wo daaru peeta. Monday/Tuesday/Wednesday daaru piyega tab tak khorchi paisa khatm ho jaega phir shaant rahega.”

As indicated, labourers can exhaust their *khuraki* by spending it on liquor consumption. Further, it is seen as a necessity for hard-working Bihari labourers to do so, who otherwise do not get to drink, considering the legal ban on liquor in their state, i.e. Bihar.

Referring to the liquor ban in Bihar, one of the labourers mentioned that liquor was necessary for hard-working people else they would not be able to sleep. He further commented that such labourers would not do hard work in their village as they could not find liquor.

“Daaru toh hard-working waale ko jaruri hai nahi toh neend nahi aayega. Bihar mein hardwork nahi karega lekin baahar jakar karega. Bihar ka aadmi hai labour ke kaam mein, usko chahi daaru, Bihar mein ab wo hai nahi.”

While speaking with one helper, among those labourers working for Vasudev *thekedar*, who was carrying a 20-litre water can to the construction site, I asked about his drinking habits. He explained that he drinks due to ‘tension’ and the kind of friends he was with in the camp. Additionally, he mentioned that he can sleep better after drinking: *‘Kya karen sahib, Manish ji. Tension mein peete hain, sharab peene se neend bahut acha aata hai. Aur sangat mein hain toh bas peete hain.’*

Drinking liquor is a remedy for the everyday ‘tensions’ that hard-working Bihari migrant labourers face in construction work (Waite 2007). Further, apart from serving as a

stimulant, labourers could express their frustration by abusing *thekedars* after consuming liquor or drugs.

Commenting upon the attitude and psyche of labourers, Maksood *thekedar* stressed that for six working days, labourers would keep quiet. However, after two drops of liquor on the seventh day, they start complaining and abusing their *munshi* and *thekedar* for not being paid. Further, they regret their situation within the *thekedari* system and attempt to beat the *thekedar*.

“...Haan, baaki 6 days bilkul shaant rehta hai, 7th din ko sab shaarab ka 2 boond peekar sab kuch nikalega-munshi paisa nahi deta, dafadar nahi deta, contractor nahi deta-saale sab ko maareng wagherah wagherah. Doosre din zuban nahi khulega, sirf sharab ke dam par niklega bolega main kahan aakar phans gaya thekedari ke andar.”

As a result of drinking, labourers complain and express their frustration with their *thekedar* regarding payments and working in the *thekedari* system. In this way, weekend drinking enables labourers to share their experience of exploitation. *Thekedars* and *munshi*, in playing parental and paternal roles, use moral language to discipline labourers to avoid fights after drinking. Those who do not drink or otherwise drink without quarrelling or fighting are considered ‘good workers’. However, those who drink create a ‘bad name’ for the *thekedar* and are likelier to remain absent from the site for the next working day. Surprisingly, during my fieldwork, I was also seen as someone who could teach labourers the moral value of not indulging in drinking.

During the distribution of *khuraki*, Rajiv *munshi* mentioned to all labourers that they have come to earn and not gamble, so they should not waste their hard-earned money on gambling. However, they could drink without creating a nuisance.

“Humlog kamane aaye hain na, yahan jua khel ke kya hoga. Mehnat se kamaya hua paisa doob jaega aisa kaam kyun karne ka. Sharab peekar halla karte hain. Khana khaye, peejiye aur so jaaye jua mat kheliye.”

Talking with the *mistris* doing granite fittings and working for Alam *ji*, we suddenly saw one labourer drunk whom the *mistris* knew. The *mistri* commented that in their team of Bihari migrant labourers, no one drinks, though there are Bihari labourers nearby who drink. Still, they remain aloof.

“Humlog ke team mein koi peene wala nahi hai lekin agal bagal labour log peeta hai isiliye hum door hi rehte hain, humko jamta nahin.”

While weekend drinking acts as a stimulant to work and enables Bihari migrant labourers, among others, to recuperate, it serves the purpose of renewing labour-power in construction work. However, *thekedars* working on a supply basis may lose their surplus if workers do not turn up at the site on Monday. *Thekedars* use subtle modes of discipline to control heavy weekend drinking as it enables labourers to complain about their *thekedars*.

In this way, weekend drinking at the labour camps is not stopped or prohibited but is considered necessary. In doing so, drinking serves to express the lived experience of exploitation. However, *thekedars* and builders exercise non-coercive forms of control to regulate weekend drinking in disciplining the daily reproduction of labour. In this way, weekend drinking serves as a site of class politics.

8.1.3 Controlling labourer's health for surplus: labour absenteeism, sickness and medical care

Absenteeism of labourers has been identified and discussed in the building construction industry emerging from production conditions such as payment delays (Loganathan and Kalidindi 2016, Rawat *et al.* 2020). However, how the absence of labourers from worksites is shaped by the control over the daily reproduction of labour is not examined. Weekend drinking, as a component of the daily reproduction of labour, is one of the key reasons for labourers' absence from worksites on Monday. Moreover, those who drink on Saturday evenings may not go to work on Sundays. Further, in my observation of the 'absent register' maintained at the BSS labour camp, many labourers were reported as sick or ill, suffering from cold, cough etc.

How does this absence from work due to sickness shape *thekedars* and builders' control over labourers' health in the daily reproduction of labour? I argue that a labourer's health is not of concern to the *thekedars* and builders. Instead, the extent to which a worker remains healthy to work is crucial for not interrupting the process of surplus extraction (Varma 2016, p141). For the same, builders and *thekedars* provide the 'necessary' medical care. However, the costs are borne by labourers or their households in the village in case of health emergencies. This underpins the politics of providing medical care for labourer's health which is embedded in the control over the daily reproduction of labour.

Thekedars control the absence of labourers by addressing labourers' health issues as it disrupts the rate at which work is done on a piece-rate basis or reduces the daily headcount of labourers on a time-rate basis. I asked Ahmad *munshi* at Rishabh worksite about allocating work to labourers in case they have health concerns or want to rest or take a holiday.

Hearing this, Ahmad *munshi* commented that it was the responsibility of the *munshi* to get them [*mistri* and helpers] to work for the day. He noted that they only had two choices in the morning: to work or not. However, those concerned about losing a day's wage would come to work even if they were sick. Ahmad *munshi* mentioned that about 50% of the labourers and *mistris* had to think twice about coming to work. A *mistri* listening to the conversation added that this construction work is such that one gets tired: '*ye kaam aisa hai ki aadmi karte karte thak jata hai.*' Correcting the *mistri*, the *munshi* pointed out that fatigue or tiredness can occur in any kind of work, not just construction, but a fixed assured payment is provided for a day's work.

"Yahi kaam nahi koi bhi kaam aisa hai. Haan lekin is kaam mein fix hai ki 300 hai toh 300 milega (8 hours/day), doosra kaam mein jitna karega utna milega."

During weekdays, the *munshi* added that he could put some pressure on the *mistri* and helpers except if they are not in good health. Hearing this, Lalan *mistri* listening to our conversation, commented that the *thekedar* will come to know if someone has not been keeping well for one or two days: '*ek se do din tabiyat kharab hai aisa bolega, lekin thekedar ko toh maloom chalega na.*' To this, the *munshi* remarked that the *thekedar* would get medicines for labourers who are sick so that it does not disrupt the work: '*Thekedar kisi ko badjodi nahi lata hai. Tabiyat kharab hai toh dawa la dega, kaam harja nahi hone dega.*'

The above excerpts indicate that a labourer's sickness interrupts the process of surplus extraction. To address the same, labourers receive medicines and are asked to rest and avoid working for the day. Alternatively, inquiring about a labourer's health arises if and when a labourer asks for a holiday to rest.

On asking Alam *ji* about labourers' health, he commented that if a labourer asks for a holiday or is not willing to work on a particular day, then first and foremost, the health of a labourer is checked. He added that if workers are found healthy, they are requested to work.

“Agar healthy hai worker toh usko request kar ke, bol ke, kaam kara lete hain. Agar nahi toh hum bhi karigar mein kaam kar lete hain taki worker ki kami mahsoos nahi ho.”

Unless a labourer is found unhealthy, there is no question that arises for a labourer not wanting to work at the worksite. This indicates that a labourer's call to rest on a day apart from Sunday can be permitted or prohibited depending on the necessity for medical attention for renewing labour-power. In the case of medical attention for reproducing labour-power, a doctor would check and treat labourers. Builders, such as BSS Real Estate, had a doctor who visited the labour camp every Tuesday and Saturday to provide medical advice and prescription to the labourers. Some building companies provide medicines for free at the labour camps; in other cases, labourers bear the cost of medicines. Further, Bihari migrant labourers despise being treated by doctors who resort to peculiar measures for health practices and charge high patient fees apart from commenting upon their living conditions.

A *mistri* was discussing how doctors treat patients in Hyderabad. He said that the doctors here recommend patients eat *idli-dosa* in case of temperature: '*yahan doctor bukhar mein bolta hai idli-dosa khao.*' In Bengal, he added, if someone falls sick, a doctor will ask them to bathe and eat fish curry and rice. But in Bihar, a doctor will not recommend having rice; instead would recommend lentils, i.e. *daal* and *roti* with mashed potatoes.

One of the labourers fitting granite in the villas enacted the way the on-site doctor treated his patients and said that he was a useless doctor. He added that the doctor charges ₹230 for two tablets and one injection, apart from commenting on their bad housing conditions, scorchy heat and possible death of labourers living in such conditions. He commented that the doctor was bad and wanted to give two injections, instead of one, to make money. He gave examples of two workers who had to return to their village urgently because of typhoid, as the doctor could not do anything.

Bihari labourers do not want to spend money to cover expenses for their health while working at the sites. In the worst case, Bihari labourers seek health care by returning to the village as their last resort, especially in case of any long-term illness.

While visiting an adjacent labour camp, I saw the posters (as below) advertising private health clinics run by Bihari and Bengali doctors. These doctors were known to the

thekedars (or from their contracting networks) and had set up shops where labourers had to pay, though it was relatively cheaper than medicines bought from the market.



Figure 8.8: Adverts of Bihari and Bengali doctors in and around the BSS camp (Source: Photographed by the author, 2019)

Sonu *mistri* commented that labourers feel better sooner when medicines from Bihar are prescribed to them: '*Bihar wala dawa deta hai sab labour ko, turant theek ho jata hai.*'

Migrant labourers may still rely on *thekedars* or doctors from their regions to meet their health needs. However, *thekedars* may deduct the cost of providing medicines from the wages of labourers or otherwise provide some medicines for free.

A *thekedar* from Chhattisgarh mentioned that if labourers face any health issues, they receive support from the *thekedars* for the incurred expenses, which are later deducted from their payments. The *thekedar* also commented about the doctors in the market, stating they were Bengalis and were '*mad*'.

“Labour ka idhar agar health ka problem raha toh unko kharcha dete lekin uske payment mein se cut hota hai. Idhar jo doctor aata hai pagal hai...Bengali doctor hai woh.”

Maksood, a *thekedar*, mentioned that he provides free medicine to his gang of labourers, unlike other *thekedars* who make their labourers pay for medicines. He added that since he earns through his labourers, he is responsible as a *thekedar* to care for them as if they were his own family.

“Humare gang mein medicine bhi dete hain jo doosra thekedar nahi deta hai. Hum free mein dete hain uska paisa nahi lete hain. Hum bhi toh labour ke jariye kama rahe, humari jimmedari hai labour, wo humare parivar ke jaise hai.”

The role of the *thekedar* providing medical care to labourers is framed as parental ties emerging from a ‘moral economy’ relation. However, it is embedded in class relations. Builders and *thekedars* need labourers to recover from their sickness to return to work to avoid any interruption to surplus extraction. In offering medical services, builders offload the costs of accessing medicines onto labourers. Alternatively, Bihari migrant labourers access ‘culturally’ specific medical care organised by *thekedars*. However, in the worst-case scenario, sending Bihari labourers off to their villages in case of emergencies or prolonged illness subsidises the cost of the reproduction of labour. At the same time, it imposes the cost of temporary replacement of labour onto the *thekedars*. In this way, the provision of medical care controls the daily reproduction of labour when it comes to their sickness and absence from work to avoid interrupting the process of surplus extraction. This is how the lived experience of exploitation is shaped by the ways in which labourers’ health is coercively controlled for surplus extraction.

8.1.4 Disciplining sexual relations, controlling violence in labour camps

Accommodating single men or women workers in dormitories, as highlighted in the context of China, poses the risk of sexual abuse, fights and quarrels (Ngai and Huilin 2010, Smith and Ngai 2006). Unlike the Rishabh Builders camp, where both men and women were accommodated in labour camps, the BSS labour camp enforces the accommodation of male construction labourers. I argue that, in shaping gender-based reproduction of labour, sexual relations are controlled and disciplined to avoid the risk of sexual abuse, violence and fights. Exercising control over sexual relations reinforces surplus extraction and produces a ‘gendered’ way of living in the labour camps.

What was common to both labour camps, i.e. that of BSS and Rishabh, was an all-male Bihari migrant labour force working in building construction.

I asked the BSS labour camp security guard if women used to stay inside the camp. Hearing this, he shared about episodes of masculine behaviour displayed

by labourers, saying when the husband goes to work, his wife has an affair with another labourer. He commented that in construction work, if labourers got hold of women, they would not leave the women until they have had sex. He iterated that sex was both good and bad. However, since labourers leave their wives and come to work in the city, they have sexual desires. Hence, they would likely have sexual intercourse as '*God has designed ladies for sex*'.

“Abhi din mein duty gaya husband. Uske wife ke saath doosra aadmi chakkar chalata tha. Idhar line mein ladies milega toh chhodega nahi, sex karta hai. Sex acha bhi hai kharab bhi hai. Labour log aur bhi karega. 2-3 mahina biwi ko chhod kar aaya phir idhar ladies milega toh wo sex karega na, wo nahi chhodega. Ladies cheez hi aisa hai bhagwan ne banaya.”

On asking why BSS does not want to keep women labourers, he responded by saying that because of ladies; labourers would not turn up at the worksite, thereby hampering production.

“BSS mein ladies nahi rakh raha, ladies ke kaaran log kaam par nahi aa raha. Usko kya matlab wo kya karta camp par lekin uska kaam harja ho raha isiliye wo band kar raha.”

Though BSS sites use a strict no-women-as-workers policy, the presence of women in adjacent labour colonies/camps invites sexual relations and puts them at risk of sexual abuse. Further, findings indicate that the presence of women in the labour camp results in male labourers not turning up for construction work and posing challenges to production. However, I did come across women who were cooks in the BSS labour camp who either stayed in adjacent labour camps or within BSS. Building companies control and discipline sexual relations in the labour camp for reinforcing surplus extraction.

At the same time, following drinking, gambling or sexual relations, an all-male workforce results in the possibility of quarrels and fights among labourers leading to violence in the labour colonies.

Regarding the issues concerning the labourers, the security guard highlighted that labourers gamble until 2 am. However, they are instructed not to fight if they want to drink or gamble and maintain peace in the labour camp. He further added that labourers often fight after drinking on Sundays. Mostly Bengali and Bihari labourers fight with one another. The presence of ladies in the camps leads to worker fights as workers forcibly enter ladies' rooms after drinking.

“Idhar labour sab raat do baje tak jua khelega, theek hai jhagda mat karo mere ko matlab nahi. Bas shanti rakho, room par pee lo jitna peena hai lekin jhagda mat karo. Camp mein Sunday ko drink karne ke baad fight karta hai, serious bhi karta, jyada kar ke Bengali aur Bihari karta hai ladai...aur haan jis colony mein ladies hai usme jhagda jyada hota hai Sunday ko. Ye colony mein ladies nahi hai. Pehle ladies tha phir colony se nikaal diya.Sunday ko pee kar aayega phir ladies ke room mein ghus jata hai.”

I asked the security guard if Bihari and Bengali labourers fought, as mentioned by others. He responded by saying labourers of other *thekedars* are usually scared, unlike Bihari and Bengali labourers whose fights are visible because of their greater number at the camps. He added that labourers who were not from Bihar or Bengal were also '*rascals*'.

“Doosra thekedar ka aadmi darr ke rehta kyunki uska aadmi jyada nahi rehta na isiliye. Bengal aur Bihar ka aadmi jyada hai isiliye unka jhagda jyada dikhai deta hai, baaki labour bhi harami hai, sochta hai ki aadmi kam hai toh maar dega.”

Speaking with a security guard of a different BSS labour camp, I commented that the security guard might work as a father and mother for the labourers. The security guard agreed with me and commented that I was right in saying that one needs to be abusive but polite as well with the labourers, else they will think the security guard is very abusive and then will not listen to the security as the brain of labourers does not work properly.

“Haan bilkul sahi keh raha aap. Gaali bhi dena phir samjhaana bhi jaruri hai labour ko nahi toh bolega ye aadmi sirf gaali deta hai. Pehle gaali dena ka phir usko ache se baat karne ka, usko bolne ka ki uske fayde ke liye bol raha, main toh ache jagah mein sota hoon, aisa bolta hoon, phir wo log samajhta hai. Koi gussa ho gaya, gaali deke chala gaya toh uske dimag mein gaali ghus jaega phir baad mein mere upar chhadh jaega ki ye aadmi gaali deta. Labour log ka brain sahi nahi hai wo kisi ke upar haath uthayega.”

Findings indicate that fights and quarrels between Bihari and Bengali migrant labourers are mainly visible in the BSS camp. I also learned about violent fights between Bihari labourers who work for different *thekedars*. However, to avoid labourers from quarrelling or fighting, *thekedars*, *munshi* and security guards use a combination of being abusive and polite at the same time to discipline labourers. Further, force or intimidation is also employed by the labour-in-charge at the labour

colonies by calling the local police to manage the fights in case the *munshi* or *thekedars* cannot handle the situation.

The fights between Bihari and Bengali workers become points of labour control by *munshis* and *thekedars*. *Thekedars* exercise control by force or persuading labourers not to indulge in fights. In the worst case, it may result in the *thekedar* and his labourers being potentially removed by the builders. In doing so, coercion is used to discipline the gender-based reproduction of labour in labour camps which are seen as spaces prone to sexual abuse, fights, violence etc. In this way, the daily reproduction of labour is controlled through disciplining sexual relations, which shapes the lived experience of exploitation.

8.1.5 Of valorising and legitimising 'Bihari-ness' in daily reproduction

Given the specific daily reproduction needs of Bihari migrant labourers, Bihari-ness is identified as a 'concrete universal' of experiencing and negotiating the architecture of exploitation in the realm of daily reproduction. This is visible in their preference for specific diets, ability to negotiate their subsistence allowance, and choose specific health services. Living *at* work for daily reproduction, in enabling surplus extraction, enforces living *with* migrant labourers from different regions who have been incorporated to work under the *thekedari* system. For instance, Bihari migrant labourers co-habiting BSS labour camp with Bengali migrant labourers, migrant labourers from Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh etc. Moreover, *thekedars* organise daily reproduction for the labourers in different ways to meet their culturally specific needs.

Cohabitation in labour camps signals a horizontal form of control and discipline between migrant labourers. I argue that the cohabitation of labourers enables disciplining the daily reproduction of labour by invoking culturally and morally specific ways of living in the labour camp. It takes place by Bihari migrant labourers valorising their cultural superiority of daily reproduction whilst stigmatising and stereotyping the 'way of living' of, among others, Bengali migrant labourers. While Bihari-ness is embedded in specific production conditions and deployed as a mechanism of exploitation, it is legitimised as a culturally and morally superior way of daily reproduction of Bihari migrant labourers. This emerges from the differentiation in daily

reproduction based on region, language and ethnicity reinforcing the hierarchies of internal alienness of migrant labour (Lerche and Shah 2018). In this way, Bihari-ness is valorised and legitimised as a morally and culturally superior ways of daily reproduction at construction labour camps.

In stigmatising the cultural 'ways of living' of Bengali migrant labour, Bihari migrant labourers do not associate with them as they eat food in the community kitchen.

In my interaction with Maksood *thekedar* from Bengal, I wanted to know about the toilet conditions at the colony as many labourers were talking about it. He commented that there were a lot of labourers who defecated in the open as they did not know how to use the toilet or how to keep their surroundings clean as labourers only think about themselves without worrying about how fellow labourers would use the toilet if it were not kept clean. He further commented that labourers listen to songs inside the toilet, talk with their wives back in the village, and smoke cigarettes without caring about the health issues that could be caused by inhaled cigarette smoke. He then iterated how labourers eat, wash their plates next to other labourers' rooms, and use the same bucket for toilet and bathing.

When I asked some labourers from Bihar and Jharkhand about the toilet facilities at the BSS camp, they informed me that they prefer to use the jungle nearby as they can feel the freshness of the natural air. I then inquired about their night time routine, to which they explained that they use their mobile phones to navigate and still go to the jungle. We had a good laugh about it. One also mentioned that Bengali labourers do not clean the toilet after use and waste half of the food they are given in the mess: '*Bengal ka aadmi hagega toh pani bhi nahi daalega, mess mein khana khaega aadha khaega aadha fek dega.*' On asking another group of labourers from Gaya about toilet conditions, they said they have to use the toilet compulsively as those are not kept clean and hygienic.

"Yahan safai nahi karta hai, majboori mein jana padta hai." Another labourer added that they alternatively go near the pond, 'humlog wo taalab hai na bagal mein wahin chale jaate hain.'

Bihari labourers also distanced themselves from migrant labourers from Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh etc., on aspects of drinking liquor, consuming marijuana, and using clean and fresh water for cooking, drinking and domestic purposes.

During my visit, I spoke to one of the granite cutters who had concerns about the hygiene in the bathroom. The labourer and others were unhappy that they had to

share the same bucket for bathing and using the toilet. Additionally, I learned that they used the water cans to prepare food, which costs ₹12 for 20 litres. I noticed some workers carrying water in buckets instead of using the water can. Although Bihari labourers prefer the taste of Bisleri water, the labourers from Chhattisgarh do not purchase it and instead use the water from the tank.

“Yeh Chhattisgarh wala nahi leta hai bisleri, tanki ka pee leta hai. Humlog ko shuru se bisleri ka aadat hai, meetha paani peete hain.”

A Muslim *mistri* from Bihar commented that the labourers from Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh waste their money on drinks, spoiling their health, rather than saving up. Another worker, on hearing this, commented that labourers from Bihar also drink. He added that labourers from Chhattisgarh beat their wives during the night who takes the burden of cooking, washing clothes etc., because of which Bihari labourers should not get their wives here.

“Peene se kuch nahi hota hai, sharir ka nuksaan hota hai, ..., raat mein jhagda hona biwi ke saath, kisi ke saath. Biwi ko maarna theek nahi hai, kyun laenge phir biwi ko idhar, wo humko khana bana ke de raha, kapda dho ke de raha. Yeh sab M.P ya Chhattisgarh wale sab mein hota hai, humare mein nahi hota hai. Bihar waale thoda kam peete hain.”

Further comparing their cultural practices, the labourers highlighted that those from Madhya Pradesh or Chhattisgarh get married early, and then both husband and wife earn at the worksite. At the same time, Bihari labourers rarely get their wives to the construction sites.

“M.P. aur Chhattisgarh wala sab ka toh chote mein hi shaadi kar deta hai, phir miya biwi dono khata kaam par jata hai, kamaya, peeya, khaaya. Humare sab mein shaadi kar ke late hain toh wife ko ghar par chhod dete hain. Bihar ki ladies ghar se bahar nahi nikalti hai.”

The excerpts indicate that Bihari migrant labourers invoke languages of morality in the labour camps when it comes to drinking water, consuming liquor etc. In doing so, they signal purity and pollution, acceptable and morally right forms of daily reproduction. Further, they employ the vocabulary of the dignity of labour in not allowing their wives to work in building construction (Jha 2004, Roy 2020). Parry's (2014) account of construction labour in the steel city of Bhilai indicates that Bihari construction labourers, unlike those from Chhattisgarh, would not want their wives to work at the sites as they may become vulnerable to sexual favours from other men.

Marx indicates that labour-power reproduction has a historical and a moral element. This is visible in daily reproduction of labour, shaping Bihari-ness as a concrete universal of how Bihari migrant labourers negotiate for their specific needs for daily reproduction. Further, in invoking languages of morality and valorising Bihari-ness as culturally particular ways of daily reproduction, the cohabitation of labourers enables 'moral' and 'cultural' disciplining of the daily reproduction of labour. This disciplining, however, takes place by migrant labourers themselves, in this case, Bihari migrant labourers. Such exercise of control and discipline over the daily reproduction of labour in valorising and legitimising specific ways of reproduction reinforces how the *thekedari* system organises daily reproduction for surplus extraction. In doing so, Bihari-ness as a the lived experience of exploitation configures class relations.

8.2 Discussion

In tying the reproduction of labour-power with the production process, the *thekedari* system expands its levers of control over necessary and surplus labour time from the worksite to the labour camps. The levers of control in labour camps extend from payment of weekly subsistence to regulating weekend drinking to using languages of morality in valorising specific reproduction methods. In this sense, control and discipline exercised in labour camps over the daily reproduction of labour composes the lived experience of exploitation.

Control and negotiation over the daily reproduction of labour begin with paying weekly *khuraki* to Bihari labourers on Sundays and organising rooms in the labour camps. Labourers' rooms are segregated based on how *thekedars* organise the reproduction of labour. The key form of control in organising rooms is to ensure that labourers of two different *thekedars* do not stay in the same room. Further, I argue that the mechanisms through which labourers meet their specific dietary needs are shaped by the control over arrangements for daily reproduction and the amount of weekly *khuraki* distributed to labourers. Bihari labourers reproduce, i.e. by preparing their food in the mini-kitchens inside their room, unlike eating in the community kitchen run by *thekedars*.

In contrast, *thekedars* from other regions, such as Chhattisgarh, West Bengal etc., organise food for their labourers, reducing the amount of *khuraki* paid to them. In this

way, *thekedars* earn profits by organising the daily reproduction of labour. While Bihari migrant labourers prefer to make their food, it reduces their necessary labour time, given the burden of cooking food. Most *thekedars* find it risky to run community kitchens for Bihari labourers, given the capital investments and fear of labourers switching to other *thekedars*. However, some 'big' *thekedars* from Bihar with large capital or several labourers may run community kitchens to intensify surplus extraction.

Further, labourers return 50% of their *khuraki*, i.e. ₹500, back to the *thekedar* for food expenses. In this sense, the control over necessary and surplus labour time shapes the mechanisms of meeting specific dietary needs in the daily reproduction of labour. The demand for cooking their own food or consenting to eat in the community kitchens run by *thekedars* shapes the lived experience of exploitation of Bihari migrant labourers.

While Bihari migrant labourers have a relatively higher *khuraki*, they negotiate for their *khuraki* with the *thekedar* or the *munshi*. This negotiation, I indicate, is embedded in the system of doing *hisab* under which *thekedars* withhold or defer their payments. Bihari labourers use the distribution of *khuraki* intended for labourers subsistence as an opportunity to confront the *munshi* or the *thekedar*. However, *thekedars* exercise parental and paternal modes of disciplining the demands for *khuraki* on the pretext of liquor, illness, phone recharge, need to send money home etc. In the negotiation process, the combination of coercion and consent shapes the lived experience of exploitation of Bihari migrant labour. The negotiation for *khuraki* is partly to do with weekend drinking, which takes place from Saturday evening until Sunday night. However, weekend drinking is necessary to renew labour-power instead of being banned or prohibited. Bihari migrants, among others, drink and abuse their *thekedar*. Being free to drink liquor and abuse *thekedars* composes the lived experience of exploitation in configuring class relations. Henceforth, weekend drinking is regulated to discipline the daily reproduction of labour for reinforcing surplus extraction (Thompson 1967, Varma 2016).

In controlling labourers' health, the extent to which a worker remains healthy to work is crucial to *thekedars* and builders to avoid interruption to the process of surplus extraction (Varma 2016, p141). For the same, builders and *thekedars* provide the

'necessary' medical care, but the costs are borne by labourers or their households in the village in case of health emergencies. Alternatively, Bihari migrant labourers access 'culturally' specific medical care organised by *thekedars*. The lived experience of exploitation is shaped by the ways in which labourers' health is coercively controlled for surplus extraction.

In shaping gender-based reproduction of labour, sexual relations are controlled and disciplined in the labour camps to avoid the risk of sexual abuse, violence and fights. Exercising control over sexual relations reinforces surplus extraction and produces a 'gendered' way of living in the labour camps. In doing so, coercion is used to discipline the reproduction of labour in labour camps which act as spaces prone to sexual abuse, fights, violence etc. This could otherwise result in the *thekedar* and his labourers being potentially removed by the builders. In this way, the daily reproduction of labour is coercively controlled through disciplining sexual relations, which shapes the lived experience of exploitation.

Further, the cohabitation of labourers serves to discipline the daily reproduction of labour. Bihari migrant labourers valorise their cultural superiority of daily reproduction whilst stigmatising and stereotyping the 'way of living' of Bengali migrant labourers. In this sense, Bihari-ness is evoked as a culturally and morally superior way of reproduction by Bihari labourers, which reinforces how the *thekedari* system organises daily reproduction. In doing so, the lived experience of exploitation emerges through culturally specific ways of daily reproduction.

The chapter contributes to the literature on exercising control in labour camps through coercion and consent to reinforce surplus extraction. Under the *thekedari* system, different aspects of the daily reproduction of labour are controlled to avoid interruption to the process of surplus extraction. The forms of control over the necessary labour time under the *thekedari* system are shaped by the necessity for *thekedars* to secure their surplus. Control over necessary and surplus labour time encompasses controlling and disciplining how Bihari migrant labourers reproduce, for instance, the distribution of a certain amount of *khuraki*, i.e. weekly subsistence, organisation of rooms, dietary needs of labourers, weekend drinking, labourer' sickness and medical care, sexual relations etc. Given the specific daily reproduction needs of Bihari migrant labourers, Bihari-ness is identified as a 'concrete universal' of experiencing and negotiating the

architecture of exploitation in the realm of daily reproduction. Bihari migrant labourers negotiate *khuraki*, organise their own kitchen to meet their specific dietary needs, participate in weekend drinking to express their experience of exploitation, resort to culturally specific ways of seeking medical care, and valorising Bihari-ness as a culturally superior form of daily reproduction. However, in the process of negotiating and confronting the control over the daily reproduction of labour, coercion and consent are produced in composing Bihari-ness as a concrete universal of the lived experience of exploitation and configuring class relations.

8.3 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that class relations are configured in controlling the daily reproduction of Bihari migrant labourers producing a lived experience of exploitation composed of coercion, consent and conflict. By accommodating migrant construction labourers in labour camps, control over their necessary labour time is exercised to secure and obscure surplus. The levers of everyday control are exercised through weekly subsistence, organisation of rooms, food consumption, weekend drinking, access to health services, sexual abuse, fights etc.

However, Bihari migrant labourers mobilise their Bihari-ness in negotiating their specific needs for daily reproduction regarding their arrangements for food, rooms etc. *Thekedars* and builders regulate weekend drinking to renew labour-power in reinforcing surplus extraction. Moreover, it enables Bihari migrant labourers to exercise their 'freedom' in abusing their *thekedar*. Controlling the health and medical care of labourers is another lever of control in the daily reproduction of labour for an uninterrupted process of surplus extraction. At the same time, coercive control is likely to be exercised by *thekedars*, or otherwise through the labour-in-charge of labour camps, the police etc., to discipline labourers against the possibility of fights or quarrels after weekend drinking or engaging in sexual relations and associating with fellow migrant labourers. Further, Bihari migrant labourers negotiate their specific cultural needs for daily reproduction, legitimising their way of living and stigmatising that of Bengali migrant labour. In this way, Bihari-ness as a concrete universal of the lived experience of exploitation is composed under the *thekedari* system through coercive control in the everyday reproduction of labour along with consent for and legitimisation of culturally specific ways of reproduction of labour.

The combination of coercion and consent shapes the *thekedari* labour regime in the case of Bihari migrant labour working in building construction, which regulates class struggles. How does the *thekedari* system regulate class struggles to configure class relations? I will engage with this question in the next chapter.

Chapter 9: Class Struggles: Reinforcing or Challenging Surplus Extraction in the *Thekedari* System

The relations in production, i.e., the labour process, shape the functioning of the *thekedari* system through coercion and consent visible both at worksites and in labour camps. How does the *thekedari* system regulate class struggles in shaping the politics of production?

Answering the above question is the central aim of this chapter. Recent literature on building construction in South India indicates that labour contractors enforced by construction capital shape labourers' structural and associational power (Pattenden 2012, 2016b). Following this, *thekedars* are seen as the hinge in shaping labourers' structural and associational power. However, what remains unknown is how the control and negotiation over surplus accumulation by *thekedars* and builders shape, define and limit class struggles. The chapter aims to fill this gap in the existing literature.

I argue that class struggle is embedded in the control over sharing surplus and the demands made by Bihari migrant labourers for work and daily reproduction issues. The builders control the *thekedars'* share of surplus in the production process by monitoring the quality of work subcontracted to *thekedars*, delaying and deducting their payments and reorganising construction work when needed. However, *thekedars* contest or navigate the control exercised by builders by operating multiple construction sites, striking against builders by colluding with labourers and using contracting networks to retain labour-power. Moreover, builders and *thekedars* collude against the entry of trade unions at construction sites. In this way, control and negotiation over surplus accumulation reworks the internal configuration of the *thekedari* system in reinforcing surplus extraction. However, Bihari migrant labourers make demands concerning the availability of construction work, payment of *khuraki* and issues of daily reproduction, for instance, drinking water, toilets etc. Such demands are immersed in their historical experience of exploitation in different production contexts. In facing the risk of losing their share of the surplus, *thekedars* collude with Bihari migrant labourers to meet their demands by temporarily stopping the everyday construction work. In this

way, class struggle emerges from the control exercised over securing surplus and the demands made by Bihari migrant labourers.

In presenting empirical data to support the argument laid out in the chapter, I draw from Rishabh Builders and BSS construction sites and other construction worksites. I begin the chapter by outlining the nexus between *thekedars* and builders in reinforcing the *thekedari* system. This is reflected in builders' control over the quality of work and payments made to *thekedars* alongside strategies adopted by *thekedars* to navigate the control through everyday tactics and collective power of strike action. Further, the chapter elaborates on how builders and *thekedars* collude to avoid the entry of trade unions in building construction work. Subsequently, the chapter discusses how the *thekedari* system is disrupted and reworked due to state policies and Covid-19 lockdown. In the later sections, the chapter describes how Bihari migrant labourers make demands concerning the production and reproduction process. The chapter closes with a brief discussion and conclusion.

9.1 Regulating class struggles in building construction

The *thekedari* system, acting as the political apparatus of production, regulates class struggles. Through exercising control and contesting the same, builders and *thekedars* defend and protect their share of the surplus. In this way, surplus extraction is reinforced. However, Bihari migrant labourers do not remain silent spectators of the same. They exercise collective action by demanding regular availability of work and demands over reproduction issues in challenging the architecture of surplus extraction.

9.1.1 Controlling the quality of work and *thekedar's* payments

As explained in earlier chapters, 'time' shapes the everyday forms of control under the *thekedari* system in enabling surplus accumulation. In addition, builders also control the *thekedars'* surplus through the quality of work and their payments. This occurs on the grounds of quality control of construction work contracted under measurement basis or the absence of labourers from worksites under supply work. Builders use delaying the payments made to the *thekedars* as an accumulation strategy and a tool

to retain labour-power (Prasad-Aleyamma 2017). The delayed payments by builders to the *thekedars* serve to reduce the power that some *thekedars* can exercise over builders. Further, builders exercise their power in replacing or removing some *thekedars* from construction sites at short notice. As a result, *thekedars* lose their share of the surplus.

9.1.1a Site supervision by builders: the quality of construction work

Beyond organising the production process through a mix of different contract arrangements and controlling the availability of material, builders keep a check on the efficiency of work delivered by *thekedars*. The figure below outlines the supervision hierarchy at the construction worksite, i.e. Rishabh and BSS. Site engineers at building construction firms check the credibility of *thekedars* based on the quality of construction work. Apart from the *munshi* or foreman of the *thekedar* performing the checks on the rate of work delivered by the *mistris*, supervisors and engineers check the progress and quality of work. In the case of supply work by *thekedars*, this is done through the record of work in the Daily Labour Report and Supply Slip. The Project manager oversees the daily happenings at the site, especially the use of material provided and its wastage. In this way, builders control the access to building materials, shaping the *thekedar's* delivery of construction work on time.

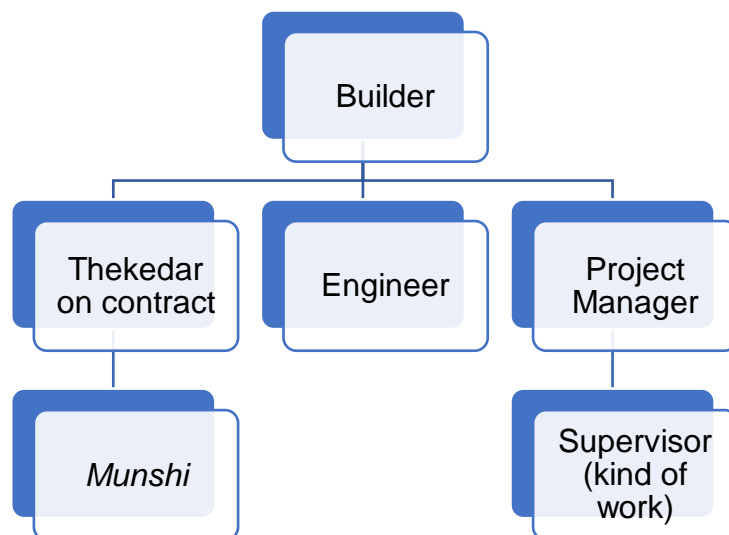


Figure 9.1: Hierarchy of builder's supervision of construction work
(Source: Fieldwork)

As the *mistris* were carrying out their work, the supervisor appointed by the company for the particular villa came and saw how they were working. I observed that constantly the supervisor was finding faults in the work of the *mistri* and telling them to do the job correctly. On such occasions, the *mistri* used to nod and reply by saying it's fine, '*haan sir, theek hai,*' or just smile. The *mistri* casually accepted the faults and was uninterested in the supervisor's comments. The *munshi* did not react or respond to the supervisor as a follow-up. Later, the *munshi* and *mistri* discussed no faults in the plastering.

Iqbal *mistri* (name changed) commented that a builder looks at the work of the *mistris* of a *thekedar* and examines the quality of work through their engineers. He further iterated that engineers who know construction, instead of just having a degree, can disrupt the potential of *thekedars* in finding new worksites.

"Builder thekedar nahi mistri ko dekhta hai, engineer se builder ko pata chalta hai, falane ka mistri acha hai, falane ka kharab hai...engineer thekedar ka kaam bigaad sakta hai...lekin bahut engineer sirf college se padh ke aata hai lekin aata kuch nahi usko."

Mansur *ji* commented that technical engineers, who inspect the quality of work, must be present from the starting phases of the construction and should not be replaced by new ones. Further, he indicated that if new engineers inspect the quality of work after the building construction is finished, they cannot be counted as technical engineers.

"First se last tak ek hi engineer hona jaruri aur technical hona, non-technical nahi. Ab jab building ready hone ke baad engineer aayega toh usko non-technical engineer bolenge na."

He added that the site engineers do not pay attention during construction but become very active in inspection once the building is almost completed. He further highlighted that the company made someone the Project Manager (PM) who did not know about building construction. Further expressing his resentment against the company's Project Manager, Mansur *ji* remarked that PM and General Manager, GM are worthless and equal to dogs. They do not appreciate the work done by *thekedars* and are keen to find faults in the work done. He added that if a mistake occurs during construction, the *thekedar* is held responsible. However, the PM relieves himself of responsibility: '*PM aur GM ke kono value nahi, kutte ke barabar hai. Kaam building mein galat hoaye tab apna galti. Saheb sab se koi matlab nahi. Saheb ke kono jimmewari nahi.*' Hearing this, one of the engineers commented that whatever happens, one should not become the PM as it involves

much tension. He added that one should have experience in passing on the tension to others, especially in civil and mechanical works.

"Kuch bhi ho, P.M (Project Manager) nahi banne ka, kabhi bhi P.M ka post nahi lene ka. Wajan kabhi mat lena, tension mat lena, tension dene ka, tension dusra ke upar dhakalne ka yeh civil aur mechanical ke line mein. Lekin dhakalne ke tarika ka experience hona."

Responding to this conversation on passing on the 'tension', Ahmad *munshi* remarked that whatever happens, *thekedar*, *mistri* and helpers will pass the responsibility of anything onto him and that he would have to answer them.

"Abhi kuch bhi hua toh mere upar dhakel deta hai. Labour mistri jo bhi rahega wo mere upar dhakelega. Seth [thekedar] bhi mere upar dhakel deta. Seth ko, labour mistri ko, mere ko hi jawab dene ka."

The above excerpts suggest that control on the quality of work is exercised through the hierarchy of supervision, which serves to discipline a *thekedar's* work. Through supervision of the construction tasks, builders check the quality of work produced and, in turn, exercise their domination over *thekedars*. Following the supervision, reports on the quality of work affect payments to the *thekedars*. Further, re-doing the construction task to maintain expected quality and finishing for the company costs additional labour time for the *thekedar*. As a result, *thekedars* hold their *munshi* responsible for any issues in the quality of work, affecting a *thekedar's* share of the surplus. In this way, the builder's exercise of power over *thekedars* in surplus accumulation shapes class struggle.

9.1.1b Payment delays, deductions, and loss of *thekedar's* payments: piece or time-rate work

The quality of measurement and supply-based construction work determines the payments made to the *thekedars*. Though *thekedars* or their *munshi* prepare and submit necessary reports, builders exercise control by deducting payments for not meeting the expected quality of work. Further, builders maintain a system of delaying payment to the *thekedars*. Delaying the payments offsets the potential loss that builders may incur if *thekedars* withdraw their labourers from the site without any intimation. The delay and deduction in payments serve as builders' control over *thekedars*.

I attempted to contact Mohan Kumar Singh (name changed), a *thekedar* who manages 150-200 labourers for concrete works at a reputed construction company behind the BSS site. I finally met him one evening at his labour camp, where he asked me to meet him in Room No. 52. During our conversation, I asked him about the distinction between measurement and supply work. Singh explained that measurement-based contracts have a good profit, but if the company supervisor is difficult or 'terrible', they will keep finding faults and deduct the payments.

At the site, supervisors check the progress of building construction work. They give their reports to the company, and then some percentage of money is deducted from the *thekedar's* payment. For instance, one of the *mistris* told me that for a work order close to ₹20-25 lakhs, there would be a deduction of ₹2-2.5 lakh. However, such a deduction does not affect the payments to the labourers because there is no proof to locate and identify the work done by *mistri* and helpers in a villa. In this sense, it is a loss that is borne by the *thekedar*.

Further, under supply-based work contracted to *thekedars*, reports of absent labourers for each *thekedar* are prepared daily through the registers at the BSS labour camp. The report is sent to the builder's office to deduct the payments to *thekedars*. This absence is recorded due to labourers not turning up at the site or not ensuring their biometric scan on time. Below is the data collected by the security guard at the labour camp for three months based on the frequency of inspection as decided by the labour-in-charge.

| Month | October (Daily absence) | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---------------|--------------------------|----|----|----|----|----|-----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| Absent | 46 | 36 | 46 | 26 | 47 | 45 | 30 | 20 | - | 30 | | | | | |
| Sick | 22 | 23 | 11 | 15 | 2 | 08 | 13 | 09 | 06 | 02 | | | | | |
| Total | 68 | 59 | 57 | 41 | 49 | 53 | 33 | 29 | - | 32 | | | | | |
| Month | November (Daily absence) | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Absent | 38 | 23 | 10 | 25 | 63 | 28 | 118 | 38 | 36 | 26 | 63 | 25 | 18 | 22 | 41 |
| Sick | 10 | 21 | 11 | 08 | 04 | 03 | 03 | 07 | 03 | 03 | 02 | 15 | 04 | 03 | 06 |
| Total | 48 | 44 | 21 | 33 | 67 | 31 | 121 | 45 | 39 | 29 | 65 | 40 | 22 | 25 | 47 |

| Month | December (Daily absence) | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---------------|--------------------------|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| Absent | 80 | 19 | 56 | 96 | 43 | 39 | 23 | 23 | 17 | 15 | 33 | 17 | 16 | 46 | 37 | 15 |
| Sick | 01 | 02 | 01 | 02 | 05 | 0 | 04 | 06 | 01 | 02 | 03 | 13 | 02 | 05 | 0 | 0 |
| Total | 81 | 21 | 57 | 98 | 48 | 39 | 27 | 29 | 18 | 17 | 36 | 30 | 18 | 51 | 37 | 15 |

Table 9.1: Records of 'absent' and 'sick' labourers from BSS labour camp
(Source: Absentee record registers at the labour camp)

For each *thekedar*, the data on the absence of labourers is matched with their DLR, which mentions the daily headcount of labourers working for the *thekedar*. By recording the absence of labourers working on supply work, builders control the payments made to the *thekedars*. A *thekedar* would incur a loss of ₹150-200 per labourer depending on the number of labourers recorded absent from the worksite. The possibility for *thekedars* to lose their share of the surplus makes them vulnerable to the control exercised by builders.

Builders control *thekedars* by monitoring the quality of construction work. Further, they delay and deduct payments made to *thekedars*. In this way, monitoring the quality of construction work complemented with the delays and deductions in payments enables builders to control the *thekedars'* surplus. As a result, *thekedars* face the risk of losing their surplus.

9.1.2 Navigating payment deduction and delays by builders: from labourers' subsistence to *thekedar's* surplus

The delays in payments by the builders to the *thekedars* may result in delayed payment of *khuraki* to labourers. While *khuraki* is meant for labourer's subsistence, i.e., the reproduction of labour-power, it is an element of the advanced and postponed wage system. As a result, labourers collectively demand their *khuraki* or do not turn up at the worksite. In responding to the builder's control, *thekedars* use their strategies to challenge the builders by collectively, yet cautiously, colluding with other *thekedars* and labourers for strike action at the worksite. In addition, some *thekedars* operate more than one construction site to accumulate surplus and manage the impact of delayed payments from one builder to the other. Further, some everyday tactics are

also used by *thekedars* in navigating possible deductions in payments to *thekedars* to protect their share of surplus.

9.1.2a Strategies of *thekedars*: individual tactics and collective power through strikes

Though builders apply mechanisms to deduct possible earnings of *thekedars*, *thekedars* find their strategies to navigate the same or otherwise challenge the builders. For instance, in supply-based contracts, *thekedars* could lose money because of labourers' absence from the site or delays in the biometric entry. However, *thekedars*, by colluding with security guards, misuse or tamper with the 'punching' system to overcount labourers' attendance and manage their absence from the worksite to avoid losing their share of the surplus.

Further, payment delays to *thekedars* affect the distribution of weekly subsistence, i.e. *khuraki* to labourers. *Thekedars* need to possess sufficient capital to pay weekly subsistence to their labourers to manage the effect of delayed payments on the retention of labourers. For instance, Rajiv *munshi* working for Vasudev *thekedar* with 60 labourers, incurred a two-month delay in payment. This meant the need to have roughly ₹5 lakh as savings to be able to pay ₹1,000 each week for eight weeks to their labourers. As revealed from field findings, it is unlikely that *thekedars* would not pay *khuraki* to the labourers for any week though they might delay it by a day or two at the latest. *Thekedars* apprehend that not paying or delaying *khuraki* payment to their labourers for any week would affect the attendance of labourers at the worksite. As a result, they may switch to working for another *thekedar*.

At a construction worksite, I gathered that labourers were angry with their *thekedar* as their *khuraki* was delayed until Sunday afternoon, usually paid on Saturday evening. On asking Mansur *ji* about the same, he indicated that a payment was expected from the builder on Saturday, which did not happen.

Speaking with a group of *mistris* from Bihar, I gathered that they had stopped working on Sunday as their *thekedar* had not paid the *khuraki*.

Continuing my conversation with the shuttering *mistris* at the building wherein a 35-floor residential apartment was being constructed, he commented that usually they are paid for one man-day for working half day on Sunday. However, their *thekedar* did not pay their *khuraki* this week; hence they did not work on Sunday despite having negotiated for wages for 3.5 man-days for a Sunday.

"Sunday ko bhi kaam hota hai, subah 6 baje ya 8 baje se 1 baje tak, 1 hajiri lega. Aaj humko de raha 3.5 hajiri ka lekin aaj kaam chhod diya, khuraki nahi diya toh humlog kaam chhod diya."

One of the labourers commented that if *thekedars* do not pay them their *khuraki* or wages, then they would catch their *thekedar* by their collar as he is from the same village: *'Thekedar nahi dega toh uska collar pakad ke le lenge. Gaon ka hai na, phir kya dikkat hai, kaise nahi dega paisa.'*

Beyond the delays in paying *khuraki*, the non-payment of *khuraki* results in labourers stopping the construction work. As indicated, it could also result in demanding *khuraki* from the *thekedar* through violent means. In this way, the delay in paying *khuraki* shapes class struggles. To ensure sufficient capital for paying *khuraki* on time to their labourers and avoid class struggles, some *thekedars* may run and manage multiple construction sites across different cities or in the same city. Further, it enables *thekedars* to ensure regular work for the labourers and address the risk of being replaced or removed from the site by the builders.

Apart from or as an alternative to operating more than one construction site, *munshis* of different *thekedars* collectivise by stopping work at the sites to confront the building company to ensure payments. Across various sites I visited, strikes at the worksite for demanding delayed payments were the decision of *thekedars*. Strikes occurred at the sites if there were payment delays for more than two months or if most *thekedars* could not pay *khuraki* to their labourers. Though the strikes at the worksites do not last for more than a day or two, *thekedars* are usually successful; however, only partial payments are then released by the builders, and some amount is still withheld.

I asked Rajiv *munshi* if the *thekedars* have a group. He affirmed that they have a group but only to exert pressure on the company when there is a payment delay. In that scenario, labourers are stopped from going to the site by shutting down the labour camp and the worksite.

Sharing about strikes at the site, a *mistri* working on a measurement basis pointed out that they had stopped working for a day when their payments were delayed. However, the decision to strike was taken by the *thekedar*. More or less, a strike lasts for up to 2 days.

Labourers working in bar-bending at another well-known construction site called a strike on the decision of the *thekedar*. Strike action was taken by disrupting the

sequence of construction work, in this case, not using the steel plates for shuttering stalled the next stage of construction i.e., concrete work. Soon, their issue of payments was resolved.

Though *thekedars* collectivise against the builders to stop the work against the delays in payments, only some *thekedars* have the capacity or the willingness to strike against the builders. *Thekedars* subcontracted with a relatively large work contract can exercise their power over builders. For instance, Mansur *ji* was contracted to work in 14 villas out of 80. However, the builder can easily replace some *thekedars* with a smaller work contract or those who are new or have no other capital accumulation source from other worksites. Such *thekedars* fear their removal or replacement by the builders as a result of which they cannot make demands alongside other *thekedars* exercising power over the builders.

During the evening, around 5 pm, I went to the Rishabh site and joined the discussion between two *thekedars* from Madhya Pradesh, Ahmad *munshi* from Bihar and one labourer, Udit. Soon, a couple more *mistris* from Bihar joined. Udit was laughingly pointing out that seven villas were given to a *thekedar* who had to leave the site as the builder deliberately wanted to hand over the villas to some other *thekedar*. Mahesh *thekedar* (name changed) from M.P. then took the offer. Looking at me, Prakash *thekedar* (name changed), a quite well-known *thekedar* at the site, told me that at one point in time, Mahesh *thekedar* (name changed) had around 200 labourers; however, they ran away with his money. He added that they all should be united so that the builder does not have control over them or does not take undue advantage of them. Hearing what Prakash *thekedar* had said, Mahesh (in a state of despair) said that, unlike other *thekedars* at the site, he is not so established enough and hence could be uprooted by the company after which he will not have anything to survive: '*Humlog ka utna hasti nahi hai, jeena hai yahin, marna hai yahin. Hume agar ukhaad ke phenk diya toh hum kya karenge.*' He added that if the builder pays an extra ₹50,000 any *thekedar* will come and work: '*50000 rupiya agar badh ke milega toh koi kyun nahi karega.*' Highlighting the differences among *thekedars*, he further pointed out that company bosses will come to know if labourers of one *thekedar* are working but others are not. Justifying himself he added that some *thekedars* could allow their labourers to continue working without disrupting the work, but that was not the case with all the *thekedars*.

"Sahab log dekhega ek thekedar ka labour kaam kar rha, doosra nahi kar raha. Toh wo puchta jo nahi kar raha wo kyun nahi kar raha. Kuch thekedar ka jamta kuch ka nahi jamta, aisa."

Prakash opined that the *thekedars* need to have a union as builders use divide and rule policy to fragment the *thekedars*. Hearing this, Udit, a labourer, pointed out that since the *thekedar* is solving all problems hence they, as labourers, need to respect and abide by the *thekedar*.

On asking if workers have ever stopped working at the site, the *munshi* commented that work always continues, even on holidays. He added that since there are thousands of *thekedars*, and if labourers of one *thekedar* create any nuisance, labourers of the other *thekedar* might continue working.

"Kaam kabhi bhi band nahi hota sirf chutti ke din hota hai, humlog apna marji se kabhi kaam nahi band kar sakte, ek thekedar nahi hai na hazaro thekedar hai, ek ka gadbad kiya toh doosra ka aadmi kaam kar lega."

On asking if *thekedars* collectively strike against the builders for payments, *munshi* said they do want to do so; however, there are plenty of *thekedars* standing/waiting behind to take over their work.

The above excerpts indicate that builders can exercise power by removing the *thekedars*. While builders can access a 'reserve army' of *thekedars* seeking work, they create 'big' and 'small' *thekedars* at a worksite through the difference in the scale of work contracts. Indeed, the 'small' *thekedars* can be easily replaced by 'new' *thekedars* as replacing the 'big' *thekedars* would also cost the builders. While *thekedars* fear their replacement or removal from the worksite at the hands of the builders, the nature of work arrangement, i.e., measurement-based or supply-based, also impacts the ability of individual *thekedars* to strike. Under measurement-based contracts, *thekedars* pose challenges to the builder by stopping construction work or disrupting its progress. In this case, even if *thekedars* strike and labourers lose wages for the day of the strike, they might have the chance to account for the lost wages by intensifying construction work. However, *thekedars* working on a supply basis are relatively more concerned about going on a strike as their payments are based on the daily headcount of labourers. Under supply-based work, wages lost for the day cannot be recovered for the *thekedar* and labourers.

Further, a few *thekedars* who are 'new' to the *thekedari* system work with a relatively lower volume of construction capital or have fewer labourers. They remain vulnerable to potential replaceability by builders at short notice and possibly being evicted from the construction site (Wetlesen 2016, p157). This indicates the differential ability of *thekedars*, resulting from control by builders and conditions of production, in exercising their collective power to navigate the payment delays by the builders.

9.1.2b Retaining labour-power: Competition and control among *thekedars*

Beyond cautiously collaborating with fellow *thekedars* at a worksite to challenge builders against payment delays, *thekedars* also compete with each other within the broader system of *thekedari*. The competition arises from the need to accumulate capital by retaining labourers. Further, labourers may switch to working for another *thekedar* if they find work at a higher daily wage rate. Such competition between *thekedars* occurs irrespective of belonging to the same (upper) caste, such as *Rajputs*, *Baniyas* etc. (Chandavarkar 1999, p225; Picherit 2009). However, most *thekedars* from the upper caste collaborate to develop their contracting network and exercise their control over *thekedars* from Dalit backgrounds (Shah *et al.* 2017). Further, this 'closed' network by upper-caste *thekedars* enables them to meet labour shortages during the circulation season or in case urgent work at the construction site demands more labourers.

Talking about competition, Alam *ji* points out that he faces competition from contractors from his village or nearby villages. However, he clarifies that the ones with whom he keeps in contact do not compete with each other. He commented that after having settled as a *thekedar*, it is tough to uproot anyone. Unlike old *thekedars*, new *thekedars* face the brunt of the problem of not knowing the system of *thekedari*.

"Ek jagah jab koi settle ho jata hai tab usko ukhadne mein kaafi time lagta hai. Naye log ko bahut kuch ka pata nahi rehta, kaam kaisa hai, system kya hai, kisse milna hai. Lekin purane log ko koi pareshani nahi, isiliye doosre log ko set hone mein time lagta hai. Unko bachat nahi hoga toh kaam chhod kar bhi jana padta hai."

From Alam's village, he says, out of every two households, one contractor is into granite fitting in different parts of India, viz. Hyderabad, Bangalore, Tamil Nadu, Calcutta, and Delhi. However, he keeps in touch with them and does not borrow

or exchange labourers from anyone in the city despite being from the same village. Earlier, when he used to stay together, borrowing did take place; however, now he is quite far from them, physically and socially, so he does not take or give any labourers.

Mansur *ji* pointed out that he doesn't connect with other *thekedars* because of the need to retain labourers. For instance, if Udit, one of his labourers, went to meet any *thekedar* from the same village or in the vicinity, he might leave working for Mansur *ji* and start working for them. However, to help one *thekedar*, they come as a collective if and when needed but do not interfere with the labourers at the site. I requested Mansur *ji* for the contacts of other *thekedars*, for which he said he would arrange them soon. I also asked if he knew of any *thekedar* who had worked in big companies. He paused and said he might be able to connect me with them though he is barely in touch with them. "*Baat toh ho sakta...* [pause]...*theek hai main set karta...* [with a heavy sigh]...*ghar maloom hai site nahi maloom.*" He was hesitant to connect me with other *thekedars* trying to explain the problems in establishing a connection with others. Yet, he said he would try to connect me in one or two days, '*ye jo kaam hota hai na...* [pause again...hesitation] ... *ek do din ke andar main set kar deta hoon aapko.*" [Mansur *ji*'s hesitation stems from the retention of labourers and their daily wage rates].

I asked Pramod *thekedar* [Dalit caste] if he gets to interact frequently with Mansur *ji* or Shahid *ji* [Muslim *thekedars* from *Zamindar* families] as they are from his nearby village in Bihar. He did not seem interested in answering the question. On further insisting, he said that in *thekedari*, because of competition, a *thekedar* fears losing his labourers to another by just a marginal increase in wage rates, because of which he only knows Mansur *ji* and does not visit their site.

"Thekedari mein competition rehta hai. Doosra thekedar aakar labor se uska charges pooch kar extra paisa dekar le jaega. Jaise ki 600 ki bajay 650 dega aur le jaega. Isiliye doosre thekedar se hi hello rehta hai, station wagherah par milte hain toh jaan pehchaan hai lekin site par hum nahi milte hain."

As indicated above, *thekedars* compete as 'men with connections', irrespective of belonging to the same caste (Picherit 2009). As a result, their ability to use their connections for reproducing their labour networks differs from one *thekedar* to the other, indicating the heterogeneity among *thekedars* (Mezzadri 2016b, p132). In the case of my research, the competition among *thekedars* is particularly over their ability

to mobilise and retain labourers to deter labourers from receiving an increased daily wage rate from other *thekedars*.

In this way, delays in payments to the *thekedars* result in issues of paying *khuraki* and the retention of labourers shaping class struggle. While *thekedars* navigate the delays and deductions in payments by builders, labourers collectively demand their *khuraki* by not turning up at the worksite.

9.1.3 Reorganising exploitation in times of disruption: recent state policies and Covid-19 lockdown

In serving as the architecture of surplus extraction, the *thekedari* system is mediated by the state and its policies. Further, the exodus of labourers to their villages due to the Covid-19 lockdown disrupted instead of causing a 'crisis' to the process of capital accumulation (Carswell, De Neve and Subramanyam 2022). However, the builders and *thekedars* expanded and tightened their control over labour in reinforcing the architecture of surplus extraction (Aajeevika 2021; Carswell, De Neve and Subramanyam 2022; Maskara 2023).

In mediating the functioning of the *thekedari* system, the state policies cause temporary disruption to the process of capital accumulation. For instance, India's demonetisation policy in 2016 affected the ability of *thekedars* to continue cash-based transactions on old currency notes resulting in delayed or no payments to labourers (Sinha 2017b). As labour retention is central to a *thekedar's* surplus, *thekedars* continued their control over cheap and compliant labour by offering a large amount of cash advance to eliminate old currency notes (Guerin *et al.* 2017, p52; Harris-White 2020). Additionally, the Goods and Service Tax (GST) introduced in 2017 compelled *thekedars* to pay taxes to the state under their work contract as agreed upon with the builders. To manage the effect of taxes on their surplus, *thekedars* increased their possibility of accumulating by distributing their work contracts through caste and family ties (Harris-White 2003, 2010).

Mansur *ji* showed me his legal work contract of ₹80 lakhs with Rishabh Builders. To avoid GST, he took the work order under two names, one on himself for ₹40 lakh and the other in his brother's name, Shahid *ji*, for the same amount.

The state policies in 2016 and 2017 affected *thekedars'* share of the surplus. However, their increased vulnerability due to the policies was addressed by passing its effect onto labour and enhancing accumulation via caste and family ties. Similarly, builders and *thekedars* faced the brunt of losing their surplus in building construction due to the exodus of migrant labourers back home amidst the Covid19 lockdown. However, builders reorganised construction work to enable the 'bounce back' of the construction industry (Maskara 2023).

By July 2020, labourers of *thekedars* from different villages in the Gaya district of Bihar were transported to worksites in Hyderabad by company buses sent by BSS Real Estate. Labourers were willing to return to work in Hyderabad for the same or different *thekedar*, considering that the state employment guarantee, i.e., Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) offered wages of only ₹287 per day to labourers without any guarantee of regular work. Moreover, the builders increased the wage rates for labourers to ₹450 for helpers and ₹550 for carpenters and supervisors. Though builders increased the wage rates for labourers, *thekedars* were asked to work on measurement instead of supply, limiting the ability of the *thekedar* to secure their share of the surplus. The *munshi* said that the *thekedar* had lost ₹1.5 lakhs in this new arrangement. If labourers work on a measurement basis, they also get profit without working for the whole day. For instance, they could earn wages for two man-days, i.e., two *hajris*, by just working in a day. However, in this process, a *thekedar* controls the labourers relatively less. Rajiv *munshi* wanted a different arrangement of work. 10 of his labourers left for their home villages in Bihar. Working on a measurement basis was demanding and disrupted their usual work speed because labourers could not earn even one *hajri* in a working day. Vasudev *thekedar* asked Rajiv *munshi* to exit from the site and leave Hyderabad.

As indicated above, construction work was reorganised by forcing *thekedars* to move from supply to measurement-based work or increase the labourers' headcount on the site. The builders continued to delay their payments. Though wage rates were increased, labourers could not earn wages because of new working arrangements. As *thekedars* could not retain labour, they remained conscious of securing their share of the surplus. Further, they maintained control over their labourers' capacity to earn additional wages under measurement work. *Thekedars* responded to builders' control

by switching from one worksite to the other, borrowing working capital to remobilise migrant labour, extending a higher advance to those who had returned home etc.

Since the beginning of the lockdown in March 2020, owing to persistent delays in payments from the builders, including BSS Real Estate, *thekedars* found themselves in debt. The payment of *khuraki* was used as a tool to retain labourers at construction worksites who were otherwise keen to return to their village after the lockdown was announced. However, it resulted in *thekedar's* debt. In this scenario, *thekedars* borrowed money from the market in their villages using personal or contracting networks. Vasudev *thekedar*, among others, had to borrow money from the local market in the villages of Gaya at the interest rate of 3% to build his capital reserve to invest in *thekedari*. The *munshi* commented that capital borrowed from the market and invested in building construction fetched a return of ₹15 on every ₹100. In this way, *thekedars* were still making a profit of ₹12 for every ₹100 put into building construction. Amidst these changes, the *munshi* was also thinking of becoming a *thekedar*. He invested around ₹2 lakh and had around 30 labourers working for him, whereas Vasudev *thekedar* had only two or three labourers.

Rajiv *munshi* moved to a new site in Dwarka in May 2021. After a brief spell of lockdown in April 2021, the delays in payments from builders continued. *Thekedars* working on a supply basis were asked to increase their labour force. The *munshi* then increased their labour force by bringing in more labourers from the village. However, since payments were not released on time, *thekedars could not source capital and* found it hard to mobilise new labourers for worksites.

The above excerpts indicate that the *thekedars'* access to credit and labour pool in the villages and tightening of controls over labour amidst the lockdown enhanced their relative position in class struggles. In this way, state policies and the Covid-19 lockdown intensified control over labour in reinforcing the architecture of surplus extraction (Carswell, De Neve and Subramanyam 2022; De Neve *et al.* 2023, accepted)

9.1.4 *Thekedars* and Builders: collective aversion to trade unions

Another aspect of exercising control to reinforce surplus extraction is the collusion of *thekedars* and builders against the entry of trade unions in building construction. Literature indicates that labour contractors can tilt the balance of power in favour of

capital than labour by restricting the entry of trade unions in the building construction industry (Lerche *et al.* 2017; Shivakumar, Sheng and Weber 1991; Srivastava and Jha 2016, Van der 1992). Under the *thekedari* system, *thekedars* and builders shield themselves and labourers from participating in trade union activities. *Thekedars* working at big construction sites avoid aligning with or allowing unions to dictate and orient labourers' working lives. Instead, *thekedars* show their potential to collaborate with other *thekedars* to address problems at the worksite. Further, builders do not permit trade union activities at the worksite and threaten *thekedars* with their removal or replacement if they or their labourers intend to do so.

Discussing the role of the Building and Other Construction Workers Welfare Board, a trade union member pointed out that they are very well aware of all that is happening at big construction sites. Still, they cannot do anything. He added that big builders do not allow their union flag at the sites and threaten the *thekedars* to be away from labour unions.

"Bade bade builder humare union ka flag nahi daalne dete, hum unko humara card banana bolte lekin wo darr ke nahi aate. Builder thekedar ko bulata hai aur dhamki deta ki union mein nahi jaane ka."

Talking about the association of *thekedars* from Bihar, a trade union member said all *thekedars* are friends and they know each other.

"Aapas mein sab dost rehte. Ek aaya toh wo 10 ko lekar aata, aisa karke poora fael gaye. Das years se ye bahut badh gaya aur Bihar waala sab kaam karta."

On the question of labour unions, Mansur *ji* commented that he does not need unions as there is much tension in attending their meetings. [This 'tension' indicates the obligations that a potential union member has in terms of setting up a union flag at the worksite, registering workers with the welfare board, attending their regular meetings, stopping work at sites on special holidays etc.] Mansur *ji* indicated he could make one phone call and within half an hour up to 100 *thekedars* could come to the site in case of any problem. However, unless necessary, he said they do not meet *thekedars* at their sites for no reason.

"Mujhe unions ki jarurat nahi. Uske meeting mein jao ye karo wo karo utna tension main nahi leta. Humare family mein 22 contractor hai, aur jod do toh 100 contractors ho jate. Hume union ki jarurat nahi. Kuch problem hua toh ek phone kiya toh poore kaam chhod kar aa jaenge aadhe ghante ke andar. Kararon rupay ki bhi jarurat pade toh bhi I

ghante ke andar aa jate paise lekar. Jiske jeb mein jitney paise hain, utna lekar aa jata wo. Lekin agar jarurat nahi toh ek doosre ke site par koi nahi aata."

He further added that they do not allow labourers to come close to the unions though sometimes they might stop work at the request of labour unions; however, they do not follow all the unions' demands. He remarked that the union is only for *naka*-based labourers.

"Humlog union ke najdik nahi aane dete...kabhi kabhi union kaam band karwata toh hum band kar dete hain lekin complete unke hisab se nahi chalega na... union sirf adda ke liye hai."

The above excerpts indicate an aversion of both builders and *thekedars* to labour unions which are considered a threat to the system of *thekedari*. Further, *thekedars* are concerned that labour unions would disrupt the construction work and dictate the working lives of labourers. Builders and *thekedars* legitimise their aversion to trade unions based on their potential to disturb production. In this way, blocking the entry of trade unions into building construction reinforces the exploitation of labourers.

9.1.5 Possibility for Bihari migrant labourers to unite: Historical experience of production relations

Field findings indicate that both builders and *thekedars* shield themselves from trade unions. Further, Bihari migrant labourers valorise the power of *naka* labourers, who have greater bargaining power as members of labour unions. However, they fear disturbing their relationship with *thekedars* by being members of the trade union as it would lead to their replacement by other labourers (Bhowmik 2009, Varma 2016, Shah *et al.* 2017) or the dismissal of the *thekedar* (Prakash 2009).

I asked Ajmal *mistri* if labourers from Bihar display any unity among themselves. Immediately, he denied it and said that if one says anything to the labourers, it will be communicated to the *thekedar*, which disturbs the relationship of labourers with their *thekedars*. He further emphasised that those who have a permanent job have a union. In addition, he indicated that *naka* workers, who speak the local language, have a union.

"Nahi hai, yeh line mein nahi rahta hai. Aap kuch boliyega toh wo thekedar ko bol dega ki aisa aisa bol raha tha. Aap toh kharab ho jaega

uske najar mein. Thekedar sochega ki aap uske aadmi ko bhadka rahe, isiliye yeh line acha nahi hai. Naukri mein rehta hai, uska union hota hai. Yahan wo Telugu wala sab hai na, uska union hai. Jo naka se kaam leta hai uska union hai, union wala paisa leta hai unlog se."

He added that one could not get away by not paying *naka* workers even if they only worked two hours a day: '*Naka waale labour ka aap paisa nahi duba sakte. Paisa nahi diye ya phir ka diye toh dikkat karega, fine marega. 10 aadmi aayega jhagda karega. Chahe naka ka labour do ghanta hi khate phir bhi full day ka paisa leta hai.*'

While Bihari migrant labourers working in building construction do not show an 'organisational' unity, *thekedars* fear their collective leadership qualities as labourers who belong to the same village in Bihar, indicative of their Bihari-ness as a mobilising tool.

On meeting with Pramod *thekedar*, who knew Mansur *ji*, I gathered that he had mobilised labourers from different villages. On hearing this, I asked why different villages. He responded by saying that if he mobilises all labourers from the same village, he is at risk of losing the labourers. They might unite and run together collectively since Bihari labourers possess leadership qualities unlike, say, labourers from Chhattisgarh.

"Dekhiye, agar ek hi gaon se labour laega thekedar toh wo group banakar bhaag jaega. Wo unite ho jaega. Isiliye bhi ki Bihar ke labour mein ek leadership quality hai jo baaki labour mein nahi hai, jaise ki Chhattisgarh ka labour le lijiye udaharan ke taur par. Bahut se bahut ek district se laega thekedar lekin alag alag gaon se."

The above excerpt indicates the sense of associational power that Bihari migrant labourers possess embedded in their village ties. I argue that Bihari-ness as a sense of associational power of Bihari migrant labourers needs to be situated within their (historical) experience of working in different contexts of production relations.

Dinesh *mistri* was sharing about the daily wages he used to take when working in Bengal, around ₹500-600/day, and that he would save around ₹15,000 a month. For picking one sack of cement/sand etc., he would charge ₹50 per sack. From what he was saying, he was trying to highlight that being in Bengal, he, along with others, used to charge double the usual wages a Bengali worker would work at. Calcutta was good for him to work in as it was just an overnight journey.

One of the Bihari labourers said that he liked Bangalore as it was a good city. I asked what they liked in Bangalore. They mentioned that in Hyderabad, for such a site, the rate for granite fitting was around ₹22/sq. ft, but in Bangalore or Chennai, it was ₹35-40/sq. ft, hence helpers and *mistris* were paid well in Bangalore and Chennai. However, when I asked about expenses in Bangalore, they mentioned that it was costly, especially the room rent. Regarding renting, it would be around ₹10,000 per room per month. Also, the workers opined that they had issues understanding the language in Bangalore; however, in Hyderabad, Hindi was ubiquitous.

Though compulsion, i.e., *majboori* to work regularly forces labourers to leave their villages, they draw comparisons between cities based on production relations, i.e., the possibility of earning higher daily wages, availing cheaper food prices etc. Further, Chandavarkar (1981, 1999) and Basu (2008), in their work on the politics of labour indicate that Bihari migrant labourers did not require a union to exercise their demands. Following this, what matters is not if Bihari migrant labourers can form a labour union or if they are engaged in 'formal' work to be able to act politically. Moreover, a lack of political organisation does not imply the vulnerability of labourers (Mohanty 2022). In this sense, I indicate that Bihari-ness as a historical lived experience of exploitation of Bihari migrant labourers, provides the necessary clay for shaping class struggles in disrupting the process of surplus extraction.

9.1.6 Demands for work and daily reproduction: Strike at worksites

Bihari migrant labourers exercise their demands for regular construction work from the *thekedars* under the *thekedari* system. This happens either in cases of labourers losing wages because of building construction work being stopped by builders or in construction work ending at a worksite. Having taken an advance from the *thekedar*, losing wages by sitting idle at construction sites deters Bihari labourers from repaying the advance. Further, *thekedars* remain concerned that labourers' having no work could trigger their switching to working for other *thekedars* within the city or beyond. In this way, the possibility for *thekedars* to secure their share of the surplus in building construction work would be reduced.

I came across *mistris* from Bihar working in shuttering on a measurement basis at a site known for building 35-floor residential apartments sitting idle during the

day. On asking them about the issue, one of them responded that there had been an issue between the building contractor and the firm which supplies materials such as steel, cement etc. which have been unresolved for the last four to five days because of which the work at the site was stalled: '*Contractor aur concrete waale mein lafda ho gaya hai isiliye kaam band hai site par. Concrete ka PM aur contractor ka PM mein aapas mein tension ho gaya hai.*' He further added that due to no work available, some *thekedars* in shuttering work had sent their labourers to another site as labourers do not like to sit idle. One of the *mistris* showed me his register, indicating that the strike at the worksite had been ongoing for the last few days. Due to the strike, labourers lose their wages unless the company has another site in the vicinity or somewhere in the city.

I asked a few *mistris* if they knew where they would work once their work at the site finishes: '*Kya aapko pata hai yeh site ke baad kahan jaenge?*' One of them immediately responded that a new site is fixed by their *thekedar* two to three months before work ends at the current site.

"Kaam ek site par khatm hone ke do se teen mahine pehle doosra site fix ho jata hai. Site milega na. Jo humara thekedar hai wo bataega."

I wondered if they had a moment where at one site, work was getting over and if they had no clue about work at another site. The response was that it was impossible that they would have to sit idle since *thekedars* operate with five or six different worksites: '*Aisa kaise ho sakta hai, aisa nahi ho sakta. Builder hai na, woh ek site lekar nahi chalta hai, 5-6 site lekar ghoomta hai.*'

By withdrawing to work at construction sites in the above scenario or exercising their claims to access construction work through their *thekedar*, Bihari labourers make demands from their *thekedar* (Ahuja 1998, 2013). Further, Bihari *mistris* and helpers working at both Rishabh and BSS sites collectively raise their voices in facing issues of daily reproduction, for instance, the arrangement of rooms in the labour camp, provision of clean drinking water, clean toilets etc. Such demands disrupt or disturb the process of surplus extraction. Following this, *thekedars* inform their labourers to stop working at the site for a day or two to draw the attention of the builders. This is similar to Guerin's (2009) and Picherit's (2009) work in the case of brick kilns and the construction sector, respectively, indicating that labourers and *thekedars* collude to make their demands heard by employers.

I asked one of the *thekedars* if they had stopped working at the site any day. After discussing with their *thekedars*, he replied that labourers stopped working because of water issues in the labour camp. Hearing this, the company resolves the issues within an hour.

"Haan sir, paani ka problem hoga toh total aadmi chutti kar deta hai. Sab thekedar problem dekhega aur aapas mein baat karega phir labour sab chutti maarta hai. Company 1 ghanta ke andar poora vyavastha karta hai, usko kaam band nahi chahiy."

Highlighting another incident, the security guard remembered that labourers had stopped working about four months back due to an issue of clearing up wasted material such as cement, sand etc. The builder wanted the labourers to remove such waste material.

Afzal *mistri* highlighted that if the labourers have problems concerning their housing, water, toilet, etc., they reach out to their respective *thekedar*, who collectively decides to strike. He commented that labourers do have power given the scale of labourers, which might result in losses for the company: '*Power toh hai hi, itna staff sab kaam band kar dega toh company ka toh nuksaan hota hai na.*' On asking if labourers shut down work at other kinds of sites as well, the *mistri* highlighted that at all kinds of sites, labourers shut down work, no matter what- it happens for building colleges, hotels, and hospitals. Clarifying his statement, he added that wherever they would face issues of money and living conditions, they would strike after collective decisions of *thekedars*.

"Jahan paisa aur rehne ka dikkat hoga wahan kaam band ho jaega. Sab mil kar hartal karta hai, thekedar sab faisla kar leta hai, lekin kuch log kaam karte rehta... Bahut kaaran hai kaam band karne ka, paisa barabar nahi de raha toh labour kaam band kar deta hai."

I asked Ajmal *mistri* about the labour strikes on the site because of toilet issues and the provision of clean drinking water. Ajmal commented that whatever problems labourers are facing; it needs to be brought to the notice of the *thekedar* as labourers cannot directly talk with the building company: '*Labour ka jo bhi problem hai uske liye thekedar se baat karne ka. Humlog direct builder se kaise baat karunga.*' He highlighted that one of the *thekedars* did not take part in the strike against toilet issues, but all the other labourers, including Biharis, did not work. Seeing that one such labourer did not participate in the strike, the builder questioned other *thekedars*. The idea of the strike was initiated by a *thekedar*, probably from Bengal, who later ran away from the site. Earlier, water tankers were used to bring drinking water provided by the builders; however, seeing that

the water was being used for domestic cleaning purposes as well, the builder stopped the water tankers. At this, the labourers had again done a strike. However, the builder disagreed with the labourers' drinking water demands and allowed the workers to leave the site. However, the workers did not leave. In fact, at one point in time, on the instruction of the builder, the utensils of labourers were being thrown out of their rooms without informing the *thekedars*. Ajmal *mistri* commented that significant issues with the builder have occurred because of water, toilets, etc.

The above excerpts indicate that the demands made by Bihari migrant labourers relate to both the conditions of production and reproduction. Further, the findings indicate the success of collective action by Bihari migrant labourers, considering that within a day or two, builders meet their demands either partially or fully.

Bihari migrant labourers demand the availability of construction work, payment of wages, subsistence etc., from their *thekedars* and their daily reproduction needs whilst being accommodated in labour camps. However, when it comes to the daily reproduction of labour-power, *thekedars*, irrespective of working on a piece-rate or time-rate basis, stop the construction work to enable collective action by labour. This is similar to Pattenden's (2016b, 2018) work in building construction in Bangalore, which indicates that labour contractors at large construction sites filter the demands and grievances of labourers to initiate collective action. However, I indicate that this process of filtering demands and grievances hinges on the *thekedar's* need to secure a surplus intricately linked with meeting the demands made by Bihari migrant labourers. My findings show that class struggle is signalled through the collective action of Bihari migrant labourers on work and issues over daily reproduction.

9.2 Discussion

Class struggles in building construction occur due to control exercised by builders and *thekedars* in reinforcing surplus accumulation. Builders, through their site engineers and supervisors, exercise their control over *thekedars* through quality checks of the construction work and by delaying payments to the *thekedars* to shape their 'autonomy' of the labour process. Such quality checks result in possible deductions of payment to the *thekedars*. Further, control by builders is visible in the reorganisation

of construction work in case of Covid19 lockdown and instructing *thekedars* against participating in any union-based organising or their activities. Chandavarkar (1981,1991, 2008) highlights a similar kind of control exercised by textile mill owners in the early twentieth century in the Indian city of Bombay over the jobbers to discipline labourers working in the mills. However, unlike jobbers in early twentieth-century textile mills in Bombay, the role of *thekedars* in disciplining Bihari migrant labourers in building construction is intertwined with their ability to accumulate capital under the *thekedari* system. As a result, *thekedars* exercise control with a view to minimise disruption to their share of surplus.

Deduction and payment delays force *thekedars* to use their reserve capital to ensure labourers' daily reproduction. Failing to do so results in collective action taken by Bihari labourers for payment of *khuraki*, a component of the labourer's wage. As a result, some *thekedars* may operate multiple construction worksites or otherwise collectivise with other *thekedars* to stop the construction work for a day or two. However, some *thekedars*, who work with fewer labourers and are 'new' to *thekedari*, are cautious of striking against the builders as they could be replaced or dismissed from work. In this way, *thekedars* collude with labourers to strike and stop construction work against delayed payments from the builders (Bhowmik 2009, Guerin 2009, Prakash 2009).

Further, *thekedars*, despite caste-based differences, compete with other *thekedars* to retain labour-power at construction sites or otherwise regulate the mobilisation of labour-power through their caste-based contracting networks. In these ways, strategies adopted by *thekedars* and builders reinforce the *thekedari* system. However, such strategies do not preclude class struggles from potentially disrupting the process of surplus extraction.

Beyond the payment of *khuraki*, class struggles also emerge due to issues in accessing work and daily reproduction. It is shaped by Bihari-ness identified as a historical lived experience of Bihari labourers exercising their collective power. As a result, Bihari migrant labourers demand regular construction work from *thekedars* and to address issues concerning daily reproduction, i.e. clean drinking water, toilets etc., from builders. However, *thekedars*, by filtering their demands related to their daily reproduction, enable Bihari labourers to challenge builders by stopping construction

work at the site. The control and discipline exercised by *thekedars* over Bihari labourers must enable workers to voice their concerns while not jeopardising *thekedars'* ability to secure surplus under the *thekedari* system. In this regard, my findings resonate with that of Pattenden's (2016b, 2018), who indicates that labour contractors enable collective action at big construction sites by filtering the grievances of labourers. Through class struggles, Bihari migrant labourers defy the paternal authority of *thekedars* and the control exercised by builders in potentially disrupting or challenging the architecture of surplus extraction.

9.3 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that class struggle is embedded in the control over sharing surplus and shaped by the demands made by Bihari migrant labourers for work and daily reproduction issues rooted in their Bihari-ness. In aiming to defend, protect and reinforce the architecture of surplus extraction, builders and *thekedars* collude to protect their share of surplus in building construction. In doing so, builders and *thekedars* reinforce the exploitation of Bihari migrant labourers in building construction. However, at the same time, *thekedars* remain mindful of the issues concerning reproduction and retention of labour-power, i.e., meeting the demands raised by Bihari migrant labourers for supporting the daily reproduction of labour. In doing so, *thekedars* collude with Bihari migrant labourers to make demands for provisions for the reproduction of labour in labour camps etc. and the delayed payments to *thekedars* by striking against the builders. Such actions signal the rise of class struggle.

Chapter 10: Conclusion

The research aimed at answering the question: How do Bihari migrant labourers working in building construction form a class? The research answers this question by formulating a theoretical framework for the architecture of surplus extraction and an analytical framework for examining class relations. In using ethnographic research techniques and applying the frameworks in the case of Bihari migrant labourers in building construction, the research aimed not to generalise the evidence gathered to 'discover' theory but to extend and refine the existing theory. By using principles of reflexive science as its methodological approach and emphasising dialogue with theory at each stage of the research process, the research has theoretically extended and refined the study of class formation.

This chapter concludes the thesis by outlining the thesis statement in answering the research question, followed by the empirical findings and arguments explaining the thesis statement. Subsequently, the chapter highlights the contributions of the thesis about the formulation of a theoretical and analytical framework and contributions to the existing literature on class relations. In closing, the chapter highlights the limitations of the research, its scope, and prospects for future research.

10.1 Thesis statement

How do Bihari migrant labourers working in building construction form a class?

By taking the case of Bihari migrant labourers working in building construction, the thesis shows how sub-contracting as a method of organising the labour process reproduces social relations, and shapes the lived experience of exploitation by regulating class struggles. In doing so, it explains the origins and functioning of the *thekedari* system as a political apparatus of production in building construction, i.e. how the *thekedari* system regulates struggles over production relations. As a result, the thesis shows how the *thekedari* system secures, obscures and legitimises surplus extraction and configuring class relations. Configurations of class relations i.e. possibility of class conflict and class compromise constitute the politics of production. The thesis indicates the significance of Bihari-ness as a mechanism of exploitation

and as a 'concrete universal' of the lived experience of exploitation in shaping class formation.

The thesis argues that Bihari migrant labourers working in building construction become political under specific conditions and mechanisms of surplus extraction in the *thekedari* system. In doing so, the interests of Bihari migrant labourers may be coordinated with or contradictory to those of *thekedars* and builders who accumulate surplus under the *thekedari* system. This is because the ability of *thekedars* to accumulate surplus depends on incorporating Bihari migrant labourers as classes of labour into the *thekedari* system, who are compelled to find work migrating from regions marked by poverty, lack of employment etc. As a result, incorporating Bihari migrant labourers under the *thekedari* system and the exercise of control produces coercion, consent and conflict, and their management in securing surplus. It shapes the lived experience of exploitation in concrete and specific ways, 'configuring' class relations, i.e. enabling and silencing how class relations can make labourers political.

While *thekedars* and builders deploy Bihari-ness in enforcing surplus extraction and as a measure of exploitability in building construction, Bihari-ness as a 'concrete universal' of the lived experience of exploitation is also mobilised for demanding dignity of work against the oppression of *thekedars*, negotiating the reservation of labour-power in the process of mobilisation of Bihari labourers for construction work, demanding work under advance-based labour relation, negotiating the daily reproduction of labour and bargaining the intensification of surplus extraction. Bihari-ness, is constituted through internal differences of caste, region, religion, skill, etc., among classes of labour in building construction. While Bihari-ness can reify rigid distinctions of caste, region, religion etc., visible in the formation of a *thekedar's* 'core and trusted network' of Bihari labourers, Bihari-ness can defy or dilute caste, kinship ties when it comes to mobilisation and reservation of labour power, enforcing surplus extraction via piece-rate and time-rate based work, and valorising and legitimising morally and culturally superior way of daily reproduction.

The politics of the lived experience of exploitation of Bihari migrant labourers is visible in the co-existence of the everyday negotiation, bargaining at worksites (Scott 1985) and the collective demands made by Bihari migrant labourers for their daily

reproduction, regular availability of work etc. Following this, the thesis argues that Bihari-ness, shaped by classes of labour in the context of the *thekedari* system in building construction and the historical lived experience of Bihari labour migration, evokes and silences class relations. Through the 'concrete universals,' of the politics of lived experience of exploitation produced in dialectical relation with specific conditions and mechanisms of surplus extraction, Bihari migrant labourers form a 'class'. In this way, the contradictory ways in which Bihari-ness is used and mobilised under the *thekedari* system shapes class formation.

10.2 Findings: empirical arguments

Class formation is the process through which 'configurations' of class relations, are historically produced, constituted, and transformed. The thesis findings explain how class relations are 'configured'. By answering the following two questions, the thesis explains configuration of class relations.

1. How does sub-contracting in building construction construct, enable, and enforce the process of surplus extraction?
 - a. How is the labour process organised and enforced in building construction?

The *thekedari* system co-constitutes the organisation and reproduction of the relations of the labour process in large-scale building construction. I answer the first research question in chapters four and five. The chapters outline how relations of production are organised through the formation of the sub-contracting relation between *thekedars* and builders and the politics of the system of advance to mobilise Bihari migrant labourers to work in building construction.

2. How does organising and reinforcing exploitation in building construction shape class relations?
 - a. How does surplus extraction shape the lived experience of exploitation of Bihari migrant labour in building construction?

I answer the second research question in chapters six to eight. I explain how the lived experience of exploitation is produced at worksites and labour camps in dialectical relation to surplus extraction. It is done by explaining the organisation and reproduction

of the relations *in* production. The final empirical chapter, chapter nine, examines how surplus extraction is reinforced under sub-contracting relations.

The relations *of* production, i.e., relations which enable the pumping out of surplus, are shaped by the *thekedari* system. In chapter four, I argued that the relations *of* production are formed through the collaboration and negotiation between *thekedars* and builders. It stems from a sub-contracting relationship between *thekedars* and builders in accumulating surplus. However, the collaboration is shaped by the *thekedar's* prospects of accumulating capital which depend on the initial outlay of capital, knowledge of construction work and a contracting network. The prospects of accumulation for *thekedars* are also shaped by the ability to mobilise specific forms of labour power, i.e. migrant labourers from particular regions within India. Further, a *thekedar's* accumulation prospects are determined by their ability to secure construction work from building companies at 'appropriate worksites'.

While an 'appropriate worksite' enables *thekedars* to secure surplus, it is shaped by the conditions of production and reproduction. The conditions of production comprise the type of construction projects, i.e., multistorey building or villa-based apartments, the building company and associated payment practices, and the organisation of building construction work by builders. Further, choosing between piece-rate and time-rate-based construction contracts, negotiating the daily wage rates offered at the site and ensuring the possibility for overtime for migrant labourers shape surplus accumulation by *thekedars*. The conditions of reproduction entail the living arrangements offered by building companies to reproduce labour power to determine the 'appropriateness' of worksites.

In this way, securing construction work at 'appropriate' worksites is enabled and constrained by the conditions of production and reproduction laid out by builders and conditions. This shapes the balance of power between *thekedars* and builders. Further, the specific conditions of production and reproduction at 'appropriate' worksites shape the exercise of control in everyday construction work in securing, obscuring and legitimising surplus. In this way, *thekedari* system emerges as the political apparatus of production. The politics of preparing a sub-contracting work order for construction work orient the apparatus by enabling and concealing surplus

extraction. However, the political apparatus of *thekedari* is not limited to the role of 'the *thekedar*' who is otherwise seen as exploitative (Breman 1996, 2010, 2014) or squeezed between labourers and workplace managers (De Neve 2001, 2014; Picherit 2018a, Raj and Axelby 2019). The chapter contributes to the literature by arguing that the sub-contracting relationship between *thekedars* and builders is shaped by a *thekedar's* accumulation prospects at 'appropriate worksites'. Further, the sub-contracting relation at appropriate worksites shapes the hierarchy and perimeters of control in enabling the *thekedari* system as the political apparatus of production. The constitution of the sub-contracting relation, in shaping the political apparatus of production, serves as the foundation for configuring class relations.

Alongside constituting the sub-contracting relation, the relations of production are enforced through the system of advance under the *thekedari* system. It enables and reproduces the mobilisation of Bihari migrant labourers in building construction. In chapter five, I argued that the system of advance serves as a political tool in configuring class relations. It is embedded in relations of reciprocity, indicating a 'moral economy' between *thekedars* and labourers (Scott 1976). However, at the same time, the system of advance indicates the exercise of class-based domination by *thekedars* and the relative exercise of power by labourers (Lerche 1995).

In deploying languages of the morality of caste, kinship, village ties etc. (De Neve 2008, Guerin et al. 2009), the cash advance system enables the development of a 'core' and 'trusted' labour network of *thekedars*. It takes place by differentially commodifying the labour-power of Bihari migrant labourers. As a result, some labourers have a relatively higher advance seen as 'permanent' than others; some work for the *thekedar* without an advance and are identified as 'temporary' labourers. Such differentiation in reserving labour power, categorising some labourers as permanent while others as temporary limits their solidarity and enables the accumulation prospects of *thekedars*. Moreover, the 'core' and trusted labourers support the *thekedar* in exercising everyday forms of control in everyday construction work. Bihari-ness of a core and trusted group of Bihari labourers, reflected in their skill and caste, kinship ties with *thekedars*, is constituted as a mechanism enabling exploitation. However, by mobilising Bihari-ness, classes of Bihari labourers as

construction labourers negotiate the mobilisation and reservation of their labour power.

The class-based domination by *thekedars* enables them to build their reputation as 'good' *thekedars*. Whilst the reputation of 'good' *thekedars* is embedded in a moral and economic relationship, *thekedars* use it to reproduce their labour networks and reinforce surplus extraction. Existing literature indicates that those who offer the advance, in this case, *thekedars*, exercise their power and control in shaping the exploitative labour relation. However, my findings suggest that labourers also exercise relative power over *thekedars* in accepting or not accepting an advance under the *thekedari* system. This is done by mobilising Bihari-ness as a demand of dignity in work in challenging the oppressive labour relations with *thekedars*. In this way, the lived experience of exploitation of Bihari migrant labourers, composed through their consent to and defiance of advance-based exploitative labour relations, configures class relations.

The relations *in* production, i.e. the labour process, are enabled by the mobilisation, realisation and renewal of specific forms of labour power. While the mobilisation of specific forms of labour-power is enforced through the system of advance, the realisation of labour power in everyday construction work enforces surplus extraction. In chapter six, I argued that labour-power is translated to labour through different modes of surplus extraction, i.e. piece-rate and time-rate-based work. It is enabled and reinforced by deploying and valorising Bihari-ness as a culturally specific and gendered form of labour power (Bourgois 1988, Lerche and Shah 2018). Surplus extraction takes place through the time-based organisation of construction work by builders and *thekedars*. The builders organise the sequence of construction work for the time-bound delivery of construction projects and fragment the construction tasks to enable *thekedars* to secure their share of the surplus.

It is the 'rate at which work is done', i.e. speed of work central to surplus extraction under measurement-based work. However, it is the 'total number of man-hours' worked by *mistris* and helpers, not the work speed, which enables securing a surplus in supply-based work. Following this, I argue that Bihari migrant labourers are controlled to deploy their skills in relation to piece-rate and time-rate work under the

thekedari system (Burawoy 1979). Bihari migrant labourers are coerced to work slowly under supply work and work fast in measurement work. In this way, control over deploying their skill shapes the lived experience of exploitation. Such actions of labourers, which *thekedars* remain conscious of, compose the lived experience of exploitation in configuring class relations.

While secure, the surplus remains concealed through differential wage rates based on production conditions and forms of labour power legitimised by *thekedars* and builders. However, the surplus is obscured through the calculation of wages, i.e. doing *hisab* to settle the account for labourers by withholding and deferring payments and systems of recording work done. Further, a study of the records and methods of calculation of wages provides evidence for surplus extraction while concealing the amount of surplus extracted from the labourers. This further occurs through builders' wage payment reports, including social security for labourers who comply with, instead of evading labour legislation.

The organisation of construction work on a measurement and supply basis, the act of deploying and valorising Bihari-ness and the system of wage payments, i.e. doing *hisab*, serve as constituents of the political apparatus of production under the *thekedari* system. The chapter contributes to the literature on relations in production in the case of building construction by indicating the significance of the time-based hierarchical organisation of construction work (Jain and Sharma 2019, Lerche *et al.* 2017, Shivakumar, Sheng and Weber 1991; Srivastava and Jha 2016). Further, the time-based work is complemented by the valorisation and deployment of culturally specific forms of labour power in configuring class relations.

Following the time-based organisation of construction work, the relations in production are reproduced through exercising control over the working day, i.e., necessary and surplus labour time. In chapter seven, I argued that the functioning of the *thekedari* system at the construction site reflected in the exercise of 'everyday' forms of control over the working day configures class relations. The everyday forms of control over the working day emanate from the sub-contracting relation between *thekedars* and builders and the contracting network of *thekedars* comprising foreman and *munshi* to secure surplus. This is reflected in the rate of work done, working on Sundays, taking

breaks or working for longer hours, negotiating for intensifying work, returning to home villages etc. Such forms of control hinged on the labour process and are aimed at reinforcing surplus extraction. Both *mistris* and helpers in measurement work are subtly coerced to follow a particular intensity at which work needs to be done.

The regulation of work on Sundays and working overtime is intricately linked to securing surplus by *thekedars* but with the need for labourers to rest (Burawoy 1985). In supply work, labourers consent to work on a Sunday and in doing overtime on a weekday. However, *thekedars* in supply work do not coerce labourers to work on a Sunday as they can secure surplus through false attendance to maintain the headcount of labourers. In measurement work, labourers attempt to work overtime on Sundays as it fetches them a day's wage by working only for half a day. The *munshi* and *thekedars* use the allocation of work on a Sunday as a disciplining mechanism to gauge the rate at which helpers and *mistris* work.

Further, *thekedars* intensify construction work by offering petty contracts to selected *mistris* to earn more *hajris*, i.e. earning more wages by finishing a piece of work in a relatively shorter time. However, *mistris*, in negotiating for petty contracts, remain conscious of the *thekedar's* strategy of offering petty contracts to intensify surplus extraction. In this way, *mistris* deploy Bihari-ness in bargaining and negotiating for *hajris* regulating the exploitability of *mistris* and helpers.

The regulation of labour circulation to meet the time-based targets of construction work serves as another form of everyday control over the working day. The *thekedars* regulate the shortage of labourers due to circulation by cautiously exercising coercion in stopping labourers from going home. Further, *thekedars* generate consent among labourers to wait to go to their village till they have some savings (Mezzadri and Srivastava 2015). Moreover, gender and kinship relations at home enable labourers to stay at the site (Mezzadri and Majumdar 2020, Shah and Lerche 2020). In case of a shortage of labourers, *thekedars* use substitute or replacement labourers or otherwise coerce labourers by intensifying the construction work.

In elucidating the mechanisms through which everyday forms of control are exercised at the work site, the chapter contributes to the literature on control in the labour process for surplus extraction. The control over the 'working day' enables and silences

the possibilities of bargaining and contestation between *thekedars* and Bihari migrant labourers. Potential class conflicts that can disrupt a *thekedar's* share of surplus are averted through subtle coercion and overt consent, shaping the lived experience of exploitation. This way, exercising control over the 'working day' in building construction configures class relations.

In tying the production process with the reproduction of labour power, the *thekedari* system extends the control over the necessary and surplus labour time from the worksite to the labour camp. In chapter eight, I argued that the lived experience of control, discipline and negotiation in the daily reproduction of Bihari migrant labourers shapes the combination of coercion and consent in configuring class relations. The levers of control and discipline entail the cost-free accommodation of Bihari migrant labourers in labour camps and the payment of weekly subsistence, i.e., *khuraki*, to labourers for their daily reproduction. Further, the levers of control over the daily reproduction of labour are reflected in *thekedar*-centred organisation of rooms based on hierarchies of work, and arrangements to prepare or/and eat food for dietary needs. I argue that the mechanisms through which labourers meet their specific dietary needs are shaped by the control over arrangements for daily reproduction and the amount of weekly *khuraki* distributed to labourers.

Most migrant labourers in labour camps, for instance, those from West Bengal, Chhattisgarh etc., do not prepare their food. Instead, they eat in *thekedar*-run community kitchens. *Thekedars* pay reduced *khuraki* to labourers by deducting the costs towards food consumption. However, paying a relatively higher amount of *khuraki* to Bihari migrant labourers reflects their greater control over organising their everyday food consumption. While Bihari migrant labourers prepare their food, it reduces their necessary labour time, considering the burden of cooking meals before and after work. Instead, some 'big' *thekedars* run community kitchens for Bihari labourers to intensify surplus extraction. In doing so, Bihari labourers return 50% of their *khuraki* to their *thekedar*. In this way, the demand for cooking their food or consenting to eat in the community kitchens run by *thekedars* shapes the lived experience of exploitation of Bihari migrant labourers.

Further, Bihari migrant labourers negotiate the amount of *khuraki*. I suggest that this negotiation is embedded in the system of doing *hisab* by withholding and deferring payments. However, *thekedars* exercise parental and paternal modes of disciplining the demands for *khuraki* on the pretext of liquor, illness, phone recharge, need to send money home etc. In the negotiation process, the combination of coercion and consent shapes the lived experience of exploitation of Bihari migrant labour. Moreover, one aspect of negotiating *khuraki* entails labourers' weekend liquor drinking. While drinking is not banned or prohibited, it is regulated to discipline the daily reproduction of labour. Being free to drink liquor and abuse *thekedars* composes the experience of exploitation. In this sense, weekend liquor drinking serves as the site of class politics.

As a result of drinking liquor or otherwise due to bad health, labourers' absence from the worksite disrupts the process of surplus extraction. Following this, medical care by *thekedars* and builders enables labourers to become healthy enough to return to work. However, the costs are borne by labourers or otherwise by offloading the same onto their home villages in case of severe health issues. In this way, labourers' health is coercively controlled in shaping their lived experience of exploitation. Besides labourers' health, the sexual relations at the labour camp are also coercively controlled, producing a 'gendered' way of daily reproduction.

Further, the co-habitation of labour camps serves to discipline the daily reproduction of labour by reinforcing and legitimising specific ways of reproduction under the *thekedari* system. In this sense, Bihari-ness is evoked as a culturally and morally superior way of reproduction. In doing so, Bihari-ness signifies a concrete universal of lived experience of exploitation emerging through culturally specific ways of daily reproduction.

The collaboration and coordination of interests between *thekedars* and builders enable securing surplus in reinforcing the *thekedari* system. However, in chapter nine, I argued that the *thekedari* system, by tying production with reproduction, regulates class struggles in reproducing the architecture of surplus extraction. Class struggle in building construction is embedded in the control over sharing surplus and the demands made by Bihari migrant labourers for work and daily reproduction issues. The builder's control over the surplus accumulated by *thekedars* is exercised through quality checks

of the construction work and the delays and deductions in payments. The effect of such control is visible in the everyday mechanisms of exploitation, for instance, the intensification of surplus extraction and reduced payment of *khuraki*. In this sense, the sub-contracting relation under the *thekedari* system comprises collaboration, negotiation, and contestation. Builders collude with *thekedars* to avoid the entry of trade unions at the building construction site or labour camps. Further, builders coerce *thekedars* into reinforcing surplus extraction, as they did in the case of Covid19 lockdown, by reorganising the work contracts from supply work to measurement work. In addition, *thekedars* collude with their labourers and collaborate with other *thekedars* working at the site to initiate strike action for negotiating and challenge the builders over payment delays.

However, class struggles emanate from contestation between thekedars and labourers over work and daily reproduction issues. The lived experience of exploitation of Bihari migrant labourers is reflected in their collective demands concerning the availability of construction work and issues of daily reproduction, for instance, payments for subsistence, i.e. *khuraki*, drinking water, toilets etc. *Thekedars* collude with Bihari migrant labour to meet labourers' demands to avoid interruption to the share of their surplus (Guerin 2009, Prakash 2009). For the same, Bihari migrant labourers take strike action in 'temporarily' disturbing or disrupting the everyday construction work. However, demands for increasing wages or consenting to work overtime emanate from negotiating and bargaining in exercising everyday control. In this way, the *thekedari* system enables or silences the possibility of conflict between labour and capital by filtering demands from labourers (Pattenden 2016b, 2018). The *thekedari* system is reinforced or reworked to reproduce surplus extraction architecture in regulating class struggles.

Broadly, the empirical chapters shed light on the conditions and mechanisms that enable and reinforce the architecture of surplus extraction in shaping the lived experience of exploitation of Bihari migrant labourers. The chapters highlight four different ways in which class relations are configured, comprising the constitution of the political apparatus of production through specific forms of labour power (chapters two and four), the organisation and reproduction of a system of migrant labour (chapter five), the organisation of construction work (chapter six), and exercise of everyday

forms of control over the working day and the renewal of labour power (chapters seven and eight) and the reinforcement of or challenges to the *thekedari* system (chapter nine).

10.3 Contributions and implications

Through my research, I engage with class analysis by examining the politics of production in the case of large-scale building construction in India. Building construction work in India relies heavily on internal labour migrants. Exploitative labour relations are organised by employing social relations of caste, ethnicity, region, etc., to enable surplus extraction. Such a process of organising exploitation through social relations beyond class may render class invisible or otherwise irrelevant. More so, in a context in which migrant labourers are fully aware, participate in and are conscious of their exploitation, class relations can be identified as insignificant.

However, my research indicates that class relations are central to examining the dynamic ways surplus extraction is organised as a result of which labourers do not become political. In doing so, my research examines the everyday dynamics of class relations which produces and reproduces the lived experience of exploitation in regulating class struggles. As a result, the thesis contributes to the politics of production in large-scale building construction, configuring class relations. In presenting a nuanced analysis of labour relations incorporating culturally specific forms of labour power, the thesis closely examines the conditions and mechanisms for the emergence and suppression of class relations. Methodologically, the research extends the case of Bihari migrant labourers working in building construction from its particularities and specifics of class relations to the general process of class formation (Burawoy 1985).

10.3.1 Proposing a theoretical and analytical framework for examining class

My research emphasises the role of the politics of production in shaping class formation. It develops and applies a theoretical framework, i.e., the architecture of surplus extraction, to examine specific conditions and mechanisms of organising and reinforcing exploitation. It throws light on why production relations are organised in a

specific way in building construction. Further, it indicates how the architecture of surplus extraction dialectically shapes the 'concrete universals' of the lived experience of exploitation by incorporating culturally specific forms of labour power.

The thesis employs the framework to examine the case of the everyday lives of Bihari migrant labourers working in building construction. Through a detailed analysis of surplus extraction, the thesis provides possible ways in which class relations are configured in shaping class formation. Such configurations emerge from the regulation of class struggle shaping the politics of the lived experience of exploitation. It highlights four different ways in which class relations are configured, which can be applied in studying other production relations in which migrant labourers are mobilised and deployed for work. These comprise the constitution of the political apparatus of production through specific forms of labour power, the organisation and reproduction of a system of migrant labour, the organisation of construction work and the exercise of everyday forms of control over necessary and surplus labour time and the reinforcement of the political apparatus of production. Such configurations of class relations indicate the emergence and suppression of class.

10.3.2 Contribution to the existing literature

My research brings back the relevance and significance of class analysis by examining the process of class formation in the context of labour migration. Explaining not the presence/absence of class relations but how class relations are enabled and/or silenced is the key contribution of the thesis. By focussing on internal labour migration, the thesis adds to the emerging body of literature on class analysis wherein labour migration enables the spatial politics of labour exploitation (Lerche and Shah 2018, Shah *et al.* 2017, Shah and Lerche 2020). By examining class formation in a scenario where migrant labourers remain aware and conscious of their exploitation in contemporary processes of capital accumulation, the research highlights the how lived experience of exploitation is politically produced in shaping class formation. In doing so, the thesis emphasises how social relations of caste, kinship, regional ties and culturally specific forms of labour power organise and reproduce production relations in shaping the politics of production.

Further, the thesis adds to the literature examining the specifics of labour relations in the context of the production process. By examining labour relations embedded in subcontracting in large-scale building construction, the research explains the politics of contracting as a form of disguising the employer-employee relationship (Lerche *et al.* 2017, Mezzadri 2016c, Pattenden 2016b, Singh *et al.* 2020, Srivastava and Jha 2016). In the existing literature, labour contractors are targeted as exploiters in the production process organisation (Barrientos *et al.* 2013) who occupy an ambiguous position between workplace managers and labourers (De Neve 2014). Similarly, in the case of the migrant-intensive building construction industry in India marked by the subcontracting process, labour contractors or *thekedars* are identified as the exploiters in the production process organisation (Srivastava and Jha 2016). My research moves the attention away from examining the relationship between *thekedars* and labourers to engaging with the systemic ways in which surplus value extraction is shared between builders and *thekedars*. In doing so, the thesis emphasises the role of builders and *thekedars* in defining the scope and limits of control in configuring class relations.

The thesis contributes to the literature on the moral economy of labour relations (Scott 1976, 1985) by explaining its significance as an element of control in enabling and reinforcing surplus extraction. In doing so, it expands the scope and limits of 'control', in organising and reinforcing surplus extraction (Burawoy 1985, Goodburn and Mishra 2023, Ngai and Smith 2007, Pattenden 2018).

The big story that the thesis helps us to understand is the inner working of the architecture of exploitation through the politics of class relations in the building construction industry. It is known that production relations in construction disguise employer-employee relations and enforce exploitation. However, the thesis has elaborated on the politics of production in construction work which feed heavily on migrant labour drawn from East and Central India. It has systematically shown the dialectic relation between the reproduction of labour-power and the organisation of the production process by *thekedars* and builders. Further, it has emphasised the significance of the modes of labour control, which enable and reinforce surplus extraction by organising everyday construction work. In doing so, it has pointed out the limits of control by showing how much labour will subordinate itself within the

regimes of labour control and what limits *thekedars* will set to their accumulation prospects.

In terms of implications, my research indicates a need to address issues of the specific lived experience of exploitation emerging from different contexts of the production process. For instance, issues of internally alienated migrant labour are different from that of local labourers, and issues of Bihari migrant labourers are different from that of Bengali migrant labourers. Policy prescriptions need to consider the 'concrete universals' of the lived experience of exploitation in addressing issues of labour exploitation. Further, in development practice, if *thekedars* are replaced by cooperatives to address issues of labour exploitation, it would be essential to examine if cooperatives are altering or reinforcing the architecture of surplus extraction.

10.4 Limitations, scope and future research

My empirical findings could be expanded further if interviews with builders could strengthen the analysis. Though I had plans to interview builders towards the end of my fieldwork, it was disrupted due to the pandemic. However, I spent six months at construction sites and labour camps in Hyderabad, India. My research could be extended to examine the case of migrant labourers from other regions working in building construction. Moreover, it would be helpful to apply and expand the theoretical framework in the case of building construction, where both local and migrant labourers may be mobilised to work.

While my research engages with the state's role in organising production relations, it does not explain how Bihari migrant labourers exercise their relationship with the state in claiming social security welfare. Further, what role do builders play in the same? Regarding development practice, labour contractors in building construction are being identified as how migrant labourers can access social security. It would be good to examine to what extent it enables or challenges the *thekedar's* share in the process of capital accumulation.

As my research broadly engages with the question of daily reproduction of labour power, it indicates that the social reproduction of Bihari migrant labourers can play an essential role in configuring class relations. Shah and Lerche (2020) engage with the

role of production and social reproduction in the context of Dalit and Adivasi migrant labourers. However, my research engages with this aspect only to the extent of labour circulation. For the same, a prolonged time in the origin villages of migrant labourers would be helpful to engage with questions such as: What role does the *thekedari* system play in the village in shaping production relations and configuring class relations? While this question could not be answered within the scope of my research, it would be helpful to examine the same in explaining class relations.

In elucidating the conditions and mechanisms which shape the lived experience of exploitation of Bihari migrant labourers, the configuration of class relations indicates the emergence and suppression of class. This is how class formation takes place.

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Appendix 1: Techniques used

| Technique | Direct Observations | Key Informant Interviews | Semi-structured interviews | In-depth interviews | Oral/Life Histories | Focus Group Discussions and Jenga |
|------------------------------------|---|---|--|--|--|---|
| | | | Direct Observation | | | |
| Space of inquiry | Worksite/ Labour camp/Village | Worksite /Village | Worksite/ Offices/ Market/ Labour camps/ Village | Worksites/ Labour camps/ Village | Labour camps/ Village | Labour camps/ Village |
| Sequence/Types of Questions | 3,6,7,8,10 | General, 15 | 14, 18, 15, | 1,2,4,5,9,13, 17, 22, 23, 24 | 12,16, 23 | 11, 13, 14, 17,18, 19, 20, 21, 24-28 |
| Respondents/ Groups | <i>Thekedar</i> , labour, <i>mistri</i> -process of construction work | Security guard, <i>Thekedar</i> , <i>munshi</i> , <i>mistri</i> , water can, cloth merchant | BCOW Board Chief Executive Officer, Labour Officers; Worker Registration agencies/individuals, shopkeepers, Moneylenders, Union leaders, union member, Labour NGO staff, police, journalist, builders (association), site engineer, supervisor | <i>Thekedar</i> of different stages of construction work, <i>mistri</i> , <i>munshi</i> , labour | <i>Thekedar</i> , <i>mistri</i> , <i>munshi</i> , labour | <i>Mistris</i> , <i>thekedars</i> , helpers |

Appendix 2: Prompts for interview/conversation

| S.No. | Thematic areas for interviews (written on flash cards or on Jenga pieces) |
|-------|---|
| 1 | Process of sub-contracting |
| 2 | Documents, worker records, wages etc |
| 3 | Wages and work, time, shifts, overtime |
| 4 | Advance, payments, etc. |
| 5 | Social security- remittance, banking services |
| 6 | Site- tools, supervision, food, division of labour, job segmentation |
| 7 | Site- Accidents, safety gear etc. |
| 8 | Labour camps, rooms, evening time, division of labour, food |
| 9 | Labour mobilisation and retention |
| 10 | Site conflicts and disputes with labour |
| 11 | Labour association, acts of resistance, negotiation, union etc |
| 12 | Alternate/parallel job opportunities/working for other <i>thekedars</i> |
| 13 | State agencies: police, labour commissioner, court records, labour inspection |
| 14 | Social security: health, education, housing, Labour/Aadhar card/BOCW card, Public Distribution System, Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, Skill training |
| 15 | NGOs at site |
| 16 | Labour history and future career, connect with the city |
| 17 | Social network: village/city, communication, friends/relatives, WhatsApp, mobile phone |
| 18 | Daily market |
| 19 | Railways- travel, mobility in the city |
| 20 | Festival celebrations |
| 21 | Free time- cinema, music, board game, drinks |
| 22 | <i>Thekedar- mistri</i> - labour interaction, work and life |
| 23 | Health and family of the workers |
| 24 | City- village interaction |
| 25 | Bihari workers- their migration, violence etc |
| 26 | Politics of Bihar: Laloo and Nitish |
| 27 | Politics of the city- village |
| 28 | Demonetisation, job market, real estate, labour reforms |