

Organized Informality: The Politics of Recruitment of Industrial Informal Workers in Durgapur

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Introduction

It was around summer 2010, I was pursuing fieldwork for my doctoral research in Durgapur, an industrial belt in the State of West Bengal. During the course of this ethnographic research I once asked a group of informal women workers the kind of work they do to earn their living. In an annoyed tone, they replied, “*garibra ja kaj korey tai kori*” (We do the work that the poor usually do). This remark, more than just revealing the class character of industrial informal work, propelled me to probe into why informal workers remain confined to a vicious circle of informality, poverty and deprivation, a concern that my doctoral research attempted to investigate. This paper is a part of my exploration (from 2009-early 2013) of this critical question in Durgapur of West Burdwan district of West Bengal. In this endeavour, I perceive informality from a political perspective, not just as an economic issue. Therefore, the chief focus of the study is on the politics underlying the development and persistence of industrial informality in Durgapur that has systematically marginalised and deprived labour of its legal rights and claims for justice.

Focus of the paper

Deploying David Harvey’s (2005) ‘capital accumulation by dispossession’ terminology, this paper demonstrates its working at the local grass-roots level in Durgapur. At the centre of this study are the informal workers who work in the micro and small-scale industries of Durgapur. These industries are formally registered but thrive because of the informalization of the labour process, a phenomenon instituted, and put into practice by the then CPI(M) government but which

practice is perpetuated by the current party in power, namely the Trinamool Congress.

While these formal units rely upon labour contractors for the supply of workers who are recruited on contract/temporary/casual basis, the more important focus of my thesis was in capturing the nexus between the entrepreneurs of these micro and small-scale industries, the local unit of the dominant political party, its trade union, and, the local state authorities. I wanted to find out how they together regulate the production, recruitment processes, and also determine the wage and non-wage components for labour recruited by them. In this context of organized informality, the poor workers, driven by their sheer need for survival, are forced to comply with the structural arrangement laid down by this regulatory network. By local level state I mean the local level administration that is in charge of labour welfare, namely, the Office of the Deputy Labour Commissioner (DLC), Durgapur. By political party, I refer to the CPIM, the ruling party of the State in 2009 when I began my fieldwork and its trade union, the CITU. Since 2011, Trinamool Congress replaced it as a dominant party.

Theoretical underpinning of the paper

The paper draws its theoretical intuition from the ideas of Karl Polanyi (1957) who argued that, even as the state played a vital role in the establishment and consolidation of market economy in 19th century Europe, it undertook repressive action vis-à-vis the workers to ensure that they did not engage in any kind of disruptive political action. Thus, he asserts that establishment of a *laissez-faire* economy is politically planned. In brief, it is a political, not a natural phenomenon.

The process of informal labour recruitment in Durgapur

Jan Breman (1996), on the basis of his extensive studies on informal workers in India asserts that the decisive factor in getting employment in the informal sector is personal contact which is institutionalized in the figure of the jobbers or labour contractors. This finding is equally true in my study area. The institutionalization of personal contact takes place in two ways- either through individual contractors or local level organizations of the CPI(M) and CITU. Both parties are interlocked in mutual collaboration and contestation while laying out and maintaining a well-planned arrangement of employment distribution; they actively negotiate with the entrepreneurs for the recruitment of local people to work in the industries.

In the rural areas, the zonal committee of CPI(M) maintains a roster of workers- both skilled and unskilled. The job seekers register their names in the local party office, which acts as a de-facto employment exchange or in other words, the local level party organization itself acts as a labour contractor to supply ‘unskilled’ workers to the industries. The individual contractors supply the migrant workers for skilled work from the adjoining states, namely, Bihar, Jharkhand and Orissa. Interestingly, the CITU branch within the urban jurisdiction of Durgapur Municipal Corporation (DMC) maintained that both skilled and unskilled workers were recruited through contractors; the latter contacted the local CITU office for labour supply. The union has made it obligatory that the hiring of one skilled worker must be accompanied by hiring of one unskilled worker as a helper. The work is distributed among the enlisted workers on the basis of a rotation system. During discussions, the workers referred to party initiatives in helping them to get jobs. Such party/union activism became obvious when, in the course of my fieldwork, I witnessed a party representative conversing over mobile phone with various industry managements one after another and accordingly instructing the workers to proceed to their work destinations. In brief, instead of a free competitive labour market, in Durgapur, what exists is a party-mediated informal labour market that nurtures a patron-client relationship between the party and the workers.

According to the local level administrators at the Office of the DLC, however, the entire recruitment process is based on an organized quota system. Each party has its specific quota to recruit its own candidates. The entrepreneurs corroborated the fact by

mentioning that the party which is at the helm of the State power, no doubt, enjoys a larger share in this quota system. Previously, it was CPI(M), now it is the existing ruling party, All India Trinamool Congress.

The politics underlying the labour recruitment process

The entrepreneur-party collaboration on the issue of labour recruitment implies that the local political power and the local capitalists have a strategic understanding in creating a kind of an enclosed labour market in the context of wide availability of cheap labour both from within and outside Durgapur. More importantly, it reveals that employment distribution among the local people is a politically rewarding function for the concerned political parties as it helps them in creating political support with electoral benefits. To elaborate, the well-entrenched party organization of the Community Party of India Marxist served as an effective grass-roots agent of the then Left Front Government of West Bengal to materialize what was in effect a neoliberal industrial policy. This arrangement enabled, on one hand, expansion of the informal employment – market, and, on the other, ensured livelihood to the workers among the population. This dual role of the party indicates that the state, or more accurately the regime of capitalism in the state, uses labour recruitment as a mechanism to mediate the tension between demands of democratic electoral politics and the interests of capitalists, particularly in the medium and small industries.

The informal labour market in Durgapur encompasses two categories of workers, namely, the ‘union workers’ who are supplied by the unions and the ‘owners workers’ who are the migrant workers, supplied by individual labour contractors. The party-mediated and the contractor-regulated labour markets are engaged in complex interactions, and their interrelationship often oscillates between collaboration and conflict. While the collaboration helps to maintain the structural arrangement for distribution of informal work, the conflict between the two often puts this arrangement under stress and strains. The local political leaders pointed out that sometimes the contractors bypass the party-mediated rules with respect to the supply of workers. The former alleged that the contractors collude with the entrepreneurs and supply workers-both skilled and unskilled, through their own networks. This trend is assessed by the local leaders as “unhealthy” because as a consequence, the party-mediated labour market comes under threat of loss of control over the recruitment

process. Correspondingly, its electoral interests are severely threatened. This brings the trade union in conflict with the contractors and the entrepreneurs. The entrepreneurs, however, welcome this conflict and use it to get rid of political activism of the ‘union workers’. As one entrepreneur remarked, “the political pressure reaches a point where the unions demand a reduction in the strength of ‘owners workers’ in order to accommodate the ‘union workers’”. These workers do not just disrupt the production process and the working of the ‘owners workers’ but pose a threat of politically mobilizing the latter. Moreover, they have to be paid every month even if they do not work. As a result, the burden of loss in production is to be tackled by imposing extra workload on the migrant workers. Consequently, in Durgapur, a desperate inclination to by-pass party-mediated labour recruitment process has resulted in an increased demand for migrant workers in the industries. The tussle between the local and the migrant workers caused by the economic and political stake-holders in getting jobs makes the informal labour market of Durgapur far more competitive that unfortunately augments uncertainty of livelihood.

This politics of capital accumulation that takes place through the above process of informal labour recruitment in Durgapur receives implicit support of the local level state i.e. Office of the DLC. The DLC Office maintains “law and order” or “stable employment generation” in the industrial informal domain by adopting a non-interfering standpoint vis-à-vis the contracts that are concluded between the unions or individual contractors, on one hand and the entrepreneurs, on the other. Our contention is substantiated by the fact that laws like *The Contract Labour (Regulation and Abolition) Act, 1970* and *The Interstate Migrant Workmen’s (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act, 1979* that mandate maintenance of records of the contractual and migrant workers respectively, do not receive significant attention from the local level administration for implementation. While my ethnographic study found that in the DLC Office, the records of the registered principal employers and the contractors who have received licence are maintained, nevertheless, the seriousness and efforts of the local administration to properly implement this law was lacking. For instance, since the local party organization and its trade union itself acts as a labour contractor, the question of being licensed to operate as contractor was not raised by the DLC Office. Thus, the political actor overpowers the administrative responsibility of the state.

Similarly, according to *The Interstate Migrant Workmen’s (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act*, a contractor who wants to bring in workers from another state, has to obtain a licence for such inter-State recruitment both in the originating state as well as a licence from the destination state. Besides, obtaining a licence from the destination state is a precondition for the contractors to apply for the second licence. But the predominant practice in Durgapur is that the contractors who supply migrant workers are not officially registered. This leads to deprivation of the migrant workers from the benefits guaranteed to them under this Act. From the worker to the contractor, therefore, it is a nested zone of deregulation and informality. The indifference of the local level state to implement this law has thus strengthened the process of labour marginalization in the sense that the local administration has left the matter of issuing licence to the originating state from which the contractors supply migrant labour.

Conclusion

The investigation into the politics of the process of recruitment of industrial informal workers in Durgapur reveals that the poor informal workers can have access to jobs only through certain social and political channels, which renders them subservient. The nexus between the party in power, the entrepreneurs and the local level state sustains an organized structural arrangement, wherein the desperation to get jobs pushes both migrants and the locals to abide by any terms and conditions specified by this network. This whole process of labour recruitment produces a vicious circle of informality, marginalisation and poverty, and in addition acts as a strategy to foster divisiveness between the two categories of workers in Durgapur. Ultimately, what thus actually matters is the accumulation of ‘capital’, political and economic, by riding piggyback on informally employed labour.

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