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Arnaud Kaba

Introduction

- 1 Between 2010 and 2014, I followed the daily life of dozens of young men in the working-class neighborhoods that adjoin the ruins of the Union Carbide factory. These poor settlements certainly bore scars from the disaster, from the long and exhausting fight led by those dwellers who were victims to get compensations for the deaths and disabilities from that night, December 2–3, 1984, as well as from the suffering of those who endured the years-long poisoning¹ of the underground water. But these scars represent only a part of the experiences which are shaping these workers' trajectories.² During research for my PhD, I followed Muslim Bhopali informal metal workers, among whom some—but not all of them—have suffered the consequences of the disaster but are overall evolving in labor worlds which are typical of the Indian informal manufacturing sector small-scale enterprises studied by Holmström (1984) and Haynes (2012). They are working in small, mechanical, car repairing, and bodymaking and metal furniture workshops spread in small clusters through Bhopal's Old town. These crafts-industrial workshops are at the forefront of Indian industrialization (Haynes 2012), merging craftsmen ideals of independence with neoliberalism (Chambers 2020) for a production that, instead of consisting in "traditional goods," fuels the local garages, transportation companies, furniture enterprises, and agricultural material businesses.
- 2 This paper looks at the cultures of work developed in the so-called skilled jobs of the informal sectors in which dwellers from North Bhopal's poor settlements (*bastis*) are engaged. In a context where a worker's skilling is organized totally outside of any governmental initiative (Gooptu 2018), it looks deeply at how the skills—which I define

as the ability to perform a task well—are socially constructed within the group of people who practice it, with a relational shaping of their social value (Ibid). It is gaining ground in what Haynes (2012) describes as a longstanding ambition to have the importance of the small-scale enterprises and craftsmen spaces acknowledged in the constitution of Indian industrial worlds and their working-class. With the exception of Holmström's work (1984) on the continuum between formal and informal firms Indian Labor studies have been largely focused on the formal sector (Sarkar 2004). Many studies address the question of the labor relations of production in the informal sector, often looking, however, more at the lower brackets of the informal sector: the indeed huge numbers of fragmented footloose laborers involved in rural/urban migration (Bremar 1996, 2013) who are often unfree (Picherit 2016; Lerche 2010); these bottom-up studies more or less stop when labor starts to be skilled.

- 3 Geert de Neve (2005), has made a valuable contribution to filling this gap with his studies on the Tiruppur garment sector. He focuses on the everyday politics of labor by building on Burawoy's project (1985) of looking at the relations *in* production instead of the relations *of* production. He has brought new elements to the everyday resistances and politics on the shopfloor, the constitution of class and caste struggle, and, more recently, to the articulations between town and village, in a context of neoliberalism (Carswell and de Neve 2014). My approach also looks at the relations in production but centers the analysis on relations to the skills inside the production process and on how these determine the values and norms of a community of practice. A community of practice is a social group linked by and forging its identity *in* the practice of related skills aimed at performing a certain activity and the learning of those skills (Wenger 1998). In these regards, the paper breaks quite new ground even if Dilip Subrahanian (2008) has showed how Bangalore's formal sector's IT workers struggle to maintain the ownership of their rhythms and labor processes and has thereby explored the working process as such.
- 4 Community of practices means that the act of learning or sharing a skill is always an act of sociability, which echoes Gooptu's (2018) conceptions of skills as socially constructed first of all. Therefore, the dynamics of acceptance in the communities of practices tell us a lot about how gender, class, and caste intermingle in this social construction of skills. Samita Sen's (1999) historical studies on the jute industry explain how much the language of skills dates from the beginning of the industry; it is a normative language aimed at discriminating against women. This is why Alessandra Mezzadri (2016) insists on the way arbitrary low consideration of their skills is a means of reproducing the domination of women in the contemporary garment industry where they are numerous, thus making women a distinct class of labor in garment sweatshop regimes. While Nandini Gooptu's (2018) special issue on skills concerns more institutional skilling, her contribution as it concerns the inside does not: she describes the gendered construction of skills among food delivery employees, concentrating especially on a female ethos of care implied in their skills (Gooptu and Chakravarty 2018). All these studies demonstrate the implicit norms and values of the discourses and the practices around skills. The following paper is centered on men and is thus from the point of view of those who are not discriminated against regarding skilling; it insists on the link between skills as a social construction and the unavoidable materiality of skills determining the way to perform a concrete task.

- 5 *How are everyday attempts to survive, obtain assistance and employment and resist coercion in a precarious labor market articulated with the bundles or norms and values deducted from a worker's recognized ability to do his job well because he has mastered its skills?*
- 6 I argue in this paper that that the relations of production in Bhopal's metal workshops can be understood only by confronting the social meaning of skills (Gooptu 2018), the concrete conditions of work and in particular the daily struggle to maintain a job, try to enhance its terms and get assistance in case of problems. It will also deal with the materiality of skills: being skilled at a task implies more than a socially constructed status, the task has actually to be performed well and there are multiple procedures of proof which link these statuses with the materiality of manual work. In Bhopal's metal workshops, the workers declared that skilled positions yield more than a livelihood, which is at the end of the day quite precarious. They also provide *izzat*, that is honor and respect. Becoming skilled is not only about having a better salary but is also about being recognized by one's peer metalworkers, and even sometimes by those giving orders. The values of work and especially the procedures of proof validating one's skills are normalizing a community of practices. Though Breman (1996, 2013) is right when he says that people from some relatively "privileged" backgrounds access the workshop—In Bhopal, one has to have family or friends in the workshops to enter apprenticeship—these regimes of proof have often been overlooked, relying as they do on material determinants rather than on relations or ex-nihilo status.
- 7 But as the values of work mitigate precariousness because they give some symbolic advantages to the workers, precariousness mitigates the ideological discourse subsumed by these values, which implicitly reveal that those dominating this labor market prevail because they are skilled and simply good at what they do. The demanding competition maintained thanks to a reserve army of unemployed workers waiting at the gates of this labor market, undermines in multiple ways the ability of these workers to stabilize their social status: first, many of the upward trajectories are fragile; the hope of having one's own workshop is seldom realized, thus making the model of the independent worker difficult to concretize for many workers who lack the slightest capital. Second, these statuses are without doubt reproducing domination, between skilled and unskilled workers, between certain branches reputedly more skilled, and between men and women, to whom skilling is always refused. The ideal of independence is often a hollow dream, the relay of an overarching neoliberal discourse embedded in craftsmen values (Chambers 2020) when those who succeed as workshop owners are not only few but generally the heirs of owners themselves. Therefore, the paper ends this broadening of the scope by looking at the very poor settlements neighboring Union Cardide where the two main protagonists of this paper, Asif and Hakim, live and insisting on the agency of these settlements' dwellers.
- 8 This paper relies on data collected between 2010 and 2014, from 7 months of participant observations and 60 semi-structured interviews and life stories. This includes my own participation in the work in the summer of 2013. I helped Asif to fix a truck lamp when he was working with Rachid (see part one) and also helped Asif and Hakim through the whole process of repairing a bus (part 2). I also spent months with Asif's and Hakim's groups of friends in their settlements and took part in the daily male sociabilities (part 3). At the end of the fieldwork, I came back with Shankare Gowda, an independent research assistant, to conduct the last, more formal, set of 40 interviews.

I. Entering into the workshop's closed communities of practice and maintaining one's position in a precarious labor market

Small-scale enterprise networks and local markets

- 9 Bhopal's old town still carries the scars of the 1984 disaster on its northern side. The ruins of the Union Carbide factory lie there as a tool of remembrance, as well as, close by, the statue of a woman weeping with her child in her arms, which is the memorial to the victims. But this part of the old town is also a vibrant small-scale industrial network. The former old city, which was the center of the power in the time of Muslim rule, is, now outshone by New Bhopal extending in the east, which was also the craftsmanship center of the city. In its crowded streets, interdependent industries are quite overwhelming: rickshaw-trucks and bus repairing workshops rub shoulders with agricultural material workshops and a whole set of shops repairing cooking utensils and making iron furniture. The whole network constitutes a vibrant, dense, commercial and small-scale production market characterized by a multiplicity of castes and religious communities trading together. However, the Muslim population is dominant in the Old Town which was their center of power before independence, and is now acting as a trap and a space gradually being marginalized for them because the huge majority of economic opportunities are created in New Bhopal, according to Christophe Jaffrelot (2012). Indeed, the new city with its malls, and service-led industry is spreading quickly and remotely, while the Muslim population, present, visibly but also statistically (Ibid), is clearly minoritarian. While this old northern town does not revolve only around these metal workshops, they constitute the core of the manufacturing activity powered by small-scale enterprises.
- 10 These enterprises are divided into three main branches; mechanical and engineering workshops, bus and truck body making workshops, and (vessel, furniture, cooler, ventilators) fabrication workshops. The mechanical and engineering workshops are often small, ground-floor sheds inside the street's buildings, next to the shops in the bazaars or on the main commercial roads. They are also concentrated around the crossroads. The mechanics' workshops adjoin various shops selling spare parts, colorful stickers, and seat covers for auto rickshaws. The mechanical engineering workshops are characterized by the concentration of small machines (turns, welding machines, etc.), creating a pretty hazardous environment because one has to sneak between them when moving around inside. Their bosses are always to be found sitting at a desk in front of the shop and generally welcoming the order givers—be they from garages or simply passers-by. Mechanical engineering companies working directly for the agricultural industry look very similar but are bigger and one can see that more capital is flowing there. The coachbuilding and repairing workshops need the most space; they are scattered over the whole of the old town, though never in an overcrowded area, are in the open-air and often consist of tiny huts where the tools are stocked, while a great part of the wasteland is devoted to storing damaged vehicles or sometimes to more formalized arrangements with a bigger room for the material and sometimes for the boss's desk. The last line is the fabrication workshop. These are industries making iron or steel furniture and vessels, and occasionally some parts of the local cooler systems,³ and include rather marginal ventilator workshops.

- 11 These small-scale companies employ a very diverse number of workers, from two people up to a dozen or more. Most of these establishments, therefore, do not have to circumvent the Factory Act, 1948, as they effectively have less than a dozen workers,⁴ which is an acceptable wage bill for exemption from registration under the Act. Many are nevertheless registered, but under the Shop & Commercial Establishment Act which has formalized them in the sense that they must pay income tax but are not forced to register the workers or to have any legal responsibility for them. Contrary to the garment sector studied by Mezzadri (2016) where the order givers can be traced through global networks, the market here is at the same time local and pretty diverse. It is largely dependent on local demand and is affected by the seasons; for example, during the monsoon, the peasants send more machines to be repaired, as do the truck and bus companies, who take advantage of the fact that the roads are mostly impassable anyway.
- 12 The engineering workshops can repair or recycle⁵ parts for local garages, agricultural spare parts providers as well as refitting, in 30 minutes, a damaged scooter. In the industrial area, which lies between the Old and the New city, some specialized mechanical workshops work for prestigious companies such as the formal sector Bharat Hindustan Electrical Limited, without their having a markedly different organization than the Old Town ones, while the owners of these shops are often city entrepreneurs whose businesses have grown. Some formal sector workers from BHEL such as Mukesh Singh may run a small workshop as a moonlighting activity, selling different services, in this case pipe cutting, refitting, and grinding for diverse companies. The bus body workshops do have a more systematic order giver; these are always transportation companies, but the fabrication workshops can outsource their products directly to the neighboring market shops for vessels, or to other small-scale companies. However, the common point within all these networks is that, as far as I know, there are no international links.
- 13 Though all castes and communities can be found in the workshops, the workforce, as well as the population of this area, remains predominantly Muslim. Many craftsmen castes Hindus (Vishwakarma) are involved in the industry, and many shop owners are from these castes but there are different Hindu castes amongst the workforce and some Sikhs owners may also be met with. It is not uncommon to see Muslim workers in Hindu or Sikh shops, but the opposite occurs much less often. Whatever the Muslim owner says about never favoring Muslim workers, the months I spent visiting the workshops incline me to affirm that these are just words. The communitarian preference must be put into perspective with the fact that Bhopal's Muslims do, objectively speaking, have fewer opportunities than the Hindus (Jaffrelot 2012). Then metalwork—here linked to craftsmanship—is generally seen as a Muslim and a Vishwakarma specialty in Bhopal as well as in the whole of North India, where urban Muslims have always been linked to craftsmanship activities (Chambers 2020). If these metalworks are not craft activities in the sense that they rely upon so-called traditional production like woodwork (Chambers 2020), garment weaving (Kumar 1988), bronze (Ruthven 2006) their organization of labor and their common norms and values, have a lot in common with these craftsmen contexts.⁶
- 14 In addition, with the overwhelming presence of former craftsmen communities, especially including shop owners, there is also an instrumental conviviality (Chambers 2019) which comes from the fact that differences of caste and religion are

not much emphasized at work— even though Hindus and Muslims seldom mix in their sectors of habitation— the important thing being to get the work done. This implies that Muslims and Hindus work together and that the discriminations are hidden; as we will see, the main characteristics of this labor market in terms of values of independence, values of skills, and norms for assessing the skills are intercommunitarian. Though access to the workshops itself is locked by the community, in months of fieldwork I never met anyone who had entered the workshops without being linked to an uncle, a father, a brother, or in some rare cases a friend, but always someone from the same religious community. Therefore, access to the labor market as well as to apprenticeship depends upon strong ties (Granoveter 1973). The consequence of this is that these workshop's labor market is also a very dense, closed, and relatively intercommunitarian community of practices (Wenger 1998), where, as Breman (1996, 2013) observed in many informal contexts, reputation is at the same time an essential tool of survival and an implacable means of control against any attempt at collective resistance.

- 15 Working in the workshops provides no social protection as the workforce is always very fluid and no one is unionized. Overwhelmingly, irregular employment is caused by the irregularity of the orders themselves⁷ which causes the workforce to be organized in terms of a “core”, a group of faithful and preferred workers who have the priority in employment and thus a certain regularity and a periphery—workers who are dismissed more easily in case of a dropping off of orders (Ibid). To gain security in employment, a worker has either to maintain a certain “rate” in this network in order not to slip to the “periphery” of a workforce, or to appear as a “desirable” worker in order to be in a position to bargain between several shop owners. The scarcity of regular employment explains the absence of debt-bonded labor, present in many lines of the informal manufacturing sector, such as diamond cutting (Kapadia 1995), silk (Joseph 2018), garment sector (de Neve 2005; Mezzadri 2016) or wood (Chambers 2020⁸). This absence of debt bondage is therefore not linked to any will to fair practice by the owners but to the fact that, due to the irregularity of contracts and competition between lowly employed workers to obtain them, the owner's main worry is not to keep their workers but to be able to get rid of them if necessary.
- 16 In parallel, workers do climb a certain hierarchy according to the level of skills that they are estimated to possess in the judgement of their co-workers and superiors. Because of the nature of the work, almost everyone becomes skilled so that, if it is difficult to enter, it is common to climb in the hierarchy: from apprenticeship, a worker may then become a “*mazdur*” (simple, normally skilled worker) and then a *mistri* (very skilled workers who have gained mastery), and the wage will increase according to the level of skills. At the time of the fieldwork, in 2013–2014, wages were from 250–350 rupees a day (3.5–4.5 euros) on average for normally skilled workers to 500–600 rupees (6–7.5 euros) for the very skilled workers. For the apprentices, though, salaries may vary, they may stay very low or be practically nonexistent because the owners consider that the skilling is already a wage. In summary, we have here a closed community of practice articulated with a strong precariousness of employment, whereas quite some other lines exist in the informal manufacturing sector where a worker's first security of employment is his reputation (Breman 1996, 2013). This configuration tends to produce chaotic trajectories, as we shall see by focusing now on Asif's trajectory, from

apprenticeship to a skilled but precarious position in Bhopal's metal works labor market, to better understand the ups and down implied by these kinds of trajectory.

- 17 Asif was born in 1971 in the small town of Ashta⁹ in a modest family. His mother died when he was 14. He went to school till he was 11 years old but he admits that his education at the government school was of very poor quality and that he reads only slowly. He then started to learn woodcraft and continued this for two and a half years. When telling his story, he insists that this period was especially short, which means that he was, according to himself, a good craftsman from the beginning. He tried to work as an independent worker for five years, and had to migrate to Indore to find another job. Because his wife was afraid of being in a majoritarian Hindu city after the 1989 communal riots, he then moved to North Bhopal, to the slums on the ruins of North of Union Carbide Factory. His wife died soon after and he remarried Rachida, a local widow who had been a victim of the 1984 disaster. Here, he could find a job thanks to his uncle's son, but in the bus body making branch.
- 18 He thus had to shift to another line which meant another community of practices: he lost the use of many of his skills applicable to wood carving, though experience in carving can be partly transferred to metal work according to him (for example the skills of eye-measuring or design-representation in the mind are the same for both domains). He fell to the bottom of the workers' hierarchy and it took him years to climb back. According to him, though, he was able to relearn the job in just two years and then be in a bargaining position and could quit the shop where he did his apprenticeship to find better wages elsewhere. He then became a *thekedar*, a jobber, and tried to set up his own workshop, but the business crashed. He returned to wage-work and worked as a skilled coachbuilder for two Vishvakarma owners. He then again fell into precariousness because he slept outside of the workshop's core of preferred workers (who have the priority on contracts and thus get less irregular jobs) and was less and less employed. He tried to work with Rachid Bhai, a friend owning a workshop, but the relationship was very tense, and Asif was particularly hurt by the lack of assistance from Rachid Bhai when he injured his foot on the railway lines in front of his house. After having tried self-employed housework, he again failed to borrow money to start his shop, and then canceled his plan to migrate to Bangalore. At the time of my last fieldwork, he had eventually found a job in his second wife's elder brother's workshop, thanks to familial assistance. Asif's difficulties in a labor market where he has so many ties shows how much the friendship and even familial links, necessary to enter the workshops, offer only very limited protection against precariousness. Here, familial assistance came only after months of desperation and strife. During his underemployment period, Asif was pressured by his wife who claimed that he was not performing his role as breadwinner, and humiliated him in front of me about this. This reduced him to tears one day.

Precarious employment, loose values of assistance

- 19 This particular trajectory is not an isolated one. In a world of labor that is scattered in small segments, this kind of chaotic trajectory is quite common. The respondents, when asked about their trajectories in the workshops, often mention their shift from one workshop to another, sometimes to other branches, though some may also stay for a very long time in the same firm. As we see in Asif's relationship with his former employers and with his friend Rachid, there are values of assistance and protection,

internalized by the workers to represent what the moral norm should be (Ruthven 2006). It consists mainly of not laying-off a worker in difficult times and providing money, not only for accidents inside the workshop but also for illness, weddings, festivals, so on. But practically speaking these values are mostly just words and are seldom applied: workers are often rejected by people they know and the only thing they can do is to complain about such rejections on the grounds that they are unethical. Delays are the main crystallizer of tensions in an industry that is dependent on many constraints of supply and needs a lot of organization to complete the contracts. Resistances are also centered on these lines. The owners regularly complain about the time the work takes which is always longer than the estimate. These moments of tension can lead to different sets of domination and resistance because the workers and the owners will try to mitigate the customer's impatience, and then the delay will lead to internal conflicts between owners and workers: the owner may want to speed up the operations, or may try to delay the workers' payment after the order's completion.

- 20 It is also to be noted that delay may be the only constraint to rhythms which can, otherwise, be pretty free, especially in the coachbuilding branch. When working in his stepbrother's workshop, repairing a bus, Asif had a good friend of his from his settlement, Hakim, as a helper, as well as another, younger, helper and had total freedom (*azadi*) of operation. As the jobber was paid on a contract basis, Asif paid the salaries himself and organized the repairing and the supply of raw material and tools. As the team was late in completing the order, the bus holder came, shouting in frustration, first to the workshop boss and then to Asif. Meanwhile, the workers, who were enjoying a pause and smoking marijuana, went back to work with dramatized celerity. This wasn't enough to calm the owner down. Asif then defended his technical choices and lost the owner in technical details, pretending that the delay was due only to technical difficulties. The owner transferred his anger to Hakim, who argued back, and, going down the hierarchical line, discharged his nervousness at the youngest helper. If Asif and Hakim's resistance was successful in the short run, the owner pressured them to complete the repairing urgently, which forced them to work more than 9 hours a day to meet the demand. When, after this was done, Asif wanted to refuse a new contract, another worker said that he would take it, thus forcing both workers to accept the contract.
- 21 If the everyday politics of the workshop (de Neve 2005; Burawoy 1985) are often violent—shouting at each other is frequent, and not only from the dominant side—workers often defend themselves vehemently. At the end of the day, it is often the workers who lose out because of the uncertainty of employment which makes them expendable. A worker defends his skills and his technical choices, but he always has to negotiate under this tension between asserting himself and being replaced by someone else. The better his reputation, the more margin of negotiation he has. This also leads to competition between workers, and reproduction of the domination: Hakim, himself an occasional drinker, pretended that a co-worker was an alcoholic only to discredit him and eliminate a competitor. Outside work, the laborers do not like to meet lesser-known colleagues, fearing that these others may pick up information that might affect their reputation, for example when they smoke marijuana.
- 22 In the end the owners remain the providers of labor. This fact allows them to play on the uncertainty of employment to assert their domination, even if these workers' daily

struggles must not be underestimated, in the sense that they can at least manage to have an important margin of freedom at work, an essential stake here because of the presence of an *ideal* of freedom: Asif undoubtedly enjoys being his own master and the trajectories go, in general, towards ideally owning one's workshop and being independent.¹⁰ Moreover, the uncertainty of employment and lack of contracts can turn to the advantage of the workers in the few cases where one reaches a peak in his trajectory and can, therefore play the competition to encourage, the owner to hire them.

- 23 Finally, these trajectories remain uncertain and are very difficult to stabilize even if upward mobilities can be observed. Therefore, I argue in the next part that though the market itself is extremely volatile, the line and its identity reproduce itself mainly through communities of practices: those common sociabilities that workers develop through the practice of the same, or neighboring, skills and the identities which are built on their attachment to that practice. As well as the sets of norms and values embedded in the daily politics of labor implied by the transmission of skills through the *ustad-shagird* (master/apprentice) structure, the regimes of proof and recognized qualities are, I argue, the cornerstone of these lines otherwise marked by extremely loose and irregular employment relations.

II. Masters of iron: communities of practice, norms of the status, and regimes of proof.

Growing in communities of practice and legitimizing one's status

- 24 On a cloudy afternoon in the summer of 2013, Asif and Hakim are working in the open air, trying to get the best they can out of a lumpy frame. The structure of master-helper, or *ustad-shagird*, uniting them is fundamental to any Muslim Indian but also in the Islamic¹¹ craftsmen context (Chambers 2020; Kumar 1988). Hakim, as he is learning the job, would in general weigh the frame while Asif welded or collected the replacement parts. But Asif also lets Hakim weld at some points. He explains to him how to see the right angles and which material to use for filling the hole. Hakim applies the instructions but is also very keen on giving his opinion and often disagrees with Asif on the way they are introducing such and such a part or the order in which they have to take care of such and such an operating chain. These discussions often end in fervent argument. Slowly, the young apprentice becomes more adept and accurate. This apprenticeship by repetition, observation of the situation and, making a hypothesis as to how to fix the buses is crucial in this work. Watching and thinking before starting is essential and what the workers are doing when they appear to be shirking is nothing less than the skill of "louper"—observing before starting—delightfully referred to by Damien Cru (2016) when he tells a joke shared by the stonecutters: a contractor has been so thoroughly convinced by his workers that the convention of doing nothing before starting to work is a mark of mastery that he fires the ones starting work diligently.
- 25 This explains times when the body makers are appearing to do nothing other than talking but are in fact performing an essential part of their job. Thus, when the bus owner comes, he may shout at everyone because the work is not advancing and the workers seem to be shirking. Nothing would, however, be more inefficient than rushing

into welding back the structure with randomly chosen recycled material on precipitately arranged angles. The technical argument about the length of the process can be a discourse of excuse as well as highlighting necessary changes of technique; this makes it an efficient grounding resistance, that also demonstrates one's status. Here lies another main difference from, notably, the typical activities of workshop regimes such as garment work (Mezzadri 2016; de Neve 2005) but also from numerous craftsmen activities (Senett 2010) that are rather repetitive.

- 26 Therefore, these practices do not contribute to the kind of alienation at work resulting from extremely repetitive actions; on the contrary, they stimulate the sagacity, the *mètis*,¹² especially in the Indian context where the workers seldom use serial spare parts but rather recycle old ones and fit an old frame to another model or transform a large sheet of iron found in the nearby dump zone into a brand-new bus cover, etc... Last, technical discussions have great importance within the profession, too, in that they assert and demonstrate that a worker, be he helper, *mazdur* or *mistri*, deserves his title and knows what he is doing: these everyday demonstrations of mastery are the actualization of the internal hierarchies of the profession.
- 27 The skills which are supposed to validate the technical hierarchies are too numerous to be listed in full here. They are learned by observation, as well as by the use of the tools, when those tools are given to the *mistri*. The laborers of the body making workshops must develop a sense for judging distance and angles almost without instruments, due to the often complex nature of the lump bodies, which do not have simple angles and call for complex adjustments of parts that are much more easily made by the eye than by geometrical calculations or measurement. The sense of improvisation, the knowledge of the material and its resistance and the intelligent choice of adaptable and cheap materials are all crucial. Lastly, the most valued capacity which sustains the other skills is purely mental: it is the precision of the 3-dimensional representation in the mind of the object to be made. Asif liked to explain to me that he could reproduce any object he saw, thanks to the precision of the mental image, which is even sacralized for the Hindu craftsmen caste (Vishwakarma); as Asif's ex-bosses explained to me, this representation for them was the vision (*darshan*) of their tutelary god (Vishvakarma) himself. Asif's greatest pride was to have people admire how he could, on this bus repairing, reproduce a very modern bumper model from just a picture and adapt it to a very old model. These instants of grace are a source of self-satisfaction for the workers which is validated by the surrounding people. When a worker performs a technical operation with virtuosity he can be admired, not only by his colleagues but sometimes by the customers (the vehicle owners, for example), whom I sometimes saw commenting on the difficult operations with great interest. The validation by peers in the community of practice shapes regimes of proof that legitimize the technical statuses.

Skills, statuses, and regimes of proof

- 28 Workers are inclined to insist on their technical mastery, which is at the center of every hierarchy and wage grid. The classical argument referred to by Breman about this configuration into cores and peripheries is that it is a means of domination by the owners that allows them to maintain the competition between the "preferred" and the "threatened" (Breman 1996, 2013). This is true but, on the other hand, practices such as the discussions about techniques are asserting, through a *concrete regime of proof*, the

technical skills and the claim of the workers to possess them and can thus be grounds for other bottom-up resistances. There is a very material way of checking one's skills. For example, one of the other causes of tension between Asif and Rachid Bhai was that Rachid's technical choices were bad according to Asif. Asif argued before other colleagues and defended his own choices, which happened to be right and this was a matter of dishonor for Rachid who was supposed to be his superior.

- 29 The term "dishonor" is the literal translation of the (negation of the) Urdu term "*izzat*" which is used in the workshop (honor, but translated in the context as respect by the workers who knew some English). This valorization is also a norm, shared by the workers as well as the owners, who do have to prove that they know the job. The importance of possessing the skills is then crucial and shared by all the branches. There are other norms that signify what makes a good worker, but they consist of valorizing so-called natural qualities that logically lead to the successful acquisition of skills. They are the interest (*pasand*) of the apprentice, the commitment to hard work (*mehnat*) and the possession of sagacity (said as "*dimag*," brain), which classes the metal workshop's activity as "works from the mind," *dimag ka kam* and which can be the ground of symbolic struggles by the workers to consider themselves as somehow comparable to the literate engineers (for more details on these points see Kaba 2014).
- 30 Normalizing an assertion by the peer as to the actual level of the skills recognized is a way to back resistances, legitimize status, and valorize the meaning of a certain way of excelling in the work, especially in branches like coach building where creativity and sagacity are extremely important. The hierarchical opposition between "*hath ka kam*" and "*dimag ka kam*" crisscross the universal opposition between the hand (the craftsman's input through the tool) and the spirit (the artist, the designer, or the architect's mind-created blueprint), which has been brilliantly theorized about, though sometimes rather dichotomically, by Richard Senett (2010). Valorizing the "*dimag ka kam*" in this context is performing a symbolic struggle for the valorization of the meaning of one's work.
- 31 However, preferring the workers with the most "spirit" (*dimag*) also legitimizes the violence existing within the ceaseless competition which is not regulated by merit but primarily by the economic situation of the labor market. The workers interviewed insisted that unions were either unnecessary or impossible to set up in a context where reputation is essential, competition fierce and employment scarce, and where activist workers would soon be ostracized. At the end of the day, the symbolic value derived from the validation of skills has to be put into perspective with the fact that this value is also the symbolic consolation in a situation that is highly precarious for the majority of the workers and where the job's position has a very volatile value in itself. In Bhopal's old town the best of the welders can still be dismissed overnight; he has a good chance of getting another job thanks to his reputation, but nothing is assured. Moreover, these norms and values are first of all masculine values and are a strong tool of reproduction of domination over women, who are excluded from these industries. The discourses which legitimizes their exclusion lie as much in arguments based on their inability to do the "hard work", as on their supposed inability to acquire these skills.
- 32 To recapitulate, the metalworks need a great variety of the skills that are used in various tasks (engine repairing, parts recycling, lump shaping) consisting in repairing and which are forbidden by Taylorian labor organization. As Crawford (2006) says,

repairing is a domain which by definition calls for improvisation, discussion, imagination and reflection on the causes as well as on the solution to the problem. These skills are also linked to concrete capacities to shape the material; this is why there are regimes of proof which can sometimes be used as grounds for resistance, for example against a supervisor unable to demonstrate that he really knows the job. It is then no wonder that these workers insist on the mental side of their skills, and use this as a tool of distinction; being illiterate, workers have no knowledge of English, in a contemporary Indian society which is often obsessed by literacy, in particular in English, as a means of ranking people in terms of class. Workers play their own card, praxeology, as a value empowering their practical way of thinking at work in opposition to the white collar's theoretical one.

- 33 This valorization of praxeology seen as the sign of "the brain" at a level equivalent to the theoretical one is at the same time central to the workshop world and circumscribed by it. Many workers affirm that they are technical engineers, or that they know the job as well as engineers do, or owners say that they prefer to hire skilled workers without degrees rather than workers holding degrees but not knowing the work. Owners and many workers supply the best formal education for their children they can afford, partly because they want to enhance their possibilities in future, for example in white collar employment and partly because the symbolic advantage of having the distinction of being English-speaking is never useless. Asif is spending a great part of his salary to pay for a private school for his younger daughter, as he previously did for his younger son who is now making him proud as he is working in a pharmacy, a job that he calls a "*naukri*" a permanent or here more a "proper" job. The workshop society values the knowledge by apprenticeship without devalorizing formal education outside of the metalwork process's practical sphere. Generally, in the worker's narratives, workshop enrolment happens when a young man drops out of school and some workers are keen on pursuing part-time attendance at school even if they need money from the family to do this. Lastly the machine, and the struggle against it, which has been for a long time irrelevant because of the extremely various nature of the job, makes these lines very difficult to automatize and is now feared by even the skilled workers. For example, in the engineering workshops, the increasing amount of electronics on cars and the unavoidable normalization of computer-driven numeric turns raises fear of inadaptability to the numeric technologies among workers who are skilled but quite illiterate in the great majority of cases.
- 34 As underlined in numerous studies on Indian craftsmen (Kumar 1988; Heuzé 2013, Chambers 2020), the ideal of freedom is ranks high among Bhopal metalworkers' values and while the aspiration for the pinnacle of a career in the workshops is not a necessary factor in becoming a big owner it is important to be at least autonomous with a proper and regular income, though this is far from being easy to achieve. Asif, after having failed once to take his place as an owner, said to me that if owners have physical relief, they also have a lot of stress; he was still striving to set up a small independent business. The workers' discourses consist of hope with a mix of consciousness of the low chances of success. As Asif twice failed to get out of wage work, Bachir, a worker who started his career in North Bhopal's workshop zone, and who was working in the Industrial zone when interviewed in 2011, failed as well to start his own shop though he was considered to be an extremely skilled worker, with a good bargaining position. He earned 10 000 rupees per month (twice the regular wage) in the workshop he was turning in and left it because he found better employment conditions elsewhere. He

possessed his machine, a rare and important advantage on the path towards autonomy. Still, he failed to create his own workshop. He explained to me, bitterly:

If you don't have a solid capital and if you aren't the son of an owner, it is very difficult to make a business successful.¹³

- 35 Indeed, the owners' biographies I made stress that the present owners are mostly the siblings of other owners who experienced mobility a generation ago. The successful businesses were set up in the '60s and '70s. The only owner interviewed who has managed to create a successful business during the present generation had land in the countryside around Bhopal that he could sell to realize the capital. According to Shakur, a 40-year-old owner, 3 lakh rupees at least are necessary to start a successful business, a huge sum of money in relation to the workers' financial means, which would need dozens of years of patient saving to gather. This bitter truth underlines the strong ambivalence in the discourse of freedom already noted by Chambers (2020) when he comments on the fusion of neoliberalism and values of freedom which tend to hide the reality of domination relations, as well as by Mohsini (2011), while Ruthven (2006) underlines the fact that in Moradabad the owners belong largely to the traditional bronze works *biraderi* (caste).
- 36 In contrast to permanent jobs, or even to any commercial and desk job which may easily be a source of pride inside the *bastis* as well, these jobs are, according to the metal workers, difficult to valorize to the family, and friends or neighbors, be one a helper or a very skilled worker. The status gained thanks to these normative validations of the skills is confined to the workplace because there it helps to make a virtue of necessity (Bourdieu 1979)—to transform through quality the fact of not having had a formal education—but workers, as individuals, would seldom apply it to their children. This limiting of the statuses of labor within the community of practice makes the Muslim workers that I followed in their everyday, as well as working, lives, even more, marginalized than the Muslim communities of Shaharanpur where the *izzat* provided by the *ustad-shagird* structure trickles from the workshop to the mohallas, popular settlements (Chambers 2020).

III. From the workshops to the poor settlements: marginalization and struggle for inclusion

- 37 Even if the freedom and creativity involved in the community of practice defined by the metalworkers make this activity meaningful from the workers' point of view, their position within the city remains very fragile. As many of their colleagues, Asif and Hakim are from Atal Ayub Nagar, an odds-and-ends slum built just between the wall of the Union Carbide factory and the railway line. The group of suburbs in which it is included forms a coherent set of unevenly formalized settlements, mainly populated by Muslims, and surrounded by Hindu neighborhoods. Here, the dwellers are employed in many other informal activities besides metalwork: construction, petty commodity productions in the market with activities such as tailoring, working in small tea shops or grocery shops, sub-contracting parts making for the neighboring workshops, or repairing doors or iron grids in houses. However, many of the settlement's dwellers work in a very irregular way, combining small temporary jobs, passing from one line to another, trying their best to make ends meet. Respondents insist on the presence of a double glass ceiling: first, they do not have access to proper education because of

poverty and the fact that only expensive private schools can provide the level required to access the right universities. Secondly, even if they manage to get a degree, the amount of the bribes to pay to get the *naukri*—a proper permanent and protected job—is beyond their means.

- 38 Sahid, a middle-aged jobber for the roadworks, represents an accurate summary of this series of cynical statements on people and, in particular the condition of young people and their future in these localities:

Everybody is on wage work, all the people are laborers and all poor. There is no formal employment here, only daily manual wage work (*mazduri*). Everybody is a laborer here, earning between 200 to 300 rupees per day approximately; that's how much I pay my workers and then it's very hard to make end meet. There cannot be any unity between workers because getting a job is primarily a matter of personal relation. Hindus, Muslims, we are all doing these daily jobs. Here, in the local schools, you can barely learn how to read and write. To get a formal job you'll have to pay between 200 000 to 500 000 rupees (3 to 5 years of a decent local wage) of bribe, that's why even the educated youth cannot get it.¹⁴

- 39 Such a statement, by one of the many settlement dwellers tends to relativize the range of the *statuses* developed within the hierarchies of the metal works. Despise the discourses about the “*dimag ka kam*” workers who are validated inside the line, metal work remains one of the many daily jobs which are available in the locality's vicinities and is not valued as such. This is summarized by Amir, another dweller: “the *izzat* (honor) in the colonies you get for the work is the amount of money you can reach”? This statement embodies an idea of running the household which is linked to the patriarchal South Asian dominant norms which fix men as the breadwinners and heads of households. Women often work (Mezzadri 2016), here as cigarette makers, or as maids, but working outside is often portrayed as failure with regard to the patriarchal norms and the local *ulemas* condemn it. The scarcity of employment which the settlement dwellers endlessly complain about often increases insecurities regarding the male's breadwinner role.

- 40 Not only there is not a structuring role of the *ustad-shagird* relationship in the *bastis*, but there is strong marginalization, even stronger than that usually embodied in the larger Muslim settlements (Jaffrelot and Gayet 2012; Chambers 2020; Mohsini 2011). A particularly striking example is that the young men from the *bastis* lack places of legitimate socialization, even in Bhopal's old town: the young men I followed during the fieldwork, especially Hakim and his friends, hardly go to the socializing male places attendance at which is considered as standard behavior in northern India to affirm one's masculinity, especially in the mohallas: the *akhara*, (Kumar 1988) or now the gym (Chambers 2000). The unstable nature of their settlements makes them quite marginalized even in the Muslim old town and their socialization places are often limited to the chai shops, improvised carrum, and snooker rooms or drinking or weed smoking activities in diverse wastelands. This may be different for young workers from more formalized mohallas in Old Bhopal, but Hakim, Asif, and their friends live on land from which the WAQF board—which owns parts of it—intermittently threatens to expel them. They lack inclusion, not only in Bhopal but also in the Muslim old city itself.

- 41 Among some youngsters, a number of activities aiming at proving one's virility do take place, but not in instituted places: there are more or less regulated fights between individuals or groups, races of hung-walk beneath the flyover crossing the settlement, scarification of one's forearm with a knife to prove one's absence of fear. These

performative activities are often accompanied by bitter-proud discourses claiming the *goonda* (muscleman) status of quite a number of youngsters; they also suggest that in these areas it is impossible to grow even as a muscleman or to develop well-organized crime networks. The young men then flirt with the idealized North Indian masculine form of power represented by the *goonda* (Michelluti 2010; Picherit et. al. 2018) but admit that they often lack any real power. The only man I met who is known to have flirted with a notable crime career is Hakim and this happened when he was living in Bombay. Therefore, the dominant feeling amongst the young metalworkers living in these settlements, whether or not engaged in petty crime, is a double marginalization: as Muslims in the old town, but also as poor, deprived youth even within the Muslim community with an especially difficult context in which to express their masculinity, being often unemployed and thus not breadwinners, and having such limited places of sociability.

- 42 In these marginalized localities, the stress of fighting on an everyday basis and the long-lasting scars of the 1984 disaster are intermingled with collective struggles for justice and inclusion. Rina Agarwala (2006) highlighted the importance of the demands to the State for the classes of informal laborers.¹⁵ If collective resistance is made extremely difficult in Bhopal's metal workshops as in many other sectors of the informal works in the Old Town,¹⁶ confrontations with the State have often been extremely vigorous. Forms of collective resistance have existed and still exist, the first being the movements for justice following the 1984 disaster. Neither the water pipe connection which enabled the slum dwellers to stop drinking water polluted by the factory's chemical waste, nor probably the distribution of compensations, would have been achieved without a struggle. The affected area's dwellers faced acute structural violence from the bureaucratic State machine at the time for claiming compensation and better integration into the rehabilitation schemes (Mukherjee 2010; Rajan 2001). The durability of these struggles directed towards the State as a national entity and as a myriad of local red-tape bureaucrats (Gupta 2012) humiliating the dwellers for their illiteracy emphasizes their agency.
- 43 These collective struggles have been going on for more than 30 years now. In a broader picture, the locality's inhabitants managed to get some clean water and, following the Delhi march of 2010 organized by the International Campaign for Justice in Bhopal,¹⁷ the Bhopal case has been reopened. Even today, the people from these localities are claiming more compensations amidst COvid-2019 outbreak (January 28, 2020) and better state action for testing and preventing diseases (letter to the government sent the March 21, 2020), and it turned out that the first COvid victims from Bhopal were disaster survivors.¹⁸ Women, though they are often invisible in the settlement's public spaces, were a major part of these struggles and they had to go through union action to achieve the permanent regularization of the few women workers who had subsidized jobs thanks to the rehabilitation schemes. Despite all the tragic stories that happened here, the inhabitants are still eager to use any interspace of freedom to strive for inclusion in the city and for social mobility and, at the end of the day, this has paid off to some extent.

Conclusion

- 44 The laboring life of North Bhopal's metalworkers shows how everyday wounds mix with deeper scars from the disaster. Laboring in metal works requires exercising practical intelligence, imagination, and creativity to reshape shiny bus and truck bodies from scraps. Managing an upward trajectory in these communities of practice gives the workers a certain social status, which is embedded in a complex system of norms and values, themselves sustained by concrete regimes of proof between peers. Though these statuses vanish at the exit of the workshop they are grounds for symbolic struggles against the degree holders. They also legitimize a system favoring social Darwinism, the fragmentations of solidarities among extremely marginalized workers. The ideal of independence, which is the core value meant to support acceptance of precariousness and the struggle for excellence at work is often a hollow dream when it comes to the concrete chances of becoming a workshop owner. However, the richness of symbolic and material, collective, and individual ways to assert the agencies are striking, especially in this context of precariousness and in a post-disaster situation. Beyond the disaster and the everlasting struggle for justice, it is the daily striving for inclusion and mobility that this paper attempts to underline for North Bhopal's inhabitants who are more than simply victims seeking justice.
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NOTES

1. When I started the fieldwork in 2010, the majority of the dwellers had access to drinking water but there were still people who did not have proper access to it as well as issues of leakage in the pipes.
2. This is why this paper distances itself from the question of the disaster, its consequences and its memory, themes that are moreover extensively discussed in other publications (Fortun 2009; Lapierre, and Moro 2002; Sarangi 1995a, 1995b, 1997; Patault 2009)—and focused on the daily relation to work and its implications.
3. A low-tech cooler made of a fan inside an iron framed cube covered with a porous material within which a continuous flow of water is poured by a pump.
4. In the Factory Act, it is stipulated that a company must register its workers only if they are more than 12.
5. For example, turning an old gear to make a new, but smaller one.
6. As a more urban population which grew with the Mughal domination.
7. A situation which is encountered in many other case studies of small-scale manufacturing: see Kumar's study of Banaras' craftsmen (1988) or Ruthven's studies of Moradabad's metal works (2006).
8. Of course, Chambers (2020) and de Neve (2005) argue that in their fieldwork bonded labor is not a one-sided process and that the relations are ambiguous, and so does Joseph (2018). But in Bhopal's metal workshops, there is seldom any advance at all (and only small amounts—less than two to three months wages—for very trusted workers and generally for special occasions such as weddings).
9. A small town (60,000 habitants) situated on the road to Indore, at 80 kilometers from Bhopal.
10. The freedom of organization is specific here to the coachbuilding industry; in the mechanical workshops, the rhythms are much stricter.
11. But the Hindu apprentices have Gurujis and the apprenticeship process remains hardly different.
12. Or the praxeological intelligence, i.e. Ulysses' trickery (Detienne 1974)
13. Interview with Shankare Gowda in Bhopal, Bharat talkies, March 2013.
14. Interview made with Shankare Gowda in February 2013.
15. She argues (2006) that the shift of demands from the employers to the state by the informal workers' organization shows that they behave like a class in itself.
16. The only unionized segments are to my knowledge the vegetable market coolies and the rickshaw drivers.
17. For a complete timeline of the International Campaign for Justice in Bhopal's actions, see: <https://www.bhopal.net/about-icjb/icjb-history/>
18. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/all-5-who-died-of-covid-19-in-bhopal-were-gas-tragedy-victims/articleshow/75152704.cms>

ABSTRACTS

In analyzing the labor relations and representations of the informal sector's metalworkers in Old Bhopal, where the scars of the disaster caused by the Union Carbide factory are still visible, this paper goes beyond the disaster to study the everyday laboring lives of the informal sector's

metalworkers. It argues that though the sector as a labor market is extremely loose and precarious, fairly structured norms and values are shaping statutory positions regarding the levels of skills and of experience that are less volatile than the labor market itself. These statuses are holding the worker's scattered trajectories together in communities of practice; claims of mastery have to be proven during the concrete working process. However, the scarcity of employment and the everlasting competition, make the upward mobilities erratic and collective resistances difficult. The ideal of independence often conceals the fact that ownership of a workshop is mostly reserved for heirs. The statuses of skills mastery have no value outside of work in North Bhopal's poor settlements where the workers, precarious and generally Muslim dwellers, face an acute marginalization. As frequently failing breadwinners, they are striving to live up to the dominant masculine norms. However, the paper also insists on the bridge between the daily strife against the precariousness and the long-lasting struggle for inclusion in the city.

INDEX

Keywords: Bhopal, labor, skills, communities of practice, metalworks

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