

# **Non-Farm Futures and the Dispossessed: Mapping Manual Labour in an Industrial Area in 21-st Century Maharashtra**

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## **Abstract:**

In this paper, non-farm trajectories for the dispossessed are interrogated through a case where the state acquires agricultural land for an industrial area in Maharashtra, India. The empirical case arguably presents an ‘ideal type’ to observe the possibilities of a classical ‘transition’ to factory employment for dispossessed rural landholders in the neoliberal era. In the manufacturing hub that develops, male and female members from Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe groups carve out precarious manual labour opportunities. By disaggregating informal labour by caste and gender and identifying mechanisms through which work is made and kept precarious, the analysis adds specificity to debates on both rural dispossession and informal labour.

**Keywords:** dispossession; manual labour; precarity; informality; labour fragmentation

## **1. Introduction**

Dispossession denotes the outcome of a typically coercive process by which land, primarily farmland, is expropriated from those who own it<sup>i</sup>. The concept of dispossession is rooted in Marx’s (1887) historical analysis of the birth of capitalism in England through a coercive and violent process he termed ‘primitive accumulation’. The forceful expropriation of land from those who were sustained by it compelled the dispossessed to exchange their labour for a wage in order to survive. The process of dispossession, thus, produced a mass of wage labourers – the industrial ‘proletariat’ – to fuel industrial production for a wage. The idea of a ‘transition’ from self-sustaining ‘peasants’ to ‘proletariat’ was not just limited to early Marxist theory. Orthodox modernisation theories of the 1960s predicted linear sequential transformation of ‘backward’ peasant societies into modern industrial liberal democracies through the process of industrialisation. In these ideas of total social change, land dispossession and the building of infrastructure were theorised as a necessary first step for a ‘take-off’ (Rostow 1961) – a linear trajectory of transition from primitive modes of agrarian production into technologically advanced industrial economy. The set of theories that formed the modernisation orthodoxy do not hold sway in academic circles today. However, a transition *imperative* – ‘transition’ into a non-farm economy as the necessary and inevitable mode of economic growth and employment – continues to linger in both academic and policy debates. The World Bank’s 2008 WDR publication titled ‘*Agriculture for Development*’, for example, is representative of the optimistic ‘transition’ imperative for small-holder farmers in the Global South<sup>ii</sup>. Instead of totalising ideas of economic and socio-cultural transformation of Marxist and modernisation theories, the end-goal of ‘transition’ in contemporary policy discourses is framed in more neutral terms such as ‘employment generation’, ‘non-farm jobs’, and ‘development’. What is

the nature of ‘transition’ that follows land dispossession for industrialisation in late-industrialising societies of the Global South?

Land dispossession has been an ongoing feature of ‘development’ in post-independence India. Land for non-agricultural use has gone from 9.36 million hectares (ha. hereon) in 1950-51 to 19.6 million ha. in 1980-81, and to 26.31 million ha. in 2008-09 (Sud 2014). The period following independence in 1947 till around 1991, agricultural and forest land were diverted for heavy-manufacturing industries, infrastructure projects such as dams, steel factories and townships, underscored by ideologies of nation-building and modernisation. The industrial estates and townships up until the 1970s were, despite large-scale dispossession, relatively generative economic spaces that absorbed dispossessed locals in industrial employment and other ancillary production units that spun out of the larger manufacturing plants. The Bhilai steel plant in the central State of Chattisgarh that started production in 1959, for example, had 65,000 workers on its direct pay-roll by the mid-1980s (Parry 1999). They were the archetypes of what the first Prime Minister of India, Nehru, envisioned as post-colonial ‘modernity’. Permanent factory jobs were accompanied by an industrial ‘modernism’ in the accompanying townships marked by schools, hospitals, cheap housing, but also electricity, roads, and public infrastructure for a larger base of the town dwellers (Parry 2003).

In contrast, the current political-economic pattern of land dispossession represents a ‘neoliberal regime of dispossession’ (Levien 2018) – predatory capitalism that has provided limited livelihood opportunities for the dispossessed rural agrarian classes either coerced or co-opted into giving up land. Land has been shifted out of agriculture for Export Processing Zones, Special Economic Zones (SEZs), industrial corridors, ports, highways, and real estate, and rural agrarian livelihoods have been replaced by non-local workforces for highly-skilled services and economies driven by speculative land markets. Recent literature has focused on these cases of land dispossession where large private corporations have been key actors (Vijaybaskar and Babu 2016; Sampat 2016) and land speculation the central interest and outcome (Searle 2011, Parikh 2015). The role of the state has been limited to facilitating dispossession as a land ‘broker’ (Sud 2009, Levien 2018). The possibilities following *state-mediated manufacturing development* in the neoliberal era continue to draw more optimism in various academic and policy circles, such as the debate following farmer resistance to a car manufacturing plant by the Indian corporate behemoth Tata Ltd. in the State of West Bengal in 2008. Activists and academics who opposed the violent implementation of land acquisition by the government still argued that state-mediated industrialisation was an indispensable driver of growth and employment and that the role of state was key for equitable outcomes (Banerjee et al 2007 for example). State-planned industrialisation in recent times remain, however, under-studied.

In this paper, I discuss a case of rural land dispossession, where the state acquires privately-owned farmland from three villages for the construction of an industrial area in a ‘backward’ agrarian district of Maharashtra. Situated 13 kms from Aurangabad town, the Shendra (Five-Star) Industrial Area (SIA hereon) is spread across 902 hectares of land. The SIA has been carved into 435 plots, of which 53 were yet to be distributed in 2010. The SIA is a deviation from the ‘new economic spaces’ (Banerjee-Guha 2013) and neoliberal enclaves characterised

by unmarked predatory global capital, speculative land markets, and knowledge-based service sectors common in 21<sup>st</sup> century India. It is no ghost-town nor a partially-materialised economic project. SIA is a planned industrial area for light and medium manufacturing, embodying a lingering vision of ‘Nehruvian modernity’. The empirical case of the SIA, thus, provides an opportunity to study the processes and outcomes of land dispossession under ‘ideal’ conditions for a ‘transition’: a state-planned industrial area where the state manages to draw manufacturing industries; where the larger local economy is not consumed by fevered land speculation; and where factories and assembly units are currently active. Nearly two decades after land was first acquired, I map post-dispossession outcomes, focusing primarily on lower-caste men and women who transitioned to manual labour in the industrial area. By connecting post-dispossession labour trajectories to dispossession, the article shows how precarious informal employment is a key ‘part of the broader process of dispossession and generation of new ‘surplus populations’’ (Munck 2013, 757). It makes concrete processes that keep countries in the Global South, not just India, brimming with a labour surplus, which in turn make livelihoods vulnerable and force people (nearly a billion in Asia) to survive on less than one dollar a day. Specifically, it highlights how the state’s failure to regulate post-dispossession labour opportunities is as important as its role in land dispossession in undermining the possibilities of alleviating precarity in rural livelihoods.

This paper is primarily based on 50 semi-structured interviews with dispossessed landholders – farmers and labourers (men and women)—, four labour contractors, labour activists and industrialists conducted in Aurangabad over an eleven-month period between 2015 and 2016, and a shorter revisit in 2018. Legal cases presented are based on documents acquired from local village heads and advocates. The paper is structured as follows: section 2 draws out the sub-national state’s role in facilitating the development of the industrial area. In section 3, I describe the scale of dispossession, the labour landscape that emerged in the SIA, and the overall labour absorption from the dispossessed communities by the industrial economy. Here, I focus on the locally powerful dominant-caste Maratha landholders. In section 4, I map how men and women from Schedule Caste and Schedule Tribe households are precariously incorporated into the non-farm economy as manual labourers, organised as labour gangs or arranged through contractors. The analysis on precarity in an industrial area is of relevance to the literature on informality in the Global South. I address larger implications in the concluding section 5.

## **2. SIA: Manufacturing Modernisation in Aurangabad**

The Maharashtra Industrial Development Corporation (MIDC) was formed in 1962 in response to the Centre’s Second Five-Year Plan (1956-1961) to rally resources and bureaucratic effort into industrialisation at the sub-national level. By the 1990s, the MIDC planned and developed three industrial zones in and around Aurangabad town – the Railway Station area with the first batch of clustered industrial units, followed by the Chikalthana industrial area around 1966 and the Waluj industrial area that developed through the 1970s and 1980s. The need for planned industrialisation and an active role of a bureaucratic unit, locally based in the district to steer the implementation of plans, has widespread legitimacy among regional

industrial capitalists even today. A local industrialist and ex-president of the Chamber of Marathwada Industries & Agriculture<sup>iii</sup> stressed the need for a specialised state body, like the MIDC, to me as follows: ‘...you need to have some kind of an expertise and a focus...In an industrial park you need so many services and somebody has to sit and plan for all this’ (interview, Aurangabad, May 2016). The SIA was envisioned by the state in the late 1980s-early 1990s to further a concerted push to industrialise and modernise Aurangabad.

SIA as a distinctly state-planned initiative was in part a response to the politics of the time. Aurangabad has been the epicentre of potent Marathwada sub-regionalism since the 1960s. Marathwada sub-regionalism aims to articulate the region’s systematic economic and political neglect since independence by the political class in the State. The politics of sub-regionalism has been expressed through constitutional demands for higher allocation of development funds in the Third Five-Year Plan, the establishment of various committees to quantify the extent of socio-economic backlog of the region<sup>iv</sup> and, on occasions such as in April 1974, taken violent forms – agitations amounting to the loss of four lives, several injured and destruction of public property worth several lakhs (Datye 1987, 518). Relevant to the argument here, sub-regionalist politics has sustained a discourse that primarily casts Marathwada’s deprivations in relation to the regional political economy of Western Maharashtra, legitimising the need for rapid industrialisation. It has fermented an overarching consensus across most sections of society, including elite circles and farmers, over the need for bureaucratic planning to redress the uneven ‘development’ and industrialisation in Maharashtra. As Desarda (1996, 3233) puts it, Marathwada sub-regionalism created a socio-political environment where ‘...the Bombay-Thane-Pune-Nashik pattern of industrialisation...became the prime model of the state’s economic growth, a new idiom of rural and agricultural revival’. The need for active planning for ‘balanced regional development’ thus lingered even in the post-liberalisation context. The SIA is a product, at least in part, of this political-economic commitment.

Seeing SIA as an elite vision of the state is not limited to policy discourse in the English-speaking circles. A common narrative amongst farmers in the region casts the SIA as a vision of Haribhau Bagade, a local politician. Bagade is a legislator from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Hindu national party that had been power in coalition with the regional Shiv Sena for the last decade<sup>v</sup>. Vivid accounts of the origin of SIA – ‘he [Bagade] got SIA to us’ – points to the common conception of a formal state figure’s vision of progress descending on the villages (interview, Shaan-gaon, January 2015).

### ***2.1 SIA, a deviation from a ‘neoliberal economic space’***

Today, the SIA sites manufacturing units in automobile engineering and assembly, pharmaceuticals, industrial products like wires and ancillary parts, small machinery, plastic, packaging and food processing. The size of plots ranges from .05 ha. to 107 ha. Most of the plots have been given to private and multinational enterprises – Wockhardt Ltd., Radico NV distillery, and Siemens Rolling Stock Pvt. Ltd. are notable examples of the mixed bag of large industrial units in operation. Based on official accounts on websites and promotion material, investments made by these units in their respective plots range from 150 million USD (Perkins

Ltd.) to 2 billion USD (Siemens Ltd.), generating 250 (Siemens Ltd.) to 500 (Perkins Ltd.) units of direct employment. The land occupied by Wockhardt. Ltd. has been demarcated as a SEZ, but the rest are leased plots with individualised incentive packages for industries.

As an exception to the more commonly observed neoliberal ‘economic space’ (Banerjee-Guha 2008), the SIA makes for an important empirical case in neoliberal India. Unlike SEZs dominated by IT/ITES firms, plots in the SIA have been allocated and utilised by manufacturing units as per intent stated in bespoke Memoranda of Understanding with the state; ‘fevered speculation’ by private capital, real estate brokers, and large farmers has been largely absent. Furthermore, the SIA does not operate as an economic space where rules and regulations are bent, suspended, and entirely subsumed for the purposes of accumulation by private enterprises. In 2013, as for example, the Gram Panchayat (GP) of Kun-gaon, one of the villages from which land was acquired, issued a legal notice to a leading car manufacturing multinational company operating in the SIA. The village council notified legal action to the company for the non-payment of tax under the Bombay Village Panchayat Act 1985. The company appealed against the tax notice and filed a legal case against the ‘State of Maharashtra’ as represented by, among other state-, district-, and block-level administrative units, its land lesser MIDC. The High Court ruled in favour of the Gram Panchayat and the company had to pay taxes for the use of open, constructed and under-constructed land in the SIA for every year of operation. Similarly, a large distillery with links to a powerful politician in the SIA had been issued closure notice from the Maharashtra Pollution Control Board and was shut down for almost a year in 2015 for flouting regulation under Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act 1974 and polluting ground water (The Times of India, June 2015). The SIA, thus, cannot be neatly categorised as ‘neoliberal spaces’ (Banerjee-Guha 2008, 2009) or economic enclaves of ‘exception’ (Ong 2006) where accumulation proceeds in the absence of any regulatory oversight.

The SIA, thus, cannot be easily and neatly characterised as a prototypical example of either the old Nehruvian modernity or the newer ‘neoliberal space’ (Banerjee-Guha 2008). I have highlighted a distinct lingering commitment to active state planning for industrialisation at the sub-regional level. It is not that the neoliberal era has been without state intervention – liberalisation in India has meant re-regulation by local state officials instead of de-regulation (Snyder 2001; Sinha 2004). An entrepreneurial state that ‘networks’ with private capital (Sud 2009, 2017), creating a ‘business-friendly’ economic-political regime (Rodrik and Subramanian 2004; Kohli 2006a, [b] 2006), has been at the core of India’s capitalist development in the post-liberalisation period. The purpose of foregrounding the discourse and practice of planning in this case is to sharpen the focus on the state. The sub-national state aims to retain an active role in steering industrialisation infused with concomitant goals of modernising a backward area, generating a productive non-farm economy, and gradually eliminating rurality. It is important to not lose sight of this developmental discourse of state-planning, modernisation and balanced regional development around the SIA and the legitimacy of these visions in the social and political milieu of Aurangabad for two reasons. First, the discourse promoted a ‘near-consensus’ (Nielsen and Nilsen 2015) in Aurangabad and prevented stiff opposition to land dispossession. Second, the empirical specificities mark it as

atypical in the more commonly observed cases of speculative investment in urban infrastructure in neoliberal India. The SIA, as being closer to the ‘ideal-typical’ industrialisation supported by theorists (ranging from Marxists to neoclassical economists) and politicians across an ideological spectrum (from the Left to the right-wing nationalists), serves as an opportunity to understand the type of labour landscape possible in twenty-first century.

### 3. The ‘Dispossessed’ and Non-farm Jobs

Farmland belonging to households of three villages – Shaan-gaon (345.86 ha.), Raan-gaon (61.84 ha.) and Kun-gaon (453.63 ha.) – were acquired between 1997 and early 2000s for the SIA. At the time of land dispossession, most households were primarily involved in agriculture - households that identified cultivation (cultivator or agriculture labour) as their main occupation in 2001 were between 72 and 95 per cent in the three villages (Census 2011 data). As mentioned above, land dispossession for the SIA proceeded largely without formidable resistance. The politics of land acquisition is not analysed here, as the primary purpose is to unpack post-dispossession trajectories. It is important to mention that over and above the legitimacy of state visions and planning mentioned above, the fact that agriculture was reeling under the pressure of two severe droughts, one in 1997 and the other in 2001, enabled a more acquiescent atmosphere for dispossession than what would have been the case in a dynamic agrarian context. Households were given INR 1,18,560 per ha. of land and the assurance of being able to buy back 1000 square feet of developed land in the vicinity of the SIA. In 2016, at the time of fieldwork, none of the respondents had been approached with this option, though there were rumours that some farmers had been extended an offer that year.

Two aspects stand out about the spatial effect of dispossession. First, communities belonging to these villages live in settlements, or in *gaothans* (as they are called in Marathi), that are typically clustered away from the agricultural land they cultivate. Even as farmland was acquired from a section of households in these villages, their settlements were unaffected. Dispossessed households thus continue to live in their *gaothans*. Second, the proportion of agricultural land acquired varied – as Table 1 shows, the scale of land acquisition was the largest in village Shaan-gaon, and even there less than half of the total geographic area was acquired for the SIA. The scale of expropriation and the economic opportunities produced by the SIA, thus, have lent to a partial spatial transformation, with the SIA sited, in its full industrial glory, next to agricultural fields with standing crops.

**Table 1. Proportion of Land Acquired from Villages**

<i>Village</i>	<i>Total Geographical Area as per 2001 Census (in Hectares)</i>	<i>Land Acquired for the SIA (in Hectares)</i>	<i>Proportion of Total Land Converted</i>
Raan-gaon	750	61.84	8.2%
Shaan-gaon	738.48	345.86	46.8%
Kun-gaon	1307.58	453.63	34.7%

Farmers in the area cultivate a variety of pulses (*tur*), vegetables (tomatoes and onions), cotton and corn. Average land size among landholding households in Aurangabad district in 2011 was approximately 1.3 ha. (Table 2). Most official reports in India classify landowners with less than 1 ha. of land as ‘marginal’ landholders, and today more than 60 per cent of landowners fall in this category (Lerche 2010, 67). Contextualised as such, an average landholder in the villages in and around the SIA, thus, operates on marginal landholding in semi-arid ecological conditions. Furthermore, as in most of India, distribution of landholdings is highly unequal with a privileged minority – the medium and large farmers in Table 2 – operating nearly one-fifth of total cultivable land in the study area. This section owns 4 ha. or more of cultivable land and constitutes only 3.4% of all landholders. The inequality of land ownership is inflected by caste – as in all of Maharashtra, land is disproportionately concentrated in the hands of one caste, the Marathas.

**Table 2. Official Classification of Households in Aruagabad District in 2011/12-2016/17**

<i>Classification as per GoM agriculture dept</i>	<i>Category Based on Land Size (in Acres)</i>	<i>Category Based on Land Size (in Hectares)</i>	Aurangabad District		State-Level	
			<i>% of Land Holders</i>	<i>% of Land Operated</i>	<i>% of Land Holders</i>	<i>% of Land Operate</i>
Marginal	< 2.5	< 1	49	20.63	48.97	16.12
Small	2.5-5	1-2	33.18	35.75	29.58	29.03
Semi-Medium	5-10	2-4	13.47	26.97	15.76	29.17
Medium	10-25	4-10	3.18	13.49	5.19	20.2
Large	> 25	> 10	0.25	3.14	0.5	5.48

*Source: Author's Tabulation based on CDAP 2011/12 – 2016/17 for Aurangabad District*

### **3.1 Marathas and Factory Jobs**

The Marathas, an intermediate caste group<sup>vi</sup>, were historically engaged in warrior and peasant occupations. In the villages dispossessed by the SIA, the Marathas are numerically the largest caste cluster involved in cultivation and, as mentioned above, agricultural land acquired for the SIA belonged mostly to Maratha landholders. The experience of land dispossession, however, has been varied for them, refracting through the inequality in the distribution of landholdings. There was and continues to be marked variation in the size of landholdings amongst them. At the time of land dispossession, the vast majority owned between 1-4 ha. of land and were involved in commercialised production of pulses and cotton on very different terms. Those that owned up to 2 ha. of land, struggled to survive only on agricultural income and relied heavily on income from wage labour either on others’ farms or non-farm work in town. A larger proportion owned between 2-4 ha. of land, mirroring the pattern of land distribution in the district. This section of landholders was even more economically differentiated; while the smaller landholders survived as petty commodity producers and managed cultivation with household labour for most of the year, the ones with close to 4 ha. of land were able to intermittently generate surplus. The scope for accumulation through agriculture for them was limited and highly variable across years. Overall, even though this group of landowners belonged to the locally dominant Maratha caste, their small landholdings meant their social and political articulation was limited. When the state acquired land for the SIA, for example, landholders in this group felt they had limited influence and agency to negotiate with the state

machinery – to bargain on compensation or to demand information on future benefits and terms of incorporation into the industrial economy planned on their land. Yet they were hopeful about non-farm jobs trickling down to them following the surge in industrial production expected in the SIA.

The section of the dispossessed most expectant about making a ‘transition’ into industrial jobs was the group of aspirational Marathas with large landholdings, diverse income sources, and local social networks across the rural-urban spectrum. Amongst the group of landholders that had 4 ha. of land or more, many were engaged in agricultural production organised on capitalist terms – they owned the land they cultivated, depended on hired-in labourers managed by household members, produced crops for exchange in markets, and many owned agricultural assets such as a tractor or wells. They had been able to accumulate over time and some had diversified into non-farm trades and enterprises, such as livestock farms, small-scale brick manufacturing, a fertiliser shop, or more commonly investing in the education of a male youth. What marks this section of rural landholders as qualitatively different from others is their investment in education<sup>vii</sup>. The male youth in these households typically had higher education degrees, such as bachelors in arts and sciences from a local university or diplomas in industrial training, with the aspiration of moving out of agriculture. Within just 13 kilometres of the study villages in Aurangabad town, there are two government vocational training/Industrial Training institutes (ITI) and two privately-owned ones. Every year, these institutes draw young men from rural households, usually that of the prosperous capitalist farmers that are able to invest surplus from agriculture into education. Young men from this rural class of Maratha landholders were best placed to, and consequently most hopeful about a, transition into *permanent* factory employment – the formal industrial ‘proletariat’. This expectation was based on precedence set by planned industrial areas of the past.

In the planned industrial areas up until the 1970s in India, the state had an active hand in organising labour supply. It mediated between a relatively abundant supply of labour, on one hand, and capital, on the other. This was true of public-sector industrial units, but also the case in industrial townships that sprung out of private capital, such as the Tata Steel Plants. The steel plants of Bhilai, Rourkela, and Bokaro, as mentioned in the introduction, were archetypes of ‘industrial urbanism’ (Parry 2003) that generated thousands of factory jobs. The channels through which these jobs could be accessed, like district-level employment exchanges and open advertisements, were defined by the state. Even though inclusion of the ‘dispossessed’, despite these official state-mediated routes, was neither immediate nor frictionless, the channels existed. In the case of the SIA, the dispossessed were left to fend for themselves.

### ***3.2 Labour Landscape in the SIA***

The Indian economy in the neoliberal period has observed ‘jobless growth’ in rural areas, particularly between 2004-05 and 2009-10 (Chandrasekhar 2011). Neither the manufacturing sector, nor the private sector is an exception to the decreasing capacity of capital to absorb labour. Kale’s paper in this Issue traces how the extractive sector in India has become increasingly capital-intensive in the last fifty years displacing labour with machines. Operations like mining and refining that previously absorbed unskilled labour have become



mechanised. This marks a shift from the previous more developmentalist orientation of large public-sector units in mineral extraction: 'In place of the labour-capital dynamics that produced hard-won welfare for workers in yesterday's company towns, companies in today's extractive sectors are developing diverse mechanisms to keep people away from the mine and factory gates'(Kale XXXX, 2). The 'mechanism' Kale analyses in her paper is that of Corporate Social Responsibility which diverts present demands for jobs locally in the mines to potential absorption in a different sector located elsewhere in the future. That capital needs land and *not* the labour on it, even when the state neatly plans a manufacturing site, is the core feature of industrialisation in neoliberal India.

In the SIA, the first set of factories started operation around mid-2000s, less than a decade after land was acquired. The factories arrived and operations began behind the imposing boundary walls, but the process of navigating recruitment remained opaque. As factory job aspirants, men from the dispossessed households faced several hurdles in accessing jobs. News about where and when jobs were available never trickled down to the villages, nor did they know how to access information about vacancies. Even the locally powerful landed Maratha households found they had no network connecting them to recruiting managers or supervisors inside the factory; there was no person of 'authority' who would introduce the 'landloser' as the rightful claimant to a factory job, as one of the large capitalist farmers summarised to me. The few who managed to access a recruiter inside the factory, were dismissed instantly, as their degrees and diploma did not equip them with the knowledge or skills required for the limited permanent jobs inside the factories.

Most of the skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled jobs *inside* the factories in the SIA are held by a migratory 'footloose labour' (Bremar 1996) managed by contractors and sub-contractors. In one of the largest multinational automobile plant in the SIA, for example, a labour contracting firm from the eastern State of West Bengal manages the labour supply. The supervisor for the labour force of 140 labourers who work on the factory floor explained how most of the labourers in the SIA were from other States – West Bengal, Bihar, and Tamil Nadu (interview, SIA, September 2018). Discriminating against the locals in hiring, particularly skilled and semi-skilled labourers that work on the shop floors, as well as manual labourers inside the factory, is a common practice in neoliberal India. For example, Barnes et al (2015) have shown this for automotive industrial units in North India. They argue that a 'flexible' labour supply, comprising migrant labourers under a contractor, allows automobile plants to respond profitably to fluctuating demand in the global automobile supply chain. A migrant workforce managed by contractors keeps wages low, circumvents collective bargaining through trade unions and, outsources the monitoring of labourers. Preference for a pliant informally-managed migrant labour force has meant that the 'transition' to the 'proletarian' future of permanent factory jobs has essentially been closed off to the educated Maratha youth from the *locally* powerful and prosperous farming households described in the previous sub-section.

The predominance of out-of-State labour was not the norm in the previous industrial areas built in Aurangabad. Automobile plants that were set up in the industrial areas in the 1970s and 1980s were more absorptive of semi-skilled and unskilled young men from Maratha

households that lost land. One such example was a plant set up by Bajaj Auto Pvt. Limited, a large domestic two-wheeler manufacturing unit based in the Waluj Industrial area (one of the three mentioned earlier). The Bajaj factory not only generated direct employment, it also spawned ancillary small-scale units producing further non-farm work. Factories like Bajaj in the previous industrial area set a precedence on possibilities for economic and social mobility and ‘Bajaj-like development’ was frequently cited by farmers and state officials alike as a benchmark of factory-based employment generation. Describing the discourse cultivated by state officials at the time of land acquisition, a farmer said to me: ‘the Collector promised Bajaj-like development’, as one landholder exclaimed in a focus group discussion (interview, Shaan-gaon, February 2016). The Collector’s office is the primary local authority in charge of land acquisition and the Collector is the administrative head of a district. The expectation of transition amongst the farmers was, therefore, very clearly to a classical notion of a ‘proletarian’ future of permanent factory employment, the type Bajaj Ltd. represented. As another landed Maratha farmer who lost around 3.2 ha. of land said to me, ‘A Maratha farmer gives land so his son can sit under a fan’ (interview, Shaan-gaon, November 2015).

After actively managing land acquisition and the development of the SIA into a buzzing industrial area, the state retreated from regulating, or even mediating, the labour landscape. Maratha farmers and their sons had vexed anecdotes of the disjuncture between what they expected and employment opportunities in the SIA. Of all farmers dispossessed, it is the locally powerful medium and large landholders, described above, who are most disenchanted by their systematic exclusion from permanent factory jobs: of 15 Maratha farmers who held over 4 ha. of land prior to dispossession, only one farmer’s son managed to secure a permanent job as an engineer in the SIA. The semi-skilled factory-floor jobs, as mentioned above, have gone to *non-local* workers. The dispossessed landholders with social and political capital and educated sons have had to carve out strategies of accumulation through self-employment and small businesses. A smallholder Maratha farmer who had his entire landholding of 2 ha. acquired summarised the overall state of absorption into the SIA as, ‘Maybe 1 or 2 boys from each village have got a job. And not from household that actually lost land’ (interview, Shaan-gaon, May 2016).

#### **4. Precarity in the State-Planned SIA**

Factories in the SIA need labour to unload raw materials, perform a variety of tasks in preparing raw materials for production purposes, package products, and load finished goods onto trucks for distribution. In addition, droves of manual labourers are required for cleaning and miscellaneous ‘help’. As is the case for semi-skilled factory workers on the shopfloor, this labour force is also organised and managed through a web of contractors, sub-contractors, and labour intermediaries. It is through this type of manual work under precarious, unregulated, and exploitative terms that a numerically thin layer of lower-caste households from the dispossessed villages has been incorporated in the SIA<sup>viii</sup>. The remainder of the paper focuses on their struggles.

In the analysis presented here, those currently labouring as manual labourers belong to dispossessed households that either had marginal landholdings of no more than 1.2 ha. of land or were landless before land was acquired for the SIA. The former category that was rendered landless by the SIA, mostly belong to the Dhangar caste, a Nomadic Tribe according to official classification. As was the case with the marginal landholders from the socially powerful Maratha caste, these households struggled to make do with production from agriculture on their marginal landholdings alone before their land was acquired. They relied heavily on income from wage labour in agriculture or non-farm work in town. It was mostly the women of these households who laboured outside their own farms, while the men focussed on agricultural production. In peak harvesting seasons, they sought reciprocal help from within their socioeconomic class of farmers for labour on their farms. Overall, however, these households were 'net sellers of labour' and vulnerable to being rendered landless through droughts, exogenous shocks on farm productivity like pests, and life events such as ill-health or death. The latter category of landless households are overwhelmingly *Dalits* from the Maang caste. They live in hamlets separate from the landowning Maratha farmers; this spatial distance follows from caste-based social segregation.

In addition to the structural disadvantage of marginal landholdings and landlessness, the two groups described are essentially excluded from the arena of Maratha-dominated formal and politics. The sample of Maang and Dhangar households represent a group of rural households that are at the margins of the regional rural political economy dominated by landowning Marathas. That they had similar post-dispossession trajectories is further evidence of their marginal location in relation to the Marathas. Their transition into precarious manual work is a product of both their economic necessity and caste-based social location (Dhangars and Dalits). The manual labour they perform are not work that the sons of landed Maratha farmers, particularly the ones expecting factory jobs, will do.

Gender and caste provide the social infrastructure to segment manual work in the SIA, which in turn continues to make livelihoods desperately precarious for those who were already struggling in the pre-dispossession economy. The rest of the section maps the mechanisms through which industrial labour organisation in the neoliberal era draws on gender and caste to reproduce precariousness observed in the crisis-ridden agrarian economy.

#### ***4.1 Dhangar Women and the 'Sameness' of Precarity***

The lowest-paying of the manual tasks – cleaners, housekeepers and other tasks such as packing materials – are occupied by women. A group of women from Dhangar caste in Kun-gaon have been accessing work in the SIA through a labour contractor, or *thekedar* as they are called in the region, since their marginal landholdings ranging between 0.8 and 1.2 ha. were acquired. In the study area, women dependent on wage-labour outside of agriculture in general rely entirely on *thekedars*, typically from the Maratha caste, to access work. The *thekedar* in this case is from the Maratha caste but not from one of the villages dispossessed by the SIA. Organisation of work through *thekedars* creates acute dependency amongst the labourers on the networks and connections of their contractors, and simultaneously reproduces social and

economic dominance of the *thekedars* who are invariably from the local intermediate caste, a dynamic observed elsewhere in India.<sup>ix</sup> Usually multiple women from the same village get employed in groups. In the SIA, even though women from a village access work through the same *thekedar*, they work in different factories and in different capacities. They all work for nine hours each day for six days a week.

Women's wages are lower than that of men in both agricultural and non-farm work in most parts of India, despite the 'tightening' effect on supply of male labour that out-migration is supposed to have (Harriss-White and Gooptu 2001). Industries expectedly exhibit a strong preference for cheaper women labourers for miscellaneous 'helper' tasks. In 2015-16, the women in this study were paid a daily wage-rate of Rs. 150 per-day for casual manual labour. This was comparable with agricultural wages for female labour in the district, and was lower than the All-India rural average of INR 170-per day (Mehrotra et al. 2014, 54). One of the many ways in which the *thekedar* exercises control over his labourers is by having complete control over cash exchanges. As elsewhere in the case of casual work in India, the daily wage earned by female manual labourers is given to their *thekedar* who in turn pays them after deducting a fee; in this case wages to labourers were given monthly. The *thekedar* also gives them advances and loans in times of urgent cash-flow constraints and distress.

The demand for the labour of women as 'helpers' is made tentative by intermittent termination of whole production units and operations within industries. Women labourers find holding onto jobs in any one factory in the SIA difficult and often struggle to secure adequate labour-days to meet their material needs from one employer. Janavi Kumari, 30-year-old Dhangar woman from Kun-gaon, had been working as a sweeper in one of the factories in the SIA for three years in 2015. Her household lost its entire landholding of 1.2 ha. in the early 2000s. When the factories first arrived, she started to work for a plant that produced automobile ancillary parts. Her work involved helping a group of male workers – also on casual contracts – package material: 'we worked with men inside the gates of the factory but outside the main building. It was good work – six days in the week and we got INR 100-per-day. Then the owner changed and the whole unit got fired. My *thekedar* then found me this work as a sweeper' (interview, Kun-gaon, November 2015). Similarly, a 50-year-old Dhangar woman who works as a gardener, maintaining flower beds and bushes that dot factory compounds for aesthetic appeal, explained that she did not have a contract but 'somehow' the *thekedar* made sure she was employed as a gardener (interview, Kun-gaon, November 2015).

Accessing and retaining work in the SIA is an everyday struggle for manual labourers. On one hand, the primarily Maratha-caste *thekedar* ensures a patchwork of manual work in the larger landscape of the SIA, which makes navigating the fluctuations in the demand for their labour easier. On the other, accessing work through an intermediary makes the Dhangar women economically reliant on the *thekedar*'s patronage and network and reproduces other forms of control primarily under dominant-caste Maratha contractors.

Neither the salience of the contractor for access to and retention of manual work, nor the precarious nature of the labour landscape highlighted here is exceptional to informal labour in neoliberal India. It is the continuity in the state of precarity through the farm-to-factory transition for this group that is noteworthy.

### *Precarity Before Dispossession*

Land titles are always in the name of a male member in the household – husband or father-in-law in the case of the Dhangar women. As mentioned briefly before, income from agriculture prior to land dispossession, far from allowing opportunities of accumulation, was inadequate for survival in most years for the households these women belonged to. Income from one's own farm had to be augmented from other sources for simple reproduction, that is for households to simply sustain. For many, this was working on other, usually larger landholders' farms in the village, or as non-farm casual labour in Aurangabad town. This is typical of agricultural labour-cum-poor peasants in most of India: 'most marginal farmers are best characterised as de facto wage workers who receive a subsidiary income from the plots of land that they own: more than half of the income of marginal farmers comes from wage income' (Lerche 2010, 67). Some also engaged in petty self-employment, like occasional artisanal work of making pots and brooms, running small shops out of the house, among others.

The group of Dhangar women demonstrated a keen understanding of the economically precarious location they occupied in the pre-dispossession agrarian economy of Kun-gaon and clearly articulated how their households would have eventually been squeezed out of agriculture even if land had not been acquired by the SIA. Agrarian crisis in the district that has deepened in the last decade would have disproportionately and systematically affected this group, making holding on to land unviable. Kumari Devi, a 40-year-old resident of Kun-gaon, explained how precarious farming was for her household:

I worked on our farm and sometimes also worked on others'. Days on the farm used to be just as long as these days [in the SIA]. Sometimes we used to start even earlier on farm. Our economic status has remained the same – yes, back then there was water. So the farm gave us income and we always had that. Now when I look,...today we would not be able to keep the land. We would have to sell the land. *Nobody wants to sell land but in this condition...* we are not like the big Maratha farmers (interview, Kun-gaon, November 2015)

She carefully laid out how hurdles in accessing water affected them more than the Maratha farmers with larger landholdings. It was difficult for them to access credit to build wells and the cost of buying water from tankers during unexpected water shortage had become exorbitant. 'Crises' and 'contingencies' in rural life that appear as random shocks do not have random effects (Li 2014); they are disproportionately more debilitating for those who are the most vulnerable. Expenses related to life events, such as a wedding, health shocks and hospitalisation would have forced them to sell off their marginal landholdings. Most women in this labour group were unsure if they would be able to hold on to their agricultural plots today. This is further buttressed by the fact that over half of them attempted to replace the marginal landholding that was acquired for SIA by purchasing land elsewhere, typically in a neighbouring or kin's village where land prices were affordable. These new landholdings for every single one of them have been diluted to meet household needs. Kumari Devi's household,

for example, replaced the 1.2 ha. acquired with 0.8 ha. of land in a village 20 km from Kun-gaon in 2001. They had to sell it the following year when their daughter got married.

The probability of being pushed out of agriculture for this group of marginal farmers, thus, was high irrespective of the SIA. While compulsory expropriation of land by the state for the SIA marked the first moment of complete landlessness for them, it was the more gradual and mundane processes of socio-economic differentiation in a context of agrarian stress that had put them on a trajectory of precarious wage-dependent livelihoods. The processes of differentiation in the pre-dispossession agrarian economy and the eventual dispossession by the state seen here, however, do not represent a dynamic change in the structure of Aurangabad's rural economy: '[a] relative decrease in agricultural employment and the squeezing out of the least-profitable farmers *can* signify healthy capitalist development. The problem for labour arises when job growth elsewhere is insufficient to provide decent alternative employment' (Lerche 2010, 67-8). *In this case, an 'exit' from agriculture is hardly a pathway out of precarity.* What further marked the response of this class of women labourers is their characterisation of their transition as non-farm wage labourers in the SIA as *sameness of precarity*.

Today, the dispossessed Dhangar women do not own land, and typically both men and women of the households sell their labour in the informal casual economy of the SIA. The precarity of women is compounded by the precarious nature of casual irregular employment held by other members in the household. Most of them had one male member working in the non-farm employment in the SIA. Kumari Devi's son, for example, works as a manual worker in an industrial packaging company in the SIA: '*In these jobs, payment comes on time but there is no guarantee that the job will be there*', she remarked of her son's casual contract (interview, Kun-gaon, November 2015). The factory in which her son works shut down 'temporarily' a few days before I met them, and they had no information on why the unit had closed and when it would re-open.

Precarity looms large in the non-farm wage employment at the lowest rung of work in the SIA. The dispossessed women manual workers remain vulnerable to 'shocks' of non-farm varieties – closure of factories, termination of employment from seasonality in factory production, which in turn is based on fluctuation in demand for the product, and conflict with contractors. On one hand, their marginal landholdings, low-caste status, and the experiences of drought made them comply with land dispossession. On the other hand, they continue to struggle in the non-farm economy as manual workers. The continuity in their state of precariousness from the crisis-prone agrarian economy makes them ambivalent to the act of state-led dispossession. *It does not, however, mean that they express a desire to not own agricultural land: 'Nobody wants to sell land'* as Kumari Devi said (interview, Kun-gaon, November 2015).

#### ***4.2 Hamali Labour Gang, Competition and Precarity***

Lalit is a 40-year-old man from a dispossessed household in the Dalit hamlet of Kun-gaon village. The hamlet is residence for those who belong to the Maang caste. His father owned less than one hectare of land, which was acquired around 1998 for the SIA. The compensation

money of INR 1,18,560-per-ha. was used for his elder brother and sister's weddings, and to convert the structure they lived in into a house made of concrete.

Men and women from the Maang caste preferred to work outside of agriculture dominated by Maratha farmers and, to the extent possible, had been working as wage labourers in Aurangabad town and other industrial areas even before the SIA arrived. Right after the sale of land, Lalit had to start working as a manual labourer in industrial clusters in Aurangabad town. As industries started to populate the SIA in the early 2000s, he began to focus on procuring labour contracts there. With no network linking him to supervisors and line managers inside the factory in the initial years, he realised that the way to penetrate the industrial area was to intercept trucks on the highway: 'I would hang around to see if there were jobs. I did not know what else to', Lalit explained to me (interview, Kun-gaon, November 2015). The trucks brought cement and raw materials for the construction of plants and these had to be unloaded at the factories. He, along with a few other men from his hamlet, formed a labour gang of Hamalis.

Hamali (also called Mathadi in the State) workers perform the physically exacting and over time debilitating task of carrying heavy loads on their heads and shoulders; they unload, stack, carry, lift, and load goods for various purposes. As Khotkar (2013, 20) puts it, 'their skill lies in carrying loads without mishaps or damage and stacking them in a way that does not waste precious space'. Their labour is hired by trucks that bring in raw material to industrial areas, as well as by industries that dispatch finished products by road. The precarity of livelihood for the Hamalis in SIA begins with how they access work: they wait at *chowks* – major intersections on highway where trucks carrying raw materials pass to enter the industrial area. They flag trucks, intercept them at the intersections, and strike deals with truck drivers for the work of unloading raw materials.

Wages for Hamali labour are based on weight of materials they carry. Table 3 provides estimates of wage Hamalis currently make per-tonne of material most common to the SIA<sup>x</sup>. The per-tonne wage for these materials tend to be largely uniform across the State of Maharashtra as they are regulated by the Mathadi Boards (discussed shortly) and are revised every three years.

**Table 3. Wage Rate for Hamali Work in the Shendra (Five-Star Industrial Area) 2016**

Material	Rate (per tonne)
Cement	INR 80 INR 50 for unloading INR 30 for placing it after unloading
Steel	INR 100
Plastic	INR 80

*Source: Author's calculations based on interviews in 2016*

A regulated wage rate does not translate into regular income for the Hamali labourers in the SIA; they experience tremendous fluctuation in their income. The flow of Hamali work is seasonal (heavy period lasting mostly from December to June) and the quantum of load

variable (the weight of material for loading-unloading varies based on demand). The uncertainty in the quantum of Hamali work available for the day means that the labour force required may be less than the size of the different labour groups. This has implications for which men in the group earn wages for the day and which go wage-less. The rotation of labourers is based on an understanding that Lalit, as the leader, fairly distributes work such that the Hamalis reproduce themselves not simply as individual workers but as a group. Moreover, in the competitive labour landscape, often various actors stake a claim on a share of the per-tonne wage rate. For the Hamali labourers to navigate this informal organisation and highly irregular flow of work and wages, they need to operate in ‘gangs’ organised under contractors or a gang leader they can trust, such as Lalit.

In his position as the leader of the gang, Lalit’s most important responsibility is to manage everyday conflict. The biggest source of strife for this group of labourers is competing for the work of loading-unloading with registered Mathadi workers.

### *Competition and Conflict*

Registered Mathadi workers perform identical tasks to the Hamali. The term Mathadi, in fact, comes from the practice of having to physically carry loads on the head (*matha*). A section of Mathadi and Hamali workers in Maharashtra are unionised under the Maharashtra Mathadi, Hamal and other Manual Workers (Regulation of Empowerment and Welfare) Act 1969. After decades of exploitative labour conditions – irregular and low wages, unsafe conditions at work, and humiliation from employers – those engaged in this type of work mobilised under activist Anna Saheb Patil in Mumbai in 1966 to get protection and workers’ rights. The Act aims to regulate manual work by mandating that a list of industries employ registered Mathadi workers and pay wages stipulated under the Act. Additionally, the Act enables a net of welfare and social security provisions, including medical allowance, provident fund, house rent allowances, bonuses and gratuity for registered labourers. The union entrance fee is negligible (a token sum of INR 1 in 2013) and the annual membership fee is kept minimal (INR 200 in 2013) (Khotkar 2013).

Industries predictably resist compliance with this Act. Having to regularise Mathadi workers by adding them to the formal payroll and paying wages set under the Act limits the extent to which industries can suppress wages, which in turn squeezes profits particularly in periods of low demand for finished products. Having workers on official payroll also increases firm size to levels that draw them within the remit of other laws and regulations, such as firing clauses. The director general of the Maharashtra Chamber of Commerce, Industries and Agriculture, as an example of the resistance against regulation, has called Mathadi employment ‘counterproductive’ to the aims of tackling unemployment in the manufacturing sector, as stipulations in hiring the registered workers means industrial units are *compelled* to trim down their own manual staff (*The Economic Times* 2017). At the formal level, private capitalists lobby extensively to be excluded from the list of industries that need to abide by the Act. On the ground, most industrial units simply hire labour informally through a chain of contractors.



There are 34 Mathadi Boards in the State covering approximately 200,000 registered Mathadi workers. The number of men and women performing this type of work and *not registered* with the Mathadi Board or any union, however, is much larger. Lalit's labour gang is one such group of manual labourers outside of the Board's oversight. As a result, they compete with the registered Mathadi workers for the limited manual work in the SIA, *fragmenting* industrial manual labour in the zone.

Lalit's labour gang competes with registered Mathadi workers, who as per the Act, should be employed by the manufacturing units for manual labour. Wrestling and protecting manual jobs from the registered Mathadi workers is Lalit's everyday responsibility. The interventions by competing registered labourers to obstruct non-compliance with the Act is explained as 'all kinds of irregularities' (*'galat kaam'/'ghapla'*) by Lalit's gang (interview, Kun-gaon, November 2015). When Mathadi workers get to the trucks first, Lalit's gang is forced to divide work and the per-tonne wages for the day following intense negotiations in which the registered workers have an upper hand. In December 2015, the gang had managed a fixed-term contract to labour in constructing new facilities inside the factory of one of the automobile manufacturing companies. Registered Mathadi workers demanded that Lalit's gang do the work but split 50 per cent of the wage with them – INR 80-per-tonne for unloading cement was thus divided into two.

The division of the job was not a division of labour. The manual labour was provided by the unregistered Hamalis entirely, while the Mathadis, who received the wages from the factory, would hand over only a fraction of the wages in cash to the former labouring group. This type of arrangement was a frequent occurrence; it was confirmed by Hamali labourers not just in Lalit's gang but also those belonging to two other groups organised under other labour contractors. They variously complained about receiving smaller shares in spite of providing all the labour; the lowest share was merely INR 30 for every INR 80 earned. One of the younger men in Lalit's gang exclaimed during a group interview: 'it is good to work on Sundays because the Mathadis don't work on Sundays!' (interview, Kun-gaon, November 2015)

If being registered under the Mathadi Board comes with state protection and a stronger capacity to negotiate with industries, why do Lalit and his gang of labouring men not get registered?

### *Barriers to Formalisation*

There are several reasons why Hamali labourers, like those in Lalit's gang, are not registered with the Board. Reasons that emerged from initial interviews were predictable, though no less significant, barriers rooted in the rationale of costs. First, the cost of realising the registration process is high for those with erratic cash flows. To get registered, one of the Hamali labourers explained, one had to go to one of the local offices in the MIDC area or in Aurangabad town. The local offices are dominated by Marathas and the Dalit (Maang-caste) labourers, such as those in Lalit's gang, face discrimination and often humiliation in their dealings with the Board bureaucrats: 'Maratha men – Kakde and Brahmandaye - control offices', as Lalit stated with resignation (interview, Kun-gaon, November 2015). The gatekeepers to the officers and touts ask for bribes, which according to Lalit are as high as INR 25,000, equivalent to almost half a

year's wage for some of them. In line with caste discrimination, the bribes sought from the Dalit labourers is more extortionary<sup>xi</sup>. Second, the opportunity cost of navigating the bureaucratic maze and chasing the registration process is severe; missing work on the days chosen by the officers in the Board often conflicts with the days they need to work the most. This line of explanation has been amply theorised and empirically recorded by literature rooted in neoclassical theories of labour markets in the global South<sup>xii</sup>. Beyond the issue of cost, repeated visits with Lalit's gang revealed constraints that are more formidable.

It is in the interest of private capital to employ unregistered labour gangs, such as Lalit's, or those that can be contracted flexibly via contractors and subcontractors. Simultaneously, weak enforcement of the Act by the state in the study area results in complete non-compliance or partial compliance by industries. An ultimately pro-capital tilt in managing labourers in the district combined with a large pool of labourers implies that industries hire unregistered labourers to the extent possible. When goods need to be loaded onto trucks, Lalit occasionally gets calls from site managers and supervisors for recruitment for those time-specific tasks. Registered Mathadi workers resist being circumvented. Recalling an incident at a plant, Lalit described to me how the chief of a local Mathadi office had arrived with local police officers to threaten Lalit's gang of Hamalis as well as the on-site supervisor of the company who had hired the gang instead of official Mathadi workers. The on-site supervisor fiercely defended Lalit's Hamali gang and opposed the police's effort to intervene in labour practices: 'these boys cause no trouble and work without any hassle. Why are you causing trouble for us?' he recalled the on-site supervisor saying to the police officer on the day (interview, Kun-gaon, November 2015). The 'hassle' referred to here is regulation.

More importantly, the preference for unregistered labourers is fundamentally about capital's inherent need for control over work. The quote from the official of a manufacturing plant in a media article reflects this: 'it's a normal occurrence that if you call 10 Mathadi workers to do a job, they would send 20' (The Economic Times, 2017). The informal Hamali workers turn out cheaper for industrial units, as factory supervisors can negotiate down the number of Hamali men required. That the manager of the manufacturing plant quoted here claims that a particular piece of manual task can be completed by 10 workers instead of 20 is not an objective verifiable fact. It is a target set by the official based on a logic that maximises surplus for the manufacturing unit. Getting registered with and organised under the Mathadi Board is thus paradoxically seen by the unregistered informal gangs as weakening their bargaining power with industry. Competition with registered Mathadi workers and the possibility of forging long-term relationships with factory supervisors for more work in the future drives the Hamali workers into 'self-exploitation' (Harriss-White and Gooptu 2001) – not just in terms of extending the number of labouring hours or the intensity of labouring on any one person, as is implied by the term, but by not acting to get formally unionised under the Act. As shown above, the daily struggles of lower-caste male labouring gangs, such as Lalit's, involves securing jobs from other registered, usually Maratha, Mathadi workers. In this task, they are driven to self-exploitation by maintaining a separate identity as the cheaper gang of unregistered workers.

In summary, what one finds in the SIA is thus a dismal picture of competition and atomistic operation among labour groups. Limited and erratic flow of work organised casually through

contractors, *thekedars*, and unregistered gangs fragments the labour force along the lines of gender and caste. Competition for work implies that labourers need to operate in ‘communities of trust’ (Himanshu, Lanjouw, and Stern 2018), where they can trust each other but also the contractor or the gang leader to secure and protect wage-work from other labour groups. The women access work collectively under a contractor they trust, and the Hamalis are organised under a leader from the same caste (Dalit) as the labouring members. Intense competition across labour groups keeps lives and livelihoods precarious for the labourers and allows manufacturing units to remain ‘competitive’ in neoliberal Maharashtra.

What are the implications then of this precarity for possibilities of organisation for labour?

### ***4.3 Labour Fragmentation and Organisation***

The politics of fragmented informal labour in neoliberal India is distinct from that of formal labour. Informal casual workers are not engaged in radical and overt antagonisms with capital over wages and other entitlements at the workplace (Harriss-White and Gooptu 2001). As a corollary, the primary site of contestation is not the site of production (ibid; Lerche 2010). Circumventing traditional labour conflict against employers, informal labourers direct their claims primarily at the state (Pattenden 2018) drawing on other social identities such as caste (Harriss-White and Gooptu 2001) and presenting themselves as interest groups such as ‘vote bank’ (Agarwala 2013). The extension of welfare benefits – education, health, subsidised rations, and rural employment guarantee – serves as a mechanism for a pro-capital state to subsidise the cost of labour for capital by enabling labour to survive beyond wages earned from employers. In the neoliberal era, politics of informal workers, thus, has been increasingly characterised by struggles over state-sponsored welfare schemes for the urban and rural labouring poor.

However, struggles of informal workers directed at the state and expressed as welfare claims of citizens and voters, observed elsewhere in India, are absent in Maharashtra. An explanation for this variation in the state’s orientation towards labour in India can be found in the sub-national specificities of *state-capital* relations. Firstly, the commitment to industrialisation in the hands of the private sector is one that has been shared across all political parties in post-independence Maharashtra, tilting more heavily in favour of private capital since liberalisation. Secondly and crucially, formal politics in Maharashtra has been dominated by interests of intermediate castes, the Marathas and Kunbis (Agarwala 2013). Maratha demands have traditionally drawn resources into the agricultural sector, which forms the base of their material accumulation. More recently, their demands have revolved around secure ‘jobs’ through caste-based reservations. The primacy of a pro-industrialisation economic agenda when combined with a domination of Marathas in formal politics has meant that ‘the electoral context in Maharashtra has not enabled informal workers to convince politicians to meet their needs in return for votes’ (ibid, 176). This political frame constrains lower caste manual labourers in the SIA, and the region more generally, to channel their claims through the idiom of caste or citizenship. The pool of state-sponsored welfare entitlements, as a result, has remained woefully inadequate in the State. In fact, a near-absence of functioning schemes earned the criticism of even the World Bank in 2000 (ibid, 164). In the study area, the subsidised rice and the employment-guarantee schemes, two major social safety nets provided by the state in India,

were practically absent. Labourers from Kun-gaon mentioned that they intermittently appealed to the state through their local elected headman, the *Sarpanch*. A younger Dalit labourer described how his appeal to his *Sarpanch* to get his wife appointed as a worker in the state-run child care centre in the village (*Anganwadi*) met with success. Eulogising the village headman, he said ‘he [*Sarpanch*] is our patron-king (*‘mai-baap’*)’ (interview, Kun-gaon, November 2015). Access to welfare schemes and other state support are, thus, meagre, not evenly distributed across workers in the group and over time, and entirely based on individual patronage networks rather than collective bargaining as this young labourer’s quote illustrates.

Welfare boards for informal workers in certain sectors, such as the Mathadi Board described in the previous section, have provided a platform to secure ‘minimal’ health, education, and housing benefits but there is variation in their effectiveness across Maharashtra (Agarwala 2013). Furthermore, if one disaggregates informal labourers by caste, as is the case in this paper, then we find how precarity is compounded for those who are lower caste and excluded even from these limited benefits. Everyday struggles in the SIA vary across the informal labourers as the axes of conflict are different for each group. The women workers are separated from the factory employers by the *thekedars*. This distance implies that they direct their grievances sparingly at their *thekedars* on whom they are deeply dependent and limit acts of resistance to covert forms of foot-dragging and absenteeism. For the registered Mathadi workers, the primary antagonist is industries that bypass state regulation by hiring unregistered manual workers. The state acts clumsily, siding with registered workers on the ground in certain instance (as in the police incident above) but systematically diluting labour laws and practices and gradually disabling labour organisations. For the Dalit unregistered male labourers, as detailed in the previous section, it is conflict with other primarily registered Maratha labour gangs that dominate their struggles. The state, particularly labour enforcement officers and the police, neither sides with them during everyday confrontations, nor does it provide a palliative infrastructure of welfare. Furthermore, in the SIA, it is the *continuity* in the state of economic precariousness that has thus far suppressed the stridency of different groups of manual labour against both the state and capital, who view their current precariousness as more of the same. Informal labour politics of lower-caste local manual labourers in the SIA thus far has not managed to successfully make the neoliberal state accountable for its state of precariousness following dispossession.

## Conclusion

In this paper, the case of land dispossession for the state-planned industrial area shows the limits to the possibility of a ‘transition’ into a dynamic non-farm economy with stable employment opportunities, let alone permanent formal factory jobs in the neoliberal era. The SIA is an ‘ideal-typical’ case of industrialisation in the neoliberal era – it was planned and developed as a manufacturing hub in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century to industrialise backward Aurangabad. The involvement of the state curtailed spiralling land speculation and unchecked land grabs by private brokers. Building on sectoral specialisation, state mediation led to drawing domestic and multinational capital in the automobile manufacturing sector. The outcome on employment for the locals dispossessed off land for the SIA, however, has been largely unfavourable. The SIA is marked by capital-intensive production units that provide

limited scope for labour absorption, migrant workers organised through contractors, and a highly precarious manual labour force comprised of local ‘proletarianised’ labourers from lower-caste communities. The analysis presented here highlights the mechanisms through which labour is made and kept precarious in the formal manufacturing sector in a state-planned industrial area. By charting out micro-processes of accessing work and labouring for different groups of informal manual labourers, it adds specificity to debates on precarity and the political possibilities for organisation. The empirical reality of pre- and post-dispossession trajectories of labour has two substantive implications for the literature on land dispossession and labour in the Global South.

The first issue involves the role of the state vis-à-vis labour in the neoliberal era. Contemporary literature on the state, particularly those that have emerged from ethnographic work, have debunked the idea of a monolithic state (Gupta 1995; Li 2005). This article similarly argues that while the neoliberal state writ large is not a rule-bound one of the ‘good governance’ agenda, it is also not simply a ‘broker’ of private capital (Sud 2009, Levien 2018) nor an institution of ‘speculative governance’ (Goldman 2011). On one hand, the state manages land dispossession astutely, staving off resistance and land speculation, drawing manufacturing industries, and regulating capital on occasion through penalties for pollution and flouting of taxes. On the other, the state loosens its grip on mediating the organisation of labour, prioritising the profit-motive of footloose private and multinational capital. It is state-labour relations that has changed profoundly under neoliberal globalisation. An informal and casual workforce organised by contractors is becoming the norm, not just in state-planned industrial zones in India, but in late-industrialising countries of Asia and Latin America. The shutting down of state-owned enterprises in China (Ngai and Huilin 2010) or the introduction of IMF-mandated labour outsourcing law in 2003 in Indonesia (Tjandraningsih 2012), for example, have increased the number of workers on casual contracts hired through private labour agencies and contractors in the formal manufacturing industries. While international policy discourse, such as the one emanating from the ILO, is rallying around ‘decent work’, states in the Global South are retreating from regulating even in formal sectors of the economy.

The second implication is for debates centred around the livelihood trajectories available to the dispossessed, particularly the nature of precarity for the already marginalised communities. Caste and gender are key elements of the social structure of accumulation for manufacturing industries in the formal sector. Organising work through contractors and *unregistered* gangs pivoted on gender and caste keep wages low and the terms of work precarious. The precarity the labourers documented here face is even more acute than that by the dominant caste men who are able to get registered with Welfare Boards and often times have marginal landholdings to partly fall back on. The form of stratification within the mass of informal workers along various social categories observed here is also found in China. Acceleration in rural dispossession in China, for example, has gradually eroded the subsidising effect the Hukuo system had on the wages of rural migrant workers in urban industries (Chuang 2015). This has created stratification within the class of rural migrant workers, where those rendered landless by rural land dispossession find it the hardest to simply survive through a combination of impossibly low wages and debt accumulation. However, while in many parts of the Global

South, precarity experienced by newly proletarianised labourers in the industrial economy is more intense than their previous livelihood strategies, in this case, many dispossessed marginal farmers found post-dispossession wage work equally precarious. Long-term neglect of the agricultural sector by the state and climate change affect marginal farmers more than the landed farmers from intermediate castes (Li 2014; Vijaybaskar Menon 2018). It is crucial to understand their dispossession along this continuum of vulnerability. This by no means redeems dispossession through the act of acquiring agricultural land; after all, ‘exit from agriculture’ (Li 2009) hardly means secure non-farm livelihood. Furthermore, the desire for land ownership was made clear by the fact that even those who found livelihoods equally precarious pre- and post-dispossession did not want to give up land and struggled to hold on to new land parcels they bought with compensation money. The purpose of highlighting this continuity in economic vulnerability is to suggest that the state’s failure to regulate post-dispossession labour opportunities is as important as its role in land dispossession in limiting prospects of secure rural employment and keeping rural livelihoods precarious.

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<sup>i</sup> Theorisation has been expanded to include water grab (Steinberg 2013) and interlinked resources (Perreault 2012)

<sup>ii</sup> See Li (2009) for a critical examination of the report

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- <sup>iii</sup> In 1967-68, seven industrialists in Aurangabad came together to form Chamber of Marathwada Industries and Agriculture
- <sup>iv</sup> Datye (1987) provides a comprehensive account
- <sup>v</sup> The coalition was in power when the SIA was developed and during fieldwork, dissolving recently in 2019
- <sup>vi</sup> A ‘middle caste’ between the ritually superior Brahmins (priests) and the lowest ranking Scheduled Caste (previously ‘Untouchables’)
- <sup>vii</sup> Others have observed this among intermediate castes in other parts of India – Upadhyaya (1997) for Andhra Pradesh, Rutten (1995) for Gujarat and Cross (2009) for Uttar Pradesh
- <sup>viii</sup> Other studies have documented a similar pattern of low-paying jobs incorporating a few of the local dispossessed households. See Levien (2018) for Rajasthan, Cross (2009) for Andhra Pradesh, Vijayabaskar (2010) for Tamil Nadu
- <sup>ix</sup> Pattenden 2018 as a starting point for contemporary labour regimes
- <sup>x</sup> A 2013 study by Pravin Khotkar found that highest Mathadi/Hamali wage in Maharashtra is for steel - Rs. 83 per tonne, which is consistent with my observation
- <sup>xi</sup> In a similar vein, Prakash (2015) documents discrimination faced by Dalit entrepreneurs in accessing credit at banks where officials are upper-caste
- <sup>xii</sup> de Soto (1989) as an example