

An Ethnographic Field Note on De-skilling, Informality and Everyday Power among Post-Lockdown Construction Workers

Anurag Singh

PhD Scholar, Department of Sociology Delhi School of Economics, University of Delhi, New Delhi, India

Abstract—Indian labour policy narrates skill acquisition as a pathway from unemployment to “decent work” and upward mobility. **Background:** this field note tests that narrative against a single site. **Methods:** drawing on an ethnographic engagement with three migrant construction workers at an under-construction housing society in Dwarka, Delhi, in April 2022 as the city reopened after COVID-19 lockdowns, it uses thick description, reflexivity and conversational interviews to read one encounter interpretively. **Results:** a cultivator, a rickshaw puller and a school drop-out had been flattened by the pandemic into interchangeable manual labour at one flat daily wage; power operated through non-decision (the wage was fixed before the worker arrived) and consent (workers called manual labour “better than sitting idle” and received a statutory rest break as a gift); and financial and regulatory inclusion reached them only partially. **Conclusion:** crisis produced de-skilling rather than skilling; the note offers a reflexive, pre-reform baseline and does not claim generalisation.

Index Terms—ethnography, informal labour, de-skilling, power, migration, construction workers

I. INTRODUCTION

The dominant policy account of work in contemporary India moves in a single direction: the unemployed person acquires a skill, the skill yields employability, employability yields a “decent job,” and the job yields mobility out of poverty [1]. This note reports on a morning of fieldwork whose smallest details tell the opposite story, and it takes those details seriously in the way ethnography teaches. Where a survey asks what three construction workers represent, ethnography asks what one close encounter, densely described and honestly situated, can reveal.

In April 2022, as Delhi reopened after two years of intermittent lockdowns, the author spent a morning at an under-construction apartment society in Dwarka, in

South West Delhi, in conversation with three men working on a single reinforced-concrete column. The note treats that morning as an ethnographic occasion. It develops three linked arguments: that the pandemic operated as a mechanism of de-skilling rather than skilling; that power on the site works through its hidden rather than its visible faces; and that the workers’ partial digital and regulatory inclusion shows a wider transformation reaching the margins unevenly. The objective is not to generalise from three cases but to interpret, and to set it as a baseline against which subsequent policy change may later be read.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Three bodies of work frame the site. The first concerns the scale of informality in Indian employment. The National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector concluded that the overwhelming majority of India’s workforce labours outside the protections of formal employment, without written contracts, social security or effective regulation [2]. Breman’s ethnographic study of “footloose labour” established the template: a circulating, casualised workforce, recruited through intermediaries, moving between countryside and city as demand dictates and bearing the full risk of its own reproduction [3]. Construction sites is the paradigmatic destination for such labour.

The second frame is the changing organisation of work under globalisation, in which flexibility for capital becomes insecurity for workers and inequality is reproduced through the mechanisms that promise opportunity [4]. Standing’s account of the precariat — a stratum defined by unstable, rights-poor work — names the condition in which these men labour [5].

Against these critical accounts stands the optimism of the skilling literature, whose claim is that training and certification lift workers into decent work [1]; this note treats that claim not as false but as incomplete, and tests it against a site the training apparatus never reached.

The third frame is analytical. To read power on the site, the note draws on a three-dimensional conception of power developed in earlier work [6], which distinguishes overt decision-making from two subtler faces: the non-decision, by which matters are kept off the agenda altogether [7], and the shaping of the preferences of the dominated, so that subordination is secured through consent rather than coercion [8]. The identified research gap is the scarcity of close, reflexive accounts of how these processes operate on small, intermediary-run sites at the informal margin, where most Indian construction labour is actually organised.

III. METHODOLOGY

This note rests on a single morning of fieldwork and therefore claims an ethnographic sensibility rather than a full ethnography, which would require sustained immersion over months. The appropriate genre is the ethnographic vignette: interpretive depth on one case rather than breadth across many. Three commitments organise it — thick description, which interprets the webs of meaning in which behaviour is suspended [9]; reflexivity, which recognises that the researcher is part of the scene he describes [10]; and, for one strand, the perspective of digital ethnography, which treats the digital as continuous with everyday life rather than a separate domain [11].

Data collection procedure: the author entered the site at in the morning and, following courtesy and consent practice, first sought the permission of the workers' employer before speaking with the three men. A conversational variant of the semi-structured interview was used, conducted in Hindi and, in one case, across a Bengali-inflected register, and recorded afterward as field notes rather than audio. Analysis technique: field notes were read interpretively, treating concrete particulars of dress, speech and gesture as evidence of larger structures, and organised into analytic themes of de-skilling, informality, power and inclusion.

Ethical considerations: participation was voluntary and the men were informed in advance that they would be asked questions; all personal names used here are pseudonyms, and no identifying details of the site are given. The limitations are stated at the outset rather than the end: one site, one visit, three respondents, a single observer, and observations gathered without sustained immersion. Nothing here is generalisable; everything is offered as interpretation of a particular scene.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Three Trajectories, One Wage: Crisis as De-skilling

The three men had reached the same column from different lives. The eldest, in his mid-forties and from Malda in West Bengal, had pulled a cycle-rickshaw nearby until the pandemic made even a rented rickshaw unaffordable, and turned to daily-wage labour into which his elder son had already gone. The second, in his early twenties and from Bilaspur in Chhattisgarh, was a cultivator from a landowning household — his father farms twelve acres with family labour — pushed to the city when lockdown closed off his rural livelihood. The youngest, eighteen, had been months from finishing Class 11 when the pandemic ended his schooling; unable to re-enrol, and unwilling to sit idle, he became a helper.

A cultivator, a self-employed transport worker and a student: three distinct relationships to skill and property. On the site all three distinctions dissolved. Each was now a helper, performing interchangeable tasks for the same wage of roughly ₹450 a day, regardless of age, origin or past. The cultivator did not yet know his rate; three weeks in, he had drawn only an advance and would learn his wage, like the others, after the fact. Gidwani's distinction between labour and work — between activity emptied into a priced commodity and the fuller sense of purposeful making [12] — clarifies what occurred: cultivation, an independent trade and an unfinished education, each a purposeful activity, were hollowed into generic, substitutable manual labour. De-skilling here is not only the loss of a technique but the stripping of differentiation and meaning until only labour power remains.

4.2 The Absent State: Informality and Its Intermediaries

Nothing on the site bore the marks of formal employment: no written contract, no visible provident fund or insurance, no knowable pay cycle. The wage was set by the employer and communicated, if at all, after work began; advances stood in for regular payment; and the whole relation ran through an employer-intermediary who controlled access to the work and the workers. This is the classic morphology of India's informal labour market, in which the intermediary occupies the structurally decisive position between labour and capital [2], [3].

Safety followed the same discretionary logic. The two younger men named hazardous conditions as a real worry, working with cut and bent steel on an open structure, yet the provision of protective equipment appeared to rest on the employer's goodwill rather than on any enforced duty. The one protection the men could name with confidence was a one-hour midday rest break — and they named it with pride, as something granted rather than owed. That a statutory minimum should be experienced as a gift measures the distance between these men and any regulatory state.

4.3 The Texture of Power: Non-Decision and Consent

Power on the column rarely took the form of visible command. Both hidden faces of power are legible in the field notes, and both surface in exactly the details thick description preserves. The wage was a non-decision in its purest form: never negotiated, never even stated, arriving as a settled fact discovered after the labour was done. A worker could labour three weeks without knowing his rate because the rate was simply not open to discussion; the agenda had closed before he reached the column [7]. The shaping of consent spoke in the men's own words. The youngest framed hard, low-paid labour as a positive choice — “this is better than sitting at home idle” — converting an absence of alternatives into an act of will. The pride with which all three reported their rest break performed the same work: a minimal concession internalised as generosity, the worker policing his own expectations downward. This is the most insidious face of power, which operates by forming what people take to be normal and acceptable [8].

4.4 Uneven Inclusion: Digital and Gendered Fault Lines

The encounter also had a digital texture, best read with the reflexes of digital ethnography [11]. The two younger men carried smartphones and used UPI-based applications to remit money home; one moved his earnings digitally despite having no bank account of his own in the city, while the eldest neither owned a phone nor felt he needed one. Financial inclusion, on this evidence, is real but uneven — present among the young, absent among the old, and everywhere partial: opening a city bank account was reported as difficult, so one worker's financial identity remained lodged in the village. A gendered subsidy ran beneath this: the eldest's wife cleaned houses across Dwarka's societies, earning more steadily than his daily wage, and the cultivator's pregnant wife did sewing in the village and held the bank account through which his remittances flowed. The male migrant's wage was propped up by women's paid and unpaid work at both ends of the migration circuit, a reproductive economy peripheral to the site yet essential to it.

4.5 Discussion: The Policy Gap and the Reform Moment

Set beside the skilling literature, the column reads as a rebuttal. Where that literature describes training as an enabling environment producing employability and mobility [1], these men reached the labour market with no training, no certification and no ladder — only a flat wage and an intermediary's discretion. The policy narrative is not false but partial: it describes the workers who enter the skilling apparatus and is silent about the larger number absorbed directly into casual labour it never touches. Comparison with existing literature confirms the pattern of expansive statute and thin enforcement across the informal economy [2], [3]. The timing sharpens the point. This fieldwork was conducted in April 2022, more than three years before India's four Labour Codes were brought into force on 21 November 2025, repealing twenty-nine legacy statutes, with central rules notified in May 2026 [13]. On paper the reform speaks to the conditions described here: the Code on Social Security reaches toward unorganised, gig and platform workers, and the Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code consolidates safety obligations. The observations therefore stand as a pre-reform baseline. The open question is one of reach rather than intent:

whether a legal architecture notified in Delhi can descend to a small site organised through a middleman, where the wage is a non-decision and a rest break is felt as a gift.

V. CONCLUSION

This note has used a single morning's conversation with three construction workers in Dwarka to argue that, on the informal margins where most Indian labour lives, the pandemic operated not as an interruption to be followed by skilling-led recovery but as a mechanism of de-skilling, dissolving diverse livelihoods into interchangeable manual labour at one wage. It has shown that power on such a site works chiefly through its hidden faces — the non-decision that fixes the wage before the worker arrives, and the shaping of consent that makes hard labour feel like a fortunate choice — and that inclusion, financial and regulatory, reaches these workers only partially, propped up by women's largely invisible labour.

Implications for theory and practice: the note suggests that a sociology of Indian labour attentive only to the trained mistakes the exception for the rule, and that policy evaluation should attend to the sites the skilling apparatus never reaches. Limitations of the study are considerable and were built into it: one site, one visit, three respondents, a single observer, and observations gathered without sustained immersion. Recommendations for future research follow directly: an ethnographic return to comparable sites, now on the far side of the Labour Codes, to observe whether the codes narrow the gap this note documents or merely relocate it.

REFERENCES

- [1] T. M. Shah, "The skills milieu of India: Pathway to social inclusion and decent work," *Int. J. Res. Sociol. Anthropol.*, vol. 3, no. 3, pp. 16–31, 2017.
- [2] National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector, *Report on Conditions of Work and Promotion of Livelihoods in the Unorganised Sector*. New Delhi, India: Government of India, 2007.
- [3] J. Breman, *Footloose Labour: Working in India's Informal Economy*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996.
- [4] F. Tonkiss, *Contemporary Economic Sociology: Globalization, Work and Inequality*. London, U.K.: Routledge, 2006.
- [5] G. Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. London, U.K.: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011.
- [6] A. Singh, "Sociological perspective of power," *Senhri J. Multidiscip. Stud.*, vol. 7, no. 2, pp. 25–36, 2022.
- [7] P. Bachrach and M. S. Baratz, "Two faces of power," *Amer. Polit. Sci. Rev.*, vol. 56, no. 4, pp. 947–952, 1962.
- [8] S. Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, 2nd ed. Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- [9] C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. New York, NY, USA: Basic Books, 1973.
- [10] J. Clifford and G. E. Marcus, Eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley, CA, USA: Univ. of California Press, 1986.
- [11] S. Pink, H. Horst, J. Postill, L. Hjorth, T. Lewis, and J. Tacchi, *Digital Ethnography: Principles and Practice*. London, U.K.: Sage, 2016.
- [12] V. Gidwani, *Capital, Interrupted: Agrarian Development and the Politics of Work in India*. Minneapolis, MN, USA: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2007.
- [13] Ministry of Labour and Employment, *The Four Labour Codes: In Force w.e.f. 21 November 2025; Central Rules Notified May 2026*. New Delhi, India: Government of India, 2025. <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2209767®=48&lang=2>