

## **How much Does Material Determination Explain in *Networks, Labour and Migration among Indian Muslim Artisans* ?**

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*Networks, Labour and Migration among Indian Muslim Artisans* is a substantial ethnography of Muslim artisan woodworkers in the northern Indian city of Saharanpur that admirably evokes the “human actuality” of their working worlds. Of Saharanpur’s population (nearly one million), 45% are Muslims; those of its woodworking *mohallas* (neighborhoods) almost exclusively so. They specialize in carving. Thomas Chambers focuses on their workshops and factories and follows them when they migrate for jobs elsewhere in India and to the Gulf. It was demanding fieldwork. Apprenticed to an *ustad* (maestro), Chambers had first to learn to sit cross-legged on the stone workshop floor for interminable days hammering tiny headless tacks for fixing brass inlay designs. In Hyderabad, he slept alongside 10 other workers on the concrete floor of a small room in front of their employer’s shop. The puerile joking, incessant sexualized banter, and hyper-charged emotional intensity of male friendships must have become wearing. In that gender-segregated world, Chambers’s interlocutors were mainly (young-ish) men, although a female research assistant helped collect some compelling data on women’s working lives.

The industry’s recent history is told as one of decline. Though there has certainly been de-skilling, business volumes cannot have contracted. Much production is outsourced locally; much now for export. More de-personalized factory production has partly displaced cottage industry, a trend limited by the premium artisans place on running their own jobs (*apna kam*) and socializing with mates when they want. They willingly work for less in a workshop of their own. Even when employed by others, skilled craftsmen (*karigars*) may recruit and supervise their own workers (*mazdoors*) and apprentices (*shagirds*), preserving the tenuous fiction that they work for themselves and blurring the lines between *karigar*, contractor, and *ustad*. Jobs are precarious and transient, though some employers try to tie labor down with advances that create relations of “neo-bondage.” Since male artisans readily decamp for work elsewhere, the risk of default is high. Mobility also occurs between disparate occupations. One friend had moved from woodworking to the garment trade, been a low-level accountant, a driver in Saudi Arabia, and a health and safety supervisor. Another was temporarily reduced to pulling a rickshaw, which decades later he still kept as insurance against another slump.

Close kin rarely work together. Neither kinship nor caste are the main conduit for jobs. Notwithstanding tension between the equality it implies and the inequality of employee–employer relations, friendship is more significant. It is these deep, affective ties between workmates that Chambers wants to emphasize—a pervasive “homosociality” that borders on the homoerotic, affections that can sour into jealous recrimination. For women, the values that dominate employment (while depressing wages) revolve rather around *chal-chalan*, “character,” pre-eminently a matter of their sexual propriety, which is incompatible with work outside the home. Abandoned wives, widows, and divorcees forced to do so are considered disreputable.

Saharanpur is close to the epicenter of the Deobandi movement. Chambers’s devout *ustad* participated in the peripatetic lay-preaching of Tablighi Jamaat. In a neighboring workshop they boozed and patronized prostitutes. One friend ditched a job in Rajasthan because it involved carving images of Hindu deities. Others had no qualms with such work. But while piety is unevenly distributed, Muslim identity is no less inescapable for the religiously disengaged. We never hear of a *Hindu* friend; in fact, the only Hindu we hear from at all warns Chambers against fraternizing with Muslims. They are “foreign influenced,” if not terrorists. Intra-faith class differences were already flattened by the commercial middle-class exodus at the Partition of India in 1947, forcing artisans into intensified dealings with Hindu merchants. Subsequently, communal antagonisms have further promoted the homogenization of religious identity and dulled consciousness of internal class divisions. For a government post, being a Muslim is a handicap; for a job in the Gulf, it helps. Livelihood possibilities are an artifact of communal identity.

Approximately 40% of men covered by Chambers’s neighborhood surveys had been migrants. Though mobility has been part of their heritage for generations, Gulf jobs opened up only in the 1980s. Now Uttar Pradesh is a larger contributor to Gulf labor than Kerala. Migration is often an initiation into adulthood, a jaunt with friends; and Chambers emphasizes the spontaneity and casualness with which domestic journeys are planned and shelved. Many such journeys have an exploratory quality and are hit-or-miss affairs—witness the several abortive starts Riswan and family made to a variety of jobs and destinations. A lottery element is often involved. Nasir sold his barbershop to pay an agent for a job in Bahrein. He was never paid the promised wage and returned home in middle age with just enough money for a secondhand rickshaw. His cousin, by contrast, had built a big house from his migrant earnings.

Gulf migration especially may drive class differentiation. Particular to it is the notorious *kafala* system under which migrants are sponsored for a visa by an employer to whom they are tied. What emerges most strongly from Chambers's ethnography, however, are the continuities between working in Saharanpur, elsewhere in India, and in the Gulf: an element of bondage, a preoccupation with *apna kam*, but above all the affective tone, the emotional investment in male friendship, and the texture of interpersonal relations. The main anxiety about strange places is *akelapan* (loneliness), though it seems exaggerated. In their Abu Dhabi dormitory, there were several Saharanpur lads. One therefore wonders how much store to set by Chambers's claim that migration fosters new imaginative horizons. In important respects these migrant artisans hardly leave home.

That continuity poses a comparative puzzle in relation to Rina Agarwala's argument in *The Migration-Development Regime* (pp. 180–84 reviewed in this Forum) that—at least politically—there is a notable contrast between Malayali migrant returnees and non-migrant domestic labor. Relations between returnee migrant organizations and trade unions are reportedly tense, and union organizers regard migrants as infertile ground. Temperamentally entrepreneurial, these workers supposedly have money to begin a business or buy land. So, on the one hand, we have Gulf migrants from Uttar Pradesh whose world is markedly continuous with the one from which they have come; on the other hand, returnee Gulf migrants from Kerala who are, or have seemingly become, very different from workers who stayed behind. How should we understand that contrast?

Reading Vivek Chibber's splendidly provocative essay on *The Class Matrix: Social Theory after the Cultural Turn* (2022) alongside Chambers prompts another question: How might Chibber's insistence on the priority of the material structure of class over its cultural encasement illuminate Chambers's ethnography? Several influential strands in Marxist thought since the Second World War began from the recognition that classical Marxism never adequately theorized the conditions under which class consciousness emerges and invoked "culture" to explain why the proletariat had so far failed to fulfill its historical destiny and capitalism had proved unexpectedly durable. "Culture," for Chibber, is synonymous with "ideology" or "discourse"; and he offers us an either/or choice between "cultural" and "material" causation. I find it an unpalatable one. In my own monograph (*Classes of Labour: Work and Life in a Central Indian Steel Town*, 2020) reviewed as part of this Forum, I identify under the rubric of "class structuration" a battery of processes that produce class closure and

are crucial to the crystallization of class identities, and that are neither one nor the other. However that may be, Chibber's crucial claim is that at bottom, class consciousness is compelled by the material constraints of the class structure and is independent of culture. Preeminent among these constraints is the compulsion on the capitalist to minimize costs and maximize profits and on the worker to enter the labor market. Ultimately, and independent of culture, these material constraints compel workers to resign themselves to a system that they recognize as dragging them down.

Though Chambers does not engage with the issue, his focus is clearly on the cultural side of Chibber's binary, and in truth an emphasis on its material half would be in danger of bypassing almost everything interesting in his ethnography. While doubtless true that in the final analysis Saharanpur artisans, like millions of others, must work or starve, that blunt fact tells us little beyond the painfully obvious. It says nothing about *who* works (no respectable woman in a factory), the *intensity* with which they work (limited by the demands of friendship), their *commitment* to the job (enhanced by it being *apna kam*), or *when* work is appropriate (not Fridays). Nor does it say anything about the way that the politics of Hindutva suppress class difference (surely a case in which it is implausible to claim that class consciousness is materially determined); about why Muslims are more likely to migrate to the Gulf than to get a government job; or about the non-material inducements to work—the friendships, banter, and jokes that loom so large in Chambers's account. True, it would be a gross distortion to suggest that Chibber extirpates culture from consideration, but one may wonder whether the strictly secondary role he accords it does not underplay the significance that Chambers's remarkable ethnography suggests that it has. What that ethnography reveals is how much of what goes on in the productive world of these workshops is set in the realm of ideas and values. To adapt an aphorism from Émile Durkheim's critique of utilitarianism, "not everything in the material is material."