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# The antinomies of audit: opacity, instability and charisma in the economic governance of a Hooghly shipyard

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**Abstract**

This paper rethinks audit regimes from the shadow-land of outsourcing in India. This is the arena of informalized work environments that are connected to global value chains and the revenue streams of an extractive liberalization state focused on public debt repayment. Based on ethnography of one such work-place, Venture Ltd shipyard in Howrah, it argues that in such settings audit creates opacity, disorders the work process and is part of value chains supported by diverse forms of charisma and racial distinction. As a result of these antinomies, testing events are times of friction rather than of the enactment of a shared calculative reason. Overall this case suggests that we need to focus more on the disordered capitalism supported by audit regimes.

Keywords: audit; global value chains; liberalization; informalized labour; charisma; race.

Public and academic debate about outsourcing in India has focused on high-tech industries, textile export manufacturing and special economic zones. These have been highlighted because they concretely manifest and display their connections to the new flows of foreign direct investment that began with the liberalization of the Indian economy in 1991. Where nationalist dreams of sunrise industries have led, media and academic commentary has followed. This important work has undermined both popular and policy assumptions. It has shown that outsourcing only benefits certain classes and castes (Fuller &

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Narisimhan, 2006; Nisbett, 2009). It has demonstrated the links between regional state policies that enable the exploitation of labour and global production chains (Vijayabaskar, 2011). It has also revealed that work within outsourced settings generates greater risks for labour in 'cost' chains and that it builds on older practices of informalized labour recruitment (Cross, 2010; Vijay, 2009).

In this existing literature outsourcing is assumed to be held together by transparent practices of audit and quality control. Anthropologists, of course, do not accept the argument that these practices are simply technical mechanisms of standardization. Following the literature on audit as an immutable mobile, studies have shown that quality control acts to transform regimes of production along global networks of outsourced labour (Dolan, 2007; Dunn, 2004). In particular De Neve (2009) has argued that such practices produce new hierarchies of value. In these some products, places and people are brought under centralized metrics, while others remain on the excluded margins unconnected to global circuits of production within an unregulated grey economy. He further argues that outsourcing from audited to non-audited firms acts to devolve risk to weaker partners in the chain. Cross (2011), writing of Special Economic Zones in India, has suggested that these regimes are anchored by documentary practices that produce relationships of detachment between inspectors and inspected. While drawing on these important critical discussions of outsourcing and audit, this paper reveals a reality that is different from these transparent chains of global connection. It shifts our focus from formal sector work-places to outsourcing to informalized sector work-places. In these settings practices of audit and inspection exist, but they do not act in the same way as that reported in existing research on formal work-places. They do not produce legibility, control of the work process or the imposition of a single calculative ethic. Instead here audit creates opacity, disorders routines of production and is supported by diverse forms of charisma and racial distinction. Audit events are a key point at which the moral economy of the different qualities of men surface rather than the site for the emergence of a single subjectivity (see also Kipnis, 2008; Tsing, 2009). As we will see, these subjectivities include charismatic entrepreneurs, low-caste 'unskilled' workers and foreign managers. Importantly this paper also examines how practices of outsourcing have their foundation in a short-term rentier regime of land, people and machines. International firms, entrepreneurs and bureaucrats in combination support the continuing existence of an extractive state, illicit brokering and informalized labour relationships. It is this hidden shadow-land of outsourcing that this paper explores through an ethnography of a private sector shipyard, Venture Ltd.

Venture Ltd is a temporary assemblage of men, machines and materials on the banks of the Hooghly River in Howrah. In this shipyard non-unionized day labourers work with leased, decrepit and obsolete machinery and dry docks hastily cut out from the mud of the shore to produce ships for international, national and state sector clients. This place is not only part of a shadow-land of outsourcing because it is a place of informal sector work. It is invisible to public debate; to the parent companies that commission work from it; and within the fabric of the city. It does not appear in local, national or international debates about industry or foreign direct investment in West Bengal. These discussions have been dominated by the issues of permanent land acquisition and the appearance of high-tech or heavy capital investment industry at Nandigram, Singur and, more recently, Rajarhat. Its clients often do not know or acknowledge that they are employing this shipyard. International clients work through a chain of intermediary companies that outsource work. State clients include other shipyards that claim the work as their own. In addition this work-place does not 'look like' a product of liberalization or of foreign investment, since it is temporary, ramshackle and low-tech.

It is important to note from the outset that the research findings from Venture Ltd cannot be limited to West Bengal or India. The firm carries out contracts for an intermediary firm, Seagrow, based in Cyprus, which has large outsourcing operations across the world including in China, Vietnam, Bangladesh and Romania. These places have different political and land regimes along with distinct histories of the informal sector from West Bengal. However, these places too can be considered as part of the same shadow-land of outsourcing. This is because the audit regimes in them work in the same way. Foreign contractual managers arrive on short-term contracts to inspect the product of labour. They do not intervene in the production process by imposing work routines, health and safety measures or international work practices as they do in more ethnographically studied settings (Dunn, 2008). Nor do they supervise or structure the use of machinery. They simply certify products of international quality. Chains of documents record this standardization of the product, but there is no attempt to regularize, intervene in or shape work relationships. This means that practices of audit used by the companies outsourcing work and intermediary brokers make the production process invisible instead of transparent. International standards are applied to the product of work but not to the process of work. This is in spite of the claim of the intermediary brokering company that it follows international requirements in terms of safe, secure conditions of employment.

Most importantly for the understanding of the underbelly of the liberalization 'boom', Venture Ltd is part of a larger shadow-land of outsourcing in India that relies on informalized work relationships. The central significance of Venture Ltd shipyard for this special issue is that it reveals how informalized work relationships are reproduced within the contemporary economy through the combined activities of bureaucrats, entrepreneurs and international firms. Much important work has examined the majority of 'footloose' temporary and recently disfranchised contractual state workers that make up the industrial work-force in India (Breman, 1996, 2004; Parry, 2011). This has emphasized the erosion of previous privileges among state workers, especially for younger generations, and the historically deep coping strategies of the urban working poor. But we have not yet traced exactly how liberalization state policies and new forms of global capital investment are now co-producing exclusions that have a different structural origin and form (De Neve, 2009; Vijay, 2009). As this paper will show it is because informalized labour is inside the networks of state and global production, rather than excluded in a zone apart from it, that it continues to exist. New liberalization state practices are complicit in producing these networks that include informalized labour. As we will see, liberalization policies have made informalized labour directly part of the revenue streams of state, national and global capital institutions. This labour does not exist in a zone 'outside' of state strategies, regulations or income streams or within an 'unsanctioned' economy, but is inside them (Guyer, 2004; Roitman, 2004).

The practices in Venture Ltd shipyard examined here also contribute new insights to the literature on global value chains (GVCs) within economic sociology. They show that they do not always produce control and standardization. Gibbon and Ponte's (2008) recent sophisticated version of GVC theory draws on concepts of governmentality to argue that audit generates a normalization of economic activities along these chains. They do suggest that the concept of quality distributed along these networks draws on social meanings and values in the immediate environment. Yet their emphasis on normalization is still not sufficient to understand audited informal sector work-places such as Venture Ltd. In these the extraction of profits is sustained by a diversity of ethics and forms of subjectivity (Tsing, 2009). Also in these situations work-place relationships are legitimized through an interplay of charisma and metrics. In addition audit practices are driven by the rhythms of financial contracts, and as a result they disorder the extraction of value. Financialization does not only affect corporate governance strategies at the top of value chains as argued in the literature on GVC (Milberg, 2008); it also affects production at the 'bottom' of them, sending unpredictable effects 'up' the chain. Overall the ethnography of Venture Ltd shows counter-intuitively that far from creating normalization, governance along a GVC can act to manifest uncertainty, temporal instability and various subjectivities.

Venture Ltd shipyard provides a particularly significant site for the exploration of these issues. It is a temporary assemblage formed from a joining together of family, state and international capital. Owned and run by two brothers, it produces for the state and international companies without being 'inside' either of these. Instead it is an informalized 'family' enterprise with no regulation or unionization. Here 1,500 men work on verbally arranged day contracts (only 50 have permanent posts with some health insurance benefits, and only 40 are on monthly contracts) in five yards on land leased on short-term contracts from the state Kolkata Port Trust. Men work for three brokers, who divide workers under separate 'companies' of no more than 20 men to evade employment law regulation that would require them to provide medical and pension cover. The vast ships being built for a Scandinavian firm are subdivided into blocks, each constructed by workers under separate brokers. Everyone is acutely aware that this is a temporary assemblage especially because people work with machinery that is leased on the open shore with no permanent structures. There is no centralized management in the yards, producing a strikingly non-hierarchical arrangement. The fragmenting of command into contractual foreign managers, contractually employed middle managers and supervision of workers in separate small teams created a decentralized structure. Here we have the highest realization of the logics of outsourcing – a reduction of infrastructure, accountability and the costs of labour to the minimum outside the limiting regulations of the state and politics. How then has liberalization, in particular changes in state policy, contributed to the emergence of this work-place?

## Extractive liberalization: public debt, rentier regimes and short-term capitalism

Accounts of liberalization in India generally follow the new capital flows and changes in the private sector following the deal of the central government with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for a $1.8 billion loan in return for an adoption of economic reforms in 1991 as a result of growing central budget deficits. This in turn led to the financial policies under Narasimha Rao and Manmohan Singh from 1991 to 1996 that ended public monopolies, approved foreign direct investment and ended the license *raj*. But what has received less attention is that in the lead-up to the IMF loan and after it there were important changes in the practices of public sector institutions. In particular a new agency was given to public deficit. From the mid-1980s the central government began to enter into new relationships with bureaucracies such as the Kolkata Port Trust that existed in order to generate revenues. Linked to a worldwide pattern connected to IMF restructuring and new financial markets in sovereign debt bonds, public sector deficit management has altered in India. Fiscal policy since Independence had treated state debt as a political relationship manifest in financial form – a national debt. Debts were engaged to make a long-term investment in the future prosperity of the nation. From the 1980s these were redefined as primarily financial transactions and were linked to new bond markets in sovereign debt. The central government imposed fiscal discipline on public sector institutions such as the Kolkata Port Trust in order to meet new demands to immediately repay these debts. This generated permanent crisis and decentralized improvisation of austerity measures across the public sector (Bear, 2011).

This changing fiscal policy had a dramatic effect on the Kolkata Port Trust. Since Independence there had been steady investment in its infrastructure and a continuous growth of its permanent, unionized work-force. This was financed by the World Bank and long-term loans from the Ministry of Surface Transport (MOST). This political relationship of social investment was most clearly visible in the fact that many central government loans were permanently frozen so no annual monetary repayment was necessary. But from the late 1980s onwards the central MOST began to treat the Kolkata Port

Trust as a source from which to extract revenue. They also reduced public subsidies, especially dredging subsidies. This forced the Port Trust into an annual cycle of decision-making entirely directed at reducing its internal debt. In addition, MOST encouraged the decentralizing of debt relations by pushing different parts of the public sector to borrow from each other in profit-making transactions. Foreign banks also entered directly into debtor relationships with Indian bureaucracies such as the Kolkata Port Trust.[1] As a result public sector institutions that had previously been agents for social investment in infrastructure became extractive agencies seeking to derive revenue from public resources. In the Kolkata Port Trust this led to radical cuts in its permanent work-force and attempts to generate revenues from its resources through any means possible. From 1981 to 2000 the permanent work-force declined from 34,492 to 11,514 employees.[2] There has been a complete hiring freeze on permanent posts since 2000. The work of cargo-loading, ship repair and marine crew has been outsourced to contractual labour. Shipbuilding for the Port used to be carried out solely in the unionized dockyards with large infrastructures at the state-owned Garden Reach Shipyard and at Hooghly Dock and Port Engineers Ltd. From 1998 the Port began to outsource its ship construction, repair and technical projects to small non-unionized, private yards along the Hooghly such as Venture Ltd shipyard. Now state shipyards also outsource to these yards, in order to cut costs and speed up production times.

Venture Ltd does not only exist because of the outsourcing of work from the Port and other state agencies. Its temporary short-term structure is sustained by the rentier land regimes of the Kolkata Port Trust. In its effort to draw money towards the central government, MOST has since 1986 instructed the Port Trust to generate income from the vast tracts of land it owns. It is the single largest landowner in the city with properties stretching along the banks of the river from Cossipur in the North to Baj Baj in the South. Until the mid-1980s the majority of this land was directly used by the Port. But as the Port shut down and reduced operations, this land fell vacant. In an arrangement inherited from the colonial period, which was designed to ensure the swift return of the land to the Port whenever required, this land has been rented out in small parcels on short 15-year leases.[3] Many plots are sublet, often illegally, without obtaining permission from the Port Trust. Local politicians often take control of these, either by settling people on narrow strips of vacant land or by becoming brokers in subletting. This leasing structure has contributed to the emergence of an informalized rentier economy and economic enterprises focused on short-term investments in impermanent structures. In spite of many plans for redevelopment of the water-front proposed by Port Trust officials and encouragement from MOST, this structure has been left in place.[4] This is because any such moves would require initial long-term investments by the Port Trust that it cannot provide under the existing public deficit regime. As a result bureaucrats have simply set about attempting to extract as much revenue from short-term subleasing as possible. Most recently, they have made the collection of dues as efficient as possible through the introduction of new computerized records and the legal eviction of defaulters.

These practices of outsourcing and rentier regimes have led to the emergence of a new kind of shipyard on the Hooghly. To understand the distinctive form of these enterprises it is first necessary to consider pre-existing yards on the river. Before the late 1990s work was carried out in the Kolkata Docks, Garden Reach, Hooghly Port and Dock Engineers or Shalimar shipyards. These were permanent institutions with stable work-forces and large infrastructures. The majority of employees were permanent, unionized workers. There were some temporary workers brought in for ship-repairing and unskilled work. These men, if they acquired skills, could move into the ranks of permanent workers. Production processes in these yards were driven by the time taken to construct a vessel, not by external deadlines in financial contracts. These yards still exist on the Hooghly. But since the 1990s they have become closed citadels for a younger generation of workers on the river. Permanent recruitment has frozen. Temporary work is available in them, but this is very difficult to access if you do not already have a relative working in them. This is because access depends on men's relationships with union representatives operating in the yards and with local politicians. The men working in Venture Ltd who had achieved work in these yards on short-term projects described an entirely different work regime. The yards are well-provisioned and have much safer working conditions than the newer private yards. Men described how the production process was driven by the time it took to construct a vessel, with much longer periods before commissioning and delivery. Inspections and audits were driven by the time it had taken for a vessel to reach a point in its cycle of building. Inspectors were men who worked in the yards alongside work-teams managing them, or they were external inspectors who had spent most of their careers in the yards before taking on this role at retirement. Inspection was a metric measure of the qualities of products, but it was embedded in experience of the work process and long-term working relationships. In addition the payment of wages did not depend on the outcome of these inspections. The impressive infrastructures of Garden Reach Shipyard and Hooghly Dock and Port Engineers were clearly visible on the waterscape. Since the 1960s, technological developments in ship design and construction had been introduced to these places at the same time as all over the world. These were contrasts that not only shipyard workers but also Indian managers and inspectors reflected on often during my field-work at Venture Ltd. Managers argued that their business was more lean and efficient with faster production times than these large firms with fixed infrastructure and work-forces. Workers instead (whether they had worked in these larger yards or not) complained about impossible delivery times, work in the open elements, faulty, inadequate equipment and dangerous conditions.

What then were the features of the new shipyards that had emerged in relation to the outsourcing and land strategies of the Kolkata Port Trust? Venture Ltd is characteristic of these in its short-term capitalism and reliance on informalized brokering structures. Turning first to impermanence, this permeated every aspect of the infrastructure and labour relations at the yard. Because of the short-term leasing system of land it was possible for the two brothers who owned Venture Ltd to expand and contract without major capital investment according to the cycles of client demand. Recent growth had been very fast indeed and linked to the recent rush of contracts from state and international clients. The lead founding brother of the company, Subroto Chatterjee, had started as an apprentice naval architect in the neighbouring government-owned Shalimar Yard in the 1970s. He and his brother bought the lease for the land and the company, then only based in one yard, in 1986. Until 2005 he built all the vessels in this narrow strip of land. His main business from 1998 came from the new outsourcing of the repairing and building of vessels from the Port. In 2003 this work took a new expansive turn with more state agencies shifting to outsourcing. Subroto began to get orders for blocks for navy ships from Garden Reach Shipyard and commissions from Port Trusts in the Andamans and Gujarat. So he took a sublease for a neighbouring strip of land. In 2005 Subroto took an even bigger gamble, accepting the commission from an old friend who ran an oil barge business to build a large tourist vessel for cruises to the Sunderbans. For this he sublet another parcel of land from a Port lessee. Then in early 2006 a friend – a naval architect in a large-scale private shipyard in Mumbai – approached him to take up the contract for huge ice class vessels for the Scandinavian firm. As a result Subroto leased two more parcels of land, one directly from the Port and another from a subleasee. These were the first two in a line of seven vessels that will be produced here. This work has been outsourced from the private shipyard in Mumbai who received the contract from Seagrow Ltd. As Venture Ltd expanded, the Port's rentier land structure began to support the generation of profits not only for state agencies but also for global firms engaged in outsourcing as well. The cost of production was much lower in this private shipyard than in existing state yards or other sites of production because there was no requirement in Venture Ltd to recoup large upfront investments in land. This very fast physical expansion with very little financial outlay is grounded in the Port's extractive short-termism. The lease system supports the rapid expansion and contraction in businesses that we see at Venture Ltd, which has jumped from employing 100 people in 2003 to 1,500 in 2008. This rentier system is ultimately to the advantage of the Scandinavian company behind the Cypriot brokers Seagrow, since it keeps the costs of production very low indeed in comparison with other possible sites.

This extractive short-termism extends much deeper and further than simply the mechanisms of business expansion. It dominated the structures of employment and infrastructure of Venture Ltd. It was not just production that was outsourced and land that was temporarily lent on short-term contracts. Every economic relationship in Venture Ltd and piece of infrastructure existed within temporary structures of outsourcing and 'renting' of men and machines. All relationships systematically devolved financial risks and costs away from capitalists and made workers the bearers of the greatest physical and monetary insecurity. Paradoxically these moves at the same time generated great uncertainty in the production process in a manner that made this form of capitalism highly unstable.

Workers subsidized the costs of production through the temporary contractual system of employment. The work-force was provided by five contractors. Some highly skilled workers (40 or so) were paid monthly, but the rest were on daily rates. There were no written contracts between the contractors and their workers. Men were moved around between yards and laid off according to the daily demands of the construction process, with no permanence in their posts or relationships with contractors. None of the workers had any health benefits, and there was no union in the yard. The contractors evaded the costs of conforming to employment regulations. The use of several contractors in the yard kept the numbers of employees per contractor below the statutory figure that requires them to give medical, accident and other benefits. The temporary use of labour in small fragmented groups kept the costs of production down.

Workers also subsidized the costs of labour by producing with poor and often dangerous infrastructure. In the yard there was the minimum amount of automated work possible. There was one plate-cutting machine for large and complex sheets of steel and three cranes that were often inadequate for lifting the weight of sheets of metal they carried. Instead of building a substantial dry dock, a pit of mud was excavated and enclosed by a mud wall. Obsolete technologies of welding, marking plates with chalk, lofting instead of CAD shaping for the mapping of plates, lifting and pulling of steel sheets with ropes and hooks abounded in the yard. The yards were also uncovered and uncemented, turning to mud in the rain and burning in the sun. There were no areas for workers to eat or sleep in, so they collected under the ship or in store-rooms at breaks. The calculations that led to this environment were succinctly conveyed to me by a manager, Mr Chakrabarty,

> Frankly, we are competitive because our wages are so low . . . It is better for us to keep the workers' skill levels low and use of machinery low, so that we can continue to maintain low wages. If they were more skilled workers we would also have to pay them more.

Workers had to labour harder in more insecure environments in order to keep their official skill levels and own wages low. This temporary structure held great physical dangers for workers, and the devolving of monetary risk to them led to literal physical risk. The work of producing many vessels in a constrained parcel of leased land with poor infrastructure resulted in constant danger. All the shipyard workers related stories of almost being sliced in two by sheets of steel that had dropped during the process of lifting. The previous year two men had died while working in the yard. There were about 10 minor accidents each day.

This temporary assemblage made the production process highly unpredictable and unstable. The labour supply was uncertain as men would be regularly absent due to the ill-effects of the work conditions. In addition, the production time was highly unpredictable because work had to stop in the uncovered and flooded yard during the three months of north-wester storms and then monsoon from May to August. Also the low level of mechanization meant that the yard production speed was much more dependent on the sheer physical strength of its work-force. In addition, the lack of investment in a permanent dry dock meant that work was interrupted by the flooding of the dock at high tide. The pressure to deliver a ship in the context of all of this uncertainty meant that often supervisors and workers in the yard would be told by middle managers to half-repair faults found by external inspectors. This created further crises. When the first completed vessel was taken for testing on the river, its steering failed and it collided with a container ship damaging the expensive propeller and part of its hull. This delay in the date of delivery to Seagrow could have led to the cancelling of orders for further vessels. No-one could say exactly when the ships for the Scandinavian firm would be ready, with delivery dates constantly slipping further into the future. There was an amplifying uncertainty at Venture Ltd produced by its short-term structures.

The strategies at Venture Ltd were entirely reliant on the informalized networks that had expanded in relation to the Kolkata Port Trust's outsourcing and rentier policies. Whenever Venture Ltd needed workers or parcels of land it was necessary to come to terms with the local politicians and union officials that controlled the supply of both. Subroto Chatterjee had worked for many years with a local leader of the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU; affiliated to Communist Party of India), an organization that states it is 'opposed to imperialist globalization, championing the cause of the working class and defending economic sovereignty of the country'.[5] This man had a dual role as a broker. He acted as one of the key suppliers of contractual workers to the yard. In addition, he had made a deal with Subroto that the union would not recruit members from Venture Ltd or take up the cause of any men in the yard. Overall this role as a broker in access to temporary de-unionized jobs was one that had been taken up by most unions active on the waterfront. This new role of unions had grown out of the outsourcing mechanisms of the Kolkata Port Trust. When Venture Ltd needed new parcels of land this also had to be negotiated through a web of political influence. I learnt more about this during my field-work when a slum on Port land next to Venture Ltd burnt down. The newspapers reported this as an accident, but shipyard workers and people who lived in the settlement speculated that Venture Ltd or someone associated with the firm had organized it. Whatever the truth behind this rumour, a middle manager later told me that Subroto was trying to lease this land now that the bustee had been reduced to ashes. But the local Communist Party of India (Maoist) leader who controlled access to all the land along the waterfront had so far been dragging his feet in facilitating this process. These are the negotiations that the Kolkata Port Trust rentier regimes support.

The situation in Venture Ltd was entirely the opposite of older forms of shipbuilding on the river. Insecurity and temporariness permeated all the relationships within it. Ultimately this was a regime that drew increased revenues towards or reduced the costs of production for central state institutions, brokers in the informalized/illicit economy and overseas companies. The irony was not lost on the men that they were in fact producing outsourced work for other state-run shipyards and better provisioned companies. They found this particularly difficult to accept because they were working-class, who unlike a previous generation of men would not be able to move into the ranks of skilled, permanent, unionized workers.

Given this short-term disordered capitalism manifested in Venture Ltd, we have to now ask: how is the hope maintained among workers and managers that profits and regular wages can be produced from it at all? As we will see in the next section, it is the charismatic embodiment of the company in the personage of its founder, Subroto Chatterjee, that generates this expectation in spite of the fragmented, unstable work process of the yards. His persona along with intense affective ties and hopes of social mobility binds the firm together as a collective project for future prosperity.

## The qualities of men and technical charisma

At the muddy bank of the river in No. 3 yard I often used the wreck of a small improvised hovercraft with a giant industrial fan mounted on its back to climb from the shore onto barges that had come in for repair to the yard. I did not realize its significance until one morning the rumour spread among contractors and low level supervisors that Subroto was trying again to build a hovercraft that would float 15 foot above the ground. They were certain that he would be successful and discussed how this would lead to the manufacturing of the hovercraft for the Indian navy and then in turn to the rising fortunes of them all through orders. Later that day, I ran into the harassed middle manager, Kalyan, who rarely had time to speak to me. He made a point of stopping me and saying have you heard about the hovercraft? He insisted that I should immediately go with him to see the prototype Subroto was working on in the No. 2 yard. When we reached the yard all the middle managers were clustered on a raised pallet bent over the prototype cobbled together from an even larger industrial fan and plywood. They tenderly looked at the parts of the machine and discussed its technical details. Looking on all around were workers and clerks who had gathered from all the other yards. Everyone had stopped work to take in the sight. The collective feeling of excitement and awe was palpable. A month or so later I happened to go to Subroto's office in the No. 1 yard perched on the edge of the river, and he immediately started to talk about the hovercraft. He explained that everyone was elated because he had successfully tested it on the beach at Madomoni where there were no obstacles to its movement. He said now we will get orders for this too – lucrative orders from private and public companies. Rumours of these orders continued through the months of my field-work.

The excitement about the hovercraft that ran from managers to yard supervisors was only matched by one other intermittent event. This was Subroto coming to fair the curves in the planning lofts. When this happened he would supplant the meticulous authority of the loftsman who had spent two weeks or so drawing the whole outline of a vessel or difficult block out on the smooth iron surface. The lines are three-dimensional sections of the hull drawn on a grid using strings and chalk and carefully placed according to mathematical formulae to match CAD plans. A loftsman, Sukarmar, called me one day to watch this process in the No. 3 planning loft, which he said I must see in order to understand Subroto's skill in 'beautifying the curves'. We walked to the loft, and Subroto rushed over to me to explain that on the computer where he created the plans for this vessel on autocad you cannot 'feel the perfection' of the curve of the vessel. Subroto then set about correcting the curves by imagining the ship in three dimensions before him. He changed the dimensions of the curves by three inches or more by free-hand drawing. After this event, the middle managers, contractors and their supervisors discussed at length the fact that Subroto, and only he, could draw the lines with a free hand like that.

These two events were characteristic of the affect that talk of the spectacular past and future success of Subroto produced. Like the figures of urban charisma discussed by Blom Hansen and Verkaaik (2009), he was admired for his ability to bring capital and foreign work to the shores of the Hooghly. Men often speculated about the opaque networks of influence through which he had achieved this. His objects of invention, like the hovercraft, were widely used as evidence of his qualities of technical daring. When I asked managers, supervisors and contractors why they put up with the bad conditions and uncertainties of the yard, they said it was because of the inspiration of Subroto. Men were proud to be part of his networks of friendship and enterprise.

The charisma of Subroto was the highest realization of the values and personal loyalties that dominated Venture Ltd. At the level of mangers, people had come to work in the firm either because of family connections to him or friendships forged before their retirement from public sector jobs. All of these men had known him for years because they used to work commissioning vessels from in him in the state sector. These old friendships had brought these public officials into the private sector. They transformed their own influence and skill directly into entrepreneurial profits. The company may have been temporary, but the personal relationships of managers were long, creating a passionate enthusiasm for the enterprise. This atmosphere continued among shipyard workers. Men were recruited through word of mouth by contractors. As a result they were either related to each other or were friends from the same neighbourhoods along the Foreshore and Andul Roads in Howrah. At both levels, the managers and workers, this in addition meant that (unlike older patterns of industrial employment in Howrah and in the Kolkata Port Trust) this work-place was predominantly populated by Bengali Hindus. Overall it was the most emotional environment I have ever been in where ties of affection and mutual admiration between friends and male relations were felt everywhere – what was called *bhalobhasha*, referring to the love of men.

This sense of a community linked by entrepreneurship and technical skill was, in spite of the terrible working conditions, experienced by workers as a kind of freedom. As we would expect from other private sector work-places in India, distinctions of caste mapped onto wage levels and status in the yard. Managers were all high-caste *kayashtas*. Skilled technicians such as loftsmen were usually Brahmins. All other ranks were from low caste and scheduled caste groups. But shipyard workers insisted that the shipyard was an equalizing and liberating space in comparison with the work their fathers or they had previously held. Men insisted that no special inborn qualities or essences were needed to do the work, that caste was entirely irrelevant. They claimed that there was a universal system that they were inhabiting that was open to all as long as they were willing to be brave, strong and do *hater kaj* (work of the hands). The entrepreneurial skill and technical knowledge manifest in the shipyard was associated with the hope of equality and social mobility.

This sense of possibility was enhanced by the decentralized command of the yard. This was fragmented into separate small teams led by overseers employed by outside contractors with very little intervention from middle or senior managers. Workers would negotiate and debate with their overseers the value of different technical procedures, insisting on them accepting their solutions. This structure also led to a striking lack of deference in company relationships. This was shocking in comparison to the port offices and docks where many of the middle and senior managers had previously worked. The scheduled caste office peon and yard supervisors who lived in one-room mud houses near the yard would lounge in the middle managers' office teasing them, slapping them on the back and ignoring their requests for tea. The middle managers would rely on these peons and supervisors for information about what was going on in the different parts of the yard. Shipyard workers would stroll in and out of the offices to pick up equipment with no formality at all. Workers would take breaks whenever they felt tired, not paying attention to their younger supervisors who would try and cajole them back to work. Any authority of command did not come from an infrastructure of recognized status, only from skill in discrete tasks, the ability to collect and disseminate information and personal charisma. Most of the workers insisted that, as Viswanath Samanta, a 42-year-old welder, put it, '*shobae shomman*' – everyone is equal.

Overall, Venture Ltd was an informalized work-place held together by emotional ties of friendship and kinship rather than by centralized fixed command structures or an identification with a single company project. In this world, ideally men were equal to each other. They claimed they only accepted the authority of others over them based on their technical and entrepreneurial charisma. It was the qualities of men that guaranteed the success of the enterprise and allowed all ranks at work in Venture Ltd a sense that its unstable capitalism would continue. But how then were audit and international work standards inserted into this short-term charismatic capitalism?

## Audit and its antinomies

Seagrow Ltd is the company that takes the orders for new-builds from European shipping firms in its ISO 9001, 1400I certified offices in Limassol and Hamburg. A flow of e-mailed plans, photographs and instructions passed between these and the short-term contracted foreign managers who circulated between shipyards in Vietnam, China and India. These managers were recruited from the old shipbuilding towns of Europe, such as Gdynia and Gdansk in Poland. In India, the results of audits flowed back from Venture Ltd's foreign managers to the Seagrow office in Mumbai which had outsourced the work to the larger private shipyard there. This office sent them on to Cyprus and Norway. The private shipyard in Mumbai is ISO 9001–2000 certified. It claimed to Seagrow that Venture Ltd was part of its company and also governed by ISO certifications, but it was in fact a separate unregulated entity to which this shipyard had transferred the risks of the labour process. The owners of Venture Ltd transmitted these risks further down the chain to contractors and their specific labour supervisors and work-teams. Audit and inspection regimes enabled this devolving of risk. Contractors were only retrospectively paid by Venture Ltd for the work their labourers carried out once a block had passed the final tests from the quality control inspectors, the Seagrow managers on site and Lloyds of India. If a block failed then the cost of making it good was carried by the labour brokers, who transferred this cost to workers through reduced wages. Audit documentation and inspection were the mechanisms by which risk was devolved to workers, while simultaneously denying responsibility for the difficult and dangerous conditions of labour that might produce obstacles to the realization of the work. These practices are an absolute denial of the rights to legal protection, fair conditions and wages that should accrue to workers as a result of their labour. The commissioning firms in Scandinavia, Cyprus and Mumbai remained confident audit practices and ISO standards were followed in the medium of networks of paper without having to engage with the labour conditions through which ships were being manufactured.

The work of foreign managers in Venture Ltd was entirely directed towards the reproduction of this devolving of risk and disengagement from work conditions, while simultaneously their physical presence confirmed the international quality of the objects being produced through the flow of emailed test results. Foreign managers only ever appeared briefly in the yard in order to carry out tests. They did not engage at all in any other part of the production process or supervise any of it, which was left to the contractors and their chosen supervisors. As Pietr, the head of the foreign team, who was from Gdynia, put it:

> What is important to me is the final quality of the product that is all. I do not mind how it is produced even if it is all done by hand. Have you seen the pipe production unit – the small shack by the river that gets flooded in the high tide? But that is not important to me, what is important is the final quality of the work . . . We are also training the quality control people so that when it comes to the next ship we can just sit here in the office and direct it by remote control.

Problematically, this audit regime did not make the quality of the product transparent to inspectors. The quality control officers being trained by Pietr were 20-year-olds with no technical knowledge whose main qualification was that they could speak English. Their lack of knowledge and the financial pressure from the contractors on team supervisors to say they had carried out corrections to blocks as specified in inspections without fully completing them led to many corners being cut. Workers and their immediate supervisors claimed this happened often and that it was easy to get this past the inexperienced quality officers, whom they derided. Legibility of the production process was not the goal or the product of audit regimes at Venture Ltd. Overall foreign managerial labour in the yard provided a paper trail of metric quality standards that supported highly exploitative work regimes. It also made the vessels produced in the yard contain an immaterial 'international' quality. Their form appeared to be generated by the knowledge practices and documentary regimes of foreign managers, even though these managers took no part in production. This obscured their creation from the skilled labour of Indian contractual workers. It also erased their generation out of and within the social inequalities of liberalization Kolkata. Audit and inspection ultimately allowed outsourcing agents along the GVC, from the Scandinavian firm to foreign and Indian managers in the yards, to remain detached from the exploitative conditions of production. They rendered its realities opaque and irrelevant to the qualities of the vessels built in the shipyard.

The testing regimes had another important unintended effect. They set fixed targets for production, but in a manner that generated instability in the labour process. Weekly inspections by Seagrow managers and Lloyds of India inspectors orchestrated the pace of production across teams. The dates of larger structural tests specified in contracts were the targets for monthly production. These schedules were not based on the work conditions in the yard or the demands of the work process, but on an ideal project completion schedule that was linked to loans from foreign and local banks to Seagrow, the shipyard in Mumbai and Venture Ltd. If these dates were missed then the loans used to provide the raw material, rented infrastructure and managerial wages for the project could be withdrawn or the terms made less favourable. As a result the pace of inspections had no relationship to what was feasible to produce in the difficult conditions of the yard. As Pietr suggested before the engine test of one of the vessels, 'We are closing our eyes and doing this because of the bankers at our back that are pushing us'. Audits introduced further instability into the already difficult production process by pushing men to work according to an impossible pace and causing a circulation of scarce skilled labour between half-finished tasks. Severe and minor accidents clustered around these large testing dates. Uncertainty and instability rather than predictability emerged from these audits.

Since audit was never concerned here with legibility nor produced stability, it is perhaps not surprising that it did not create a consensual ethic or subjectivity among managers, supervisors and workers. Instead, test events were sites for the emergence of diverse concepts of hierarchically organized productive powers. They manifested a fragmented cluster of ethical selves differentiated along lines of nation and race that ultimately supported the outsourcing structure of the GVC of the shipyard. The power of audit was not that it standardized techniques or ethics as predicted in the literature on audit in formal work-places, but that it transformed objects that had been made by Indian workers into international commodities. It also temporarily manifested a centralized order among all the fragmented production teams and fluid command hierarchies.

Take for example the tank test that Sukumar and Arup, contractors' supervisors, who had worked up the ranks, excitedly involved me in. Hydraulic pressure was to be pumped inside the cavity of a block in the ship, and a soap solution would be painted over the seams so any leaks would show through the evidence of bubbles. Everyone waited for the inspectors from Seagrow and Lloyds. When Pietr arrived there was a tense air of expectation. Workers stopped their tasks to watch for the outcome, which would determine their pay and workloads in the next few weeks. Without acknowledging anyone Pietr walked over to the compressing machine using sign language to issue instructions to Arup and Sukumar. He was spectacularly distinct with his tall frame and clean white overall. He was followed by Mr Pandava, the Lloyds of India inspector, in his orange boiler suit. Workers drifted up to the gauge on the pressure machine to check the progress of the test with anxious faces. The inspectors declared the test successful, and the supervisors and workers visibly relaxed.

Arup then said to me: 'The most important thing to remember that I have ever told you, Laura, is that this ship is our body. It is just like a man's body too'. He began to sketch out on the ground exactly where a man's ribs would fit on the ship's plan, how the wheel house was the eyes of the ship and the pipe system its network of veins. Sukumar joined us and said the ship was exactly like a man's body, but that it was most like the body of a 'huge, strong man from abroad, not weak and feeble like our Indian bodies'. Sukumar began to pour out his greatest worry, which was for his wife and son, because he does not know what would happen to them if he had an accident. His back, he said, bore the physical scars from working up the ranks. Both the supervisors sought to claim the ship as a man's body like their own, produced at a cost to their physical bodies, but now it had become not quite like them. It was something vast and foreign that belonged abroad to other, stronger men.

Back in the yard office the claims for whose productive powers had generated the ship and how these related to hierarchical distinctions of race and nation continued. The Lloyds inspector Mr Pandava began a nationalist account of Indian technical skill and of how when he was young he had corrected faults in plans for ships that had come from Jarrow in the UK. His career he described as a progressive process of recognition that Indians could have technical skills equal to those of foreigners, which meant they could produce objects of an external, *baire* (foreign) quality. Pietr entered the office puncturing his proud reminiscences. He was cursing and angry, shouting, 'These Mumbai shipyard engineers are hopeless. My problem is that I want to get the vessel delivered but these Mumbai shipyard engineers understand nothing at all', showing his disdain for the various 'local' engineers around him.

The test was a visceral enactment of claims to productive powers both material and immaterial embodied in the ship. The only point of convergence between the workers and managers was that the ship now had taken on an external, foreign, international quality through the process of inspection by Pietr. Ultimately the test was an act of separation that turned an object produced by the knowledge, skill and labour of Indian workers into an international 'global' commodity from which they were abruptly doubly alienated. It was no longer theirs, in that they had been paid for their labour in building it, but also because the inspection transformed it into an object that manifested the knowledge practices of foreign managers in an absolute denial of the conditions of its production or the workers' contribution to it. It was this inspection that made it possible to exchange the ship as a commodity that fitted international standards so that it could be traded in a global market-place at a price that would generate surplus value for its rentier brokers in Venture Ltd, the Mumbai shipyard and for Seagrow. This transformation could only be effected through the personages of foreign managers whose very presence in the inspection made it possible. So in this practice of audit it is not solely the technical enactment of metrics that makes objects exchangeable, nor are unified ethical subjects produced in order to guarantee the quality of these objects, as predicted from the literature on formal sector audits. Instead it is the distinctions between various persons and their qualities that support the creation of a global standardized object. Differences of race and nation embodied in the productive powers of people are central to these practices of audit. Without these the extraction of value from labour through short-term capitalism along the GVC of Seagrow, the Mumbai shipyard and Venture Ltd would not be possible. It is through these reified differences in the qualities of people and objects that the exploitative conditions of production can be entirely erased. Testing events are visceral enactments that materialize these distinctions and make objects suddenly mobile and global commodities.

The work of contractual foreign managers was oriented entirely towards making ships into global things, and they circulated between different countries in order to achieve this. Their reflections on the workers and conditions in Venture Ltd were generated by this experience. They expressed a distanced, but sympathetic ethic. They presented themselves and the workers as equally caught up in inevitable and transcendent forces of capital movement. The politics of scale and determinism of discourses of globalization as described by Mathur (1998) and Tsing (2005) were clearly manifest in their accounts of the shipyard. Pietr, for example, was from Gdynia and left the state shipbuilding yard there as it declined, to work as an engineer on container ships. His representation was characteristic, born from his experience of work in China, Vietnam and on the high seas as well as from the decline of Polish shipbuilding. He took a global perspective that produced a form of sympathy that led to disengagement from the conditions of workers in the yard. He began by explaining his own movement as a product of global capital:

> The problem is that the cost of working in Poland is higher now than in Korea, China, Vietnam and India so I had to come here as there is a slump in the industry. This has especially happened since Poland joined the European Union because the government is now not allowed to give a subsidy to shipbuilding due to EU rules. In shipbuilding there is only a 5 to 10 per cent margin for profit and the highest cost is the workmanship.

The workers in the yard, he suggested, were similarly subject to the flow of capital. Their low cost of wages meant they had now been caught up in the shipbuilding industry for a short while. All of the foreign managers shared this sympathy and disengagement. From their perspective this yard on the Hooghly was simply a speculative economic bubble whose fate was already sealed, as theirs had been by the mobility of capital. As a Ukrainian engineer, Stephan, told me:

> I watched the men dig out mud from under the ship in the No. 5 yard. In other places they would have machines and at the end of the day they still had made no impression. The work here is on a bubble. I have seen a yard in Romania where they had gone up and up to employ 3,000 people, but now that has closed and the companies have moved to China, Vietnam and Bangladesh. Now all the Romanians are going to New Orleans where they are trying to restart the shipping industry there. I feel so bad when I walk out of the yard and look at the slums and the poor there. Soon this yard will be gone. The work will move on somewhere else and these people will have no work.

This was an ethics that led the foreign managers to feel sympathy for the poor as inevitable victims of economic processes as they had been. But it also disabled them from acting to intervene in their wages or work conditions.

Since forces of capital were represented as global and inevitable, it is not surprising that any behaviour that did not serve the needs of capital was immediately attributed by managers to recalcitrant 'local' cultural difference. They remained mystified as to why workers would not work overtime, attributing this to a cultural dislike for hard work rather than to the conditions of labour in the yard. Similarly they spoke of 'their' festivals – that Indians were so religious they had to follow in spite of being offered overtime to work on festival days. No open social comprehension was attempted, nor were refusals to work among workers ever attributed to the contradictory and difficult labour conditions generated by the GVC. These ethics were a direct product of the outsourcing structure, and they helped to reproduce it. This structure was tied together by shallow, temporary wage contracts and fiscal agreements on delivery dates underpinned by the threat of changes to credit relationships. Although these are all social relationships, they were experienced by foreign managers as inevitable forces that led to the circulation of capital, objects and men including themselves. No intervention in these appeared possible, so managers felt sympathy but were certain that they could not change either their fate or that of Indian workers.

Audit in the shadow-land of outsourcing manifested in Venture Ltd shipyard therefore acts to generate instability in the production process, reduce legibility and make the conditions of production opaque. The men who carry out these audits are as important to the reproduction of this extractive GVC as the material metric practices they enact. Their physical manifestation of 'foreignness' allows the transformation of objects into global commodities, and their ethics of sympathetic disengagement reproduces social relationships within the GVC by presenting them as the product of inevitable forces of capitalism. It is the diverse qualities of men alongside the standardized 'quality' of metric audit that reproduce the extraction of surplus value from labour in the shadow-lands of outsourcing. Likewise it is distinctions between different kinds of hierarchically organized selves, rather than coherent systems of ethics as outlined in the existing literature on formal outsourcing, that support the persistence of GVC. Ultimately GVCs may be forms of economic governance, but their forms of control contribute to the unplanned emergence of instabilities in production, proliferating social distinctions and a disordering short-termism in urban social relationships.

## Conclusion

We do not yet know how large the shadow-land of outsourcing manifested in Venture Ltd is. This is in part because these forms of production are not traceable from the top of GVCs as firms may not even know their commodities are being made in such contexts. These places of production are also not immediately visible in cityscapes, since they do not manifest the explicit signs of global capital flows such as advanced infrastructure. They take place in decaying, improvised production settings. We can trace broad signs that this is most likely a more widely spread phenomenon in India from the continuing dominance of informalized labour relations since liberalization, and macro-economic studies of state-wide growth. Nearly 50 per cent of the non-agricultural workers in the Indian economy do not have a regular, single employer (Sanyal & Bhattacharyya, 2009). In one of the most prosperous Indian states, Gujarat, that has had the most foreign direct investment, with an annual compound rate of growth in state domestic product from 2000 to 2008 of 10.76 per cent, there has not been any improvement in daily wages for urban informal workers or in poverty indices, which have stayed constant (Hirway & Shah, 2011). Of course, not all of this informality and exclusion is connected to GVCs, but we must explain how they contribute to the recreation of these existing inequalities. This is a task that we have only just begun. This is in part because academic and public debates have often followed the visible signs of international business in new spectacular infrastructures or dramatic conflicts over land acquisition. We need much more analysis of changing local level state fiscal and policy practices driven by public deficit and attempts to extract revenues from public resources. Alongside this we need to trace the hidden rentier regimes through which political and economic influence is maintained by the tiered brokering of access to resources, including that of land, in urban areas in India. Existing analysis has suggested that these regimes are structured by the absence of state intervention and policy in relation to the urban poor (Chatterjee, 2004; Roy, 2002). But this example of the Kolkata Port Trust suggests otherwise that liberalization policies driven by a politics of public deficit have actively contributed to new forms of outsourced work and revenue extraction, which profoundly affect the livelihoods of the urban working classes.

The example of Venture Ltd shipyard also has implications for our discussions of GVCs. If we site our research in the shadow-lands of outsourcing away from places where there has been long-term investment in fixed plant, machinery and trained workers we discover quite different aspects of contemporary economic governance. Most importantly we understand that we may have over-emphasized its rationalizing, standardizing and ordering capabilities. Accumulation of the surplus value of labour in the GVC of Venture Ltd generates instability in production, diverse subjectivities and ethics. This is because its audit practices do not produce legibility, but create an international quality in objects while denying their conditions of production. These practices are also entirely divorced from processes of production because they are driven by a financialized logic structured by contracts of credit relationships between various outsourcing agencies. As we have seen, a GVC structured in this manner generates amplifying uncertainty in when and how products will be delivered for all concerned. It also supports the growth of unstable short-term forms of capitalism that threaten the long-term livelihoods of workers, Indian and foreign managers alike. Outsourcing begins to look less like a phenomenon that serves the needs of capital as originally suggested by writers following Harvey (1989) and more like a capitalism at war with its own long-term productivity and focused on shareholder value (Milberg, 2008).

The multiple meanings of quality in Venture Ltd shipyard have general implications as well. Here 'quality' is simultaneously a metric audited measure and a charismatic attribute of managers as international or entrepreneurial subjects. In spite of structural differences these neo-liberal forms of managerial labour have much in common with older paternalist forms. In both contexts the value of a manager is the quality that he imparts to objects that makes them 'his' – or in other words, that makes them an expression of the quality of his self, not the product of the collective labour of workers. As I have described for the colonial and post-colonial Indian railways, it was the management of the biomoral substances of nation, race and caste through arrangements of domestic and public life that sought to guarantee uncertain profits (Bear, 2007). In disorganized neo-liberal outsourcing it is quality in its two meanings of charisma and metrics that sustain the faith in profit, and the denial of the productivity of the labour power of workers. Here too, as we have seen, distinctions of nation, race and culture are essential to the legitimating of the structures of production. In spite of their differences paternalism and neo-liberal outsourcing both contain idioms of productive powers that exceed economic rationales and technical metrics. I would like to suggest that whether we are analysing state paternalism, soft capitalism or outsourcing, the value of a manager is always the quality that that he imparts to objects and labour. This makes them a prosthetic extension of the quality of his self rather than the product of the skill and surplus value of the labour of workers.

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## Notes

1 This is a summary of the history derived from reading the Board Meetings of the Port from 1950 to the present available in the Port Trust Library, Kolkata.
2 Board Meetings of the Port, 4th meeting 31 March 2000.
3 Board Meetings of the Port, 5th meeting 9 April 1930.
4 Board Meetings of the Port, 20 January 1989 Item 9 Appendix II.
5 See website: http://www.citucentre.org/abtus/index.html.

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