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The Geographies of Intermediation: Labor Intermediaries, Labor Migration, and Cane Harvesting in Rural Western India

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The geographies of intermediation: Labor intermediaries, labor migration, and cane harvesting in rural western India

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Abstract

In this paper, I explain the role of labor intermediaries in the weaving of capital–labor relations in capitalist agro-business. I do so by focusing on migration infrastructure or the vertical network of labor intermediaries who facilitate labor recruitment from migrant home villages and migrant labor disciplining on cane fields in rural western India, where the laborers are brought seasonally to harvest sugarcane. I show how the role of labor intermediaries cannot be understood by containing them within the villainous stereotypes associated with brokers. Intermediaries are embedded within the labor geographies of commodity production where capital accumulation requires the downward transferring of the risk of financial loss from capitalist agro-business to intermediaries and laborers. I collected data for this research by conducting interviews and focus-group discussions in the Yavatmal and Kolhapur districts of Maharashtra state in rural western India during summer 2014 and 2015–2016.

Keywords

Brokers, intermediaries, labor geography, labor migration, sugarcane

Introduction

Among migrant communities, it is common to have an intermediary who mediates between parties, such as a labor migrant and an employer. A typical “broker” or “intermediary”

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embodies multiple expertise. They could be a “professional” or an amateur who is involved in labor recruitment by chance or because of their social position (Lindquist et al., 2012). Unlike the extensive literature on the causes and consequences of migrant departure from their home communities and arrival at their destinations, the literature on migration infrastructure, that is, the institutions, networks, and people that facilitate migrant mobility, is scant (Goss and Lindquist, 1995). Focusing on migration brokers instead of migrants allows for a conceptualization of the infrastructure that actualizes mobility. This focus on the infrastructure of migration and not on the migrants is a corrective to the “artifact of methodologies” in migration studies that have paid little attention to entrepreneurs and brokers in migration at the cost of illuminating migrants and their families and communities (Hugo, 2004). Further, through ethnography and an application of qualitative methods, it becomes possible to problematize the binary view of brokers and brokerage as either altruistic social networks or profit-minded; it allows for the weaving of a more complicated narrative of brokering that fully incorporates profit, trust, and empathy, and not one or the other (Lindquist et al., 2012).

In this paper, I focus on labor intermediaries who mediate the migration of economically and socio-politically marginalized rural communities on a seasonal basis to the sugarcane fields of rural western India. By focusing on these intermediaries, called “Muqaddams” (my anglicized pluralization of the *Muqaddam*), and their facilitation of capital–labor relations, I make the following claims in the rest of the paper. Note that Muqaddams are village-based labor intermediaries responsible for labor recruitment from their home villages and labor supervision on distant cane fields. I show how Muqaddams are embedded within the labor geographies of commodity production, where capital accumulation requires the downward transferring of the risk of financial loss to intermediaries and laborers. I show that for labor intermediaries and laborers, the work of cane harvesting entails enduring the burden of managing potential risks of a loss of reputation, which affects their employability during future harvesting cycles.

In the following section, I focus on the role of labor and labor intermediaries in the growth of the sugar capitalist agro-business in India, through their management of labor recruitment. I then discuss the methods employed for data collection and the study sites. In the second half of this paper, I discuss (a) how Muqaddams recruit laborers in their home villages; (b) the social relations that the Muqaddams enter into with other intermediaries, such as, truckers, who are often owners of large-haul trucks, and mediate between village-based Muqaddams and sugar factories, and with laborers, sugar factories, and cane farmers; and (c) the politics of labor disciplining on migrant destinations (cane fields), which brings all the aforementioned actors in social relations of conflict and cooperation. Lastly, I outline the two empirical and theoretical contributions of this research and conclude with a discussion on the future of cane-labor intermediation in India and, more broadly, of agrarian change.

Situating the intermediary

A “broker” is best understood in particular ethnographic contexts, and reading a broker as a “sociological type” (cf. Weber, 1978) allows the figure of the broker to be deciphered in multiple socio-historical contexts (Barker et al., 2013). The identity of a broker relates to their location, temporality, and power, and is not fixed in space and time (Boissevain, 1974). Yet, the classic “broker” in academic research and policy remains stereotyped as a ruffian who illegally entices migrants into exploitative conditions such as trafficking into sex work (Doezema, 2010). Scholars have stereotyped brokers as generally inherently amoral/

immoral, untrustworthy, and intent on maximizing individual gains (James, 2011), “Janus-like” (Wolf, 1956), and someone who manipulates people and information and profits from his work of information transfer (Boissevain, 1974). In the context of international migration within Asia, migration brokers have occupied a distinctly demonized position that is connected to the production of “free” and “unfree” labor (McKeown, 2008). For instance, brokers are central to the global concern on human trafficking, producing a priori the distinction between brokers as the perpetrators, contra migrants, who are the victims (Doezema, 2010). However, this is not true of all brokerage. The relations between donors and development recipients are mediated by NGOs that are widely considered as grassroots organizations manned by “moral fieldworkers” who do “good work” (Fisher, 1997). Functionally, labor brokers are key private actors involved in the regulation of international migration. A stark example of this are the migrant laborers who wait in lines at Bangladesh’s Dhaka airport, wearing the uniform of their future employers after having paid a substantial sum of money to the broker to purchase a passport, acquire visas, and book flights and accommodation at the destination, often, in the Middle East (Stalker, 2000). Migrants often pay the brokers higher charges compared to what is mandated by government regulations (Stalker, 2000), thus muddling the difference between labor brokers and traffickers (Castree et al., 2004).

I argue in this paper that the role of brokers and intermediaries is not just to facilitate labor migration but also to put into motion class relationships. The relationship between laborers and the capitalists who purchase the labor power of the laborers exists in and outside of the workplace, and this combination defines the labor market; that is, the quantitative and qualitative matching of labor supply with labor demand through labor-market intermediaries who match workers with employers (Castree et al., 2004). Migrant brokers or intermediaries are precariously located in the midst of capital and migrant-labor relations. Lindquist (2015) has shown that international migration intermediaries who broker labor migration from rural Indonesia to the palm-oil plantations of Malaysia are always at the potential risk of losing their savings because they make loans to the laborers recruited by them in order to secure the contract. These loans risk being defaulted on. As labor and capital are set in motion by the intermediaries for the recruiters, Lindquist shows that the risks and debit/credit relationship are borne at the level of the home village of the migrants. Similarly, local NGO workers who rely on international donors risk losing their jobs as the global economic cycles of boom and bust impact donor funding to the NGOs. Scholarship in geography has, however, little to say about internal migration and the migration infrastructure that facilitates it.

Historically, sugar production has been a technical and political challenge, as well as a challenge in terms of labor recruitment. These challenges have materialized in the germination and expansion of the sugarcane industry in post-colonial western India. The early plantation system was agro-industrial because, under one authority, it combined agriculture and processing. It had three essential features. First, the operational discipline, or what is proximate to the modern-day vertical integration, because both the mill and the field needed to be productive together, not separately. Second, the labor force, part-skilled and part-unskilled, was organized in terms of the plantation’s overall productivity goals. Third, time-consciousness was infused through all phases of plantation-system life, which was a result of the sugarcane agro-ecology and cane-processing requirements (Mintz, 1959). The problem of labor recruitment and availability has been a historical one and continues to affect current sugar production, particularly in India.

Labor and the Indian sugar industry

Beginning in the late 19th century, the agrarian landscape in western Maharashtra in India underwent rapid transformations due to the construction of large-scale irrigation canals originally intended to provide famine protection through the extensive irrigation of subsistence crops like sorghum and millet. Farmers' apathetic adoption of the irrigation infrastructure led, in 1909, to the enforcement of new (colonial) irrigation policies that then resulted in the more intensive use of canal water for cane cultivation (Attwood, 1992). Specifically, the construction of the Pravara canal in 1920 and the Godavari canal in 1921 ushered in large-scale cane cultivation in western Maharashtra (Baviskar, 1980). In 1932, the Imperial Deccan Canals Financial Improvements Committee recommended the establishment of sugar factories to encourage cane cultivation. The Colonial State offered entrepreneurs facilities and concessions to secure land leases, rent fixations, and low-cost supply of canal water. Importantly, a protective duty imposed by the colonial government on imported sugar in 1932 allowed the modern Indian sugar industry to emerge (Baviskar, 1980). Note that in this period, Latin American countries like Cuba and Brazil and European Pacific Island and African colonies dominated the global sugar industry (Sato, 2015).

Toward the end of the first quarter of the 20th century, in villages where canal irrigation was implemented, labor demand surged. Irrigation led to double-cropping and perennial cropping, which led to an increase in labor demand at regular intervals. Sugarcane cultivation in the Deccan generated annual employment for around 100,000 hired laborers annually (Attwood, 1992). When dry villages that were not in the irrigated command area in the region suffered from crop failure, laborers from these villages found work in the canal tracts. The Deccan canals increased employment avenues in the region in two stages: first, through opportunities to construct the canal, and later, the laborers who came to construct the canals settled to work as agricultural laborers. Later, more laborers migrated permanently from the dry villages especially farmers from the dry villages that had experienced failed rains. Rising labor demand resulted in an increase in wages for laborers (Attwood, 1992).

In India, the first four sugar "cooperative" factories were set up around 1933–1935 but only one of them survived. The first cooperative factory in independent India was the Pravara cooperative factory in western Maharashtra, established in 1951 (Baviskar, 1980). Cooperative sugar factories are large industrial units with a membership/shareholding of 2000–4000 cane-growing farmers over 50 to 100 villages, where 200,000 to 400,000 metric tons of cane is crushed annually over seven months (Baviskar, 1980). These units employed between 1000 and 6000 people directly or contractually and the organization of the cooperative is hierarchically structured. For instance, within the agriculture department of sugarcane cooperatives, the "line structure" begins at the top with the agricultural office and proceeds to "agricultural overseers," who are responsible for farm supervision and advising cane farmers. The overseers are responsible for cane harvesting and transportation. The agricultural overseers are assisted by groups of fieldsmen who coordinate with individual farmer-shareholders and the Muqaddams, who, in turn, manage migrant laborers employed for cane harvesting (Baviskar, 1980). In the next section, I focus on the centrality of Muqaddams in the constitution of capital–labor relations in India, especially in the sugar agro-industry.

Muqaddams and capital–labor relations in the Indian sugar agro-industry

Since the 1930s, migrant workers have been brought from all over India for the construction of irrigation canals and dams and to work on plantations. Intermediaries recruited labor

from home villages, and their power has been significant locally, although a chain of subcontracting facilitates labor circulation itself (Picherit, 2009). The ubiquity of the labor intermediary in industry and labor organization in India has led to their portrayal as a social archetype and a cultural artifact, a surviving pre-industrial figure, and an institution suited to the specificities of Indian culture and conditions (Chandravarkar, 1994). The approach to migration brokerage in labor markets has been normative and moralistic despite the dynamic historical persistence of the broker. These perspectives have presented migrant brokers as impeding the collective organization of workers and freedoms in the labor market. Political brokers are seen as restraining democracy and the free choice of the voters, while development brokers are understood as impeding development and related state policies. The prediction of the demise of brokerage in the normative approach to democracy, state, and capitalism has been inaccurate. Recent research has underscored a reappearance of the role of brokers in various spheres impacted by globalization. Particular emphasis has been on development and state resources, labor migration, global production networks and industries, and politics. New research has highlighted the agency of labor brokers, the incongruity of their positions vis-à-vis castes and classes, populations and institutions, and social power. The latest research has placed emphasis on the skills of the labor intermediaries, their ability to navigate variegated social groups and geographical spaces, modes of governance and forms of power, and moralities and economies (Picherit, 2018).

Muqaddams recruit laborers and sign contracts with them for the sugar factories. The factories remain outside the purview of the contracts signed between the intermediaries and the laborers. Muqaddams serve as the recruiting agent in laborers' home villages, supervisors of the harvesting work, and the boss at the campsite (Breman, 1979). Muqaddams facilitate the building of social relations between the cane fields and the world outside, including negotiating relations between parties with divergent interests. They share the social context of the cane cutters and work closely with them (albeit in a different capacity) during the harvest season (Breman, 1990), while serving as the "ears and eyes of the [cane] factory" (Breman, 1978: 45).

The number of teams that a Muqaddam may recruit is determined by the factories, based on the Muqaddam's record of service to the factory, which includes their length of service, trustworthiness, and meticulousness. Thereafter, the factory enters into a contract with the Muqaddam. Factories make advance payments that seal the contracts between the laborers and the Muqaddam (Breman, 1978). Breman identifies two categories of Muqaddams: the *gadavalas*, that Muqaddams who bring to the fields his laborers plus a bullock-cart. They also carry cane from the fields to the factories. The second category is the *koytavalas*, whose laborers limit themselves to cutting and loading cane onto the trucks that transport the cane to the factories (Breman, 1978). Muqaddams occasionally head their own teams and bring them to the cane fields to help with the cutting when the numbers of cutting teams working for him are few. A Muqaddam must ensure that cane harvests tied in bundles are always ready to be picked up by the factory. Therefore, he must manage labor and labor time (Breman, 1978). While a few scholars argue that all laborers could graduate to the position of Muqaddams (de Haan, 1996), others have argued convincingly that upward mobility is challenging in the sense that potential Muqaddams must demonstrate certain personal capabilities and their potential employers should be convinced by currently employed Muqaddams of the trustworthiness of these potential hires. Laborers interested in eventually working as Muqaddams must demonstrate loyalty to their Muqaddam for several years, his ability to respond to the Muqaddam's needs, and his ability to serve the Muqaddam (Picherit, 2009).

On the cane fields, Muqaddams elevate themselves from cane cutters by not participating in the work of harvesting and, instead, instructing and supervising the migrant laborers (Breman, 1979). More recently, scholars have demonstrated that in India, labor intermediaries attach great importance to the notion of respectability, which crisscrosses linked spheres such as caste, religion, economics, and politics (Picherit, 2009). The organization and circulation of labor in India are linked to these spheres. Muqaddams fail in their role when they are unable to recruit efficient laborers because they do not have enough savings to make large advance payments to hire experienced laborers and are unable to organize work during harvesting. They are also seen as failing in their role when they are seen as being too diffident to the factory staff or to their laborers, too harsh toward the laborers, or not having strong ties with other Muqaddams (Breman, 1979). Sugar factories fully recognize the authority of the Muqaddam over his laborers, direct their orders to the laborers through the Muqaddam, and typically never interfere in conflicts between laborers and the Muqaddam (Breman, 1978). In their payments to the Muqaddams on the cane fields, the sugar factory deducts the advances paid to the Muqaddams (Breman, 1979). In southern India (Tamil Nadu state), in addition to receiving a bonus from sugar mills, intermediaries retain between 10 and 30% of labor wages as their “commission” (Guérin et al., 2009).

Cane labor migration in Maharashtra

Research methods

I conducted this research in six villages in Yavatmal district of eastern Maharashtra, which is home to laborers and labor intermediaries, and at two sugarcane fields and a sugar co-operative factory in Kolhapur district of western Maharashtra (see Figure 1). Maharashtra is ideal for this research, since a fifth of India’s sugarcane (6.8 million metric tons) is produced in the state alone over 900,000 hectares, which is close to one-fifth of the area under sugarcane cultivation in India (Indian Sugar Mills Association, 2018). Over half-a-million migrant laborers seasonally migrate within Maharashtra, often from the dryland areas to the cane fields, in order to harvest cane (Chandran, 2016).

The fieldwork for this research project happened in two phases: preliminary research in two villages in Yavatmal district during summer 2014, followed by interviews, observations, and focus-group discussions during summer and fall of 2015 and early spring of 2016. In total, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 14 Muqaddams and truckers and a focus-group discussion with 16 Muqaddams and truckers. Research participants were between 40–50 years of age and belong to a variety of agro-economic backgrounds including farming households, full-time agricultural laborers, and migrant laborers, that is, laborers who migrate seasonally to harvest cane and work on urban construction sites.

This research is part of a larger project to examine labor migration and social change in rural western India (Rai, 2013, 2018a, 2018b, 2019; Rai and Smucker, 2016). In Yavatmal district, I interviewed all the truckers and Muqaddams in five villages, and I conducted a focus-group discussion with truckers and Muqaddams in the sixth village. Additionally, in Kolhapur district, I conducted interviews with one Muqaddam at a cane field and with an agricultural officer in a sugar factory. The Muqaddam I interviewed in Kolhapur was employed on a contract by the sugar factory, which is standard practice. Additionally, I observed harvesting in two cane fields in the region from where the harvested cane is transported to the factory.

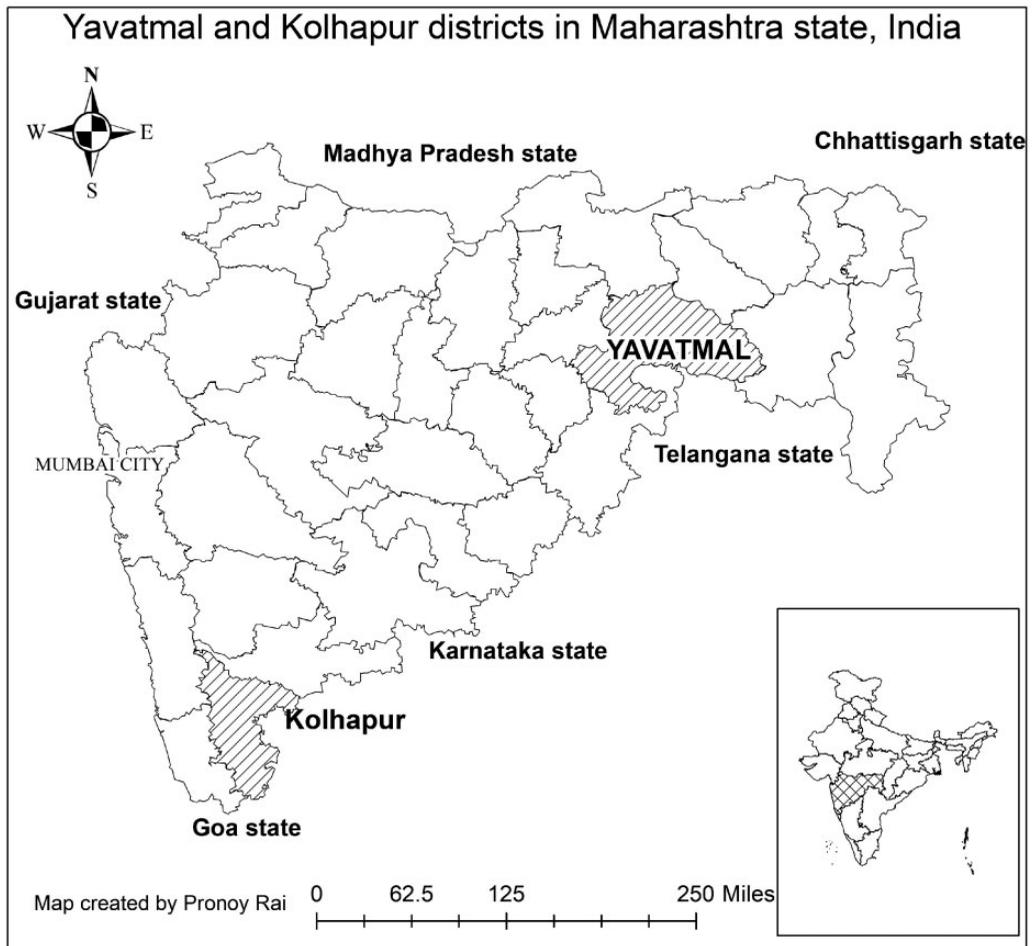


Figure 1. Location of Yavatmal and Kolhapur districts in western India.

Recruiting at home: Strategies

In Maharashtra, labor recruitment by Muqaddams typically happens during summer, when seasonal migrant laborers are back in their home villages after working in the cities, and opportunities for farm work in their dryland home villages is limited. Laborers are hired in groups that generally have an equal number of women and men. The group (called *toley* in Maharashtra) consists of 16–20 laborers, who are generally from the Muqaddam's kinship network. The Muqaddams and truckers (more on them below) who participated in this research were from the formerly nomadic tribes (called *Banjaras*, in Maharashtra) and other constitutionally recognized tribal communities (called "scheduled tribes.") No women Muqaddams or truckers were available for this research. This is not as surprising, because sugar mills rarely recognize women as being "capable" of serving as intermediaries (Guérin et al., 2009).

Prior to the departure of the laborers to the cane fields, Muqaddams facilitate the signing of work contracts between the truckers and the laborers. At their destinations,

a Muqaddam's primary responsibility is to ensure that laborers harvest a certain quantity of cane as agreed with the cane factories.

Muqaddams adopt various strategies to recruit laborers. A Muqaddam explained,

[Migrant] laborers are poor. They are always in need of large sums of money for family events like weddings. Therefore, we give them a significant loan to hire them. Thereafter, around October or November, toward the beginning of the harvest season, we drive them in large trucks to the cane fields (Personal communication with a Muqaddam, July 10, 2014).

Recruitment through loans cuts both ways; it ties up laborers with Muqaddams in exploitative labor arrangements, as I will explain later in this paper, but it provides laborers rare access to a large credit. Muqaddams also make loans to marginal farmers for purchasing seeds, which the farmers repay by harvesting cane commensurate to the principal and interest. Muqaddams generally consult with their relatives and friends for referrals to hire laborers. A Muqaddam explained, "We, generally, only recruit relatives or close friends. Unfamiliar people could leave the cane fields without finishing work and reimbursing unpaid loans." (Personal communication with a Muqaddam, July 23, 2015.) Are Muqaddams worried about the urban labor market as a potential pull factor for rural labor migrants?

Muqaddams are deeply aware of the distinct disadvantages that non-local, rural migrant laborers have in urban labor markets. A Muqaddam explained,

We pay a lump sum loan to the laborers. In our home village and in the cities, laborers typically earn wages. In cities, [rural] laborers do not always receive these wages. The builders and contractors in cities are thugs. Rural laborers cannot summon the courage to bargain for or demand fair wages from these people. The laborers are all alone in the city without friends and relatives, with whom they could socialize. In the sugarcane fields, wage payment is guaranteed and is made in advance (Personal communication with a Muqaddam, July 2, 2014).

Muqaddams understand that their potential recruits have two options: first, to find work in urban workplaces where wage theft – or the denial of wages rightfully owed to the laborers – is common, and migrants, foreign to urban worksites and labor relations, cannot bargain for better wages or act against wage theft. Muqaddams understand that the laborers, adept at and familiar with working in caste and gender homogeneous social groups in their home villages and other rural sites, find themselves in the absence of this sociality in the cities. The second option is to migrate seasonally to harvest cane. On cane fields, it is unclear if laborers are adequately compensated for any extra cane harvested beyond the loan paid to them. In these fields, laborers work under physically and mentally exploitative work conditions. As laborers make their decision whether to sign contracts to eventually migrate out to work in the cane fields, laborers weigh these against the guaranteed payment of a loan, additional payment for surplus cane harvested, and an opportunity to work in a familiar rural landscape with their extended kinship network.

Being recruited: Muqaddams, truckers, and sugarcane factories

In addition to the Muqaddams, the migration infrastructure that facilitates labor recruitment and migration includes sugarcane truckers. Sugar factories sign legal contracts with the truckers to secure cane supply. The harvested cane is required to be transported from the cane fields to the factories for processing into sugar and other by-products. Additionally,

truckers work with Muqaddams to transport cane laborers from their home villages to sugarcane fields, from one field and another, and back to their home villages at the end of the harvest season.

Truckers are embedded in their local agrarian economies. Truckers, who are also affluent landowning farmers, purchase trucks from their savings generated over many years from agricultural incomes. In other cases, Muqaddams “graduate” to become truckers by buying trucks from their savings generated over several years from their work as Muqaddams. Both Muqaddams and truckers are undoubtedly street smart, that is, they have a keen understanding of the “dynamics of actually existing capitalism” (Akhtar, 2011: 173). The sugar factories provide truckers with the wages for migrant cane cutters, which are expected to be distributed to the laborers through Muqaddams. However, the loans that Muqaddams make to the laborers during the hiring season, in reality, flows from the truckers to the laborers through Muqaddams, that is, Muqaddams make loans to the laborers using loans advanced by the truckers. Therefore, the truckers retain as much of the labor wages paid by the sugar factory as necessary as reimbursement for the loans. Muqaddams cover all other labor expenses. A Muqaddam explained,

Truckers make loans out to us but there are incidental expenses. Sometimes laborers don't have enough money to buy food, alcohol, medicines, and such during the harvest season and they expect loans to be made for these expenses too. Not all truckers make loans for these expenses even after paid expenses have been accrued (Personal communication with a Muqaddam, July 23, 2015).

To be clear, all loans made to the laborers are recovered from their wages. So, the loans, while a “generous” gesture from Muqaddams and truckers, are not bonuses earned by the laborers. Second, there is no standard formula for the calculation of the percentage of the total wages to be paid in advance to the laborers. Instead, the lump-sum advance is determined to a large extent by the availability of funds with Muqaddams, their general estimate of the extent of harvesting work that would be available for the laborers, and the negotiations between laborers and Muqaddams.

Truckers and Muqaddams may not be related but truckers must be able to trust Muqaddams with finances and labor. Often, Muqaddams and truckers have been colleagues for several years, friends, or close acquaintances. This trust is critical for the trucker–Muqaddam relationship to operate. A Muqaddam explained, “I worked for the trucker for seven years as a [cane migrant] laborer. He and I became acquainted and he eventually started trusting me with [managing] the laborers. That's how he came to hire me” (Personal communication with a Muqaddam, October 28, 2015). In addition to this trust, Muqaddams also sign a legal work contract with truckers that obligates Muqaddams to employ labor necessary to harvest cane in specific sugarcane fields.

Sugar factories offload all risks related to labor productivity on to the truckers and Muqaddams. Muqaddams risk the loss of their reputation in the market and future contracts. So too, the truckers are expected to handle any wage-related grievances. For instance, laborers expect to be paid for the period when they are “on the bench,” between one round of harvest and the next. Sugar factories sometimes delay making this payment to the laborers, leading to increased tensions between the laborers and the truckers on the cane fields. Truckers, in these cases, pay the laborers out of pocket and are eventually reimbursed by the factories.

Sugar factories employ multiple managerial measures to minimize the risk of loss due to labor productivity. This includes signing legal contracts with groups of truckers instead of

individual truckers that enforce harvest delivery requirements on the truckers. A group is led by a trucker with longstanding professional relations with the sugar factory and substantial collateral to offer, often in the form of a couple of trucks, in case of harvest loss due to labor issues. Any such loss is borne by the group of truckers, although the penalties paid by individual truckers is not equal. A trucker explained,

Cane factories sign contracts with us as a group. A group generally consists of three to six truckers and we share the risk [of financial loss resulting from low labor productivity.] Factories ask us to offer our trucks and tractors as collateral. So, if my Muqaddam is unable to fulfill the contract and harvest the agreed-upon acreage of cane, I may lose my vehicles to the sugar factory and in some cases, the other truckers in the group would also have to pay a penalty. If they are unable to pay the penalty, they are never hired again and get entangled in court cases and lose money (Personal communication with a trucker, July 10, 2014).

Thus, sugar factories offload risk through a complex web of risk-sharing that allows them to place the highest risk on the specific truckers whose employed laborers “cause” any harvest losses. The rest of the relatively lower risk is distributed among the remaining truckers in the group. In signing contracts with the cane factories, truckers, therefore, bear the risk of losing income, collateral, reputation, and potential future contracts.

Upon the satisfactory delivery of harvested cane, Muqaddams and truckers are paid commissions. Sugar factories pay laborers around 190 Indian Rupees for harvesting a metric ton of cane; 18% of this is paid to Muqaddams as commission, while transportation costs are reimbursed to the truckers and they are paid additional bonuses. Since the laborers receive wages as loans, the creditor (truckers and/or Muqaddams) retains labor wages as reimbursement. These payments are withheld if sugar factories are not satisfied with the quantity or quality of harvested cane delivered to them.

The labor regime in cane harvesting can be described as “predatory capitalism.” There is little free labor in the labor processes in cane harvesting (Breman, 1979). Debts allow Muqaddams to control the laborers, first by recruitment through loans and then by exploiting their labor on the cane fields. In cases where the laborers are unable to reimburse the loan, they find themselves forced to return to work in the next harvesting season. Given the financial stakes for the Muqaddams, they do not hesitate from using extra economic measures to exploit the laborers (Breman, 1990). The spatial mobility of labor often results in reduced freedom for the laborers. This is because laborers are burdened by the costs associated with migration (especially travel) and their ability to negotiate is severely compromised by their indebtedness due to the payment of an advance and the role of the intermediary in labor recruitment and supervision, resulting in “multiple asymmetries” and very high exit costs to labor (Guérin et al., 2009).

When the intermediaries lack resources themselves, they must be able to mobilize capital, through moneylenders, if necessary. This allows the intermediaries to supplement, during the harvest season, the advances that they make to the laborers prior to the start of the harvest, to meet labor demands for more/better food, cigarettes, alcohol, sweets for family, medicines, and for subsistence between two harvest contracts when the laborers are on the bench without work (Guérin et al., 2009). The intermediary’s influence is undercut by those who make credit to him, which he needs to then extend as an advance to the laborers (Picherit, 2009). While this section is generally focused on the capital end of the capital–labor relations, to understand how labor intermediaries like the truckers and Muqaddams actualize these relations, I focus next on how labor is managed and disciplined by the intermediaries on the cane fields of Maharashtra.

Managing migrants: Living and working in the canefields

In the distant and remote sugarcane fields, accessing affordable food is a challenge. Laborers generally buy subsidized food grains through the government's subsidized food-distribution stores in their home villages and transport it along with them to the cane fields. When the laborers exhaust the food grains, they select one person in their group to return to their home village to purchase and bring more grain bags for all laborers in the group. Note, however, that each laborer has access to a limited quantity of food entitlement. Laborers also buy food grains from relatively expensive local roadside stores. Since the government-run stores sell only wheat, rice, and sugar, laborers often have Muqaddams travel to regional markets to buy additional groceries for them. The cost of the food items is credited to the laborers' "accounts" as a loan that they reimburse by harvesting more cane.

Muqaddams continuously supervise work on-site, live in the same tented areas alongside the cane fields where the laborers camp during the harvest season, chaperon sick laborers to health clinics, and when laborers depart from the fields without harvesting their share of cane, Muqaddams locate and persuade the laborers to return. Camping near the cane fields invites unique risks and inconveniences. A Muqaddam explained,

The cane fields are near forests and there is a risk of insect- and scorpion-bites. The laborers live in temporary tents made of tarpaulin or plastic that are a hassle during the rains. Our home villages are better places to live and work (Personal communication with a Muqaddam, July 4, 2014).

Since a Muqaddam and his laborers are often from the same kinship network, Muqaddams find it easier to discipline the laborers, which would be relatively difficult among a group of unfamiliar employees. Muqaddams, in addition to supervising laborers, sometimes work alongside their labor group to harvest cane. Doing so allows Muqaddams to earn both a commission and receive wages. Muqaddams argue that labor efficiency tends to increase when they work alongside the laborers. However, generally, only poorer Muqaddams work the "second shift" as a laborer for additional income.

Persuasion plays a key role in labor management. A Muqaddam explained,

Laborers would simply return home [to their home villages] if I tried forcing them to work in the field using violence or coercion. Whenever they are angry, annoyed, or just disinterested in working, I sweet talk them into working. There is no other way (Personal communication with a Muqaddam, July 23, 2015).

Muqaddams exercise caution in hiring laborers to ensure labor compliance. As a Muqaddam clarified, "We never hire people who can't take orders from us" (Personal communication with a Muqaddam, July 23, 2015). To calm tempers at the work site and to keep laborers interested in their work, Muqaddams resort to gifting laborers meat, liquor, and tobacco. When laborers leave without harvesting their share of cane and they cannot be cajoled into returning to work, sugar factories, through Muqaddams, freely deploy violence. One Muqaddam explained,

If we can track the laborer down, we would forcibly hand them over to the sugar factories who get the laborers arrested by the police. The laborers sign a contract with the truckers to harvest the cane. Police beat up the laborers in the prison and only let them free when the laborers

compensate the factory for their loss. Of course, if the laborer just escapes and we can't find them, we can't do anything (Personal communication with a Muqaddam, July 23, 2015).

Just as sugar factories transfer risk down to truckers and Muqaddams, the Muqaddams do the same to discipline labor groups. When a laborer from a group departs to their home village without harvesting enough cane to pay off their loans, Muqaddams require the remaining members of the labor group to compensate for the loss of labor power by forcing individual laborers to harvest additional cane. When migrant laborers return from the cane fields to their home villages without completing their harvesting job, Muqaddams and truckers resort to both pleading and threatening the laborers to bring them back to the cane fields. Truckers often confiscate any belongings of such laborers left behind in the cane fields, but the value of these belongings is often insufficient to compensate for the loss of labor power. Yet, this return migration of the laborers without fulfillment of contractual obligation is not because the laborers have a better job offer. During a focus-group discussion, a trucker recounted a poignant incident:

Last year, one of the migrant laborers that I had transported to the cane fields killed himself in the cane fields. I had paid him an advance of INR 100,000 to harvest the cane. So, I lost the money. After his death, his friends also left the cane field in shock and grief. During that harvest season, I ended up incurring huge losses (Focus-group discussion with intermediaries on September 15, 2015).

Muqaddams are expected to have funds to cover significant incidental expenses for laborers during the harvest season and, therefore, must have enough savings. A Muqaddam explained,

Muqaddams should have the cash to pay laborers, regardless of whether Muqaddams themselves have received loans from truckers. For example, during the harvest season, laborers take a break and return to their home villages to participate in village festivities like weddings. Before leaving, the laborers ask us for additional loans and we are expected to have the cash to make those loans out. The truckers can't make loans on short notice, in turn, for us to pay to the laborers (Focus-group discussion with intermediaries, September 15, 2015).

Muqaddams must also have savings to make loans to the laborers for them to visit clinics and purchase medicines and expensive food such as meat. For Muqaddams to be successful in recruiting and retaining labor, they must fulfill the expectations of a credit provider.

When Muqaddams use force and violence to control laborers, they are aware of the support and backing provided to them by the sugar factories. Laborers respond with violence rarely (Bremen, 1990). In Tamil Nadu state, intermediaries are able to control "fugitive" laborers through sanctions and punishments advanced by local caste leaders and friendly muscle men who are assigned by the intermediaries to help them supervise the laborers (Guérin et al., 2009). In Andhra Pradesh state in southern India, violence and exploitative methods alone are insufficient for brokers to bind laborers; instead, intermediaries strengthen their ties with same-caste henchmen and political brokers in order to respond to the demands of the laborers, which include employment, wages, development programs, and physical safeguarding. For intermediaries, their reputation as someone able to protect the laborers from their own caste is their main asset. Therefore, intermediaries cannot rely on violence and coercion alone to build their relations with the laborers (Picherit, 2018).

Discussion

I show in this research that the orthodox stereotyping of labor intermediaries as exploitative is simplistic. The Muqaddams in western India are entangled in a complex capital–labor relation that starts with sugar factories and connects truckers and laborers. Sugar factories bear low risks of loss due to labor inefficiency, transferring it down to the Muqaddams and the truckers, who attempt to transfer it down to the laborers by enforcing a regime of incentives (loans) and discipline (exploitation). What helps the Muqaddam–laborer relation is the fact that they are often from the same kinship network and inhabitants of the same village, while the sugar factory is the “foreign” entity. Labor intermediaries attempt to strike the right balance between “authority” and “proximity,” as they find themselves clasped under contradictory pressures from sugar-factory managers and workers (Guérin et al., 2009). For an intermediary, a “highly unstable and fluid position” is the defining element of life (De Neve, 2014). Within labor processes, the category of the labor intermediary is ambivalent, unstable, and associated with instability and unpredictability (Picherit, 2009). De Neve has demonstrated that the skills, knowledge, and resourcefulness that contractors bring to the table are often undercut by the irregularity of work availability and payment regimes and the volatility of the workforce. These setbacks often affect contractors in ways that end up relegating the contractors back to the ranks of the laborers (De Neve, 2014).

The spatial labor relationships that this research captures include those between Muqaddams and laborers, Muqaddams and the truckers, and among truckers over a vast rural landscape that includes sugar agro-capitalism and cane fields in western Maharashtra and migrant home villages in the drylands of eastern Maharashtra. The narrative in this research clearly privileges the making of capitalism not entirely through the themes of accumulation but through the eyes of labor intermediaries who are actively involved in the production of spaces of (agro-) capitalism, thus coding Muqaddams within and central to the labor geographies (Herod, 1997) of sugar production in India.

Western India’s cane labor migration infrastructure – future?

Research participants have informed me that farmers in western Maharashtra have started to use sugarcane harvesters manufactured by New Holland, a Fiat-owned brand. This was especially propelled by state subsidies provided to farmers for the purchase of these harvesters. However, these subsidies have been undercut by the lack of applicability of the harvesters in small and increasingly fragmenting agricultural fields (Deininger et al., 2017). Other measures are being employed to change the terms of labor hiring in cane fields. The sugar-factory agriculture officer interviewed for this research anticipated increasing the commission paid out to truckers to 40% and potentially eliminating the provision of advance payments made to migrant cane cutters to reduce losses due to laborer inefficiency, in favor of payments made on a piece-rate basis. Muqaddams, however, are aware that they can hire younger laborers to work in the cane fields. A Muqaddam explained, “Rural youth these days try to attend school if they can. If they cannot find a job in urban factories, they work as cane cutters.” (Focus-group discussion with intermediaries on September 15, 2015)

In India, given that circulation at the bottom of the employment hierarchy does not create avenues for accumulation for labor (Picherit, 2018), cane labor is socially reproduced without any upward mobility in sight. Therefore, what remains unclear is both the future of this form of labor migration as well as the nature of agrarian change in India, as landless laborers find fewer sources of employment with the introduction of labor-saving technologies in traditionally labor-intensive farming. No change is possible in migrant-labor

conditions until the logic of the capitalist mode of production, which puts into motion the annual seasonal cycle of labor migration – steered by Muqaddams and truckers – is questioned.

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