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Experiencing space-time: the stretched lifeworlds of migrant workers in India

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Abstract

In the relatively rare instances when the spatialities of temporary migrant work, workers' journeys and labour market negotiations have been the subject of scholarly attention, there has been little work that integrates time into the analysis. In this paper, building on a case study of low-paid and insecure migrant manual workers in the context of rapid economic growth in India, we examine both material and subjective dimensions of these workers' spatio-temporal experiences. What does it mean to live life stretched out, multiply attached to

places across national space? What kinds of place attachments emerge for people temporarily sojourning rather than moving to new places to reside and work? Our analysis of the spatio-temporalities of migrant workers' experiences in India suggest that, over time, this group of workers use their own agency to seek to avoid the experience of humiliation and indignity in employment relations. Like David Harvey, we argue that money needs to be integrated into such analysis along with space and time. The resulting paper sheds light on processes of exclusion, inequality and differentiation, unequal power geometries and social topographies that contrast with neoliberalist narratives of 'Indian shining'.

Keywords: space-time, Harvey, temporary migration, migrant workers, India

Introduction

This paper is about the lifeworlds of temporary migrant workers employed in the fields and construction sites of eastern India in the twenty-first century. Our aim is to integrate time into the analysis of the spatial stretch of such workers' lives. Following Harvey, we propose that it is important to understand the political economy that gives shape to both the material and subjective dimensions of individual workers' spatio-temporal experiences. We critique the apparent universality of the concept of time-space compression, arguing that temporary migrant workers' experiences of space and time are influenced by their socio-demographic positioning in terms of class, age and gender, as well as by individual and collective agency. Along the way different geographical scales

are encountered – including workers’ bodies, housing, locality, region and nation – revealing multilayered inequalities of wealth in worlds that are both mutually constitutive and changing at different speeds

There has been relatively little research published on temporary migration for work within India. Noteworthy exceptions include the work on migration in collections recently edited by Saraswati Raju and colleagues (Raju et al, 2006; Raju, 2011; Raju and Lahiri-Dutt, 2011) and others who have specifically focused on the lifeworlds of manual workers (including Breman et al, 2009; Carswell and De Neve, forthcoming; Chari, 2006; Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan, 2003; Waite, 2006). Given the large numbers of people involved in such migration in India (UNDP, 2009), the relative lack of research is surprising. Yet the importance of temporary internal migration in other contexts is well known, particularly migration from rural to urban China – within geography, see for example, the work of Wang and Wu (2010).¹ Geographers will also be familiar with Don Mitchell’s (1996; 2010) exemplary historical work on the making of the Californian landscape by mobile agricultural workers in the early and mid-twentieth century.

¹ Short-term internal migration for work in India takes place in starkly different conditions from similar migration in China. Crucially India has no formal equivalent to the *hukou* system (see Cheng and Seldon, 1994; Zhang, 2002) through which in China the place where one is registered as resident brings with it differentiated social and economic rights and entitlements. Nevertheless, recent comparative research on housing in Shanghai and Mumbai shows fragmented urban citizenship rights in both cities, with uneven and inconsistent protection for recently arrived residents (Weinstein and Ren, 2009).

Chari's ethnographic contribution to the research on India contains rare spatio-temporal analysis of the working lives of migrants and others in the garment industry of the town of Tiruppur in Tamil Nadu (2006). Chari demonstrates the importance of double accumulation of surplus labour and surplus capital by capitalists. Along the way he highlights the contrasts between the work 'season' and 'dull' time, between working on piece rates and time rates, and the preference of some workers at later stages of their working lives for smaller-scale employers with less intensive work regimes (page 158). We will encounter such important temporalities in the spatial experiences of the migrant workers discussed in this paper, but we work outwards from the perspective of their main village of residence, where their families remain when they go off to earn money, thus highlighting the stretching out of migrant workers' lifeworlds.

As with Chari's work, Thieme and colleagues integrated spatial and temporal analysis in their research on migrant workers traveling to India from the westernmost part of Nepal (Pörtner et al, 2010; Thieme, 2006; Thieme et al, 2011) – across an international border, the openness of which rendered this movement almost equivalent to internal migration (Skeldon, 2006, page 20). Here too, we see changes in the experience of work over the life course, as well as differentiation between generations of migrants. The work and earnings of a small number of first generation migrants led to greater access for second and third generations to educational investment and land acquisition in Nepal. The third generation of these families no longer migrated for work, settling in the lowlands of Nepal and making the former movement to India obsolete, rarely travelling even to visit older family members in the hill region (Pörtner et al,

2010). Yet the majority of Nepalis migrating to India experienced very little social mobility. Jobs involving difficult shift work and irregular payments – such as nightwatchmen in Delhi - were often passed down from father to son.

Rogaly and colleagues' earlier research in India focused on migration to rural areas, revealing strong evidence of *informal* exclusion and marginalization of temporary migrant workers at the places they moved to for work (Rogaly et al, 2001; 2002). For example, rice harvest workers temporarily roughing it in employer-provided accommodation a long day's travel from home would not be able to access local crèche facilities or primary schools for the children they may have had to bring with them. Given that labour force segmentation of this kind – a secondary labour force imported or drawn in for particular tasks for specified periods of time – is critical to flexible accumulation worldwide, greater understanding is required of the spatiotemporalities involved.

The *political economy* of temporary migrant working – how the latter fits in to changing modes of capital accumulation – and the *spatial differentiation* of this process across India is emphasized by contributors to Breman et al (2009). *Time* is explicitly built into the book too – it contains chapters focused both on historical and contemporary periods and, while recognizing diversity, it narrates a generalized shift away from inherited relations of bondage to new forms of employment relations, which no longer include the protective aspects of patronage, but, albeit for shorter contractual periods, retain elements of unfreedom.

'labour mobility over short and long distances gave rise to new forms of labour bondage in a wide variety of seasonal work sites such as: brick kilns, saltpans, stone quarries, construction... as well as in agribusiness... the new forms of labour bondage can... be found in rural or urban-based industries. (pages 3-4)

Yet Thieme's research shows that in spite of the lack of social mobility, the flexibility and informality characterizing the employment conditions of Nepali migrants in Delhi were also appreciated by workers, enabling them to be involved in seasonal agricultural work and festivities back home. Moreover, some women came to Delhi for medical treatment and child-birth. In the rare cases when they stayed, having their own cash earnings enabled them to challenge patriarchal structures and to gain greater control over family budgeting and investments (Thieme, 2006; Thieme et al, 2011).

Nevertheless national scale historical research by Willem van Schendel (2006) describes a shifting gender division of paid work occurring in India since the middle of the nineteenth century. While women took up more labour-intensive and unpaid or poorly rewarded work in the rural economy, men shifted to the more capital-intensive urban work that helped to entrench the notion of male provider. Such historical accounts draw attention to the distribution of power in family and kinship relations and the way this resulted in particular deployments of the labour power of family members (page 244).

Like Thieme and colleagues' work, Van Schendel's observations also emphasize the stretching of migrant workers' lifeworlds across rural and urban economies (page 254). Some authors have used the term 'multilocality' to describe the simultaneous maintainance of living arrangements and social, cultural and economic relationships in different places within and across national borders (Watts, 1981; Deshingkar and Farrington, 2009; Rolshoven and Winkler, 2009; Schier, 2009; Thieme, 2008; 2010; forthcoming).

Our aim in this paper is to integrate time into a materialist analysis of the ways temporary migrant workers' multilocal lives stretch across space, and to provide glimpses of how these are experienced subjectively by workers themselves. This will add to the excellent work by anthropologists, for example that of Shah (2010), who showed how the indigenous rights movement in Jharkhand state in India led to the stricter application of rules of propriety in intimate relations among young people. Young people began to choose migration for brick kiln work because living spaces in the brick kilns were not subject to the same kind of surveillance and social control as living spaces at home were. So migration to the kilns for Shah could 'serve as a temporary space of freedom' (page 156). However, working in the brick kilns was, in Shah's words 'always seen as a temporary phase in a person's life' (page 154). Notice the in-built temporality here.

Another anthropologist Xiang Biao's recent work on the outmigration of workers from North East China to Japan, South Korea and Singapore, makes the case that 'temporal anxieties' experienced as 'rushing, waiting and suspension of life' are

produced both by rapid capitalist transformation in China and the immigration controls of receiving state (2010). Xiang Biao thus shows the importance of temporality in the stretched out lives of temporary manual work migrants. His work reveals the slow as well as uncomfortable, even dangerous journeys; the waiting, hanging around for work before being hired into intensive, fast paced employment regimes with minimal breaks in the working day.²

In beginning a discussion of the spatiotemporal materialities and subjectivities of internal migrants into, across and out of West Bengal, we draw here on a project that began as a collaboration between Rogaly and Abdur Rafique of Visva-Bharati University (see Rogaly et al, 2001; 2002; Rogaly and Rafique, 2003; Rafique and Rogaly, 2005; Rogaly et al, 2009). It culminated most recently in a set of translated and edited work-life history transcripts published as a book in West Bengal, entitled *Known Faces, Unknown Lives* (Rafique, 2010). This collection is based on research relationships developed by Rafique with men in a largely Muslim village in Murshidabad District of West Bengal since 1999, as well as briefer visits Rogaly has made there, and the work of Deeptima Massey, who completed her PhD fieldwork in the same village, which we have called Jalpara (see Massey, 2008).³ Murshidabad is one of the most densely populated districts

² In the introduction to his study of waiting among educated unemployed young men in north India's lower middle classes, geographer Craig Jeffrey draws attention to a 'growing literature based in different parts of the world on forms of "waiting" wherein people have been incited by powerful institutions to believe in particular visions of the future yet lack the means to realize their aspirations' (2010:3).

³ As with Jalpara, research participants are referred to using pseudonyms. Rogaly, who normally resides in the UK, carried out ethnographic research on migrant workers' employment relations in two villages in West Bengal over nine months in 1991-92 as part of his doctoral thesis. In 1999-2000 he was resident

of India's most densely populated state;⁴ land is unequally distributed and most households have micro holdings of their own cultivable land (a third to a half an acre would be typical). The division of labour is strongly gendered with men rather than women seen as responsible for earning cash in the majority of households that cannot get by without wage work.

Time-space expansion in a multi-speed India

In the final decades of last century, as was the case for other villages in the eastern part of Murshidabad District, Jalpara's largely agrarian economy underwent a dramatic transformation. During the 1980s and 1990s, staple crop production in the village intensified, enabled by the spread of private groundwater irrigation, powered initially by diesel engines and subsequently by electricity. A large share of the gains from the increased productivity were

in West Bengal for 19 months leading a larger project in which Rafique, who had lived in rural and small town West Bengal all his life, was one of five co-researchers, each of whom spent a year researching seasonal migration for manual work in one village using participant observation and semi-structured interviews and keeping detailed fieldnotes. Rafique was located in Jalpara and built up intimate relations with research participants there that continue up to the time of writing. Rogaly visited for short trips of two to three days at regular intervals. The transcripts drawn on in the present article were collected as part of a further collaborative project, during a period of Jalpara-based ethnographic research by Rafique in 2005-06, which included the recording of the work-life histories of thirteen men aged 21 to 67. Interviews were conducted and transcribed in Bengali by Rafique and translated into English with the help of Rahul Bose and Romy Danflous. *Known Faces, Unknown Lives* was first published in Bengali and has been made available to research participants. Deeptima Massey's thesis, which was supervised by Rogaly, focused on Jalpara women, most of whom stayed behind when men migrated.

⁴ Murshidabad's population density was 1,334 persons per square kilometre in 2011, high even by the standards of the state of West Bengal as a whole (1,029 persons per square kilometre). See provisional 2011 Census results table A2 available at http://censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-results/prov_data_products_wb.html accessed 18th November 2011.

captured by relatively few people, whether in the form of profits from crop sales, rental income from tenant cultivators or sales of irrigation water from the recently dug shallow tube wells.⁵ Groundwater irrigation shifted the seasonality of demand for wage workers – more days of work were required on each unit of land across the year as double and triple cropping became the norm, and rice (the major crop) continued to be both planted and harvested by hand.

Nevertheless most households had only miniscule holdings, were dependent on others for the supply of irrigation water, and could not get enough waged work locally to afford even a basic living throughout the year. Over time, as population grew and households split, the landholdings of this precariously placed majority continued to shrink in size while the available wage work had to be shared between greater numbers of people.

Together with an increase in demand for workers elsewhere in the state, these processes have meant that since the 1990s increasing proportions of young men from Jalpara have migrated away for temporary periods to work. Main destinations included first the intensively farmed irrigated rice fields of less densely populated districts of central West Bengal – as planters and harvesters – and latterly a combination of these agricultural work-places and urban-based construction sites in Kolkata and beyond (Bag, 2011, page 96). The demand for

⁵ ‘The water price remains high in the private water market, which is oligopolistic in nature’ (Khasnabis, 2008, page 114). Harriss-White’s (2007) work shows how the state government’s political accommodation with rice mills made the latter a major locus of accumulation as they exploited the large difference between the prices for a) rice sold to the government for selling on through the subsidized Public Distribution System; and b) unhusked paddy they bought from cultivators. However, accumulation by commercial capital is beyond the scope of this paper.

construction workers has been especially notable since the early 2000s, as India's economy has boomed with a growth of almost 8 per cent per year between 2000 and 2007 (Dicken, 2011, page 34).

Like the workers who participated in Xiang Biao's and Alpa Shah's studies, men from Jalpara did not experience time-space compression in the form David Harvey expounded on in *Condition of Postmodernity (CoP)*. Harvey wrote that 'in money economies in general, and in capitalist society in particular, the intersecting command of money, time, and space forms a substantial nexus of social power that we cannot afford to ignore.' (1990, page 226). While we concur with Harvey's emphasis in *CoP* on the importance of money (and therefore economic structure and class) in the equation, our data does not support his implication of a *generality* in the process of time-space compression, in which in his words 'the time horizons of both private and public decision-making have shrunk, while satellite communication and declining transport costs have made it increasingly possible to spread those decisions over an ever wider and variegated space' (1990, page 147).

The picture painted by Harvey did not ring true for the workers in Jalpara, who divided their lives between agriculture at home – whether earning wages from others or micro-scale farming on their own account - and various ways of earning money through periods of a few weeks or months spent elsewhere in West Bengal or further afield. As cash income necessarily played an increasing role in workers' livelihoods with a reduction in possibilities for subsistence production, so Cindy Katz's concept of time-space *expansion*, developed out of

her work in rural Sudan, became as important as any kind of compression. Agriculture in the village Katz studied became more stretched out over space, while village men increasingly migrated to various towns in Sudan and abroad. Katz's analysis resonates with our understanding of Jalpara. She wrote 'Time-space expansion embraces, reworks, and plays into the altered geographies of globalization... If in one way the known world expanded for people in [the Sudanese village she studied], in others their place in it receded as their village was increasingly marginalized.' (Katz, 2001, page 1225).

In Jalpara village marginalization was occurring at a number of scales. Locally, the greater concentration of wealth, meant that larger numbers of people needed to seek work further afield. At the same time, Jalpara, like many other parts of rural West Bengal, was not benefiting from the new developments in services, and especially in information technology that accounted for much of India's national economic advance (Khasnabis, 2008; Bag, 2011, page 87). If India was moving at two different speeds – one seeing the rapid development of urban middle-class consumer culture, the other an insecure rural and urban world of low-paid informal work – Jalpara was firmly part of the latter. As we shall see there were important differences in the spatiotemporalities of the relatively wealthy and the growing precariat (Standing, 2011) in Jalpara, while, in relation to developments in the national economy and infrastructure, *everybody* in the village was in the slow lane.

As Jon May and Nigel Thrift put it in the introduction to their book, *Timespace The Geographies of Temporality*, the standard narrative of time-space

compression was 'overdrawn'. Critiquing E.P. Thompson and other commentary, including Harvey's, on nineteenth and early twentieth century England, May and Thrift show not only that space variously both expanded and contracted, and time sped up and slowed down, but, that, citing Stein, one of the contributors to their collection, "there was in reality no single uniform urban time, but multiple times and multiple routines... factory work intersected with family, religious and domestic routines" (Stein cited in May and Thrift, 2001, page 15) and these had been based partly on clock time far before factory production regimes came into being, for example as measured by church bells. Crucially for the agenda of this Special Issue, May and Thrift's critique revealed a 'more general failure to consider the extent to which the experience of any such changes *differed* for *different* people – according in part to *where* a person lived... as well as to a person's social position' (2001, page 12, emphasis added).

Yet Harvey is of course interested in analyzing how and why experiences of space and time differ. Specifically in relation to migration, he argues that power shapes who migrates where, and, in particular, which rung of a migration hierarchy any particular worker has access to (Harvey, 1990, page 234).

Further, in looking again at the Jalpara material for this paper, we have found it useful to return to discussions of time and space in a more recent book of Harvey's *Cosmopolitanism and the Geographies of Freedom* (2009). Here, in a chapter entitled Spacetime and the World, Harvey insists, on the importance of

looking simultaneously and in an integrated way at spatiality and temporality.⁶ Harvey ends up arguing that there is a need for a better grasp of the dialectic of spacetime if a cosmopolitan project can emerge which is effective and productive for the mass of the population 'living in the deprived and marginalized spaces of the global capitalist economy' (page 165).

For Harvey, absolute, relative and relational ways of understanding space and time, and the relations between them, need to be kept in 'dialectical tension with each other' (page 134). Whereas *absolute* space is understood as 'fixed and immovable' and *absolute* time as linear, separating history from geography, in *relative* space-time, 'the standpoint of the observer plays a critical role in establishing perspectives' (page 135). Many people can be in the same place relative to someone else at the same time – seeing it another way, many specific locations may be equidistant from the same destination in terms of the time it takes to travel there. For example, for a wealthy resident of New Delhi, Murshidabad District is relatively close to West Bengal's state capital Kolkata; for the research participants, Kolkata and Jalpara are a long and draining overnight or day long bus or train journey apart and the journey includes either a five kilometre walk or a ride in a cycle pulled cart (rickshaw-van). Relational spacetime as an idea emerges from a search for the 'things, events, processes and socio-ecological relations that have produced [particular] places in spacetime' (page 140).

⁶ Just as the editors of this Special Issue have suggested we do in relation to processes of marginalization and exclusion.

Harvey holds that space and time (space-time, spacetime) are best viewed in all three ways – and if the question is posed in this broad way, the answer is likely to be expressed in terms of one or all of the absolute, relative and relational formulations. Rather than seeing these three concepts as hierarchically arranged, Harvey writes that he ‘find[s] it far more interesting in principle to keep them in dialectical tension with each other and to constantly think through the interplay among them. Ground Zero is an absolute space at the same time as it is located in relative space-time and has relational possibilities’ (page 141).

‘To earn enough to fill our stomachs takes such a lot of time’

In Jalpara, both time-space compression and expansion have been evident in a movement from everyone being dependent on the monsoon rains between June and October for the cultivation of a single crop to some people, particularly owners of tubewells and pumpsets, being able to cultivate three crops per year on their own account. *Money* comes in here – cultivation of irrigated crops and the sale of those crops has led some people to be able to accumulate and achieve greater control of land and water resources and to start relatively lucrative agricultural input and marketing businesses, closing off routes for others to be able to avoid waged employment. In Doreen Massey’s language the power geometries have shifted at various scales. While some were able to use time and space compression to their advantage, others’ short-term geographical mobility was a product of a lack of choice (Massey 1993, pages 61–62).

The changes in absolute space over absolute time included the pursuance of cultivation over every inch of available field to the edges of homesteads thus making less grazing land available for people - often without land of their own - who relied on being able to graze livestock as part of their living. The narratives published in Rafique's book informed our understanding of the process of land use change in Jalpara. Ten participants had worked as shepherd boys as children and recalled grazing sheep, goats and cattle for their own or other families. One man, Anwar Sheikh recalled his own and his brother's work:

Since we didn't own any livestock, I used to shepherd for others. I herded cows and goats. The landowner would only give me food, or a pair of shorts. I was not paid any cash wages... In our area, no one pays you in cash when you are thirteen or fourteen. I had to live in other families' households throughout the year. Tending goats is a big responsibility. Foxes would prey on them. Even you, who are an adult, would not be able to prevent foxes snatching the goats away. One day a goat was snatched away from my eldest brother. The owner beat him up saying, "What were you doing when the goat was stolen? Playing or what?" "No", he replied. "I was bringing them along the *al* [low mud boundary between fields] in a line." When you have fifteen or sixteen goats walking on the *al*, in a line, there's a big distance between the first and the last... The family scolded him anyway, and beat him up. He came back angry, and didn't eat anything. He was just cursing and saying, "I won't work for them anymore."

For Anwar's brother, from a poor family, with no option but to herd goats for others, the relative space-time of the *al* when goats are walking on it is experienced as an obstacle – a distance too great to survey, time insufficient to catch a thief, animal or human. The changing use of the absolute space of the fields had changed over absolute time to push herders to cover longer distances, and to have to stretch out lines of livestock on return. The social and economic inequality that gave the richer family impunity for the physical punishment of Anwar's brother was produced in relational spacetime.

As the men grew into their mid and late teens they remembered starting to do waged work in other, richer, local people's fields. This continued to be part of the experience of several men after they married, had children and split from their parents' households to live in autonomous units. It was stressed by many that payment for work done for local employers was only rarely received at the end of the day's work, and often workers had to wait weeks or even months. For example, Samsed Seikh said his family was 'completely dependent on our physical labour'. However, he continued, 'the landowners make us work and then keep our wages pending for about twenty days'. Badsha Ali described the difficulty of paying off debts (run up by most households for regular expenses such as groceries, as well as larger items like health care) through working for local employers: 'the problem is that wages aren't always paid regularly if you work in your own village.' Similarly, according to Rakib Seikh,

here in Jalpara, if I go to work for you now and do work which is worth fifty rupees, then ask you for the money – you might say, "wait, I'll give it

to you in two days time". Maybe I'll get two rupees or five rupees at a time but that's not much help. That way it all gets spent.

This was one manifestation of difference in experiences of space and time between richer and poorer men in Jalpara. Another was the need that poor villagers had to seek the help of generally better off informal group leaders or formally elected political representatives. Badsha Ali was telling Rafique the story of his failed attempt to get the correct identity documents required to receive state subsidies on basic goods:

Once I went to the [local council] office but [it] was closed. So I came back. It's just that to earn enough money to fill our stomach takes up such a lot of time that there's not a spare moment. It costs twenty rupees to go on top of losing a day's wage. If I leave my work, that landowner will employ someone else. So I'd lose the job too. It's a highly problematic situation. Thinking of all this puts me off from going.... Today I have no work but the office is closed so nothing happens.

Salaried bureaucrats were likely to expect poor Jalpara residents to wait for any kind of service, including that of gaining school admission for their children, a key activity in a state where the proportion of children dropping out of primary school at 64 per cent in 2007-08 exceeded the figure for India as a whole by almost half (Bag, 2011, page 97). Samsed traveled to Kapasia high school for his daughter's admission. He reflected that 'no one listens to poor people like us. If I

told the school authorities to do something, they would just say “wait, wait and wait in the queue”. They are very insolent.’

Anwar Seikh thought the size of one’s *samaj* or clan made a difference to whether you were listened to by a local politician. He has long been frustrated in trying to get the same crucial identity documents referred to by Badsha Ali:

We are not a big group – our *samaj* is small. We don’t have many votes. There are only three of us brothers – so three times two, six votes, maximum nine. When they see a group of twenty potential voters, they will help. Everything is sorted out in five minutes. But our family isn’t like that. We can’t even afford to oil our hair. So they don’t help us. If we call them because there is something they need done, they will say ‘I don’t have time now; I’m off to Topedanga or to Baharampur. I don’t even have five minutes to spare. So I can’t do anything today.’ But I need him on that day and he says he’ll come the day after. How can I get my own work done? This is how the village ‘heavyweights’ behave with us, the poor.

Better off people like the elected representatives referred to here experienced relative space-time of travel to the main district town of Baharampur differently from manual workers. Travel to town came more easily to the former, and it did not involve loss of earnings. More generally, differences in experiences of relative space-time manifested in greater *elective* mobility and greater leisure for accumulators, who could start businesses in the local town, avoid manual work altogether, and even seek medical attention in far off Kolkata. For manual wage

workers, on the other hand, poverty and lack of work made for an *enforced* mobility – travel to far off places to work for a wage as ‘reluctant migrants’ (Rafique et al, 2006), and relying on waged manual work wherever they ended up, essentially having to do the bidding of their bosses.

Stretched life worlds – working away in *bidesh*

All of the male research participants had once - or continued episodically - to stay away from Jalpara for work for periods of days, weeks or months at a time. Their lives were *necessarily* stretched out by the combination of a lack of income opportunities at home and the idealised gendered division of waged work (especially relevant when it came to staying away).⁷ The generic term for the location of work that meant staying away was *bidesh*, an unfamiliar, foreign place (opposite to *desh*, home place). Again exemplifying the difference between relative space-time on the one hand and absolute space and time on the other, for those moving *bidesh* could be as close as the other end of Murshidabad District and for the participants in this research *bidesh* was within India, almost always eastern India.

Working away could mean working for a wage, trading in agricultural produce such as mangoes, straw or date molasses, or house-to-house begging (Massey et al, 2010). All of these varied seasonally. Time was not determined by subsistence need or business requirements alone but was also/ alternatively shaped by

⁷ In contrast to the many couples, families and all-women groups that migrated away to work in the same intensively farmed districts of south central Bengal from areas further to the west and south (see Rogaly et al, 2002).

individual and collective cosmologies and religious practices, including in some cases prayer - *namaz* - and the fasting season.⁸ Badsha Ali, for example, has many reasons for avoiding waged work whether in Jalpara or *bidesh*. In spite of the trouble it takes, he keeps bullocks that enable him to operate as a self-employed ploughman:

I find it very difficult to maintain these twin cows as you can tell. You might wonder then why I keep them: so I can work whenever I want to. And when I'm ill I can come home. I can plough [a plot of land] and come back home and be at peace. Whereas working as a daily wage labourer does not give me that option. Then there are also things like Namaz. I keep cows [because it allows me to do] my Namaz, even though it's a problem really.

Anwar Seikh's work-seeking and employment experience in *bidesh* was also shaped both by poverty and by religious time:

Once I went to Hugli but came back because I hadn't found any work. I went the year before last and looked for work throughout the night. But I didn't find any, nor did I find any food. I starved all night. Well, around three in the morning all the food I had been carrying had run out. It was Roja days. I carried on without food and went to Katwa, finally found an employer, and went to Barddhaman to work. I think I worked for about eleven days and then came home for the Eid Namaz.

⁸ Ramadan, locally referred to as *roja*.

People setting off to seek work away from Jalpara, often started out, like Anwar Seikh did, with few resources, and thus had little power to bargain at the labour market place they stopped at a day's journey away. Their spacetime experience of the destination area was shaped in part by their relations with those whose ownership of land and multiple businesses back home in Jalpara and in small neighbouring towns gave them control over the limited quantity of local employment and the wage rate and, as we've seen, the timing of payment.

As for their employers in the place they called *bidesh*, many of whom were Hindus, migrant Muslim men from Jalpara articulated a range of experiences. E.P. Thompson's 'clock time' kicked in here: particularly when men were paid by the hour rather than by the piece, they talked of the surveillance by the employer and the rudeness that often came with it. Rakib Seikh first went to harvest rice in *bidesh* when he was eighteen:

When I first went to harvest rice I brought back three hundred rupees in fifteen days. The food was provided by the landowner. We used to stay in their spare rooms... I took a shawl from home during the winter. It was difficult and very cold... The landowner... was a Hindu, so we had to clean our eating area with cowdung after meals. The man... made us work very hard; he kept on nagging us saying that we were not working well and so on. He was quite rude to us.

Rafique's work-life histories reveal men who were seeking a sense of autonomy over their own space and time, men who would only *put up with* what they saw

as the indignity of casual employment for manual work, and who sought to accumulate petty capital to set up on their own as traders - still moving across space, and still circumscribed by market relations, but as their own masters, weighing up where to buy, where to sell, when to go etc. Rakib, for example, bought a cycle rickshaw cart using a mixture of loans secured by pawning his sister's gold jewellery, strategic appeals for loans to more monied people he had developed good relations with, and a year's rent from leasing out his mother's sixth of an acre. He had established himself as a straw trader and now only occasionally had to resort to migration for wage work in *bidesh*. Sabir Mian also preferred traveling away to trade over traveling away to labour. He 'noticed that selling mangoes is profitable and you have a lot of freedom too. I liked that trade the best.'

Bodies, work and value

The increase in subjective control that petty traders narrated suggests transformed relative space-time away from a sense of humiliation (and clock time) in spaces controlled by agricultural employers who often treated them without the hospitality they would see as proper – an aspect of what was experienced as a different culture in foreign places (foreign of course in a relative sense). Having one's own business as a trader or transporter could involve extremely antisocial hours and, as with wage work, difficult, even dangerous, journeys. Income did not necessarily increase. Yet having a business that enabled life to continue, such as selling date molasses, or hiring out a bullock

pulled cart to transport goods and people, meant not having to put up with food dropped from a height by Hindu employers, or cleaning the floor with cowdung. There is resonance here with Julia Elyachar's study on workers in Cairo *Markets of Dispossession*, which Harvey cites:

'She [Elyachar] discovers that different processes not only create different relational spatio-temporalities in the lived lives of Cairo's working inhabitants, but also give rise to totally different notions of value. The workshop culture is not about maximising profitability through competition but about acquiring respect and social standing over a limited spatiotemporal terrain... Competing spatiotemporalities are... inevitably associated with competing ways... of understanding value' (Harvey, 2009, pages 162–163).

Meanwhile, as the new fast economic growth of 'India shining' came into gear in the present century, many men continued to have to migrate for wage work in rice fields. However, the farm work and associated on-site food and accommodation were not remembered as arduous or humiliating in every case. Indeed Rakib, who lamented his own dropping-out from primary school after just three years, enjoyed one experience of *bidesh* when he and his fellow workers were housed in a madrasa. The religious scholar who lived there 'had an MA in Bengali. He used to tell us a lot of fables. It was nice to listen to him. The teacher used to love us as his own children... We could roam around freely after our work.'

The early 2000s also witnessed the continuation of migration for work in brick manufacturing and in refrigerated potato storage units by men from Jalpara along with the arrival of contractors seeking building workers for booming urban construction projects in Kolkata. Each kind of wage work and each workplace regime (Rogaly, 1996) entailed different spatio-temporalities. Urban construction work would often be for months rather than weeks, was further away, and was less group-based than the lives lived away from home by the traveling gangs of rice-transplanters and harvesters, who would stick together day and night. This was a West Bengal manifestation of the accelerated divide in India that Arundhati Roy (2011), among others, has eloquently critiqued. 'India shining' for *some* needed to be produced by *others* – transforming absolute space and time, relative space-time and relational spacetime simultaneously.

Workers remembered the embodied experiences of brick-making and potato refrigeration workplace regimes and narrated them vividly. Ajinul Shah told Rafique that he was...

actually scared to work in the refrigerated potato stores. It's very heavy work. If you work for three or four days at a stretch, you won't be able to stand up. Someone will have to lift you up. You need at least five days' recovery time. It really takes five days at least for the aches to subside. Initially you can't even urinate by yourself. You do a little a time and need someone to help you. Nor can you lie down to sleep. You feel like you're suffocating. This is all because you're carrying loads of fifty to sixty kilos for a stretch of three to four hours.

It was not just following potato refrigeration labour that the men of Jalpara often returned from working away completely wiped out, with degraded body capital, a concept deployed by Louise Waite (2006) in her study of quarry workers in Western India. Serious recovery time was needed. Moreover, illness was common in the absolute spaces and times of work in *bidesh* – evoking differentiated space-time too as serious illness was always harder for poor people when the *de facto* financial costs and time associated with medical treatment were so high. Inequality in relational spacetime caused certain people to take greater risks with their bodies. As with Waite’s research participants, Jalpara men tried to manage their bodies; this could, for example, mean finding ways keeping going at times of ill-health, or staving off extreme cold or heat.

Badsha Ali recalled the winter harvest work in *bidesh*. Different conceptualisations of the connections between time and the space of the body are working against each other in his narrative – the need to forget the body to make the work go faster; the bodily cost of a day’s work; the impact on life-span.

I go to the field in the early morning before dawn. Now, imagine that your fingers are cold; it’s winter. Our faces are wrapped with pieces of paper, cloth, whatever – we call it ‘catching the heat’. That’s how we start our day at work. Then, keep working and don’t think about the food break, because the work is contractual [piece-rate] so the sooner you finish it the better... So how long can I survive? One day’s work eats away six months of your life. By dusk, your heart and mind are tired and broken.

There are many such stories of pain and eventually illness in the narratives – illness contracted while away from home earning a wage, illnesses experienced as a trader in mangoes, in date palm sugar, and illnesses of families who have remained behind in Jalpara while one of the men is away. Anwar Sheikh became ill when he was weeding rice fields in *bidesh* during the rains.

I became frail. Lack of food, you know. I had caught a cold. I nearly fell over because my head was spinning. If you don't eat properly every day you're bound to get weak, aren't you? Without three meals a day, a person turns into a patient. I coped for twenty-nine days like that. I used to force myself to eat something with salt in the morning...

These narratives reveal widespread insecurity, exacerbated by living away from known sources of treatment and the care of family members. Night-time fears of those staying behind and their general well-being were also the cause of anxiety for migrants – again associated in part with a lack of security. The connections between the experience of separation, hard living conditions in temporary quarters, poor quality food and arduous manual work and ill-health were, as we have argued, produced through the inequalities of relational spacetime.

Time was also experienced in terms of life course, itself connected to the (gendered) spatial circuits already mentioned – inside and outside the village as worker, as beggar, as homestead paddy processor or own account cultivator. Older people were less able to stretch lives across space as workers due to the

physical demands of the journey, the risks of ill-health and the toll on the body of the work being performed. Older men and women in Jalpara, had, however, long engaged in begging. Hard work in *bidesh* could also be associated with lifecourse in the ultimate sense. Rakib Seikh would never forget his time working at an electrical power plant in Kolkata in 1998.

... he told me to carry sand to the thirty-sixth floor, as much as I could. It was around ten in the morning. There was a thirty-four floor building just beside this one, fenced off by tin sheets. A labourer was painting on the twentieth floor with a safety belt around his waist. While painting he had to move the hook of the safety belt to go to a different area. When I was climbing down, I was watching him. Suddenly he somehow lost his balance, the safety belt broke, and he fell down. I was on the fifteenth floor then, very near him. As I was climbing down I could see his body completely smashed on the ground with blood and bones scattered everywhere. Actually when I was on the tenth floor I just couldn't move as if I'd had a heart attack...

Men living in Jalpara did not go lightly into traveling away for wage work of any kind. This was a movement produced by an increasingly unequal ownership structure of land and water resources, exclusion from high enough quality education to be able to access any kind of steady job, and no opportunities to migrate for safe, well paid work in India or abroad. It was one in which men of a certain age participated, the reach of which had expanded as labour markets developed further afield to serve the newly enlarged, prosperous minority in

India. In spite of workers' embodied knowledge about the risks involved and their body management techniques, the conditions they worked in, not of their own choosing, could have harmful, even tragic consequences.

Conclusion

Wage work in West Bengal can be intense, exhausting, even debilitating. It can also be completely absent when time stretches out. Moreover, long distance journeys are likely to be unaffordable for many unless a labour contractor pays. David Harvey's framework for understanding spacetime as elaborated in *Cosmopolitanism* is important because it keeps firmly in view the relations that produce differentiated experiences. These have to do with class, and with political economy operating at multiple scales while being both shaped by, and productive of, locally- and regionally- specific gender, and interethnic relations. Greater understanding of the spatiotemporalities of migrant workers in India adds weight to the case for extending the simultaneous analysis of temporalities and spatialities experienced by marginalized and excluded people more generally. For people such as those Rafique came to know so well in Jalpara, both work together to produce limited opportunities for some while contributing to exclusion, differentiation, and unequal power geometries and social topographies.

Though appreciating worker subjectivity and agency is important, it should not in any way take away from critique of the widening structural inequalities in India or elsewhere. The stretched lifeworlds of migrant workers inside India

form part of a pattern of life produced by multi-scale and variegated processes of capital accumulation on the one hand, and intense, poverty-driven work-seeking on the other. As Xiang Biao (2010) has argued for international migrants from China, men moving temporarily away from Jalpara to find work experienced a combination of rushing and waiting; a mix of spatiotemporalities which do not correspond with time-space compression in the way it was defined in Harvey's *Condition of Postmodernity*.

Nor do the Jalpara workers' narratives evoke the same kind of liberatory potential in migrant work as found for the brick factory workers from Jharkhand state by Alpa Shah (2010). Although it could include spacetimes of humour, even inspiration, temporary migration for wage work was most often undertaken due to lack of financial means and was remembered as exhausting, stressful, and sometimes the cause of physical illness and/or humiliation. Time and space reshaped themselves between busy and quiet agricultural seasons at home and away and shifted again during longer spells of brick manufacture work or far off work trips to the city to contribute labour power to new luxury developments. Difficult and dangerous journeys, cramped temporary living quarters, anxiety over loved ones back home, deteriorating body capital and low pay often characterized workers' experiences. In spite of such conditions, the work provides much valued cash earnings for people with no alternative, while enabling accumulation by others whose lifeworlds have been speeded up and digitally connected, and for whom timespace has indeed been compressed.

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