

By Invitation

Three Representations of Insecurity in Three Narratives of Unorganized Workers

Jerome Joseph & Srinath Jagannathan

Three representations of worker insecurity emerged from the lived experiences of three workers from the informal/unorganized sector in India. The authors argue that these three representations of worker insecurity from the three narratives captured through this engagement are the drivers around which the unorganized organize themselves as they struggle to eke out livelihoods on the margins of society.

Jerome Joseph is Professor, Personnel & Industrial Relations Area, Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad. E-mail:jerome@iimahd.ernet.in. **Srinath Jagannathan** is Assistant Professor, Centre for Labor Studies, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai.

Introduction

Theoretical effort depicts job insecurity as “the severity of the threat to one’s job and powerlessness to counteract the threat” (Greenhalgh & Rosenblatt, 1984:440), thus suggesting that there are two important dimensions to the lived experience of the insecurity phenomenon in the pursuit of livelihood in and through what is represented by a “job”. The more fundamental dimension of this phenomenon is *the degree of real threat* to one’s livelihood and the second element is *the degree of powerlessness in countering the threat*. Managerial constructions of job insecurity also suggest that both the perception of threat as well as the perceptions related to one’s own ability to stave off the threat is a function of “locus of control” and a function of whether the locus of control is external or internal. “Compared to people with an external locus of control, those with an internal locus of control generally see environmental events as having less impact and believe that they have the power to counteract whatever threats their environment may pose” (Ashford, Lee & Bobko, 1989: 807). Locus of control is presented here as a disposition of mind

and orientation of attitude which gives the individual a greater or lesser ability to deal with threats. The material exploitation and deprivation that workers are subjected to, emerges from the ability of managerial thought in constructing their subjectivities as either subjects of domination or objects of subordination (Knights & Willmott, 1989). A position of this kind taken in the context of the discourse on job insecurity ignores the structural dynamics of organizational-managerial commodification of labor through the neo liberal instrumentality of job insecurity. Simultaneously, in one theoretical stroke, the locus of control argument exonerates organizational-managerial regimes of any moral compulsions while placing the onus of the social consequences of work on the vulnerable worker who is already burdened by the excruciating agony of debilitating insecurity. However, Collinson (2003: 534), drawing from Kondo (1990), rejects this idea, for “selves are never fixed, coherent, seamless, bounded or whole; they are ‘crafted selves’ not least through contradiction and irony.” How organizational-managerial structures construct workplace insecurities may be crafted through social engineering but how workers as individuals as well as a class handle insecurity and its counter constantly defies straightjacketing to suit neoliberal regimes of work organization. The inherent contradictions in the structures of work organization and conditions constructed around the narrative of insecurity are confronted by worker’s own individual and collective acts of creative assertions of dignity and the right to livelihood as a basis for emancipation.

This is evident even more in the unorganized rather than in the organized sectors of labor praxis. The worker counter to regimes of insecurity emerges, manifests itself in the form of the refusal to surrender or conform to organizational-managerial scripts of domination and subordination. The rejection of the praxis of insecurity which views workers as subordinate objects and uses insecurity as an instrument of work extraction (Brockner, Grover, Reed & Dewitt, 1992) also reflects a yearning for an alternative mode of work organization and worker mobilization among those who expend their labor power to fulfill the needs of society. It is this context that we seek to engage with the subjectivities of the marginalized in unorganized work and livelihood spaces to understand better the diverse representations of insecurity.

The Method

We draw upon the experiences of three workers from the informal, unorganized sector with whom we engaged as a part of a larger study involving 202 workers from numerous contexts such as stateless refugees, unorganized sector workers, contract workers in the organized sector and formal organized sector workers to understand the phenomena of worker insecurity.

Towards the above ends, unstructured conversations were held with these workers after explaining to them the details of the research project and after getting their consent. Confidentiality of data to protect identities was assured. All the identities of the workers have been

concealed in this article and their names have been changed. The conversations revolved around the problems they faced in their lives, their work, the problems they faced while working and pursuing livelihoods, injustices and deprivations experienced by them, their resentments about exploitation in work and society and the possibility of resistance. Detailed field notes and transcripts of the conversations were maintained and many of the conversations were recorded with the consent of the workers. Multiple engagements were sought with workers, and conversations were held either in their work settings or in their homes. They were held in three Indian languages – Hindi, Tamil and Marathi.

Irfan, the Driver: Insecurity as Repression

We met Irfan in a place where tempos are usually parked and the drivers congregate to discuss the events of the day. We were able to hold conversations with tempo drivers collectively and individually in this place. This conversational site represented a public space where workers could engage with each other, and discuss the way ahead on matters. It was here we met Irfan, who works as a tempo driver transporting household items from one place to another in Mumbai. Irfan is about forty five years old and spoke about his experiences in the following words:

“Injustice is of various kinds. Injustice is in terms of money, in terms of work, in terms of time table. Instead of 8 hours duty, people are forced to work for

10 hours or even for 12 hours. But the payment is only for 8 hours. People are also forced to work. They don't have a choice. If they don't accept these things, then they will be forced to leave their jobs. The powerful exploits this. They take advantage of these situations. Injustice is aimed at every person. These days unions are also not there. The environment also prevents unionization. If unions are formed, workers know that they will be thrown out of their jobs. So they accept their situation. They don't even ask for pay raises. So people are afraid. There is no question of gratuity if we lose our jobs. In private employment, there is no question of long service gratuity. You work for 10 years for an employer, take your payment and then leave the company. There will be no benefits for the worker. Even after working for years, benefits of at least 5000, 10000 rupees, even this cannot be expected.”

“There is no payment at proper time. The suffering is of the workers ... They cannot raise their voice. If they raise their voice, they will be thrown out of their jobs. There is no support for the workers. The worker is expected take care of his hunger on his own. There is no one else who will support him ... There is no proof that you are a worker. So what will you do with 8 to 10 people coming together? The records are important. But the registration itself is not proper. There is only kacha (informal) receipts of the payments made. There is nothing pakka (formal) ... Also, owners will keep the support of one or two workers. They will pay extra to these workers, and ensure that everyone else is silenced.”

“Yes, they are being controlled. If I say a small thing, earlier there was slavery. Now there is democracy, but the other meaning of democracy is slavery only. Earlier there were foreign masters. Now there are Indian masters. They are copying their foreign masters only. The foreign masters used to extract everything, the Indian masters extract little by little.”

Insecurity intensifies when any attempt at collective contestation of managerial hegemony emerges.

Exploitative repression prevails in the form of long and intense hours of work and depressed and uncertain wages. Any attempt at collective mobilization and representation to redress grievances could lead to dire consequences. As Irfan argues, in an atmosphere of insecurity, workers are afraid to even ask for pay rises, as the employer can immediately replace them with somebody who is willing to work for lower wages. Irfan’s view indicates that there is nothing natural about insecurity but it is a coercive instrumentality to subordinate workers to accept unjust conditions of work. Insecurity intensifies when any attempt at collective contestation of managerial hegemony emerges. Irfan compares the situation of workers with the analogy of imperialism and its dominance over colonized nations and compares the current exploitation of workers as a form of labor colonization. Exploitative repression gets exacerbated by the withdrawal of the state at the point of the lived experience of work insecurity and the absence

of the state when the insecure worker seeks to activate her democratic and constitutional right to collectivize to protect work and livelihood rights. The insecurity inherent in the pursuit of the right to livelihood and the intensification of work insecurity when the insecure worker asserts her right to collectivize combined together for Irfan to experience the agony of insecurity as exploitative repression.

Yusuf, the Tailor: Insecurity as Resentment

We met Yusuf in the same place where we met Irfan. When we were speaking to Irfan and other tempo drivers, Yusuf volunteered to participate in the research. Yusuf urged us to make the voice of workers like him prominently heard in society. Yusuf is about thirty years old, is married, but does not have any children. Yusuf stitches seats of auto rickshaws and does other tailoring work that helps repair everyday wear and tear of the auto rickshaws. He speaks about the painful exploitation by municipal and police authorities. Yusuf sees his work as that of an artist as he works with only a needle and thread, and obtains raw material in the form of discarded cloth pieces from a tailor with a bigger business, and he is extremely resentful of the bribes that police constables seek from him.

“There are many problems that I face while doing my work. People from the municipality and the police harass me. Every time they come, they want 50 or 100 rupees. Sometimes I might have done

no business. Then I tell them – today there was no business, so was it all right if I gave them nothing? But they have no sympathy. They used to ask if there was no business, what was it that he was doing there? Go home and sleep! Now if I go to my home and sleep, what will they do? People in the municipality and the police are able to survive only because of workers on the street. If workers on the street did not work hard, where will people in the municipality and police get their money from? It is because of us that they are able to survive ... Now suppose there has been no business on a particular day, even then I give them 100 rupees that day. I say – let him live happily in my name today. Let him (obscurity) with the 100 rupees that I have given him. Let him (obscurity) with the 100 rupees that I have given him. Let him live off me. It is because of me that he is surviving.”

There is recognition that change will occur only when such hegemonic discourses are contested and changed.

There is a lot in Yusuf about the bribes that are extracted from him. He recognizes the contemporary inequalities that prevail, but refuses to accept these inequalities as natural, and vociferously displays anger and resentment about the abuse and harassment that is inherent in the perpetuation of these inequalities. There is recognition that change will occur only when such hegemonic discourses are contested and changed. Yusuf says: “The common public is responsible for

all this. It is not the government that is responsible. For instance, even if prices fall, the shopkeeper will never tell the public that prices have come down. Let me earn my profits, why should I bother ... People don't want to be happy together. They want to see each other burning. They don't want to see each other progressing in India. He is a 'Muslim'. Let us not take him. He is a 'Ghati' [Person speaking Marathi. People speaking Marathi are the dominant linguistic community in Maharashtra, whose capital city is Mumbai]. Let us not take him. He is a 'Bhaiyya' [Hindi speaking migrant. Recently incidents of violence against Hindi migrants have occurred in Mumbai]. Let us not take him. Now take a Bhaiyya. He can wake up at 3 am in the morning and then does a lot of work. Now people cannot see him working hard. So they try to pull other people down who do a lot of hard work. People don't understand that they are only defaming those who work very hard. How will India progress? Everybody is in tension.”

Yusuf suggests that the insecurity and inequality inherent in structures of economic exploitation further intensifies by the ethnic chauvinism of the exploiting classes as well as civil society. Workers like Yusuf are thus clear that a society based on the premises of justice cannot be built on the grounds of ethnic exclusion and hatred only strengthens exploitative structures' ability to use coercive instrumentalities as work insecurity and socioeconomic inequality. If Irfan's silent anger flows from his lived experience of insecurity as repression, Yusuf's vocal anger

surges from the experience of insecurity as resentment against social, economic and political structures which militate against the rediscovery of community and solidarity among the laboring classes.

**Ramesh, the Cycle Mechanic:
Insecurity as Resilience**

The engagement with Ramesh took place in his cycle repair shop in the northern suburbs of Mumbai, a pavement enterprise precariously sheltered under a plastic sheet to provide a modicum of protection from the heat and the rains. The purpose of the study was explained to Ramesh to get his consent. Ramesh is more than fifty years old and came to Mumbai about forty years ago. Ramesh spends his day in Mumbai repairing cycles and people passing by and drawing on his skills rarely realize the remarkable and resilient life history that lies concealed beneath his everyday search for livelihood. Ramesh arrived in Mumbai from his village when he was still a young boy of ten. His parents could not afford to educate him in their village because what they earned from being daily wage agricultural workers was hardly sufficient to feed their eight children. Ramesh first did various jobs in Mumbai like helping out in provision stores and working as a welder. Using his savings, he continued his education in night school and college. He earned a bachelor's degree in commerce from one of the best colleges in Mumbai.

He then found work in a mill. Using

his savings, he also built his home in the northern suburbs of Mumbai. "Yes, I enjoyed work during those years. I especially enjoyed the time when I got a promotion. The people around me started looking at me with respect. They were stunned to an extent. We have been working in the company for such a long time. Yet he has managed to get a promotion in such a short time. So he must be a skilled person. Therefore, they started looking at me with respect. Everybody became friendly in the office. They used to support me."

Ramesh describes how he still visits his college sometimes – "Yes, I go there once in a year or two. All my teachers and Principal have now retired. But I go there, meet people in the office. Stay there for some time. Meet the Principal. When I go there, I take all my certificates. That is why they permit me inside, otherwise they don't allow people from outside to enter the college. Then I go and meet the Principal for 5 minutes. When I first went there, I met the Principal and explained him my situation, how I completed my education with great difficulty. The Principal talks to me with kindness. The Principal said that is great ... The Principal also said that you are a persistent person, that is why you were able to complete your education. If anybody else had been there in your place they would not have been to accomplish the same thing. I told him sir, my parents were poor. They used to struggle and take care of us eight children. They could not afford to spend a lot on our education. So I came to Bombay, started doing work, started going to night school.

Then I did work in the night and attended the college during the day.”

Then trouble started at the mill – “There were some indications that the mill was closing down. I got a sense of that from the uncertainties which started relating to the date of monthly salary payments. Earlier, worker salaries used to be given on 7th of every month. Then the salaries started getting delayed. In some months – it started becoming 12th, in some months – it started becoming 15th. Then advance used to be given on 20th. Then advance also started getting shifted to 25th or 30th. Then I used to get some doubts that the company is going to go into losses.” Then his life collapsed when the mill closed down abruptly without warning. It was then he started his pavement cycle repair shop near his home. His main lament was also that his sons have not been able to obtain the same kind of education or jobs like him.

Insecurity is much more and the subjugation that inheres in the production of insecurity is extremely debilitating for workers.

The lived experiences of workers like Ramesh suggest that insecurity is much more and the subjugation that inheres in the production of insecurity is extremely debilitating for workers. Ramesh is subjugated when in spite of his tremendous resilience in the face of life long insecurity he is forced to return to urban poverty and informal work after the mill closed down. In this poignant portrait of insecurity, the life history of the main pro-

tagonist is an uncertain journey through most of life’s landscapes – the ‘village’ from which he runs away at the ripe old age of ten years; the ‘agrarian landless labor family’ which earns barely enough to feed an unwieldy family of ten; the ‘urban jungle’ which pulls a village dropout chasing a livelihood dream; ‘the urban retail store’ and its opportunity for child labor in the form of 10 year old Ramesh; ‘the night school’ for the first step towards a better livelihood; the ‘college campus’ with the promise of escape from the ‘streets’; the ‘mill’ and ‘organized-modern Job, monthly salary’ and ‘promotion’ as the pathway to prosperity; and the ‘street’ and the ‘pavement’ as the uncertain refuge for a self-employed livelihood. Through all of life’s landscapes there is only one truth for Ramesh – an assured insecurity about livelihood, income, and the even more unbearable agony of his sons, insecure future. However, through all the colors of the various landscapes of his life’s canvas there is one recurring theme, that of insecurity as resilience - the never say die attitude which drives his narrative in the struggle against insecurity.

Discussion

The positivist, resource based view of the “organized job sector” constructs “job insecurity as a discrepancy between the security employees would like their jobs to provide and the level they perceive to exist” (Jordan, Ashkanasy & Hartel, 2002: 361). That well being is impossible within the capitalist text of subordinating social relationships is evident from Ramesh’s experiences where

just compensation for his dedication is not available. The subordinating social relationships of the managerial apparatus of organized work hierarchies often use the language of liberation and self-actualization may be promulgated as a seductive means of engineering consent (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002: 624). A prominent debate in positivist, managerial literatures about whether insecurity leads to an increase in performance (Galup et al, 1997) or whether it leads to a decline in performance (O'Driscoll & Cooper, 1996) is indicative of the fact that managerial discourses do not view insecurity as a dysfunctionality, but instead view it as a behavioral stimulus that produces the unquestioning, compliant worker. Such articulations of insecurity in the "organized labor sector" are far removed from the articulations of the unorganized labor consciousness.

Irfan's resentment at the marginalization of workers and their collectives and his comparison of the exploitation of workers with imperialism can be read as providing the conditions for breaking out of the acceptance of insecurity and an expression of outrage that calls for an end to the violence of insecurity. In this sense, the resistance of these workers is not a "non-authorized, yet authoritative portrait of what is normal and expected", their resistance does not "normalize and counter-resist". In their critique of the state represented by the police and municipal workers and their predatory endeavors in extorting bribes from the workers, perhaps the workers are engaging in a "radical approach to reflectionto highlight the

pretences and hypocrisies of official power" (Fleming & Spicer, 2003: 171).

There is a seething anger underlying the daily struggle for livelihood and there is a rising.

The Irfan narrative shows that the unorganized labor is not a site of silence, acquiescence and abject surrender. There is a seething anger underlying the daily struggle for livelihood and there is a rising, articulated consciousness of the repression represented by the lived experience of insecurity. The Yusuf narrative displays righteous anger against the exploitative work structures and divisive social stratification and shows evidence of an alternative construction of insecurity as resentment against the social, economic and political injustice and the consequent marginalization of the unorganized labor sector. The Ramesh narrative represents insecurity as resilience as he straddles the diverse landscapes of the marginal livelihoods and sees his life and livelihood riddled by uncertainties. He also sees that the next generation is likely to get even less than what he has been able to get in terms of education and livelihood.

Thomas and Davies (2005a) have taken the position that resistance must not be understood only in reactive terms, but its generative potential must also be discerned. Drawing from the lived experiences of workers, resistance cannot be seen only in traditional terms such as strikes, there is a need to pay attention to the alternatives that workers are em-

phasizing (Fleming & Sewell, 2002). In the case of the most vulnerable workers in this study, rather than becoming compliant to exploitative structures and failing to challenge the degeneration of the public (Kosmala & Herrbach, 2006), they show evidence of renewed consciousness, articulation and collectivization as the workers seek to move away from current insecurities and injustices. Looking for the alternative discourses is an important avenue for understanding resistance (Merilainen et al, 2004). Resistance is particularly important in the context of movements towards a politics of justice and transformation (Thomas & Davies, 2005b).

Alternative narratives which yearn for change and justice are evident in the articulations of workers.

Alternative narratives which yearn for change and justice are evident in the articulations of workers. For instance, Ramesh emphasizes the culture of friendship, respect and solidarity rather than the project of career when he recalls what gave him the greatest joy even while he was working. Irfan keeps alive a sense of resentment with the status quo and his emphasis on the practical difficulties of workers coming together at the Tempo stand to construct alternatives indicates a search for the ways in which collective action could be brought about. Yusuf also calls for solidarity among workers as he disagrees with the violence inflicted on migrant workers and local workers based on ethnic divisiveness.

This study hopes to have indicated that insecurity is not merely about discrepancies in the degree of threat to security or the degree of powerlessness in countering the threat among workers. Cultural exclusion, subordination, exploitation, manipulation, enforced identity regulation, denial of collective mobilization and representation are some of the factors at play in the construction of worker insecurity.

Williams (2009) documents how street level practices of manipulation, divide and rule, intimidation and violence exploit homeless workers and make them work under conditions of permanent insecurity, where they have no choice but to accept a regime of low paying, uncertain jobs. Pollert and Charlwood (2009) document the troubles of vulnerable workers in Britain, and the shift of governmental positions away from the right to collective representation of workers which could enable them to engage with various problems at work such as stress, bullying, workload, job security, working hours, contracts, health and safety, opportunities, leave and discrimination. In spite of these numerous practices creating insecurity for unorganized sector workers, and therefore this study through direct engagement shows that there is evidence that workers show great resilience in displaying resistance to repression, as they “struggle for humanity and dignity... to escape conformism, subordination and compromise ...through practice, through revolutionary praxis” (Memos, 2009: 221).

Resilience in resistance to repression is the principle around which the unor-

ganized organize themselves in their daily struggles to eke out livelihoods on the margins of neoliberal bastions of capital.

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