

Exploring the Work & Lives of Crematorium Workers

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This study seeks to explore the work and lives of crematorium workers in an atmosphere of insecurity, low pay, precariousness and diminishing avenues of resistance such as the presence of a strong trade union movement. The retreat of the state in a culture of privatization and deregulation leads to deteriorating employment conditions and diminished avenues for formally accessing justice. These workers were working in a crematorium where many services were being contracted out. All the crematorium workers yearn to be engaged in service of society and demonstrate tremendous dedication. They refuse to surrender the idea of their selves to the diktats of the employer.

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Introduction

Our engagement with a crematorium in a major city in Western India as a workplace is to provide an illustration of how the employment relationship is increasingly becoming dehumanised. Yet workers do not passively consume the adverse changes made to the employment relationship. In spite of their powerlessness, they resent the changes and resist it. Through our engagement with the workers, we wish to show, what expressions these resentments and resistances take. By doing so, we hope to add to the debate around the nature and character of the resistance of workers.

What has led to the de-humanization of workplaces is the ideology of unbridled managerialism – one that Harney (2009) calls as ‘extreme neo-liberalism’. This ideology advances the argument that protective labor laws are bad for economic growth, and therefore they need to be dismantled (Besley & Burgess, 2004). Doing so will lead to more economic growth and more employment. Taking this argument forward, Nayyar (2009 September 24) writes: “... it’s impossible to hire labor on a ‘permanent’ basis, as is required by our labor laws which frown upon ‘hire and fire’. It may seem cruel

to equate human labor with physical goods but the economic construct is the same – trade is good and free trade is optimal”. And how exactly the ‘optimal good’ of free trade can be introduced into the employment relationship is illustrated by Brockner, Grover, Reed & Dewitt (1992). They argue that if job insecurity is increased from low levels to moderate levels, then the work effort of workers improves. This argument is in line with the expectation of Greenhalgh & Rosenblatt (1984: 443) that productivity would increase with increasing job insecurity. Then how can empirical results be explained where productivity does not improve with increasing job insecurity? Jordan, Ashkanasy & Hartel (2002) hypothesize an answer – the aberration of productivity not improving with job insecurity can be explained by the fact that if employees lack emotional intelligence, then they do not respond to job insecurity by improving their work effort.

It is this managerial commonsense of manufacturing optimality by producing insecurity that is at the heart of contracting out services. Jobs with security, reasonable pay, benefits such as housing, health and pensions disappear, and instead, temporary, insecure employees are made to perform with extremely adverse employment relationships. Our study attempts to understand how workers respond to such managerial common sense, where they are made to perform in an atmosphere of insecurity, low pay, precariousness and diminishing avenues of resistance such as the presence of a strong trade union movement. The retreat of the state in an overall culture of

privatization and deregulation leads to deteriorating employment conditions and diminished avenues for formally accessing justice.

When the grand and mega level discourse of free trade and optimal good intersects micro and meso discourses (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000) of everyday precariousness, then workers still try to create safe spaces where discourses of resistance can be articulated. The way these safe spaces are forged can provide us with interesting insights into the strategies of subaltern resistance. So long as the human being refuses to be domesticated by the grand discourses of optimality, avenues of challenge and contest remain open, and from the grass roots, new ways of organizing society may emerge. When the grass roots with their carefully crafted safe spaces overlap, new ways of organizing resistance against injustice may flourish. Through this study, we seek to understand what is happening in the grass roots in response to numerous subjugating discourses that are acquiring dominant positions.

Method

The workers with whom we engaged were working in a crematorium, where many services were being contracted out. Till a decade ago, the crematorium was fully managed by the XYZ Municipal Corporation (XMC) in a major city in Western India, and all the workers were on the pay roll of XMC. All the workers had employment security, reasonable wages revised regularly through

collective bargaining, healthcare and housing was provided by the employer and other benefits such as pensions were also available to them. Since skills pertaining to working in the crematorium were conserved within caste based groups, the employees belonged to families who had been associated with the crematorium for many generations. So there was a good possibility of the children of crematorium workers taking over the jobs of their parents. But with the contracting out of services in the crematorium, employment security, pay and other employment benefits diminished. Also, with the modernization of the crematorium, a new set of skills such as operating electric and gas pyres coming into play, it was no longer possible to assume that the children of crematorium workers would find good jobs in the future in the crematorium as XMC employees. For the moment, some employees continued to be on the rolls of XMC, and given their intimate association with the crematorium for many years (and generations), their employment contracts were not altered. They were assured of their jobs and benefits until they retired. Yet the old sense of autonomous functioning was no longer present for them, and they had to consult the various contractors for various day to day matters. The contractors also listened to these employees on matters such as recruiting contract workers, as given their intimate knowledge, managing the crematorium was then easier. We engaged with them in unstructured conversational interviews and assured them of confidentiality. We turn their names in this article anonymous and provide some of their narratives below.

It was no longer possible to assume that the children of crematorium workers would find good jobs in the future in the crematorium.

Ajay, Municipal Corporation Employee

I have been working in the crematorium for more than ten years. We work in the afternoon shift from 2 pm to 10 pm. I stay a little far away from the crematorium. I have my dinner only after reaching home around 11.30 pm. I have a daughter. She is in the first year of her college. I asked her to enroll in the Arts stream as she has to get married and move to her in-laws home later. So there is no point in enrolling her in professional education or in the science stream. It is important to understand the distinction between work and home. There is no point in carrying the anxieties of work to home. As a rule, I don't discuss what happens at work at home. As such, there is no problem of discrimination due to the fact that I work in the crematorium. But working in the crematorium is an awkward fact. It is not something worth discussing at home or with other friends and relatives. It takes a great deal of resolve to be not able to discuss your work at home. Sometimes corpses such as that from murder cases or suicides come here. It is terrible to see them. But it is a part of work. It has to be seen and forgotten. There is no point in frightening people at home by talking about them. It is also true that I don't see such corpses everyday. It is only once in a while that

such things happen. Once I reach my home, I take bath and then have dinner. It is important to forget the memories of work when one goes home. I work to sustain my family. But there is nothing particular that I hate about my job. Amar bhai, who manages everything, and whose family has been around here for many years, is a devotee of the goddess. He takes bath everyday in the evening and prays to the goddess. I have been able to meet people like him here, which is very good. Also, it is a stable job. In today's times, such jobs are precious. Also, being here, I have been able to learn more about the different communities and the differences between them. Otherwise the process of cremation is simple. They bring the dead here. They say a few prayers. Then the corpse is cremated, and then they take back the ashes. There is nothing extra-ordinary about it.

Preciousness of Job Security

Ajay comments on the zeitgeist of employment insecurity in which all of us live today, when he says that secure jobs such as his, are few and precious today. And it is precisely the scarcity of secure jobs that has destroyed the well being of many workers (Malenfant, LaRue & Vezina, 2007). The secure job then becomes a treasure that Ajay cherishes. At the same time, such an act of cherishing does not lead Ajay to a psychological contract of 'contributions (which) include obedience, loyalty and cooperative behavior' (Dyne & Ang, 1998: 695). The discursive construction of the idiom of preciousness is in fact disobedience of

the current organizational practice of contracting out jobs which substantially pay less and yield almost no benefits. There is no obligation that Ajay feels to defend the practices of XMC in contracting out jobs as an exchange for the favor bestowed on him in terms of a favorable employment contract. And it is precisely this sense of obligation that managerial wisdom wishes to manage through the psychological contract (Robinson, Kratz & Rousseau, 1994). In refraining from having his obligations managed in this way, Ajay resists.

Parvati, Amar's Wife

I started working only after marriage. My family from my parent's side is no longer involved in this type of work. They have all moved to other kinds of work. Some of my brothers have been able to start businesses of their own. But someone has to do this work also. However, my children have gone to schools and my elder son is in college. He is also good in sports. I would not like them to be a part of this work forever. The electric pyre is easy to operate. I have to keep the corpse on the rails. Then the rails must be lifted. I have heard that in Bombay, the rails are also lifted automatically. But here, I have to lift the rails manually. Before I use the electronic panel to allow the corpse to enter the electric pyre, I place small wooden sticks on the rails as a symbolic act of ritual. Once the electronic panel is operated, the corpse enters the electric pyre. Then it takes around forty five minutes for the cremation to be complete. Then after some time, the ashes

can be collected and given to the family members of the deceased. They then perform the rituals that need to be performed. In the wooden pyres, it takes around three hours for the cremation to be completed. I don't have a particular preference for the wooden pyres or the electric pyres. It is really a choice that the families of the deceased need to make. But the electric pyre is easier and quicker to operate. But the families decide on the basis of their faith and religious principles. Cremation is not a complicated process. Once you have learnt what needs to be done, then all cremations are similar. But it is a process in which people have a lot of faith. I respect that faith and try to ensure that I can help the family members of the deceased in whatever way I can. It is necessary that we do the simple things correctly in order to help people. For instance, there are so many workers who sleep in the crematorium in the night. Sometimes, Sanjay, the employee of the company which maintains the electronic panel, has to travel to another crematorium late in the night. So I ask him to stay over here itself because sometimes he has to be alone in the crematorium in the night. It may get slightly awkward to be alone in the crematorium in the night. Here at least all of us are there. So he wouldn't face many difficulties spending the night. Also, he has to travel alone from here to another crematorium and then have dinner there. All these are inconvenient aspects of life. But there is no way in which we can avoid them. It is after all a question of livelihood. We have to do some work in order to live.

Artifacts of Resistance

While the employer creates a sense of job insecurity and depressed living conditions following from low wages, workers create a sense of community oriented security for each other.

Parvati also refuses to see herself as an individualized worker in the light of obligations that psychological contracts may place on her. She reaches out to other workers, who are far more vulnerable than her, with a sense of care and community. Sanjay, who is forced to sleep in the crematorium because he cannot afford a house, is shown a lot of care by Parvati. While the employer and the neo-liberal discourse of optimality emerging from above seeks to individualize workers, and view them as instrumental agents involved in 'rational' social exchange, the grassroots will otherwise. While the employer creates a sense of job insecurity and depressed living conditions following from low wages, workers create a sense of community oriented security for each other, and by showing care for each other, seek to improve each other's living conditions. While the agendas of new public management and human resource management seek to individualize workers, the grassroots seek to retain the sense of a collective. Only, the collective is not in the form of a formal trade union, but in the form of a substantial community of care. The collective has thus shown the ability of moving away from a divisive politics of narcissism (Heery, 2009: 250)

to the inclusive politics of care and community. The politics of care is also oriented towards the users of the crematorium as Parvati does everything to help them in fulfilling their sense of faith. This politics of care is in line with the care shown by workers in other contexts for people whom they are responsible through their work (Orulv & Nikku, 2007). Such a politics of care is in sharp contrast to managerial common sense which does not hesitate in terminating women employees once they disclose that they are pregnant (Borve, 2007).

Amar, Employee of the Municipal Corporation

My father was actively involved in politics during the freedom struggle. He had met all important leaders like Gandhi. In that sense, my family has been able to have an identity of its own for a long period of time. We have been associated with this crematorium for ten generations now. I would not like my children to continue with the crematorium work. It is not that there is something wrong with the crematorium work. It is just that there is a world outside. I want my sons to see that world and then decide what they want to do in life. My elder son's passport and visa were almost ready. And he was about to leave for the Middle East to work for a computer hardware firm, but terrorism and violence erupted in that part of the world. I felt uncomfortable with that and asked him to not go. My son plays Kabaddi very well. He is now in first year B.Com in a very good college in the city. He got admission through the sports quota. He has been playing Kabaddi at the youth level

for state right from his school days. He is doing well. I have also heard of IIMs. I am not sure whether he would be able to make it there. But after finishing his B.Com, I would be happy if he can pursue higher education or work in a company which deals with computers. Sometimes I do go to watch his matches. Otherwise my entire life has been spent in the crematorium. I have a home in the residential quarters that the Municipal Corporation has provided across the road. It is reasonably furnished. We have a few electronic gadgets like televisions and video players. My children use these gadgets and live in the home sometimes. But I literally stay in the crematorium only. Anybody can find me here throughout the day. I take my bath here. I eat and sleep here. I never know when I will be required for some help. So it is better for me to stay here throughout. My younger son is struggling a little in his studies. He failed in his tenth standard exams last year. This year I have asked him to concentrate on his studies and pass his exams some way or the other. Education is important to get a decent job outside. I have also arranged for him to go to tuitions so that he faces no difficulty in passing the exams. It is important for me that my children have a decent future. I am doing everything I can to ensure that. I do get disappointed when they face setbacks in their lives. I want them to be as good as others in terms of their education.

De-politicization of the Worker

Though many of the services in the crematorium are being contracted out, and Amar's ability to make autonomous

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decisions in day to day affairs has been consequently diminished, he does not function within the premises of a dominating psychological contract. As predicted by conventional literatures about survivors in the context of job insecurity, he does not show any withdrawal symptoms. He continues to remain dedicated to his work, he stays in the crematorium throughout the day, rarely going back to his home. He does this out of a sense of social calling, a sense of pride that his family has been of service to society for ten generations by working in the crematorium. It is this sense of social proximity that makes the worker a political actor. And thus, Amar recalls his family's association with Gandhian social movements for the political independence of India with pride. The intent of neo-liberalism and managerialism, acting through the sites of contracting out services, is to commoditize and de-politicize the worker, so that she remains as a performer of technicized roles alone, for which she is provided instrumental remuneration. Such a degraded sense of diminished identity is resented and resisted by Amar. In the absence of a social and political movement that can challenge such neo-liberal paradigms and restore the dignity of the worker (Thompson, 1963), workers have to evolve their own strategies to refuse to become mute commodities or resources that the rhetoric of current human resource management would have them become (Legge, 2005).

Sanjay, Employee of a Contractor

I don't belong to this city. I come from a village which is more than two hundred kilometers away. Someone whom I knew in the village was working for the company which maintains electronic panels for crematoriums. He asked me whether I would like to come over and work for the company. I agreed and now I know most of the work regarding how to maintain these electronic panels. Earlier the company used to manufacture and maintain electronic panels for many industrial applications. Now it is beginning to restrict itself to manufacturing and maintaining electronic panels for crematoriums only. The company does not have an office in this big city. It has an office in another city, which is one hundred kilometers away from this city. The company has two employees in this city in Western India including me. I have a few friends among those who work for the company in another city. But our interaction is limited. But if there is something important that is happening in the company they let me know about it immediately. I get along well with Amar Kaka and Parvati Kaki. They take good care of me. I don't have any room for myself in the city which I can call my home. I spend my night in another crematorium. It is a lonely place but when I came here for the first time, I found shelter there. So I have continued staying there. I can't afford to have a home in this city. My monthly salary is Rs. 2500. I have to send some of my savings to my village. I also can't afford to get married. Even if I marry, I can't bring my wife to this city. I will have to leave her

behind in the village. And at most, I can visit my village once in a year. And then the expenses of having a family will any way start accumulating. Also my wife will be unhappy with a husband who is far away from her for almost the entire year. So what is the point of marriage? All this is happening because of the contract system of work. Actually I am doing the work of three people in maintaining the electronic panels. As per municipal corporation norms, if it had employed permanent employees, then three people would have been employed for the work which I am doing. But now the contractor is able to employ one person instead of three and get away with it. Eventually I only receive the payment for a single person. Thus, while some people profit from the contract system, people like us suffer. For instance, even if I had not got more salary, at least two more people could have been employed. It will be interesting to know how many people have lost their jobs due to the contract system.

Deprivation & Resentment

The sense of resentment is acute in Sanjay's voice. With the salary he gets, he can't afford to even hire a home in this city. Consequently, he can't afford to marry as well, as he wouldn't be able to take care of his family. The precariousness of his employment rankles even more when he finds that he is made to do the work of three people, and the profits are pocketed by the contractor. Even in the midst of the precarious situation, his sense of humanity is alive, as he mourns the loss of jobs in a selfless way.

There is a genuine sense of agony in his wanting to reach out to those who might have been able to find employment if the work had not been contracted out. Also his sense of warmth, community and gratefulness towards Parvati and Amar for helping him out is a beautiful depiction of the human being's ability to freely give and take, without any sense of calculative or manipulative formality. Sanjay's resistance thus finds expression in an important sense of resentment, which refuses to accept the current nature of employment relationship as natural and normal, though the worker is powerless to effect changes in it. While labor process analysis of resistance focuses on structural contradictions, and post structural analysis of resistance focuses on subjectivities that create the possibilities of plural makings of the self, in the crematorium, we find that resistance occurs through a celebration of selflessness. There is a yearning for de-emphasizing the convergence of plural social collectivities in the self of the individual, and instead the need is to cherish living through drawing freely from each other in a sense of genuine community. While the managerialist discourses wish to construct labor as a commodity, the actions and articulations of workers seek to articulate themselves as human beings engaged in a community taking care of social needs. What is important for the workers in the crematorium is neither the sense of contradiction contributing to the efficacy of the inevitable tales of a collapse, nor a reflexive understanding of the different elements of their self, but an abiding sense of humanity and community. Even this sense of humanity and

community is not ontologically fixed through acts of authorial centering, but is left open to an atmosphere of deliberative cares by which they can reach across to the needs, hurts, angst and desires for justice of people with whom they engage. The self is thus forever in discovery of expansive sites of humanness, and constantly open to discursive reformulations. The need for justice is also expressed, not in terms of a rigid vocabulary of normative right, but through a poignant lyric of the felt and expressed sufferings of human beings.

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Explaining how cynicism may actually reproduce dominant ideological cultures, Fleming and Spicer (2003: 164), drawing from Zizek (1989), write – “Expressions such as, ‘Im not a sucker, I have not bought into this rubbish’ pervade contemporary social relations of work and seem to sit comfortably alongside obedient practices of arduous labor”. The distinction between resentment and cynicism is that there is a recognition of the deprivations emerging from an unjust employment relationship. The awareness exists that the rubbish has to be borne for the sake of life. For instance, Sanjay has to do the work of three people on his own for an unacceptably low pay. This awareness is then used to sustain a critical resentment towards such injustice,

akin to the idea of hidden transcripts proposed by Scott (1985). While employment practices may be ‘embedded in hierarchical and coercive corporate assumptions and rules’, resentment preserves the sensibility of anger against such coercion, while acknowledging its contemporary powerlessness to alter such unjust hierarchies (Knights & McCabe, 1999). Resentment ensures that the processes of owning, naming and indirect resistance (Prasad & Prasad, 2000) depart from being exclusively oppositional to becoming a transformational preservation of humanity, and thus what is being owned and named is humanness. The project is one of remaking the dignity of the human being (Hodson, 2001).

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Conclusion

To quote from a poem by Rabindranath Tagore (1992/1912: 22), “Give me the strength to make my love fruitful in service. Give me the strength never to disown the poor/ or bend my knees before insolent might”. These two lines of Tagore’s poem brilliantly summarize the resistance of the crematorium workers more than all the academic musings on resistance put together. All the crematorium workers yearn to be engaged in service of society and demonstrate tremendous dedication in spite

of the deteriorating employment conditions. They also reach out to each other and exhibit compassion towards other vulnerable people as well and do whatever is in their reach to help them. In spite of the dominating nature of the managerialist discourse of optimality operating through the instrumentality of individualized psychological contracts, they refuse to surrender the idea of their selves to the diktats of the employer. They resist through the strategy of resentment and the genius of community. They seek to hold a mirror to the deprivations that managerialism is causing, and thus lead a plurality of human actors to rediscover their conscience and act according to it.

They resist through the strategy of resentment and the genius of community.

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