

Restaurant Waiters: The Precariat Before & During the Pandemic Times in Gujarat

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We study here a specific class of precarious workers viz. male restaurant waiters by drawing upon 31 male waiters across 11 standalone restaurants in leading cities in Gujarat. The study involved extensive participant observation and interviews over fourteen months to explore the workplace dynamics and individual lived experiences of male waiters in the age group 25-50 before and during the pandemic. We study different work settings, and explore how the emotional labor and economic hardship varyingly shape his experience of precarity. Our findings demonstrates the fluid interplay of situational and long-term precarity and interconnected social relations inside and outside their labor process by overwork, casualization, unemployment and underemployment with ineffective labor laws.

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Introduction

In India's crucial service industry, restaurant waiters situated at the margins of the formal and informal labor economy and working in standalone restaurants that are unaffiliated to any hotel chain; constitute a large unrepresented critical mass of understudied casual workers. In this interpretive empirical reflection, we delineate the interplay between situational and long-term precarity, underemployment, unemployment, and the casualized character of these precarious laborers. We contribute to the sociology of work and employment relations literature by highlighting the importance of studying precarity as an ongoing individualized nebulous process of becoming, being and feeling precarious rather than as a state and an outcome or category. Our study argues that employment relations must look at precarity from each worker's historical and contextual existential frame of reference within and beyond the social relations of their workplace and labor process before generalizing anything about the character of precarious informal labor. We argue that the pressure and sustained bullying and

exploitation a waiter encounters are concurrently situational at the site of service and long drawn. It is a unique aspect of his profession that we unpack.

The pandemic was a decisive inflection-point for everybody. However, it affected a class of workers, specifically restaurant waiters, to a far greater degree. By drawing upon individual accounts and interactions, this paper demonstrates how their social context, working conditions, labor process, challenges at the workplace, and emotions co-act to uniquely exacerbate their vulnerability and intensify their cycle of precarity before, during and just after the pandemic. Understanding the silent majority's exploitation requires appreciating each waiter's socio-economic constraints and uniquely resilient macro factors outside their control that shape their distinctive situational matrix. Market competition, legal protection, and their immediate social milieu's normative understandings form the external invisible resilient factors. COVID-19 showed that it is impossible to make statistical generalizations about a waiter's overlapping interdependent multi-layered familial, workplace, and personal circumstances, although they appear similar on the surface. Tracing how and why each waiter and his family are continually pulled deeper into a maze of socio-economic inequality and emotional turmoil can be applied in similar developing national contexts.

We focus on building our findings on the lived experiences of being a waiter and the impact of COVID-19 on them rather than restating the well-known

characteristics of precarious and informal labor by citing Standing (2014), Seligmann and Schriphost (2016), Johnson (2016), Barnes and Weller (2020) to define precarity through a specific literature review. Since this is a historical recollection on the pandemic and the period just after that, our analytic narrative inductively brings alive the cumulative importance of bounded decision-making, context and situational insecurity, which varyingly privatised the experience of precariousness. Each waiter had to choose between stress and harassment at work or being in greater distress by being unemployed or underemployed.

Research Questions & Setting

This paper answers four interrelated research questions that recur throughout to solve the puzzle of the persisting insecurity and alienation of the waiter.

- a) What are the multidimensional combined contextual socio-economic compulsions that go into making of a typical waiter?
- b) How does the intrinsic spontaneous emotional and physical labor within a particular restaurant segment uniquely impact his employment and employability within and beyond his restaurant, which in turn affects his employability before and during the pandemic?
- c) Why is dissent difficult?
- d) How did COVID-19 affect waiters' mental and economic precarity and vulnerability, employment prospects?

We chose leading cities in the state of Gujarat, India due to its variety of cuisines, and cosmopolitan atmosphere.

To prioritise the overall customer experience and waiter's labor process, we chose a variety of restaurants, including those with a set menu, popular restaurants with less emphasis on ambience but a focus on food, and upscale restaurants with an emphasis on both ambience and food [Crang,1994]. Our standalone restaurants lacked the conventional organogram of a star hotel or a conventional firm. Their roles were defined and yet dynamic, from the supervisor to order taking waiter to the food server to water server table cleaner, depending upon the cuisine. The managing supervisors were either graduates or senior waiters who had transitioned to management. Senior regular waiters of experience of a decade and those who were casual but looking to be regularized, having worked there and at other places for over five years, mostly took orders. Those who were temporary and casualized sometimes took orders but cleaned the table before and after the service, placed the water, and filled in for other jobs. The relationships here are structured on interpersonal dynamics and patronage of the owner and being on good terms with the supervisor. Identification with the restaurant was more out of the sentiment of owner loyalty rather than any deliberate teamwork.

Methods

We realized that research on waiters required immersive field research and

in this connection, we did extensive unstructured interviews, role play as various kinds of customers, covert participant observation, and phenomenological analysis. Class and social status prevent covert study of waiters. The waiter struggled to speak spontaneously and even if he did his supervisor would follow behind him. Despite these difficulties, we explored the waiters' fluid and accumulated understandings of how to do their work, tacit knowledge, and changing perceptions of social relations and work micro-politics through repeated observation and interaction within and outside the restaurant in their natural settings. We invested time and tried as much as possible to dissolve into the field setting with the purpose of achieving the objectives of this study based on hard facts emerging from the ground and allowed the participants' emergent themes to guide our fieldwork.

In Mar2020, Oct2020, Dec2020, Jan2021, Jul2021 & Jan2022, we undertook the fieldwork in Ahmedabad, Vadodara, Gandhinagar and Surat to get to know the setting and making them more receptive and spontaneous. We also interacted with the waiters after the lockdown and kept track of them through telephonic interactions.

Since each individual experiences were interwoven with multiple causal threads and we were clear that we wanted individual experiences to speak themselves out fully rather than prematurely arrange them thematically. This research was to a journey of immersion first in the field and multiple rounds of

intense retrospection, bracketing and then finalising significant statements and then coming out with the final account of each individual and then proceeding to extract some common themes while concentrating on each waiter's individual voice. This intensely self-temporal and reflective process was finally reinforcing and synthesising the emergent themes that had evolved organically from the personalities, self-definitions, and their interrelationships. To triangulate data, we interviewed and revalidated emerging themes with the same respondents, multiple waiters, owners, managers and customers at the studied restaurants.

Work of Waiters Before COVID-19

Becoming a Restaurant Waiter: We discovered that experience of each waiter when he traversed the journey of finding suitable employment varied because the compulsions, circumstances, life journeys and trade-offs differed from individual to individual and inextricably impacted their employment decisions. Pertinently, their unique contextual set of circumstances, challenges and economic hardships along their life-course thus far framed their thinking and orientation and how they responded varied even though they apparently came from similar social strata.

For some, despite all their hardships working in such well-known restaurants was by itself a considerable achievement. Their recruitment into these restaurants we studied mirrors the global trend of the informal individualization of recruitment into this profession through known inter-

mediaries as identified by Ram et al. (2002) in the UK context by word of mouth from waiters working in other restaurants and on the spot by the supervisor or restaurant manager, and at other times contracted through a middle man or contractor.

The waiters employed belonged to two categories. The first; employees directly appointed by known sources of the owners who supervised the business. The second largely involved temporary and contract labor.

In India, most restaurant owners take advantage of the cheap labor and manpower resources readily available owing to migrants moving into the city from villages searching for better opportunities.

Table 1 shows that these five respondents had different migration and life paths. Their accounts show how circumstances and salary influenced job acceptance decisions, which chained them to their demeaning jobs.

The paternalistic workplace makes recruitment and employment informal.

The paternalistic workplace makes recruitment and employment informal. Even during regular times, few could advance from waiter to senior steward and supervisor and retaining the job was even more challenging. For some, their earlier hardship returned in a magnified form during COVID-19. Others thought they had finally made a fresh modest start

Table 1. Dashboard of Employment Trends

Name	Migration trajectory	Reason	Financial compulsion to join	Progress	Primary Anxiety
Atul	Rural-urban (From Bodeli to Vadodara)	Emotional abuse arising from domestic violence from alcoholic father	Poverty	Trainee to Junior waiter temporary waiter which did not result in any significant monetary gain. ITI to Italian restaurant order taker was about to be regularised before pandemic.	The salary was not commensurate with the family needs, especially after his marriage. Career dead end after 5 years with working in manufacturing now impossible.
Ashok	From Vadodara	Restaurant work attracted him due to his manufacturing job's stagnation and his parents' financial troubles.	Perception of better pay.		
Prakash	Rural-urban	Restaurant waiter Father's Unexpected bereavement. Mother was a construction labourer. Compelled to leave school at 10th standard despite being a good student. Uncle usurped dead father's ancestral land in rural UP. Homelessness	Supporting younger sisters' education and getting them married, which in itself in India, is a huge and worrying responsibility compounded further by the advent of the pandemic. Multi-faceted hardship	Owner on compassionate grounds, provided employment. I have progressed from assistant waiter to order taking waiter who was promised to be regularised. Learnt English, did all kinds of odd jobs in various eateries and restaurants before coming here. Junior waiter to supervisor against all odds with all his tact and charm won over the owner. Temporary waiter but not on rolls and invisible apathy.	Supporting dependents with no possibility of immediate financial growth resulting in financial hardship. Dependents, children's education and a return to past left behind after somesocial mobility
Satyendra	Rural-Urban				
Naman	Rural-Urban	Caste oppression	Poverty		Double whammy: on account of poverty coupled with a return to caste oppression, bleak future

for their families, and now they faced the possibility of losing it forever.

Conditions and Labor Process

We now turn to the everyday experience of working as a waiter in leading cities in Gujarat. We understand how they felt at their workplace as they, adapted to reacting to the situational requirements of the management. Therefore, we establish that his performative occupational demands and labor process varied across the restaurant genre and cuisine. The waiter's comprehension and experience of his labor-process are shaped by his accountability and responsibility within his work context and the nature of his interaction with other waiters and customers in the restaurant. The waiter had to inevitably dissolve into the ambience and geographical source of the food and know something about it.

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The restaurant clients are heterogeneous of varying age groups, backgrounds and possess differing social and cultural capital. The waiter can adopt no standard pattern while dealing with them other than following standardized routines and communication practised by other waiters. The objective is to execute the service cycle and clinically move on to the following table. His emotional labor is only one part of his overall service

cycle combined with bodily gestures and movements.

The feeling of job and emotional insecurity is familiar in all workplaces, and however, differs in the case of the respondent waiter because of its psychological impact on him. The suppression of his genuine emotions and the compulsion to get on with his jobs and self-presentation work is a unique aspect of his embodied emotional and physical labor. Each waiter we studied did not have the cognitive ability by the nature of his work to feel it or evaluate his emotional labor and self-rationalize because most of the time, he is on the move. His social background prevents him from dissecting and becoming aware of the fundamental constitutive elements of his self-estrangement even during the rare moments of leisure, unlike other service work contexts.

The onus on self-learning and adaptive self-management on the waiters we studied is enormous compared to the formalized training of his counterpart in the West. The Indian restaurant waiter without formal training has to learn the job and the functional emotions associated with it quickly and become adept at it. He cannot fumble or be indecisive right from cleaning the table, placing the water and serving the food course. Pre-COVID, these semi-literate waiters went about their actions without a second thought and still put up a good performance in an alien environment. Both before and during the pandemic, a waiter's emotional labor triggered a chain reaction of multiple anxieties and stress, some recognizable, some unrecognizable on

many fronts they have to keep bottled up in a confined domain.

In a pre-set menu restaurant, the speed of service determines restaurant service continuity and efficiency. In contrast, a high-end multi-cuisine restaurant is more laid back, and much more interaction takes place between the waiter and the customer while placing an order and also on the polite enquiries the waiter makes to assess the customer satisfaction on the quality of food served and the services provided and about the tip he can hope to get.

Consider the narrative of Bhupen Bhai improvizes his daily grind (a fixed thali restaurant) -

“I have long working hours beginning at 830 AM and do not find time to have breakfast. The routine begins by meeting around 930 AM to plan for the day ahead. The waiters’ duties, including junior waiter assignments, are distributed and delegated. To ensure that the waiters understand the day’s Gujarati menu, they are briefed. 1130 AM is our start time. The restaurant’s menu is posted outside. By 1230 PM, business peaks. The restaurant’s supervisors watch everything. After a customer arrives, we serve them food at a set time and never leave them unattended.

We refill the customer’s thali before they ask because the supervisor signals the dish and table number. Our customers stay loyal this way. As soon as possible, the tables must be set for the next guest. We are always busy and cannot make or receive calls during working

hours. We cannot let go of discomfort, pain, exhaustion, and any discrepancy that will disrupt this fabricated island of Gujarat, where everything is carefully planned, from furniture to lighting. I keep going despite being exhausted, sore, and hurt. Guests arriving at 1450 may delay closing. Lunch is at 1600 hours, then we smoke and start work at 1700 hours. After a quick meal, I return home late exhausted and ready to sleep, leaving no time to spend with my wife and children, who are already asleep”.

He exclaims, “What a dog’s life!”

Conversely, other old restaurants are not known for their ambience, moderately priced and known for the quality of the food they provide. Here the conversation between the waiter and the customer is finite, as the accent is on efficiency and customer turnaround. Here, while the order taking waiter has to listen attentively to the order being placed, his job is more or less repetitive and monotonous by nature. and at the end of the day, the respondents reported feeling bored and exhausted.

However, in higher-end restaurants, not only varying the interaction according to the customer matters but also how the customer is transported to a different world in conjunction with the restaurant’s ambience and the quality of the food and service as illustrated by two respondents Ashok and Ketan. Here, the waiter and the customer become encapsulated in both the globalized cosmopolitan and local context (Kikon, 2018:4153; Cook et al., 2016: 229-34). Respondent

waiters had to intuitively size up the customer quickly during the pre-pandemic and pare the individual(s) with their mental database to 'frame' them (Nicod & Mars, 1984 : 58) and moulded their behavior according to the needs of the situation and merged their identity to that of their employer restaurant (Cayla & Bhatnagar, 2017). They did it spontaneously out of a situational necessity rather than having any special love for their job unlike in Kaya and Fotaki (2022:30).

The customer and waiter must work together to create a dreamland gastro-economic travel adventure (Srinivas, 2007). If this doesn't happen, the waiter and customer are drawn to life's realities, and the customer expresses his displeasure, sometimes in foul language. Despite his feelings, the restaurant waiter must start afresh with another customer and work until the restaurant closes. Consider Alok, a matriculate who must become an expert on Italian pizzas. He must assess the customer and then share his pizza-making expertise to gain their trust. From his small house in Itola village in Vadodara's suburbs to Little Italy restaurant, it has been one long imaginary journey.

"I must keep smiling and answer the customer's questions about the type of pizza, its crust, toppings, sauces, and accompaniments in a convincing manner. My goal is to make them feel at home, and compensate the restaurant and me. I had to do this well despite my mental anguish."

After the pandemic, Alok struggled to find work. Despite emotional and

mental strain, he prefers affective labor and imaginary identification to nothing

Ketan was employed by a high-end restaurant which closed and fired him before COVID-19.

"I've worked in this restaurant for three years. Despite never visiting Venice, I had to imagine myself there while doing my service impressing the customer required this imaginary trip. I immerse them in fantasy and personalise each customer's experience. My Rs.16000 salary and my wife's receptionist salary cover expenses."

The pandemic closed the restaurant, leaving Ketan unemployed.

Furthermore, the waiter's outcome of the impression management of the customer was the tip he received at the end of the interaction, which provided him with added income to support his family.

In many restaurants, tips are placed in a box and then distributed to the staff, whereas, in fine dining establishments, tipping is situational and spontaneous. Tipping is a reciprocal exchange in which one party performs a service and the other expresses gratitude (Mars & Nicod, 1984: 75). An experienced waiter understands how to control the timing and spatial positioning of the interaction while serving the customer to validate the customer's ownership of the experience. The tip varies based on the individual customer. Tipping is not contingent just on customer service reciprocity, and the relationship hierarchically favors the cus-

tomer as opposed to any prevailing custom (Mulinari, 2019 : 440-41). Due to the pandemic, even this small remuneration that a synchronized or non-synchronized service waiter could anticipate for all of his efforts fell to almost nothing.

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Therefore, all waiters studied across restaurants struggled with low motivation and burnout from having to be available for insolent customers and indifferent superiors and colleagues. Some senior waiters in higher-end restaurants had lost their assertiveness and individuality after years of adapting to the restaurant's clientele and competing for the owner's favor. The waiters we studied were scarred emotionally. The actor and real person become indistinguishable, harming each psychologically. Thus, the respondent waiter's enactment is his livelihood, not a choice to excel. He must stay calm under a demanding supervisor.

Therefore, the relatively uneducated waiter is a unique performer with invisible emotional scars. He sells ambience and service without ever leaving the restaurant for long hours. After years of accommodating the restaurant's clientele and vying for the owner's favor, some senior waiters at upscale restaurants had lowered assertiveness and individuality. The actor and real person become indistinguishable, harming each psychologi-

cally. The respondent waiter's performance is thus his means of subsistence rather than a deliberate attempt at excellence. His emotions and decisions revolve in and around making the best out of his shackled air-conditioned workspace and his modest home.

Articulating Dissent

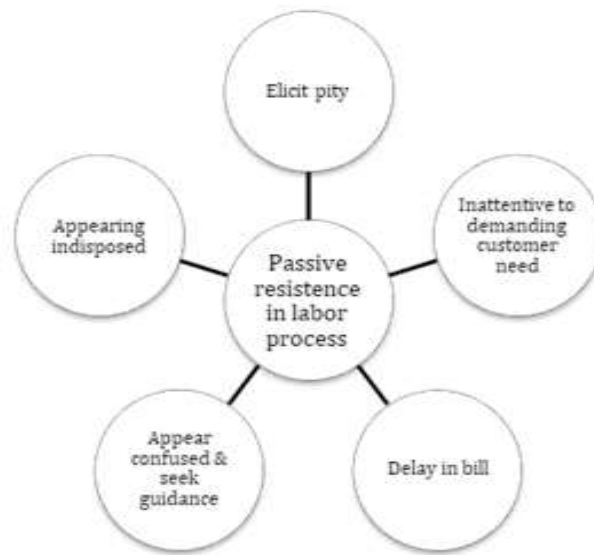
Building upon the description of this confined work environment, any articulation of dissent was a dynamic, concurrent process involving the waiter, the customer, and the managers and owners. Here cooperation is transactional and functional, and trust was conditional before and during the pandemic. The high attrition rate of casualised waiters led to low belongingness, and the work pace and the self-interest of waiters encouraged social fragmentation of the work environment. Insecure respondents were either apprehensive or averse to venting their frustration or openly demonstrating dissent. They could not temporally create 'banana time' (Roy, 1959) and find common ground to articulate their grievances jointly. For junior waiters, continued employment; for some waiters, the chance to be regularized by the owners; and for regular senior waiters ensuring that regular payment and tipping mattered immensely. Since employment dynamics vary from restaurant to restaurant, the waiter was confounded by work-related

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issues, some of which he created and others caused by the competitive environment's demands. The problems did not follow a predictable pattern and were caused primarily by changes in the waiters' workplace circumstances.

In addition to expressing discontent, fig. 1 reveals that PreCovid-19 respondents sometimes employed passive and subtle strategies with customers and superiors. Depending on the restaurant, and service pattern, there was limited space for waiters to manoeuvre.

Fig. 1 Waiters Work Patterns-Model



Too much micromanagement by owners and supervisors is not possible in most of the restaurants we investigated due to the fast pace of work and the fact that too much personal supervision would hinder the waiter's effectiveness in interacting with customers. Aside from waiters' keeping track of themselves and each other's work, owners and supervisors quietly watched waiters for signs of inefficiency or discontent. The management required supervisors like Satyendra to report any inefficient waiters. Satyendra (particularly between the first and second wave in India after the lockdown) had to prove his loyalty to his

owners by being a regular informant of restaurant waiters or lose favor and become redundant. This information helped end the services of a specific waiter akin to Sosteric (1996: 304). His input helped management cut labor costs during and after each pandemic wave.

Financial compulsions, the workforce's heterogeneous age and experience, lack of rights awareness, and reluctance to forge alliances prevented the coordinated mobilisation of collective dissent. Importantly, contrary to Kearsy (2020 : 507), we found that the absence of a cohesive peer network within and

beyond the waiter's restaurant (Anner et al., 2020:719] persisted throughout the pandemic, resulting in a lack of emotional support, information sharing about potential job opportunities or shifts, and an inability to express dissent. None of our respondents identified with Kelly's (2012) collective mobilisation thesis. Recognised trade unions did not reach out to precarious workers or view them as vulnerable or in need of support.

Impact of COVID-19 on Waiters

COVID-19 and ensuing lockdowns had a debilitating cascading financial effect on the restaurant business and its employees. Hitherto in the discussion on precarious labor, only the economic aspect has been highlighted. We address the intersectional impact of disturbed emotions, cognition and the everyday monetary struggle of the human agent and his family that was exacerbated by the pandemic.

Most of our respondents were unaware of the rules governing their employment, Social security benefits, including the ESIC Act of 1948, the Interstate Migrant Workers Act, the 1979 Act and the Shops and Establishments Act of 1961. Moreover, what we could discern from our respondents was that they had no access to legal recourses or trade unions for collective bargaining. The nature of the employment of the waiters falling in different categories meant that the management could take advantage of their non-compliance with the prevailing labor laws adding to their profitability. It was the unexpressed norm that the labor

department, or the food inspector, was adequately attended to by the owners during the inspection. We found a blatant violation of the various labor laws and observed very little compliance with the unorganized workers' social security laws. The Government temporarily putting all labor statutes in abeyance or low compliance during the pandemic added to the workers' woes.

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These hitherto busy waiters who work in restaurants now stare at the restaurant walls, overwhelmed by anxiety with few customers to serve and to endure long hours with nothing much to do. But now they feel anxious and worried about getting shifts. They were never in control of their time before and during the pandemic. They encountered an emotional cacophony of disbelief, anger, masculine shame, hopelessness and fatalism. In his moments of solitude at home, the unemployed waiter respondent often reflected on the grind he had to go through daily, with no time for any other distraction, and that the stress and strain were worth it because he was doing it for the sake of his family. He also remembered how he used to volunteer for double shifts to supplement his income. As someone who was unhabituated to being idle, the feeling of not doing anything at home triggered multiple thoughts that reminded him of the emotional scars and physical fatigue that he had either repressed or

ignored during his working days which acquired a different character with multiple pandemic, induced insecurities of his family and himself. Now that he was confined to the house, he felt lonely, with no one to share his feelings with and not knowing what the future held for him. During the lockdown and pandemic, the waiter felt a psychological and emotional vacuum, missing the familiar busy restaurant social context and customers. During this period, domestic rows and growing frustration arose from being confined in a small, crowded space without much movement.

The lockdown and pandemic depleted all their savings. Each respondent had never planned for this prolonged unemployment and underemployment, so each day was a challenge.

Consider Satyendra's narrative

“The pandemic hurt the restaurant business, and the restaurant was closed during the lockdown, leaving me helpless. These developments have drastically impacted my two school-going children, and I again found myself at crossroads, not knowing what to do.”

Their families suffered financially, and paying school fees on time was difficult, resulting in authorities harassing their children. Respondents wanted to educate their children well so they would not repeat their struggles, but after the pandemic, schools required computers and the internet for online classes, making it impossible. The waiter's depression and strain, led to a cycle of violence

and abuse that the women endured. This increased psychological and physical abuse was the collateral damage caused by COVID -19.

Respondents such as Bhupen Bhai and other respondents from restaurants with a fixed menu format who have long been accustomed to movement and physical fatigue do not know what to do. Having grown used to the routine over the past two years, Bhupen Bhai eagerly awaits a call from the restaurant to give him a shift following the lockdown.

Not all waiters were taken back after the lockdown by the restaurant management.

Not all waiters were taken back after the lockdown by the restaurant management, who knew fully that the operations would take some time to stabilize. Respondents also reported that restaurants had to follow social distancing seating norms after lockdowns. These compliance standards reduced the restaurant's seating capacity, reducing revenue, forcing management to use waiters less, and resulting in unpredictable salary cuts. As such, only the senior, experienced, and efficient waiters were taken and subsequently, when business improved, more waiters were taken back. Some owners gave waiters money and care without expecting anything in return. They did so with the hope the restaurant would return to normal. In certain restaurants, the owner gave senior waiters free housing in exchange for their availability and odd jobs. Junior

Table 2 Dashboard of Waiter Response

Respondent	Compulsions	Imminent threat	Response forced by COVID19
Sumit	“I failed dropped out of school. Mother sent me to Vadodara to work with care by a relative. Father was a cleaner in nearby college. My hardship led me to this profession and it continues.”	Restaurant closure. “I used to make Rs.6000 per month, but now the future appears worse and uncertain.”	Unemployment forced him return to his village near Patan and look for work.
Jiten	Since the Janta lockdown, my employer fired everyone. I have been idle since June and in dire economic distress.	During the lockdowns, I tried unsuccessfully to find work at a grocery store and a medical shop, but I have since found work at a lower paying restaurant for Rs. 7500 after the second lockdown.	Emotional harm-Affront to male ego. “My wife works as a maid servant. I survived on her salary of Rs.9000 with no other alternative.”
Mitesh	Acute economic distress brought about by paycuts. “For these lockdown months, I received half my wages. I am desperate for any work other than this.”	Multi-faceted financial and emotional constraints. “I scraped by pawning my wife’s jewels. After the restaurant opened, I joined and got Rs.5000 per month. Survival is hard.”	Homelessness. My landlord has threatened to evict me, making each day difficult.
Mukesh	Bedridden mother and dependent wife, son and daughter. “On application for financial aid, P.M.G.Y gave me Rs.500. Since I worked here before, I returned between the first and second lockdowns. No tips, half salary.”	Expensive healthcare and am struggling to care for ailing mother. COVID 19 has compounded my woes.	Alarming economic and familial distress. “I am willing to do any job. My wife is employed as a maid. I do not know how much longer I can feed my family and survive.”
All	Limited job skill-sets, employability and reduced employment prospects.	Self-service restaurant, Home delivery services Swiggy, Zomato and now Blinkit. AI induced algorithmic control, automation and displacement of labor.	Persistent employment redundancy.

waiters who failed to create such affective connections were worse financially. However, these fragile dynamic reciprocal power relationships are forged through un verbalized dependencies of extending a loan or offering an out-of-turn payment, driving the waiter deeper into a debt-trap.

Table 2 summarises the ramifications of COVID19 on the waiters and representative quotes.

Becoming a platform delivery worker or finding alternative jobs was easier said than done. The waiter's skillset, workflow, and routine are attuned to his environment. In COVID -19, their spontaneous adaptive performance and/or personalization skills were useless and importable, specific to the restaurant's situation and context, making it difficult for a waiter to adapt to unfamiliar surroundings and owners even if he found work in another restaurant. The waiters could not see beyond the restaurant, and many lacked the mindset and job skills to find another job during the pandemic. Waiters were desperate for difficult to get jobs and they risked contracting the virus by travelling to their villages for

Self-centered customers and waiters came from different subcultures and life-worlds, and while customers adapted to new food habits to the detriment of the waiters. Some waiters risked contracting the virus by traveling to their villages for manual labor during the lockdown.

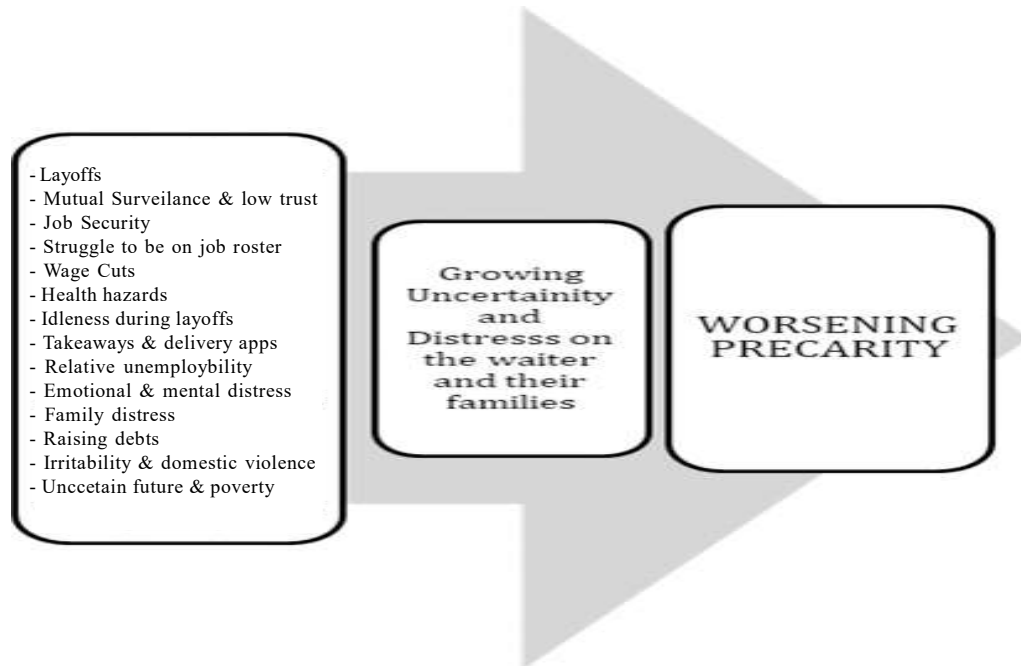
manual labor during the lockdown. The MNREGA scheme of the government was a life saver for many during the pandemic or thereafter. Most waiters said the government's COVID -19 relief fund was inaccessible and was also insufficient

Concluding Discussion

Precarity before and during the pandemic is misunderstood as an outcome rather than a complex evolving social process where human subjectivity varyingly interacts with resilient social inequalities and inadequate state support. The performative labor, fatigue and insecurities of these unique precarious workers are taken for granted (fig. 2.)

We have mapped different situational contexts and circumstances waiters found themselves in and examined the limitations and constraints as they transitioned from varying reasons and challenges before and after becoming a waiter. These evolving interrelated challenges within and beyond work moulded each waiter's unique life course. They framed his understanding of his interdependent emotions, concerns, alienation, and economic difficulties. We analysed the labor process of each different restaurant setting, and it shaped the waiter's exhaustion and exploitation uniquely. Thus, even before the pandemic, emotional work stress caused by fluctuating low pay, reliance on variable customer tips, high workloads caused by long unplanned work hours, and working double shifts either voluntarily or involuntarily, compelled him to work in this

Fig. 2 Challenges of Waiters



underappreciated profession exposing him to numerous health risks like cardiac risks. COVID-19 brought a different kind of uncertainty, and getting past everyday became a challenge. This study's examination of each waiter's lived experience revealed how underemployment and unemployment distinctively impacted the workers and their families in India. It reflected on how a combination of unexpected developments such as COVID-19 could keep and pull them even deeper into intergenerational poverty, which they tried to escape. The multiple constraints confounding the waiter during and just after the pandemic left him with mixed feelings and unsure about not knowing how to cope with the situation.

Hence, we bring to the frontstage each missing affective human subject's experiential journey and voice hitherto inad-

equately discussed in the precarity literature and, subsequently, the pandemic's impact through our unpacking the social relations of the workplace from each waiter's account and accumulated insights from other waiters' voices.

We believe we have inductively arrived at some answers to the puzzle of how a causal chain of vulnerability traps the waiter by answering the three research questions at the beginning of this paper. Our crucial takeaway is that contract labor, temporary jobs, long hours of work, low wages with no job security, very little labor compliance, and little or no social security support put the restaurant industry in a poor shape concerning the employment of labor. These are a silent, overlooked, and taken-for-granted bullied precariat who work in many restaurants throughout India.

COVID-19 has accelerated home delivery, and AI-driven apps like Blinkit have accelerated customers' decision-making without time to reverse it, adversely affecting waiters. He is easily replaceable and a victim of dynamically evolving extrinsic circumstances and resilient structural socioeconomic forces beyond his control.

After the lockdown, waiters struggle to find new jobs to uplift their socioeconomic status. Further variants and rising infections could again damage the restaurant industry and the waiters' livelihood.

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