

Between 'Baksheesh' and 'Bonus'

Precarity, Class, and Collective Action among Domestic Workers in Bengaluru

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How is class experienced by domestic workers when they come together for collective action? Using ethnographic data, this paper argues that the collective action efforts by some unions of domestic workers in Bengaluru to demand "bonus" reveals the struggles over class that they engage in, struggles that make them conscious of their in-between class status as self-employed workers in a precarious informal economy. The collective action of demanding bonus in Bengaluru entails a cultural-political struggle away from a gift economy relationship and towards a more commodified economy under conditions of precarity in the informal economy.

News stories about the abuse of domestic workers (henceforth *DWs*) by their employers potentially generate debate about how class distinctions operate in Indian society (*EPW Engage* 2017). However, public discourse frequently constructs the *DWs* as passive, reducing them to mute victims who do not articulate their own desires, demands, and dispositions, in short, as inscrutable subalterns. This paper approaches the *DWs* "subjectively" through their actions as meaning-making human subjects whose identities (and behaviour) are shaped by "objective" sets of relations within which they act and confront their employers. The *DWs* construct meanings about their lived experiences in the process of political struggles (Burawoy 1989), including struggles over how to classify symbolic goods (Bourdieu 1989) such as "gifts" and "bonuses." Their identities are visible in the taking up of positions as subjects, which is the work of "culture" (Hall 1997). Rather than an abstract category of analysis, "class" then becomes a culturally experienced reality that shapes collective action. It comes alive as symbolic power and strategies at moments when the *DWs* produce their services and "subjectivities" within work relations. Attending to the struggles of the *DWs* to collectivise allows us glimpses into how they "make their histories" only within given conditions of existence.

One moment in the making of such histories occurred a few months ago in Bengaluru. Rita, an organiser in a *DW* union started her area-level meeting by asking a question to the approximately 30 *DWs*: "In two months a festival will come, what is that?" When the *DWs* chorused "Deepavali," Rita took the lead and solemnly exhorted the workers saying

This is one chance to demand a *bonus*. Few employers will give, and few will not. So, our Executive Committee members have suggested that we print the posters with the demands of bonus and "weekly off." And paste them near the apartments. (field note entry, 1 September 2017)

Rita's exhortations gain force from another moment of history making, now legendary among the *DWs*. As one of the organisers of the union recalled,

Previously, employers used to give them (*DWs*) old saris (at the time of festivals such as Deepavali, Eid, Christmas, Pongal). However, (some-time) in 2015, a *DW* returned the sweets and asked for 'bonus.' (interview, 11 December 2017)

This action by a *DW* of spurning the prestation¹ of a sari in order to demand a "bonus," spurred their unions to encourage the *DWs* to ask for bonus (the equivalent of one month's wages) rather

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than the baksheesh² or gift of a sari. Part of a longer campaign for decent work based on the International Labour Organization's Convention C189 and the Millennium Development Goals of the United Nations, this demand transformed organically into a "campaign for bonus" (henceforth cfb).

The cfb is one of three major struggles by the dws in Bengaluru—the others being for a minimum wage and a weekly off.³ It directly engages the class consciousness of the dws as "workers," confronts the class practices of their employers, and has significance for collective action. Using ethnographic data, this paper explores the cfb as a conjuncture that reveals the struggles of the dws over class, struggles that make them conscious of their in-between class status as self-employed workers seeking to become wage workers in a precarious informal economy. It argues that the cfb entails a cultural-political struggle for the dws away from a paternalistic relationship symbolised by baksheesh and towards a new conceptualisation of their work relations symbolised by the demand for bonus. The dws thus struggle to reconstruct their subjectivity as workers but in ways that reflects their class position, for the gift of the sari symbolically constitutes and reproduces relations of domination. Further, the structure of domestic work puts limits on the collective action of the dws, which occurs, only outside their place of work, usually in their residential neighbourhoods. Each dw thus enters her place of work, as an independent self-employed worker.

The paper is organised into three sections. The first section describes the context of collectivisation of the dws in Bengaluru. The second section explores the diversity of experiences and actions of the dw in the cfb in order to demonstrate how their subjectivities are shaped. The third section interrogates the significance of the categories baksheesh, bonus and a third category—"advance," with reference to how the cfb campaign is affected. The conclusion draws out implications for unions working with the dws.

Context of Collectivisation of Domestic Workers

In recent interventions, scholars argue for the salience of informal sector workers in reimagining labour activism and resistance to capital. Chakrabarti and Dhar (2008) call to reimagine trade unionism by acknowledging the centrality of marginalised figures (self-employed, peasants and homeworkers) to working classes. They urge a processual understanding of class as the performance, appropriation, distribution, and consumption of surplus value, since this reveals a diversity of sites where collective struggles become possible. Similarly, Sanyal and Bhattacharyya (2009) argue that new locations and forms of labour activism today emerge, not from those who are traditionally exploited (that is, at sites of extraction of surplus such as factories), but from those who are excluded, that is, dispossessed of their economic resources without becoming proletarianised. This excluded labour is in the informal sector, being self-employed such as peasants, household workers, and retail workers. Refusing to view self-employed workers as disguised wage workers, Sanyal and Bhattacharyya take them to be "surplus workers" embodying a relation of exclusion (in

opposition to exploitation or extraction relations) and existing within an economy of need (rather than an economy of profit). Notably for them, radical mobilisations nowadays are by such workers against exclusion.

Both these papers offer insights into the case of dws in Bengaluru. dws are petty commodity producers (producing a service) but not independent producers (like peasants and artisans) since they use tools provided by the employers. Being proletarianised, dws fall within the circuit of capital, and are not "excluded." They are tied to capitalist production since they work in households of employers who themselves work within the circuit of capital (being either owners of capital or wage workers in capitalist firms). Yet, dws are not wage workers since they are not exploited in the sense used above. Indeed, dws in this study largely view themselves as self-employed workers. Additionally, as informal sector workers, dws work without contracts, and within diverse set of labour arrangements.

Along with garment, construction, and restaurant workers, dws are among the largest groups within urban informal sector workers. They are overwhelmingly a female workforce, with their work undervalued partly due to its "naturalization" as woman's work (Kothari 1997; Sankaran 2013; Sharma 2016). Scholarship on dws has established how women's work is invisibilised within the household, the lack of legislations that guarantee the welfare of dws, including minimum wages, and the need to reconceptualise the home as a place of work (Naidu 2016; Neetha and Palriwala 2011). Since 92% of the working population in India work in the so-called informal sector (NCEUS 2007), any sustained resistance to the hegemony of capital requires the participation of informal sector workers. Such resistance presumes the collectivisation of informal sector workers which is not a new phenomenon (Chigateri et al 2016; Gallin 2001; George 2013). This has however proven to be uniquely challenging due to the diversity of extant work arrangements of informal sector workers (Chen 2011). In the case of dws, some work as live-in workers (with room and board), but more often as workers working in multiple homes. Some are paid piece-rates for each kind of work they perform, while others are paid a salary. The foci of our study are self-employed workers who work in multiple homes. Additionally, the lack of a locus for organising that is analogous to the factory site, and the precarity of work, which makes any organising a threat to livelihood, raise some questions: What kind of labour activism would dws be capable of? What would collective action look like with dws? How would the question of class come into play with respect to the collective action of dws?

Over the last decade, a number of dw unions have formed in Bengaluru. Since 2011, dw unions registered officially with the labour department. Organising dws from their own neighbourhoods (mostly low-income residential settlements), union meetings create awareness of the rights and collective conditions of dws. All unions regularly petition the state to improve the working conditions of dw. The petitions highlight particular kinds of ill-treatment by employers of dws at the site of work, and urge the state to recognise dw as workers

or constitute a dw board. Registering with a union enhances the ability of dws to access existing state welfare measures such as old-age pension, widow pension, education scholarships, and to aid their husbands to register in the construction welfare board.

Unions vary considerably among themselves. While some use state welfare measures as a strategy to enrol dws who find it attractive to get a tangible benefit, others use construction welfare boards as a model to form a similar dw board. Yet others, have veered away from the welfare provisioning function, to focus on raising worker consciousness and collectivisation of dws. While many dw unions have also lobbied with the state to institute a minimum wage for dws, a few dw unions have taken up issues that potentially seek broader social and structural transformation of work relations of dws. We view these as labour–non-governmental organisations (NGOs) since they are promoted by NGOs (Bhattacharjee 1999; Ford 2006). Rita, for instance, is part of one such labour–NGO.

Whereas many conventional unions engage in the demand for minimum wage via state measures, the labour–NGOs realised early on that the dws work without a break in a week. Consequently, they started the demand for weekly off (mostly on a Sunday). This demand has been made by most dws with a good degree of success. As Sunitha, a dw, recalls,

No, there were no holidays then (before 2012). We didn't know there was (could be) a holiday on Sundays. We used to go because we had difficulties and we had a job ... that security was there ... Only now, we have come to know of the union, what is a year, what is "bonus, what are holidays ... only after joining the union after forming the organisation. I have more knowledge (understanding) now, I did not have any knowledge (understanding) then. (That) I had a job and money, was all I had in mind. (interview: 3 May 2017)

Sunitha's candid acknowledgement of the ways that union membership has enhanced self-understanding of her situation and its possibilities is echoed by many other dws. The cfb emerges within these struggles by dws for minimum wage and weekly off.

Taking the Struggle into the Home

Dw unions encourage dws to ask for bonus around the festival season which, in Bengaluru, is understood to roughly commence from the festival of Deepavali (October) through Christmas until the Tamil festival of Pongal in January, although it also includes Eid (which usually occurs around June). The customary gift of a sari and/or a box of sweets is made by most employers in this festival season. Although English is not spoken by most dws, they refer to the customary gift as simply "sari," or "sweet *boxu*" (a Kannada tinge). Similarly, whereas some dws use the Tamil and Kannada word *kaasu* (which is cash) when they reference the nominal amount of money sometimes given as a gift, almost all of them simply use the English word bonus when they reference it in contrast to *kaasu*. As mentioned earlier, we will use the term *baksheesh* in this paper to refer to the customary gift since this term captures the class of symbolic goods and relations we are most interested in.

The cfb campaign reveals how the class situations of dw are shaped by their employers' practices. Farida is a dw who has

worked for one and a half years with her current employer who pays her ₹2,000 per month. She vividly recalled the instance when she asked for a bonus from her employer for the first time:

Yamuna (referring to a dw organiser) had given me a paper (a poster made by the dw union) during Depavali about bonus. I went and gave it to them (the employers). The husband questioned me: "Akka, why did you give this paper to us? It is out of love we give (the 'gift' of a sari). Who gave you this paper?" I told them that I am part of this union and so they had given me this. He grumbled and gave me ₹500. (interview: 18 May 2017)

Three interconnected points are noteworthy in Farida's comments. First, the commonly used speech practice of the employer who addressed the dw using the filial term "Akka" (elder sister) acts as a counter to the subjectivity of "worker" that is implicit in the dw seeking a bonus. It rhetorically frames the interaction as a rupture of an imagined relation—that of family members. In this sense, akka becomes accusatory (of the dw) within a moral universe made by the employer. The dw stands accused of rupturing the moral code of family members who, it is assumed, do not monetise their relationships.⁴ Second, the assertion of an emotion of love (by the employer) underscores the status of the sari as a prestation or gift with implicit claims of being better or purer than the commodified bonus. This claim about the "(im)morality of money" has a long history across cultural contexts (Parry and Bloch 1989). The dw thus faces a work relation in which her employer desists from occupying that subject position, instead constructing the relation in imagined filial terms with emotional power, one effect of which is a justification for non-payment of a bonus (family members after all do not get paid bonus). The sari here is the material condensation of a relation ritually symbolising the patron status of the employer in the context of a festival (more on this in the next section) and therefore the impossibility or undesirability of a worker status for the dw.

Finally, the "grumbling" by the employer suggests a construction of the union as a problem that "pollutes" the "pure" filial relation (based on love and gifting), and the presumed docility or innocence of the dw. The latter is again, a paternalistic practice (or strategy if you will) in a social game whose rules favour the employer. If it is the union that breaks the presumed docility of the dw in the eyes of the employer, then it is the household that needs to be protected from the polluting shadow of the "office." Thus, Rihana, another dw mentioned how her employer refused to give bonus by asking rhetorically, "is this an *office* to pay you bonus?" The fact that the household is indeed the place of work for the dw, and a place of production of value and subjectivities, is thus elided within this game. Consequently, the work of social reproduction overwhelmingly carried out by women (the housewife employer supervising the dw) remains invisibilised (Rai 2013; Razavi 2013).

In the everyday flow of negotiating their lives, dws display a sense of clarity, albeit not necessarily in a singular manner, about what the demand for bonus means to them. While the cfb campaign has successfully raised the awareness of bonus among dws, there are some dws who remain sceptical of the

demand. Sabhiha (a DW who has worked for 10 years) articulates a common fear thus

We go in search of a job and we ask for the job. They [employers] don't call us for work. In this case, how we can demand ["bonus"] saying they have to give us? If we ask them they will say "did we call you and ask you to come for work? You came looking for job on your own. Are we not paying you monthly, do your work and go." (field note entry, 15 December 2017)

Thus, the fear of losing their job operates as a limiting mechanism for many DWs when it comes to demanding a bonus. However, a far greater number of DWs in our study have attempted to bring up the question of bonus with their employers, albeit not necessarily as a straightforward demand. In doing so, DWs explore the meanings of bonus in complex ways. The next two DWs bring together the matters of use and exchange values, and dignity in their comments.

Lalitha, a DW who has worked for five years with her employer and who received a bonus reflected on its value thus:

Bonus means extra money for our work. If they give sari it is not useful for us. If they give bonus we can buy some things for our house ... groceries we can buy, or we can pay school fees. They gave bonus respecting my work. With happiness they have given me bonus. We may have many saris [but] if they give money it will be used for something. (field note entry, 15 December 2017)

Lalitha approaches a view of bonus as a form of compensation ("extra money for our work") and sign of "respect" by the employer. This is at least as important as the exchange value of the bonus. In a more complex manner, another DW, Revathi who has worked as a DW for 15 years narrated her experience of not using the term bonus but asking for money instead of a sari. In doing so, she makes a case couched in an appeal to a "fair" demand (rather than a "right") as she operates within the same filial relations seen above.

In the beginning, for three years they gave me saris. I told her, "Akka, don't give me sari, give me money, it can be used for my house expenses." *I did not ask as bonus*. If we get bonus it can be used for any houses expenses; (it) can repay loan. *Can we give sari as loan instalment?* Bonus means we have been working since so many years. It is not extra money. We are asking this because we have been working since so many years. If we get money we can use it; if we get sari we will wear it for some time and then throw it somewhere. Those days I had admitted my children to school ... so I asked "any way you are not giving *advance*, give me money" (emphasis ours; field note entry, 15 December 2017)

Again, there are three points to note in Revathi's account. First, her contrasting of the gift of a sari with the bonus (which for her is simply money) brings out the reality of precarity of many DWs. The need for money (exchange value for other goods and services, including her children's education) makes it qualitatively different from the sari (that only has use-value for DWs). Second, Revathi's argument for a bonus (although she does not use that term) is premised on the power of a moral argument—that it is fair for her employer to give her money (not saris). This is, as she points out because saris would not be acceptable to her employer as a mode of repayment for a loan taken by her (Revathi) from her employer. In making her argument, Revathi boldly asserts a social and

moral equivalency—that of the coeval if not equal social statuses between the DW and her employer wherein both take loans that they have to repay, the employer who (presumably) takes loans (that is, mortgage) from banks, and the DW who takes a loan (that is, the "advance") from her employer. In doing so, she complements her construction of the bonus as reward for her long years of service. Taken together Revathi's rhetoric lays the foundation for viewing the bonus as a "compensation" rather than as a gift or unreasonable demand without a basis in morality.

Finally, Revathi's introduction of the term advance is central to our understanding of the DW-employer/patron relation. Advance is an interest-free *loan* that many DWs take from their employers, a loan that they struggle to repay. Along with the baksheesh and bonus, the advance forms a symbolic material triad that shapes the DW's identities, consciousness, and potential for collective action. We will explore this triad in some more depth later. For now, we highlight two points—that DWs frequently take "advance" from their employers and that this is related to their precarity, and that the attempt by DWs to move away from the baksheesh and towards a bonus is continually mediated by the advance. Indeed, many times the distinction between advance and bonus is blurred by the employers themselves as in the case of one employer who refused to give a DW an advance but reluctantly gave her ₹2,000 a little later saying "anyway I have to give you 'bonus.'" Such an ambiguous situation prompts Vani, a DW to frame the issue as a deterrent for demanding a bonus: "Some employers give us 'advances,' but don't take it back. So, how can we ask for 'bonus?'" On the other hand, this situation has prompted some DWs to raise the demand for bonus with more confidence as in the case of the DW who pointed out the miserliness of her employer by saying, "Anyway you do not give me 'advance', so at least give me money (meaning 'bonus') at festival times" (field note entry, 6 December 2017).

Class as a Factor

What do such articulations of their reality say about the DWs' experiences of class? For Elster (1986) who approaches class as a key explanatory factor for collective action, classes in market economies "are characterized by the activities in which they are *compelled* to engage by virtue of their endowment structure" (1986: 145, our emphasis). So, do the DWs come together *as a class* to collectively demand their bonus? The DWs exist within the informal economy with a particularly weak endowment structure—defined by Elster as including "tangible property, intangible skills, and more subtle cultural traits" (1986: 147). Although most DWs live in their "own homes," many of them do not have the title deed for the property. This makes for a precarious existence, since the threat of eviction is a spectre that does not go away and requires collective struggle to "normalise" their residence. Property ownership thus is elusive for the DWs. Their "skills" are also at best minimal as perceived in the marketplace, a factor of the "gendered naturalisation" of their work which makes them appear as if they do what they "naturally" do, that is, without acquisition

of skills. Finally, their “cultural traits” are part of their status-based degradation and domination, being mostly either so-called “lower castes,” “minorities” (in terms of religion or ethnicity), or clearly working-class, and more usually a combination of these. The choices that they face in terms of getting credit (loans) to satisfy the needs of children’s education and family healthcare are between traditional moneylenders, a well-entrenched sector of microfinancing NGOs, self-help groups (SHGs), or their employers. Of these, the first two are typically usurious (with interest rates ranging from the low-end of 24%–34% and going as high as 50% or more, with household jewellery or title deeds if any demanded as collateral). The SHGs charge a similar interest but do not typically grant large amounts of loan. In such a context, the Dws arguably are structurally *compelled* to seek interest-free “advance” from their employers as the best way to optimise their endowment structure.

What do the Dws use the advance for? Despite the diversity within the Dws, one characteristic shared by almost all of them is their aspirations for their children’s future, aspirations that unflinchingly proceed through seeking their education. More than healthcare needs (sadly, only viewed as an emergency care for the most part), and marriage costs (a one-time expense for each event), all Dws prioritise the education of their children above all other household expenses. Sunitha, a Dw puts it thus in a reflexive manner:

After struggling and struggling so much ... we don't have any dreams. But, at least let our children be happy is the only dream ... They should be able to stand on their own feet, find a good job and if each one is happy it is enough. That is what I ask God ... We struggled in our life. Our children should not suffer and struggle. Let them study, get some knowledge, and work hard and be happy in their life. Leaving that I have nothing else in my life. (interview: 3 May 2017)

Sunitha’s reference to her own “struggles” as shaping her aspirations for her children is a common theme among almost all the Dws we have interviewed and interacted with.

Educating children however is not an easy task for the Dws, given the deteriorating public education structure and the attractions that private schools hold across classes. Indeed, many of them are clear that their children too deserve as good an education as their employers’ children appear to be getting in private schools. Fees for the kinds of schools that their children typically enrol in are at the minimum around ₹12,000 a year, with fees expected to be paid upfront at the start of an academic year in June. Taking loans for such amounts from the market leaves the Dws in a debt trap. For instance, Anjali, a Dw and her husband took a loan of ₹30,000 from the market at 20% interest when their first child came of school age. After two years they are still paying it back. Anjali then decided to work as a Dw after she had her second child. Her reason for this, as she admitted, was that it offered her the possibility of getting interest-free loans or advance from her employer. This, although as many Dws admit is not an easy task either, and was only possible after working at least a year with an employer.

The biographies of the Dws give a glimpse into their aspirations. Most of them migrated with their parents from the

countryside to the “big city.” While some of their parents worked at construction sites, a large proportion also worked as Dws. Many of the Dws today were introduced to domestic work by their mothers who frequently took them along to their places of work. This interrupted their schooling. While some of their mothers did receive “advance” from their employers, their main need was for medical or marriage-related expenses rather than school fees for their children. Those who escaped the burden of debt did so largely by not educating the children any further than primary schooling. It is only for this generation of Dws and especially so in megacities in a post-liberalisation economy, that “advance” has become an integral part of the Dw’s social reproduction through work. This has, in turn, facilitated education as a way out for the next generation with most Dws expecting their children to not get into domestic work. As Zeenath, a 63 year-old Dw put it:

... We were not facilitated to continue further (studies). Later I made my daughter study, she has done degree (accounting). My son is into painting work. Domestic work should end with me and not let my children land in this, with this thought ... We should stand on our feet and our children shouldn't become like us. (interview: 25 April 2017)

It is within this context that the Dws demand a bonus. Yet, although the CfB campaign has been successful in convincing most of them to ask for the bonus, a very large number do not receive one. However, many employers have started giving cash instead of the gift of a sari. At a union discussion in November 2017 (with 26 Dws), it became quickly clear that almost all of them did ask for bonus. Of these, 16 received cash (five of who also received a gift either of a sari or a sweet box). With two exceptions, the cash amount (*kaasu*) was only a nominal one, far less than the bonus demand of a month’s wages. Thus, when one Dw said, “I am working in three houses ... I got nothing ... and in one house they gave only ‘tambula,’” everyone laughed and one of them said *shabash* (well done) in a mocking yet empathetic manner. On the other hand, everyone clapped when another Dw said that she got 1 kg sweets (“*thuppa sweet kottaru*” which means that the sweets were made in ghee, a sign of good quality), a sari, and a bonus of ₹1,000 that was equal to her pay in that household. She thus managed to get *baksheesh*, bonus and dignity (good quality sweets) all together. The meeting thus simulated a social game around bonus among the Dws.

Workers with Rights

The demand for a bonus, like the demand for a weekly off, has structural transformation potential since it represents Dws as workers with rights. However, although the CfB is an instance of Dw collective action within their unions, the demand for a bonus depends on the Dws’ individual actions. As of now, it is the individual Dws who decide whether to ask or not based on their personal relationship and situation with their employers. Consequently, the difficulties faced by the CfB demand strategies that incorporate the logic of Dw–employer practices including what Dws *have* to do in order to hold onto or optimise their set of endowments. To realise the radical potential of the CfB, union strategies need to account for the complexity of Dws’ experiences

of class, and the dynamics of the bonus, advance, and baksheesh. It is to this that we turn to in the next section.

Constructing Employers and Workers

DW subjectivities are shaped within relations represented by the above three kinds of exchanges. At one union meeting, Maria, a DW and an organiser (executive member and treasurer of the union) used a frequently heard refrain to exhort DWs to think about themselves as significant actors in the economy:

You are playing an important role in the economy because the middle class (your employers) have to go to work. If you don't go (to work) then their productivity and income suffers. (field note entry, 21 December 2017)

Many DWs affirmed such a characterisation of their working selves as providers of labour-power that structurally aids the reproduction of capital by aiding the reproduction of middle- and upper-class employers who work in capitalist firms. In this sense, DWs are wage workers in the circuit of capital. Yet, as seen in previous sections, many DWs think of themselves quite differently, as self-employed workers negotiating their own terms of work selling their “service” to potential buyers (their “patrons” from the households where they work). The slippages between self-employed workers and wage workers is reflected conceptually and experientially in the tensions between accepting a baksheesh (a gift-exchange economy), and demanding a bonus (a commodity-exchange economy) while entangled with the advance (as precariat in the informal economy). What kinds of payments then are the baksheesh, advance, and the bonus, and what do they say about the relations that enmesh the DWs with their employers? Far from being a theoretically arcane exercise, these questions reveal the symbolic power within which DWs engage the classifications of symbolic goods at their workplace.

Let us start with the baksheesh, usually glossed by the English terms, “charity” and “tip.” Both these terms signal different senses of a gift and the kinds of relations that are spawned (or not) by them. Following Parry’s incisive comments on Marcel Mauss’ work on the “gift,” we can note that the gift in the Indian context does not draw the receiver into a relationship of reciprocity (Parry 1986). This is unlike the gift (*hau*) in the Polynesian context, which generates a relation of reciprocity. Parry goes further and shows how the sense of the gift in many societies can be traced to the lexical domain of the Hindu concept *daan*, which carries the ideas of “purification of the donor” within it. Indeed, the fact that the baksheesh is given not only during Hindu festivals (Dussehra, Deepavali), but also for Muslim and Christian festivals (Eid and Christmas), allows us to speculate how the moral economy of *daan* converges with that of the Islamic *zakat* and the Christian charity (if not “tithing”). All three have some systematic basis within the respective religious prescriptions, although the latter two are more minutely prescribed in terms of the proportion of wealth to be given away. More importantly, each of them has a purificatory function for the giver. Additionally, the Hindu *daan* is very closely tied to a conception of the receiver as a “sin-sink” and the gift itself as embodying the donor (Parry 1986).

On the other hand, there is a more modern sense of baksheesh as a form of tip, a reward for a good service. In contrast to the sense of *daan*, a tip is intended to ensure continued service; hence it draws the donor and receiver into a reciprocal relation. The receiver and giver co-produce the relationship of service with expectations made by both parties to the transaction. Given that baksheesh occurs only during the religious festival period, it is likely that the modern sense of the transaction is subsumed by the traditional sense. Employers may view the baksheesh more in the spirit of *daan* rather than a tip. That this may indeed be the case is signalled by the fact that the DWs frequently note that many Hindu employers usually give the sari along with one of the most auspicious symbols in any Hindu ceremony, the *tambula*. The sari then arguably represents an auspicious gift or *daan*, which does not need a reciprocal action from the DW, being an expiatory act or an accrual of merit for the donor.

Advance on the other hand, is an informal social contract that obliges the DWs to continue to work with the employer in order to pay off the loan. It is in a sense a form of obligatory labour, not unlike what Breman has termed “neo-bondage.” The precarity of the DWs in the marketplace compels them to take the advance, and hence become attached to their employer (Breman 2010), since the cycle of taking advance continues so long as children need to be educated. This makes their take-home wages either stagnant or lower each year depending on whether the employer gives them a raise, and hence makes the chances of a bonus recede further.⁵ The DWs in our research admitted to taking advances from their employers quite frequently. The amounts vary widely, from ₹100 to ₹20,000. What is common is that the DWs are unable to take this advance from their employers without having worked for some time with them. They usually enter into informal agreements with their employers to pay it back through monthly instalments. This takes the form of a payment at source for each month, an instalment. In other words, so long as a DW has an “advance” that needs to be paid back, she receives her monthly wage minus the instalment. This in turn creates a monetary strain on the DW. The net effect is that the advance acts as a form of entrenched dependence by the DWs on their employers. It brings them back to work as DWs.

Employers for their part, actively work to maintain distinctions needed to sustain a paternalistic patronage relation. The DWs work within a household, a real but ambiguous regime of production. The ambiguity is due to the fact that the work needed to reproduce a household is customarily or traditionally not viewed as work or productive work. It is perceived as not tied in to the productive work that brings in income from outside (that is, the work via employment in, ownership of, or transaction within capitalist firms by the owners of the household). This has implications for the DW whose situation contrasts with the situation of a worker in a factory, even a garment or construction worker in the informal sector. The work of the latter is deemed as necessary for the production of surplus and hence they are exploited in the conventional sense of providing surplus for profit. The DWs however are viewed as part of

consumption practices, with the household viewed as a consuming rather than productive unit. This elides the operation of a regime of production within the household, the power relations that shape the labour process of “domestic work,” the allocation of labour within the household, and even the extraction of surplus within a “subsumed class process” (Resnick and Wolff 1989).

A “gift” is not a loan. Employers therefore are invested in keeping the distinction between baksheesh (daan or tip) from “advance.” The regime of production within a household tends to informalise relations in contrast with the formal employment regime of the employers. This contrast sustains the distinctions between “work” and “home” needed for the employers, and the gendered aspects of domestic work. Such a paternalistic patronage relation favoured by the employer is evident in the way that Reena, a dw, explained how her employer justified *not* giving her a bonus.

Yes I asked for bonus ... (but) they give me sari though I asked for bonus. They say if they give money we spend it. (Indignantly) Yes, we do have expenses ... (They say) “If we give you sari, in our name you will wear that sari and come.” (field note entry, 15 December 2017)

Such a discourse produces the (temporary) consent of the dws to the regime of production. It does this along lines explicated by Parry above when he says that the daan in the Indian context embodies the donor (persons and things are not strictly differentiated). The sari reminds the donor of the daan (made explicit by the expectation that the dw will wear the sari and come to work). Going further, we can also say that, despite the compelling nature of Parry’s reading of daan, there is indeed some reciprocity albeit intangible, that is expected in the daan of the sari. The dw is implicitly reminded of the need to show gratitude, a moral obligation, which Bourdieu has captured as the transformation of economic capital into symbolic capital in the service of reproduction of relations of dominance (Bourdieu 1990; see also Narotzky and Moreno 2002). Nonetheless, the gift of a sari does not produce legitimacy for the employer/donor, since the dws speak of being denied their “fair” bonus as is pointed out by Zeenath who justifies the demand for bonus thus:

Have we not worked hard? That is why we fight and demand. We work hard for 365 days. So we ask for it (bonus). (field note entry, 15 December 2017)

Conclusions

We have shown in this paper that there exist contradictions within the class locations, experiences and hence subjectivities of the dws. They come together as a class for collective action around minimum wage and weekly off, but not as easily or evenly for demanding the “bonus.” This has to do with the fact of their contradictory class experiences. On the one hand, they view themselves as self-employed workers operating within a paternalistic relation with a patron, and on the other they feel largely convinced about the fairness if not the right to seek a bonus as wage workers in an informal economy. The contradiction culturally manifests itself in the tensions that the dws experience as part of the cfb, a tension that reflects their

precarity as informal sector workers within a relationship of paternalism with their middle- and upper-class employers.

Bonus is a form of reward for work that has now come to assume the form of a rightful compensation annually, with the rate fixed as a month’s pay. The triad of baksheesh-advance-bonus can then be viewed as an evolutionary movement towards a social contract that always recedes so long as the middle term, “advance,” exists. This dynamic is realised through the actions of actors (the dws and their employers) shaped by the meanings of a transactional relation. While the cfb campaign has succeeded in pointing the dws in the direction of moving the baksheesh from daan to tip to bonus, it is still unclear whether the donors (employers) view baksheesh as a daan or tip. This matters because whereas baksheesh as daan does not offer a transformative mechanism towards becoming a bonus, the baksheesh as a tip contains within it a possibility of approaching a sense of bonus.

As argued here, the structure of the informal economy ensures their precarity in a context of weak endowment structure, high costs of reproduction of labour (education, healthcare), and lack of public investment in welfare. The dws, as precarious workers, are unable to easily sever ties of patronage. The demand for bonus therefore confronts the dws with a real sociocultural and economic “cost.” So long as their wages are low, access to formal institutions of credit weak (as informalised workers), and the costs of education and healthcare are high, the paternalistic patronage of employers are part of the conditions of possibility of the reproduction of the dw households. They thus exemplify a contradictory class location, which highlights slippages between “employer–worker” and “patron–service provider” relations. dw subjectivities being deeply embedded within the regime of household production,

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the cfb reveals a class situation wherein the employer as patron frequently trumps the employer as boss. The bonus then is an ever receding possibility so long as the advance and baksheesh structurally and ritually respectively shape dw-employer relations.

What then are the implications of the above analysis for the cfb and the unions? What, if anything, are ways that dw unions may reimagine their own possibilities? From the discussions above, it is clear that the fight for a bonus cannot be achieved without a simultaneous struggle for a comprehensive set of welfare guarantees by the neo-liberal state, especially in education and healthcare. Nevertheless, it also becomes imperative for the dw unions, especially labour NGOs, to acknowledge the ways that the social game of gifting a sari constructs dw “consent though not legitimacy” to the paternalistic regime of production. This demands a campaign that constructs the household as the site of production, not only of economic value, but also of political and ideological subjectivities (Burawoy 1989). Going back to the union organiser who spoke about how the dws sustain the wages of the middle- and upper-class employers, the cfb campaign could imaginatively reveal ways that the dws are compelled to make their histories within conditions not of their choosing. The cfb demand could then

become a story of a struggle—a story of how the move away from being constructed as a “servant” (that is, struggle for dignity) is connected to the move towards being constructed as a “worker” (that is, the struggle for formalisation). It would then articulate, for a public, the ways that precarity, paternalism, and production need to be overcome within the household site.

In reimaging the cfb thus, we can remind ourselves of the work that Freire called “conscientizing.” To return to where we began this paper, about dws as subjects not subalterns. The act of asking for a bonus is a transformational act for the dw to liberate themselves and become “responsible Subjects” (Freire 1996: 36). It is simultaneously also a demand for middle- and upper-class employers to free themselves from weaving paternalistic webs of relations and instead be in solidarity with the oppressed, to “stop making pious, sentimental, and individualistic gestures” and to affirm that dws “are persons” (Freire 1996: 50). The cfb thus demands the possibility of a dialogue between differently situated actors whose liberation is tied to each other—the dws (wrestling with being self-employed workers under conditions of precarity and paternalism, which keeps them as “servants”) and their employers (whose practices of gifting erases their own complicity in reproducing relations of domination).

NOTES

- 1 A commonly used term in anthropology that denotes a customary or *obligatory* (and frequently ritualised) transaction. We use the term here to highlight the point made by Mauss that there is no “free gift” and all gifts entail social relations (Mauss 1990 [1954]).
- 2 Baksheesh is an Urdu word used mostly by some of the union organisers. It is a gloss on prestation that we find appropriate to use in this paper since it captures local meanings (“charity” and “tip”) although it is not used by DWs themselves.
- 3 Other struggles include the attempt to establish a DW board, to make the state recognise DWs as workers, to raise awareness about sexual harassment at the workplace, and to establish the right to a “decent work.”
- 4 Many times this situation is complicated by the fact that some DWs too use this term when referring to their employer (although this does not seem to have been the case with Farida).
- 5 Tellingly, it is only with new employers that DWs are able to negotiate a bonus.

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