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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Zones of compounded informality: Migrants in the megacity

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Abstract

This paper introduces the term zones of compounded informality to demarcate locations wherein regulatory exclusions in distinct domains interact to escalate the impact of exclusions for people who live and work in these areas. Based upon a study of India's Delhi, National Capital Region (Delhi-NCR), I explain how the interaction of flexible planning and employment in particular locales produce zones of compounded informality as a technique of governance. Circular migrant workers in Delhi-NCR overwhelmingly live and work in these zones, wherein unstable employment and housing contribute to nomadic migration. Legal exclusion from housing protections interacts with other procedural pathways, creating barriers to accessing social protection and citizenship rights. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, including participant observation, interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and a survey of 981 workers, I consider how zones of compounded informality in Delhi-NCR interact with India's *Aadhar* biometric identification system to variegate access to the franchise and Targeted Public Distribution System (PDS) for migrant and other low-wage workers.

KEYWORDS
employment, informality, migration, planning, legal exclusion

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INTRODUCTION

Informality is a robust area of inquiry across labor, urban planning, and migration studies. Research on labor in the global economy has addressed the rise in contingent work among migrants and other workers (Beard & Edwards 1995; Kalleberg, 2000; Silliman Bhattacharjee, 2022; Valenzuela, 2003). This line of research is increasingly attentive to working conditions for the two billion workers in informal employment across the globe (Guardian Labs, 2021). Relatedly, research on cities has attended to the concentration of migrants and the poor in urban peripheries wherein informality conditions their experiences of citizenship (Bhan, 2016; Holston, 2009; Srivastava, 2019).

This paper introduces the term *zone of compounded informality* to mark a palimpsest of legal exclusions within a particular location as a technique of governance. Within these zones, exclusions in distinct regulatory arenas—such as housing and work—not only interact to escalate the impact of each exclusion on workers' lives but also interact with other legal and procedural pathways to determine access to rights and entitlements. In this regard, zones of compounded informality participate in the spatial production of "variegated citizenship"—distinct modes of governing segments of the population (Ong, 1999). While forgoing research has attended to the relationship between formality and informality (Hart, 2009; Hodder; 2016, Roy, 2009), this paper contributes a new framework for interrogating how informality in distinct governance domains interacts in the lives of migrants and other workers.

My analysis of zones of compounded informality is rooted in a study of how rural-urban circular migrant workers employed in Delhi-NCR experience and navigate informality at the nexus of deregulated work and housing. Forgoing literature has well established that the working poor in Delhi-NCR is overwhelmingly comprised of migrants from across states in India (Naik, 2015). However, as Gautam Bhan (2016) points out, even after decades of living and working in the city, low-wage workers continue to be portrayed as migrants—including in legal proceedings concerning their rights to reside in slum areas. Systematic legal exclusion from housing and labor rights protections undermines stability and access to socio-political citizenship for migrant workers in the city, participating in producing the figure of the perpetual migrant.

Part One introduces zones of compounded informality in relationship to the literature on labor, urban informality, and "states of exception" (Agamben, 1998, 2005). I will explain how studying zones of compounded informality deepens our understanding of the ways migrant workers experience interactions between informal employment and housing. This section also discusses my ethnographic research, including participant observation, interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and a survey of 981 circular migrant and resident workers employed in Delhi-NCR. Part Two provides context on uneven development, circular migration, and social stratification. Part Three lays out the interaction of legal exclusions in housing and labor rights in zones of compounded informality. It begins by detailing the context of flexible employment and flexible planning in Delhi-NCR (Gururani, 2013), and then describes migrant experiences in zones of compounded informality wherein exclusion from labor and housing protections interact, propelling cycles of unemployment and debt. Part Four explains how zones of compounded informality interact with access to the franchise, Targeted Public Distribution System (PDS), and financial inclusion for migrants and other workers. Here, I focus on India's *Aadhar* biometric identification program as a primary access pathway.

I found that in zones of compounded informality, despite holding Aadhar cards, circular migrant workers are unable to establish the proof of residence they need to vote and collect PDS rations in the city. This failure of Aadhar in facilitating enfranchisement and social protection underscores a buckling of socio-political citizenship for circular migrant workers in post-independence India. While challenges accessing identification (ID) as a barrier to citizenship have been interrogated in forgoing literature (e.g., Abbas, 2016), this study provides new insight into the context of the Aadhar regime. Further, by locating the variegation of citizenship for circular migrant workers in the interaction between the deregulation of urban labor markets, unregulated housing, and pathways for accessing social protection in particular locales, my analysis contributes to scholarship on how urban social orders are based on the governance of space (Bhan, 2016; Caldeira, 1999; Merry, 2001). Part Five explains how zones of compounded informality lend insight into the exodus of millions of internal migrants from India's megacities in the wake of COVID-19.

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In Part Six, I conclude the paper by arguing that the acceleration of market fundamentalism, state withdrawal of labor and social protection, and exclusion of migrant workers from civic planning are defining features of our time. In short, zones of compounded informality are on the rise across the globe, making them integral to contemporary studies of labor migration in the global economy.

SPATIAL PRODUCTION OF COMPOUNDED INFORMALITY

Informality and exception

The term informality was first introduced in context of labor markets and employment in the 1970s, referring to economic activity by workers that is not regulated by the state (Hart, 1973). While early studies of informality focused on self-employed workers, myriad forms of wage labor outside the ambit of state regulation are now well-established as informal work (Breman, 1996; Srivastava, 2019). Forgoing literature has considered how processes of labor informalization characteristic of neoliberal capitalism function by segmenting workforces—including along caste, gender, and religious lines (Jha et al., 2017; Lerche & Shah, 2018; Mezzadri, 2022; Silliman Bhattacharjee, 2020b; Srivastava, 2019).

A distinct line of research on cities attends to urban informality (Castells, 1983, 1989; Perlman, 1976; Roy, 2005); and relatedly, “spatial illegality”—illegality in the inhabitation and production of space (Bhan et al., 2013). Empirical work across the global South has shown that informal and illegal inhabitation is practiced by the poor and elite (Bhan et al., 2013; Holston, 2009), but consequences are different in form and degree for the poor (Yiftachel & Yacobi, 2003).

Empirical studies of urban informality in India include extensive research on slums (e.g., Bhan, 2016), and growing literatures on informal rental housing (Desai & Mahadevia, 2014; Naik, 2015) and access to infrastructure (Anand, 2017; Desai, 2018; Mcfarlane & Desai, 2015). Ananya Roy (2009) identifies informality as a defining feature of India’s urban planning “idiom.” She describes urban land management as dynamic processes of informality and deregulation, wherein the law is deliberately rendered open-ended and subject to multiple interests and social processes. Significantly, she emphasizes that informality in India is not casual or spontaneous, but calculated to undergird territorial state practices.

Related scholarship on states of exception (Agamben, 1998, 2005) directs attention to inclusion and exclusion as mechanisms of social ordering. This research is rooted in Giorgio Agamben’s contention that sovereignty is principally expressed through demarcation between people considered integral to the body politic, and the state of exception wherein the politically marginalized are reduced to “bare life”—subjects exposed to violence and death (1998). Ananya Roy (2005) applies this framework to planning modalities that produce informality as a state of exception from the formal order of urbanization. Situating exception as a technique of neoliberal governmentality, Aihwa Ong lays out how exclusion is deployed by states in Asia to optimize spaces for capital accumulation by exempting them from planning and labor regulations (2006).

Neoliberalism as exception has been meaningfully applied by Thomas Cowan (2015) in understanding how in Gurugram, Haryana, India—a site in this study—the state governs through exception by outsourcing fragmented authority to private developers, state development authorities, and the Municipal Corporation of Gurugram. Drawing from and contributing to this research, I focus here on the interaction between regulatory regimes in spatially determined sites of neoliberal exception—sites where the state governs through layers of exclusion that optimize capital accumulation and labor extraction with far-reaching human and environmental consequences.

Zones of compounded informality

In this paper, I introduce the term *zones of compounded informality*. This formulation highlights two significant dimensions of state exclusions of informal workers from labor and housing protections. First, identifying *compounded*

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informality calls for attention to the experiences of people who are not only in informal work, but are also subject to other regulatory exclusions. Second, the confluence of regulatory exclusions within discrete *zones* calls for identification of particular locations that are carved out from state regulation. While attention has been given to the relationship between formality and informality (Hart, 2009; Hodder, 2016; Roy, 2009), this paper breaks new ground by providing a framework for marking and interrogating the interaction between informality in distinct regulatory domains, and the human and environmental impacts of these experiences.

Demarcating zones of compounded informality is significant to socio-legal studies because deregulation further conditions access to rights and entitlements for the people who live and work in these locales. People living and working in zones of compounded informality may hold rights but be *defacto* excluded from them due to the interaction between converging forms of informality and procedural access pathways. In this regard, zones of compounded informality participate in spatially producing "graduated sovereignty"—distinct modes of governing segments of the population that produce variegated experiences of citizenship (Ong, 1999, 2000).

Discovering compounded informality

I conducted the empirical work for this paper between 2014 and 2021 as an ethnographic researcher and lawyer, affiliated with the Delhi-based Society for Labor and Development (SLD). My ethnographic field research included participant observation, interviews, FGDs, photography, sketches, multimedia, and surveys conducted in South West Delhi and Gurugram, Haryana and in districts in the Indian states of Bihar, Jharkhand, and Uttar Pradesh with high levels of migration.

From within this body of ethnographic work, this paper draws primarily from ongoing participant observation, and interviews and FGDs conducted in 2016 and 2021 respectively. These include 12 interviews with circular migrant workers employed in garment, domestic, and construction work conducted in 2016 that focused on living conditions in Gurugram district—including in tenement housing in Dundahera, Katarpuri, and Kapashera; an informal settlement referred to as Sikanderpur Pahadi; and a slum referred to as Sikanderpur Basti. In these areas, I worked with a team to document worker homes and housing areas in photography, sketches, and 360-degree video.[1] I also draw from two FGDs conducted in 2021, including 40 migrant garment workers, that sought to understand their experiences during the COVID 19 pandemic and imposition of national lockdowns in 2020.

As part of this ethnographic research, in 2017, I worked with SLD to conduct a survey of 981 workers in North India. Respondents included circular migrants (147) and residents (140) in Delhi-NCR—more specifically, in Dundahera, Manesar, and Sikanderpur areas of Gurugram, Haryana; and Kapashera in South West Delhi. The survey distinguished circular migrants from residents based upon self-description as either moving between their homes and Delhi-NCR or living full time in the city. We also spoke to circular migrant workers in their home districts in Katihar (102) and Purnea (121), Bihar; Latehar (110) and Palamu (118), Jharkhand; and Kanpur (133) and Kannauj (112), Uttar Pradesh.[2] These states were selected because Bihar, Jharkhand, and Uttar Pradesh have the largest rural populations in India, and are significant origin states for migrant workers (Abbas, 2016). Districts were chosen based upon high levels of rural-urban circular migration, and the presence of civil society organizations engaged in supporting migrant workers. Surveys were conducted in Hindi and focused on understanding access to Aadhar cards, voter ID, the franchise, PDS, and bank accounts. In each area, we supplemented surveys with interviews, including with migrant workers, government officials, activists, and workers as well as leadership in civil society organizations (Silliman Bhattacharjee, 2018).

Additionally, over the last decade, I have engaged in research on garment global production networks (GPNs) in India and across Asia. I draw from my understanding of the garment GPNs—and more specifically, in Delhi-NCR—to situate the ethnographic research described above in relationship to dominant trends of deregulation and casualization in the garment industry and across the global economy. This includes drawing insights from my own empirical work, and the work of academic and trade union colleagues.

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UNEVEN DEVELOPMENT, CIRCULAR MIGRATION, AND SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

The Delhi-NCR is a spectacular manifestation of India's imbalanced economic growth (Ghosh, 2012; Kundu, 2003) that fuels migration. Parallel to the explosive development of urban economic and industrial hubs, India has seen declining employment in agriculture (Gidwani & Sivaramakrishnan, 2003) and the inability of smaller towns and cities to attract investment. This imbalance drives millions of workers to seek employment in cities and production hubs (Abbas, 2016; Tumbe 2018). In Delhi-NCR, the most populated city in the country, the migrant labor market is highly differentiated—including permanent and semi-permanent skilled and educated migrants, and low-wage circular migrant workers concentrated within informal sectors and informal employment in the industrial and other formal sectors (Deshingkar 2008; Srivastava, 2011, 2019). In the Indian context, forgoing research has considered how central and state government practices of liberalization, caste hierarchy and discrimination in hiring and employment, and recruitment intermediaries stratify this informal workforce (Silliman Bhattacharjee, 2023, 2022; Srivastava, 2019).

Among low-wage workers, migration in India has a "rhythmic, circulatory character" (Breman, 1996:11): an estimated 25 percent of the rural workforce routinely migrates between their homes and urban and industrial hubs (Breman, 2020). Circular migration is driven by choices to pursue opportunities for employment (Chatterjee, 2008), and livelihood and food insecurity among small landholders and landless workers—processes that date back to the first half of the twentieth century and accelerated after Independence (Breman, 1996; Chatterjee, 2008). In this context, it is common for rural households to survive on land-based activities and wage labor (Gidwani & Ramamurthy, 2018; Gidwani & Sivaramakrishnan, 2003). Trans-local migrant workers accept employment for wages below or just above minimum wages in urban areas since they are higher than agriculture and other rural sectors (Nathan et al., 2022).

A large proportion of circular migrant workers belong to groups at the base of India's social hierarchies, including Scheduled Caste (*Dalit*), Scheduled Tribe (*Adivasi*), and Muslim workers who lack access to education, livelihood opportunities at home, and land and assets. They overwhelmingly find work in informal and temporary employment (Deshingkar 2008; Lerche & Shah, 2018; Srivastava, 2011, 2019). Women workers are also disproportionately concentrated in informal employment in the formal and informal sectors. As such, spatial variegation of citizenship in zones of compounded informality articulates (Hall, 1985) with "conjugated oppression"—co-constitution of class-based relations and oppression along gender, caste, tribe, and other identity lines (Bourgois, 1988; Lerche & Shah, 2018).

ZONES OF COMPOUNDED INFORMALITY IN DELHI-NCR

Enter "High-Tension Gali"—a residential lane that has become synonymous with the surrounding neighborhood in urban Kapashera, Gurugram. Here, workers live in the shadow of a high voltage electric transmission tower carrying 33 kV transmission lines to export-oriented factories. The tower spans a narrow lane lined with two-story buildings. These power lines power the factories where many find work, without providing electricity to the workers' neighborhoods in their shadows. Cars, bicycles, auto-rickshaws and pedestrians' thread beneath the humming tower. Off the grid charged by these lines, workers siphon electricity from street lamps, reporting fires sparked by the maze of wires.

The power lines over High-Tension Gali are a metonym for the palimpsest of flexible labor and planning regimes in Delhi-NCR that facilitate access to labor in line with fluctuating employer needs and capital flows, while excluding circular migrants from labor rights and social protection—including stable residence, access to rights and entitlements, municipal services, and zoning, construction, and rental market regulations. Where flexible employment and housing interact in zones of compounded informality, risks associated with each informality regime intensify for the people who live and work therein.

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Flexible employment

The spread of capitalism in India is marked by class relations that have given rise to informalized, insecure work, and these relations are co-constituted by relations of race, ethnicity, caste, tribe, religion, and gender (Lerche & Shah 2018). By 2019, 90 percent of India's workforce was in informal employment (ILO, 2019), with 95 percent of *Dalit* and *Adivasi* workers employed in the informal sector, or in informal jobs within the formal sector (Mangubhai, 2014; Sengupta et al., 2008). Put another way: more than 400 million workers in India are channeled into flexible, labor intensive work, and without labor rights or social security (Kompier, 2014; Pratap, 2015).

India's labor law regime dates back to the late-colonial era, with labor rights rearticulated in post-Independence state policies (Silliman Bhattacharjee, 2016). However, the persistence of the informal sector reflects both the slow pace at which the central and state governments have included the working poor within labor rights protections, and systematic deregulation of formal sector work as a route for achieving labor flexibility in line with trade liberalization (Sodhi, 1993; Srivastava, 2016). Despite constitutional commitments to labor rights, formal employment remains largely circumscribed to industrial production (Breman, 1996).

Since the 1990s, India's economy has been transformed by central and state government promotion of trade liberalization, greater entry of foreign capital and consumer goods, and privatization across sectors (Chatterjee, 2008). India's balance of payment crisis—beginning in the 1980's and peaking in early 1991—prompted the government to adopt the World Bank-IMF stabilization and structural adjustment program (Sodhi, 1993). As a condition of access to conditionality-driven structural adjustment loans, the World Bank and IMF required India to promote trade liberalization, greater entry of foreign capital and consumer goods, and privatization across sectors (Chatterjee, 2008). These conditions guided new central and state industrial policies and laid the groundwork for transformation of India's economy away from inward-looking economic growth, and toward the promotion of deregulated capitalism (Silliman Bhattacharjee, 2016)—including by dismantling regulatory regimes, reducing the public sector, creating a larger role for private enterprises, and opening up the economy (Sodhi, 1993).

In line with this template, India's central and state governments shaped the contours of Delhi-NCR with a focus on promoting manufacturing (Barnes, 2018) and service industries through export-oriented policies and facilitated entry of foreign direct investment. These changes came with systematic erosion of labor standards at both the central and state level, enacted through legislatures and courts (Silliman Bhattacharjee, 2023: 231–34).

Today, workers across India enter markets where formal employment models are in rapid decline as labor market policies and practices promote non-standard work. Across industrial establishments researchers have documented a hollowing out of formal employment. Measures to achieve labor flexibility among industrial employers include increased use of contract labor, outsourcing, and subcontracting (Nagaraj, 2004; Silliman Bhattacharjee, 2016; Zagha, 1999). By 2012, the percentage of workers with long term contracts in manufacturing fell to 17.5 percent (Srivastava, 2016). Employment, moreover, is layered by social status, with socially vulnerable groups—including Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes—concentrated in informal positions within industrial establishments (Silliman Bhattacharjee, 2020; Srivastava, 2019).

Flexible planning

As Delhi-NCR develops at a breakneck pace, projected to reach 36 million people by 2030 (Biswas & Tortajada, 2017), it subsumes localities across state, municipal, and *panchayat* (village) jurisdictions. Together, private developers, the Haryana Urban Development Authority (HUDA), Haryana State Infrastructure and Industrial Development Corporation (HSIIDC), and the Municipal Council of Gurgaon (MCG) administer the megacity, participating in "fragmentary governance" of this evolving landscape (Cowan, 2015; Dharia, 2022). In this palimpsest of governance regimes, Delhi-NCR has been developed through "flexible planning"—a deployment of exemptions, compromises, and force to secure elite interests and sites of global capital accumulation (Gurunani, 2013).

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Shubhra Gururani (2013) locates flexible planning in Gurugram in a series of historical developments. The creation of the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) and enforcement of the Delhi Master Plan (1962) conferred authority for land sale and development in the Delhi Metropolitan Area to the DDA. In this context, private developers like Delhi Land and Finance (DLF) were pushed out of Delhi. By the early 1980s, the visionary KP Singh of DLF and other private developers began purchasing land directly from villagers in Gurugram (then Gurgaon)—including land formally controlled under the Haryana Development and Regulation of Urban Area Act, 1975. Successive repeals of the Urban Land Ceiling Act, 1976—designed to limit monopolistic land accumulation—by the central government in 1999, and the Haryana Government in 2011 facilitated privatization. Delhi-NCR was deeply divided by these planning, privatization, and deregulation processes: the elite live in gated developments while due to rent control modifications, villagers and poor migrants are relegated to receding peripheries (Naik, 2015).

Tight control on land within Delhi-NCR prevents migrants who seek to get a foothold in the city—including those who have been there for decades—from illegally occupying or squatting on land (Bhan, 2016). Instead, nearly all low-income housing in Gurugram exists as a form of informal rentals, ranging from slums to single and multi-story tenements (Gurunani, 2013; Naik, 2015). Circular migrants in Gurugram overwhelmingly find housing in *lal dora*[3] (urban village) areas that fall outside the bounds of municipal authorities (Cowan, 2015). In Gurugram, for instance, informal rental units are exclusively located within 39 urban villages, or alternately illegally constructed on agricultural land (Naik, 2015). In 1957, the Delhi Municipal Corporation (DMC) notified lands classified as *lal dora* as exempt from building bylaws and construction norms under the Delhi Municipal Act.

Complete state abdication of responsibility for construction norms, public health, and security is unsanitary and dangerous for migrant workers and other area residents. In one four-story tenement building in Dundahera, for instance, there are 148 rooms housing between 600 and 800 people. The building has 16 toilets in all—between 40 and 50 people share one toilet. Lack of access to toilets requires residents to defecate in nearby forests. Geeta Devi described risks of open defecation: "*There are insects, animals, black snakes and mosquitos. We can't go at night. We are frightened.*" Workers recounted cases of sexual assault, kidnapping, and murder when they leave settlements to defecate in the open.

Not only are construction norms unapplicable, but entire areas are excluded from Delhi and Gurugram Municipal Corporation beats. Meena, a migrant woman living in the High Tension Gali area explained: "*Where we live, the drains are open. Municipal workers don't come here.*" Acute water shortages, bacterial and mosquito borne health conditions like dengue and malaria, and devastating accidents are common in areas outside the bounds of municipal water and sanitation. On January 27, 2016, in Kapashera, for instance, 5-year old Ankit Kumar, the son of a migrant construction worker, drowned in an open septic tank just outside his school (Indian Express, 2016).

Zones of compounded informality

In Delhi-NCR, informal work, and housing compound in the sense that they interact to intensify the consequences of deregulation in each individual arena. Employment insecurity for temporary workers who face layoff periods heightens the impact of predatory housing practices by deregulated landlords. In this regard, informal work, and housing—characterized by unstable income and unpredictable skyrocketing costs, respectively—interact to leave workers in financial deficit. These conditions push migrants and other area residents who live below the poverty line to the brink of survival where they take on debt to meet basic needs.

Between cycles of employment, workers in zones of compounded informality are vulnerable to involuntary relationships of dependence with landlords who extort additional payments on credit. A worker I will call "Sidh" is unemployed for 3 months each year when production cycles wane. During these periods, he enters into debt with his landlord in Dundahera. Between June and September each year, Sidh, and his family live on credit. *"Until October, nobody gets work. To pay for room and rations, we go into debt by INR 8,000-10,000."* As a condition of delaying rent payments while unemployed, Sidh's family is required to buy rations from the landlord's shop—an added expense of 20–25

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percent. Penalties for unauthorized outside purchases can be severe, he explains. "*If you don't buy from the landlord's shop, then you can be thrown out—other landowners get people beaten up.*" The practice of landlords requiring tenants to buy marked up groceries on credit during periods of unemployment was common for workers I met in Dundahera and Kapashera.

What are the interests that sustain zones of compounded informality? First, circular migration keeps labor costs down for industrial and other employers who can capitalize on wage differentials between rural and urban areas. Unstable housing in Delhi-NCR prevents migrant workers from establishing stable residence in the city, contributing to nomadic circular migration (Breman, 2020). A woman I refer to as Manju described feeling like a foreigner in Delhi-NCR despite being a citizen: "*This is foreign land and we are foreigners. We cannot settle here. We come to work.*".

Second, urban planning that operates through deregulation and "unmapping" allows the state and parastatal elites flexibility to alter land use, deploy eminent domain, and acquire land for various forms of urban and industrial development (Roy, 2003)—without taking responsibility for worker well-being. Municipal and state authorities in Delhi-NCR cut costs by sidestepping planning and housing infrastructure for large populations of migrants and other workers. Mobility among transient worker populations, furthermore, allows multiple jurisdictions to evade responsibility for their needs by claiming it is the responsibility of another authority (Dharia, 2022). In this regard, the withdrawal of regulatory power in Delhi-NCR is a feature of power, creating what Roy describes as a "logic of resource allocation, accumulation, and authority" (2009: 83) that is calculated to undergird the territorial practices of the state and extract migrant labor from this industrial base of vast global production networks.

VARIEGATING CITIZENSHIP IN ZONES OF COMPOUNDED INFORMALITY

As marked by K. Sivaramakrishnan (1998), for the last 20 years, nation building in the post-independence Indian state—the largest democracy in the world—has been driven by a "bipolar cultural core" encompassing jostling imperatives of democracy and market-driven development. Identification as a gateway to citizenship (Abbas, 2016) is a key site of negotiation in India's rapidly evolving governance landscape.

Embracing both imperatives, the Indian government rollout of the Aadhar[4] program, the world's largest biometric identification system, had the articulated aim of improving targeted delivery of social protection measures and access to formal financial inclusion. Deregulation in zones of compounded informality, however, interacts with Aadhar to condition access to rights and entitlements for circular migrants and the urban poor more generally. There are a variety of citizenship outcomes that emerge in these areas, with consequences for migrant and other workers conditioned by the extent and nature of residential and employment informality.

Aadhar and social democracy

Since independence in 1949, India's central government has adopted laws and policies with the explicit aim of dismantling entrenched structures of caste, religious discrimination, and patriarchy—including civil rights laws and social protection to support exit from caste-based and other feudal labor structures. The Targeted Public Distribution System (PDS), a food security program for below poverty line (BPL) households, for instance, aims at advancing the constitutional right to food.[5] I use access to PDS and the franchise as a barometer of access to socio-political citizenship in zones of compounded informality. My engagement with Indian citizenship here is interested in ideals of political equality, social protection, political participation, and inclusion within political community (Abbas, 2016).

Both residence and identity (ID) proof are required to vote and access social protection, including PDS. Forms of ID and address proof within India include voter ID cards, Aadhaar cards, and passports. Voter ID, Aadhar, and passports all include residency information, but only allow one residential address—necessarily creating dislocation between formalized and actual residence for those who move between residences in India. Of course, consequences

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of this dislocation are heightened for workers and families that depend upon public services and social protection frameworks.

It is most common for migrant workers to Delhi-NCR to retain strong connections with their native places, and for their families to be split between Delhi-NCR and their native homes. A survey of 300 migrant garment workers in the NCR found that 76 percent had family members in their native homes (Mezzadri & Srivastava, 2015). Since access to the franchise and PDS rations is conditional upon local residence, however, and both Aadhar and voter ID cards only allow one address, circular migrant workers must choose between voting and accessing rations in their native homes or destination areas.

The decision of whether to access the franchise and PDS at home or in destination areas, does not, however, exist as an actual choice in zones of compounded informality. In these areas, landlords are not accountable for providing leases—a requirement for proving residence. While address proof can also be confirmed by an electric or water bill, property tax receipt, or liquid petroleum gas (LPG) connection, workers in informal housing lack personal water, electricity, and LPG connections. Unable to prove residence, circular migrant workers are functionally undocumented within their native country.

Restricted access to the franchise

Only six percent of migrant workers surveyed in Delhi-NCR held voter ID cards permitting them to vote in the city. Notably, 96 percent of circular migrants interviewed in Bihar, and 77 percent in both Jharkhand and Uttar Pradesh, reported being registered to vote in their home constituencies. Since under Article 326 of the Indian Constitution, a citizen can exercise their right to vote only in the constituency where they establish formal residency, labor migrants are not allowed to vote unless they travel to their native places during elections. Extending absentee privileges to interstate migrants has been opposed by the Election Commission (Choudhary, 2015). Notably, in 2015, the Supreme Court authorized Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) to vote in elections from outside India.

At their nexus, laws that allow citizens to vote only in the constituency where they establish residence, and the absence of in absentia voting provisions for internal migrants, raises critical questions about defacto disenfranchisement of circular migrant workers. The near complete disenfranchisement of circular migrant workers from local electoral process in Delhi-NCR undermines incentives for local officials to include migrant needs in urban development and labor rights protections. Put another way, housing deregulation and the corresponding exclusion of migrant workers from access to residency proof bars migrants from informing political processes to advance their interests, systematically entrenching zones of compounded informality.

Restricted access to PDS

Circular migrants and residents both reported challenges accessing PDS rations in zones of compounded informality. Of the 147 circular migrants we spoke to in South West Delhi and Gurugram districts, none of them held ration cards or accessed PDS rations in the city. However, 110 out of 140 residents (79 percent) reported holding ration cards in Delhi-NCR. Residents also, however, reported challenges accessing PDS rations even while holding ration and Aadhar cards. Among 110 residents holding ration cards and local Aadhar cards, only 70 (57 percent) confirmed consistent access to rations while 40 (43 percent) reported access challenges. The inability to access PDS rations for workers living in informal housing in Delhi-NCR compounds experiences of employment informality by preventing workers from accessing the social safety net during routine gaps inemployment.

Cross-cutting challenges in accessing PDS rations among circular migrants and residents in zones of compounded informality highlight the spatial concentration of exclusions. The complete inability to access PDS rations among circu-

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lar migrants, when compared to the possibility of accessing rations among residents, demonstrates how within these zones, workers are impacted by varying dimensions and degrees of informality. These findings demonstrate variegated access to rights and entitlements for migrant workers in destination areas, rather than a complete eclipse of India's social democratic state.

Citizenship, insurgency, duplicity, access

Experiences of citizenship are not static, but rather, flexible and contingent forms of political subjectification that emerge through iterative and constitutive performances between the state and its subjects (Gidwani & Sivaramakrishan, 2003; Ong, 1996). As laid out by Nikhil Anand (2017), citizenship is claimed not only through social practices of voting, but also through demands for state resources—including water services, schools, and health care. In his account of how Mumbai residents seek to be recognized by city agencies through legitimate water services, Anand argues that "hydraulic citizenship" is an "intermittent, partial, and multiply constituted social and material process"—cyclical, iterative, and highly dependent on social histories, political technologies, and distribution infrastructures (2017: 8–9).

Like hydraulic citizenship in Mumbai, claiming residence in Delhi-NCR as a marker of citizenship is iterative and far predates the 2016 rollout of the Aadhar regime. Significant scholarship has attended to the challenges that migrants and the poor face in complying with the demand for evidence of permanent settlement in the city (Bhan 2016; Bhan et al., 2013; Srivastava, 2012). Amidst these barriers, Sanjay Srivastava (2012) focuses on how residents of a Delhi slum produce fake IDs and other documents. The preceding discussions of access to the franchise, PDS, and bank accounts focused on formal access pathways—calling for further research into how migrants forge informal, insurgent, or duplicitous access pathways within the Aadhar regime.

COMPOUNDED INFORMALITY, COVID 19, AND EXODUS FROM THE MEGACITY

India, March 2020: the COVID 19 pandemic, coupled with the Government of India imposing immediate lockdowns across the country, drove the worst domestic migration crisis since Partition in 1947 (Infante, 2020). As lockdowns halted public transportation, an estimated 10 million circular migrant workers returned to their rural homes, walking hundreds or even thousands of kilometers in the scorching heat. Images of families walking bare feet, without food and water, circulated in the global media—a dark icon of India's forty-day lockdown.

Prevailing flexible employment practices facilitated widespread layoffs when COVID 19 struck. An estimated 130 million people in India lost their jobs the day after the lockdown was ordered (Breman, 2020). Migrant workers, concentrated in in informal employment and housing were disproportionately affected (Sriraman 2022). Women, overrepresented in the lowest rungs of supply chain production and in domestic and construction work (Action Aid, 2020; Silliman Bhattacharjee, 2020b), were also particularly hard hit. According to a survey of 433 garment workers—an overwhelmingly female migrant workforce—working in production clusters in Gujarat, Haryana, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu, 89 percent of workers experienced layoffs or terminations, leading to a 73 percent decline in wages during lockdowns (AFWA, 2021). A 2020 survey of migrant workers who returned to their native homes during lockdowns found that 90% had been dismissed without receiving owed wages or severance (SWAN, 2020a, 2020b). Exacerbating the impacts of sudden job loss, internal migrant workers were unable to access PDS rations in cities (SWAN, 2020a, 2020b).

At the same time, unable to afford rent, workers in zones of compounded informality faced sharp penalties from deregulated landlords. Ashmita, a migrant garment worker living in Kapashera, explained: *"We were unable to pay on time so they charged us penalties each day. We paid fines, until we could not afford them anymore."* Workers also reported charges levied for any additional occupants. Meena, a migrant garment worker living in Kapashera explained: *"Owners began charging us for every guest who stayed in our rooms—we had to pay when relatives in the city needed a place to stay,*

and when family from the villages came for medical treatment." Unable to meet escalating expenses, many migrants had no option but to return to their native homes (Mukherjee et al., 2020).

During the first lockdown, relief from the central government amounted to less than one percent of India's GDP (Breman, 2020). A 2020 survey of migrant workers who returned to their native homes during lockdowns found that almost no one received cash allowances from the government (SWAN, 2020a, 2020b). As a result, 66 percent of migrant workers surveyed had less than 200 rupees, and 75 percent only had food to last them for two days.

For workers in flexible employment, experiences of sudden economic free fall are not new—but the scale of job loss due to COVID 19 lockdowns and supply chain disruptions were unprecedented. In this regard, the pandemic functioned as a magnifying glass (Mezzadri, 2022: 381)— amplifying the vulnerability of workers in zones of compounded informality in Delhi-NCR and across the country. Sudden job loss, extortion from deregulated landlords, and exclusion from social protection pushed migrant and other workers to the brink of survival. During the 2020 lockdown, the average debt among migrant garment workers increased by more than 200 percent, with 93 percent pushed below the international poverty line (AFWA, 2021). In Delhi-NCR and elsewhere, spatially determined exclusion of workers from job, housing security, and social protection drove humanitarian crisis and mass exodus in the wake of COVID 19.

Critically, where employers and the state retreated, civil society activists responded to the urgent needs of migrant workers. Tarangini Sriraman provides an account of relief work assisting migrant workers to travel home—a process that for activists included archiving their engagement and managing their anxiety by systematically noting the Aadhar ID numbers of the workers they assisted (Sriraman, 2022). In effect, then, although Aadhar numbers did not facilitate access to India's social safety for migrant workers in the wake of COVID 19, they did provide a mechanism for activists to track and legitimize their interventions, facilitating archival practices required for legal and administrative accountability to funders. This mode of using Aadhar for archival purposes suggests that Aadhar may in fact facilitate access to alternate resource pathways, beyond those envisioned by the state—providing preliminary insight into the question of how migrants and activists, together, use Aadhar numbers to forge alternate, informal, or insurgent access.

CONCLUSIONS

Over the last four decades, an accelerating multiplication of rural-urban linkages in South Asia has expanded labor circulation exponentially (Gidwani & Sivaramakrishnan, 2003). Beyond Delhi-NCR, workers inhabit zones of compounded informality across India's megacities and production hubs. Globally, flexible employment is on the rise, catalyzed by the growing gig economy, and employment practices on product supply chains, construction sites, and in the hospitality and service sectors. At the same time, the acceleration of market fundamentalism and corresponding erosion of labor protections, collapse of social protection floors, and exclusion of migrant workers and the poor from civic planning are defining features of contemporary neoliberal capitalism. As uneven development, environmental devastation, and conflict continue to drive migration, we require frameworks for understanding the interaction between informal work and deregulation across other domains. The experiences of circular migrant workers in Delhi-NCR, then, are relevant to the study of migration, cities, and zones of compounded informality elsewhere in the world.

First, in zones of compounded informality, experiences of migration are deeply embedded in informal dwelling and work. At their intersection, deregulation of housing and work can create a compounded and complex web of informalities with significant implications for the lives of workers and their families, including cycles of debt, inability to access social safety nets during routine gaps in employment, and exclusion from political processes that inform fair housing and labor rights. These interactions undermine financial and political stability migrant workers require to establish firm footholds in the city—thereby sustaining the idea, category, and figure of the perpetual migrant, an outsider to the realm of socio-political citizenship.

Second, in zones of compounded informality, the eclipse of the regulatory apparatus of the state in varied domains not only interacts to escalate experiences of exclusion, but also to produce additional exclusions. Such an integrated

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understanding is critical to gauging the real impact of exclusions on migrant workers—a project relevant to studies of migration, mobility and social policy.

Third, studying zones of compounded informality in migration studies and across the social sciences stands to facilitate analysis of accelerating informality across the globe. In particular, this framework draws together insights from anthropology of labor, studies of spatial governmentality in cities and production hubs, and legal anthropology. Activating this methodological approach calls for locally specific ethnographic engagement and legal process analysis, together with investigation of the relationship between accelerating deregulation and "global forms" of market driven development (Ong & Collier, 2005).

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ENDNOTES

[1] For a virtual tour of the areas in this study, visit the Lockstitch Lives 360-degree interactive documentary (www.lockstitchlives.org).

[2] Due to lack of disaggregated government data on internal migration by location, sampling frames enumerating migrant workers within study locations are difficult to obtain. Accordingly, we identified respondents using a quota sampling approach that aimed to represent experiences of a diverse population, including women and men from Dalit, Tribal, OBC, and communities considered higher caste.

[3] The term *lal dora* [red thread] was first used in 1908 to refer to non-agricultural village land. These areas were demarcated by the land revenue department by tying a red thread denoting their exemption from the jurisdiction of municipal authorities.

[4] *Aadhaar* identification numbers can be obtained by Indian citizens and resident foreign nationals. *Aadhar*-linked biometric and demographic data is collected by the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI), established in 2009 by the Government of India, and charged with implementing the *Aadhaar (Targeted Delivery of Financial and other Subsidies, benefits and services) Act, 2016*.

[5] Article 21 of the Indian Constitution, protects the fundamental "right to life" and has been interpreted to include the right to food. On July 3, 2013, India passed the National Food Security, Act ("Right to Food Act"), aimed at addressing endemic hunger. The right to food is operationalised through PDS that provides grains at subsidised rates.

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