



# Subaltern counter-urbanism: Work, dispossession and emplacement in Gurgaon, India

Thomas Cowan

LSE Fellow in Human Geography, Department of Geography & Environment, London School of Economics and Political Science, United Kingdom



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## ABSTRACT

This paper draws on field research carried out on two struggles at auto parts factories in Gurgaon between 2014 and 2015. Drawing on workers' accounts from the two struggles, I am concerned with how we might think about the women workers struggle, following Roy (2017) as enacting a gendered politics of emplacement. In doing so, I conceptualise the struggles as instances of subaltern counter-urbanism. Borrowing from Roy's (2011) "subaltern urbanism" and Fraser's (1990) "subaltern counter-publics" the struggles are counter-urban as they emerge from and are mobilised against conditions of urban everyday life which render women fixed into labour systems defined through hypermobility and flexibility. The struggles are equally counter-Urban as they break from hegemonic understandings of urban politics within disciplinary Urban Studies which tie subaltern political subjectivities to the itineraries of territory, dis/possession and collective consumption (Roy, 2011). It will be shown that the women's struggles evoke demands for emplacement in the city that are future-oriented, speculative and always tentatively under erasure.

## 1. On the battlefield

In October 2014, I met with Sonu in Kamla Nehru Park in old Gurgaon. Kamla Nehru Park is one of Gurgaon's few municipal parks and has been used by workers as a public meeting place for rallies and meetings for a number of years. The park sits underneath the old Gurgaon gurudwara hidden away from the roads and street life of the city. That day hundreds of women, employees of a nearby auto-component plant that I will call Azadiplex, sat under the park's pagoda while Sonu and others took turns to lead discussions on the previous six months of industrial dispute and struggle at the plant. Rallying calls of "mazdoor ekta zindabad!" [long live worker unity!] common in workers rallies in Hindi-speaking India, were peppered with evocations of dignity [*izzat*], unity [*ekta*], hard-working commitment [*mehanati*], strength [*shakti*] and the necessity for the women to remain resolute against violent "boys" and exploitative thekedars outside the factory gates. The park meetings were unlike political events I had previously attended during my time in Gurgaon; the mainstream union programmes where elderly activists would deliver sermons on capitalist greed from a stage, and the NGO meetings where middle-class women with international colleagues in tow would facilitate orderly discussions with observant 'beneficiaries'. The park meetings were far more lively affairs. The women sat in a large circle, in deep discussion on a range of topics from sympathetic supervisors to violent landlords, disagreeing with each other, interrupting each other, breaking off into smaller

discussions while their children ran around, in and out of the pagoda. Groups of men, not accustomed to seeing such large groups of working-class women out in the park raising slogans and discussing political strategy, clustered at the edges of the pagoda looking in. A male representative of a prominent Communist party union stood at a distance, notes in hand waiting to be invited in to speak. Sonu, eyeing up the male onlookers remarked to the group that they ought to be wary of speaking too openly here in the park, the company may have sent spies and 'local boys' may recognise them from the villages. As the meeting wound to an end, the union official got two minutes to make a solidarity speech before the women picked up their children and made for the exits, quickly departing on shared auto-rickshaws back to the urban villages which house Gurgaon's one million strong migrant worker population. As quickly as the meeting had assembled, the park was deserted again. Sat with Sonu in the park watching her co-workers quickly disperse, she highlighted the fault-lines on which their six months of struggle had hinged. "Earlier women were not given any position in society. Now to get our position we have to get down on the battlefield. Whether at home or outside, homemakers now want to be valued as they should be!"

Indeed for Sonu and many other women, engagement in the wave of workplace struggles in Gurgaon across 2014, provided a basis to begin to challenge the situated gender relations, the restrictions on behaviours, practices and mobilities, and subjection to gender-based violence, which are central to the reproduction of the women as cheap,

E-mail address: [t.cowan1@lse.ac.uk](mailto:t.cowan1@lse.ac.uk).

pliable labour power and precarious, marginal urban residents.

In recent years cities in India have been conceptualised as sites of profound social and spatial transformation (Sankhe, 2010). Both popular and scholarly discourse has detailed India's "remarkable urban moment" (Shatkin, 2014) marked by liberalisation of the economy under the New Economic Policy in 1991, the unleashing of new forces of global and domestic capital and with them new political imperatives of economic development centred on the access and transformation of urban and rural land (Levien, 2013; Doshi, 2013; Sassen, 2014; Banerjee-Guha, 2013). In such narratives, each actor in the story of India's spectacular urbanisation take part in a pitched battle over the purpose, use and value of urban land. Global capital seeks it out, the entrepreneurial state facilitates access to it, an emergent middle class demands its attention, and subaltern actors are defined through their strategies to lay claim to it. In this dominant narrative of Indian urbanisation, both the urban and urban politics are theorised through an ostensibly dis/possessive and territorialised lens.

Gurgaon, a city 20 km south-west of India's capital New Delhi in the state of Haryana, is often understood as metonymic of these dynamics of India's urbanisation. Since the early 1990s the once agricultural town has been developed almost entirely by private real estate developers and today the city caters for a newly emergent cosmopolitan elite eager to escape the political obstacles of the existing Indian city (Gururani, 2013; Donthi, 2014; Searle, 2016). With its expanses of luxury real estate, export houses, and finance and property oriented economy, Gurgaon in many ways falls neatly into a popular imaginary of contemporary urban India, shaped by the bulldozing expansion of urban capitalist accumulation across the country.

My contribution in this paper follows two key lines of inquiry. First, building on labour geographers' attention to the role of labour in configuring landscapes of capitalist development (Herod, 2001; Strauss, 2017) together with feminist social reproduction scholars emphasis on the shifting and blurred spatio-temporalities of "life's work" (Mitchell et al., 2004) I explore the two struggles led by women workers in Gurgaon's auto parts sector. I conceptualise these struggles, following Roy (2017) as invoking demands for emplacement yet demands which, rather than pertaining to processes of dis/possession, emerge from particular articulations of gendered experiences of work, social reproduction, im/mobility and everyday life in the city.

Second, in doing so, I seek to unsettle the dispossession-centred terrain of contemporary urban studies. The women workers' struggle, not least a publically discernible strike is somewhat peculiar and jarring when situated in India's prototype neoliberal city. The political struggles explored in this paper are engaged in by actors who are not only marginalised from an immediate politics of land and territory – often materialised in squatting, evictions and displacement – but whose epistemic registers, material conditions and imaginaries equally operate on the margins of dominant frames of dis/possession. These are subjects who form part of the thirty five percent of India's "temporary" urban residents whose cheap, flexible labour underpins the nation's "urban awakening" (Sankhe, 2010), and yet whose presence is always temporary; propelled into seemingly endless circuits of rural-urban migration by agricultural decline at home and precarious living and work arrangements in the city (Bremar, 1996). In this regard, the women workers' struggle has no place in the material and discursive repertoire that has come to define "world-class", "neoliberal", or even the "subaltern" city. Against discourses which "evacuate" everyday spaces from "the epistemological terrain upon which knowledge and theory about... the 'global city' is produced" (Buckley and Strauss, 2016) and breaking from "subaltern urbanist" approaches that have a tendency to bind "popular politics" in India to community, territory and possession (Chatterjee, 2004) the women workers' struggles draw attention to the manner in which gendered discourses and practices, relations and experiences of everyday life, shape particular forms of urban politics and in turn particular urban and industrial landscapes.

In this paper I contend that to understand the de-territorialised

claims to place engaged in by migrant women in Gurgaon, it is crucial to examine the ways in which gendered discourses and practices fix-in and obstruct the desired "hypermobility" of the migrant worker which underpins flexible capital accumulation in contemporary urban India, and in doing so account for the dominating presence of work in the everyday life of most migrant workers in the city.

In this regard, the "female migrant worker", and the everyday gendered practices which mediate their un/waged labour, might be understood as the "constitutive outside" (Mouffe, 2000) of India's spectacular urbanisation, fundamental to the uneven reproduction of conditions of urban accumulation, and yet marginalised from urban property, belonging and politics; the migrant worker, her geographies, struggles, imaginaries and place-making practices remain dominated by the constancies of urban work yet outside of the universal grammars through which we come to understand the contemporary city.

Taking the experiences and practices of these groups on their own terms, I argue for relational and socially and spatially grounded understanding of the urban and its politics. In doing so, I take seriously and seek to centre the women workers' own experiences, demands and imaginaries of place. As I will demonstrate in this essay, the women's political strategies invoke a sense of place through practices and discourses that transcend the immediate spatiality and temporality of their everyday lives. Whether in occupying factories, staging protest camps at the factory gates, embarking on vigilante retributive justice within the neighbourhoods, or engaging in lengthy, complicated legal challenges, the women workers are appropriating a practice and language of emplacement typically associated with the traditional fordist-era male industrial worker and repurposing it for their own means. In doing so, the women's accounts conjure up a speculative and "extroverted" place in the city, one which belies fixed territoriality or dispossession (Massey, 1994).<sup>1</sup> Crucially these struggles make demands for emplacement which recognise the partiality of their position within broader spatio-temporal landscapes of precarity. This imaginary of place while temporally stretched, is equally spatially contingent and fraught with insecurity. A kind of emplacement which acts as caesura to lifetimes of precarity, envisioned by subjects always already outside of the territorialised throes of dis/possession.

The following will first examine the literature on subaltern politics in urban India, drawing attention to the ways in which dominant epistemological registers affirm a decidedly territorial urban and urban subject. I will then draw on field research carried out in Gurgaon between 2014 and 2015 with two groups of workers' engaged in workplace struggle,<sup>2</sup> to draw attention to the conditions which explain the women's very public engagement in workplace struggles and the speculative imaginaries of place which anchor those engagements.

## 2. Beyond dis/possession

In a recent paper in this journal Roy (2017, 3) in an analysis of anti-eviction campaigns in Chicago and Cape Town asks, "Who can count as the subject who can claim home and land?" Building on a wealth of scholarship which interrogates the relationship between property, possession and personhood (Blomley, 2008; Butler and Athanasiou, 2013; Porter, 2014) Roy seeks to examine how the "dispossessed subject enacts a politics of property" and how these enactments unsettle and rework our understandings of the relationship between property and personhood. In doing so Roy builds upon Butler and Athanasiou's (2013, 13) claim that logics of possession and dispossession have

<sup>1</sup> Massey (1994, 154) conceptualises an "extroverted" sense of place as "articulated moments in networks of social relations and meanings".

<sup>2</sup> Fieldwork took place across urban villages and the IMT Manesar industrial estate in Gurgaon between 2014 and 2015. Here I carried out both ethnographic enquiry into the workers' protest camps and neighbourhoods, and semi-structured and unstructured interviews with participants. I have changed the names of all interview respondents and their workplaces.

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