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## LIVING WITH PRECARIOUSNESS

### Survival in Small Manufacturing Enterprises

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*Here, small businesses remain small.*

*If you see this [business] as a businessman, you would see this as a “reject” business.*

*I have been in this line for 25 years... now I run this gala [manufacturing unit]. I am everything here: helper, worker, employer.*

These are the narratives of multiple men who migrated to Mumbai from eastern Uttar Pradesh (UP) in the 1990s and 2000s in search of a source of livelihood. Through linkages of family, kinship, village, and friendship, they ended up in an industrial neighbourhood called Vishesh Nagar<sup>1</sup> in the city’s central-eastern suburb (in the municipal L-ward of the city). Three decades later, many of them run small manufacturing units, now the employers of other and newer migrants who work for them. Vishesh Nagar is a hub for recycling, manufacturing, and finishing of metal parts, garments, stationery, and toys, marked by a spatial division into compounds. Each compound has 30–50 production units of varying sizes and typologies. Most business owners of these units identify themselves as Muslims and some as Yadavs and Vishwakarmas. Production units range from 150 to 500 square feet, employing on average six workers who live on-site. Most of these small-scale producers talk of the ruinous nature of their business: the small and dirty spaces within which they work, the long hours of work, constant stress of not having enough orders, and the thin, stagnant margins on which they have been operating for years. These narratives appear in sharp contrast with the more popular perceptions of Mumbai as the land for economic opportunity for rural migrants looking to earn a livelihood in the city. In this chapter, we pose the following questions: How have these ruinous circumstances been perpetuated for the migrant small businessmen from Uttar Pradesh? Relatedly, how have they coped with them, and sought to remain in business? And what are the consequences of relying on one’s own business strategies for the future of these producers and their enterprises?

From the 1980s, deregulation policies facilitated the closure of big industrial production in the city. As the real estate value of the century-old textile industry, which stood in central Mumbai, became more attractive than actually undertaking production, mill owners decided to shut operations, retrench thousands of workers and sell the mill lands (D'Monte 2006). The government's relocation policies mandated industries to relocate outside the city (Government of Maharashtra 1998), making way for the private takeover of land in central Mumbai by global finance and multinational banks and corporations. This did not imply an end to manufacturing in the city, but forced small producers to retreat to slums or small manufacturing clusters like Vishesh Nagar to continue informal manufacturing activities.

Small-scale production activity in India has faced multiple regimes of deregulation and fragmentation, which has not only reduced the size of firms but also kept them uncompetitive and small. Analysis of the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) data reveals that the average enterprise size has decreased marginally but consistently across the informal manufacturing sector (Raj and Sen 2019). They are characterised as "informal" by the state policy architecture as they fall out of regulation thresholds. Though some attempts have been made to re-regulate or formalise small-firm activity and small producers have sought to adapt to these new regimes, such as Goods and Services Tax (GST), credit schemes for Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), and new licensing requirements, there is no systematic state regulation of, or support to the everyday operations of the informal manufacturing sector.

Yet, informality is not the only challenge faced by small enterprises. Producers from marginalised groups face additional limitations in being able to grow their businesses. These challenges bear out in particularly historically contingent ways that keep certain neighbourhoods, manufacturing enterprises, and their owners marked by the stigmatisation of their work as "dirty" and "polluting" by the state as well as bourgeois civil society. Studies on neighbourhoods where waste segregation, recycling, and leatherwork are undertaken are instructive here for they show how caste and religious prejudices against Dalits, tribals, and Muslims are persistently reproduced through stigmatisation of their occupations which both devalue their work as well as restrict mobility out of the occupation (Chatterjee 2019; Gidwani and Maringanti 2016; Gill 2010; Jamil 2017).

The informalisation of the manufacturing sector is thus accompanied by a politics of stigmatisation, which renders everyday survival precarious for these businesses and their operators. Given the examples above, these conditions are not unique to Mumbai or even to Vishesh Nagar. At least two large studies on Annawadi and Dharavi have amply shown the precarious nature of business, life, and the neighbourhood in suburban Mumbai for Muslim entrepreneurs (Boo 2012; Saglio-Yatzimirsky 2013). The focus of both our empirical and theoretical contributions thus is not to characterise precariousness in Vishesh Nagar or distinguish it from other similar urban neighbourhoods, but to instead offer a close ethnographic reading of how working lives get built around precarious conditions (Han 2018). We show how the small producers running these units have tried to forge a market for

recycling and manufacturing products and spaces for themselves within it. Small producers explain this by foregrounding the role of what they term *pehchaan* with vendors across the city that they receive orders from. *Pehchaan*, a Hindi word, could in its literal sense imply a range of meanings: identity, recognition, credibility, or simply “to know.” We use producers’ descriptions and narratives of *pehchaan* to discuss the multiple interactions, relationships, and expectations that precariousness forces them to operate within. Loss of *pehchaan* implies a loss of credibility and business, forcing the producer to constantly cultivate this image at enormous costs to himself and his migrant workforce.

The chapter is structured into four sections: in the first, we lay out the conceptual framework for the argument. In the following sections, “History of Intersectional Precariousness” and “Stigma and Tenuous Dependencies in Vishesh Nagar,” we outline the myriad ways in which small producers encounter and cope with regulation and stigmatisation pressures in Mumbai. The last section, “Building Pehchaan” examines the strategies of *pehchaan* and its limitations in migrant producers’ attempts to survive in Mumbai.

The arguments are based on research conducted using multiple methods. The authors carried out detailed oral history interviews with 12 marginal producers in Vishesh Nagar between October 2020 and June 2021. Both authors have been associated with a migrant workers’ facilitation centre set up in Vishesh Nagar by the non-profit Aajeevika Bureau. The centre, first established in 2015, has been engaged in a number of activities, such as providing legal aid to migrant workers in cases of wage theft and worksite accidents. It has also sought to organise migrant workers in a labour collective called *Kamgaar Sahayata Samiti*. In addition to praxis, the centre conducts research on occupational safety, informality, and migration. In 2019, for instance, we completed a community mapping of Vishesh Nagar by profiling 535 manufacturing units covering 3659 workers. In addition to the oral histories collected, the authors draw from this community mapping data and conversations with workers and small producers who have routinely visited the centre over the last two years.

## Framing the Conceptual Argument

The conceptual distinctions between informality, precarity, and precariousness have shown how working classes navigate multiple forms of vulnerability and the limitations of the ability of secure work alone to provide a fulfilling life (Millar 2017; Pang 2018). Building on Butler’s (2009) conceptualisation, we see precariousness as constituted not only by the lack of state regulation but also by stigmatisation of one’s work, business, and neighbourhood as “dirty,” “polluting,” “illegal.” Their compounded consequences for everyday life form the focus of our study. We also respond to the call for urban theorisation to draw from everyday vocabularies and practices of the city. For instance, in the realm of planning, scholars have shown how urban planning theory tends to be informed by top-down designs of utopia and experiences of the Global North (Roy 2009), and the need to infuse it with the

vocabularies and practices of the precarious like “squat,” “repair,” and “consolidate” rather than “construct” or “plan” (Bhan 2019). To this set of vocabularies, we add the practices of seeking legitimacy and credibility that migrant entrepreneurs often club together as the building and maintenance of *pehchaan*.

*Pehchaan* is by no means exclusive to Vishesh Nagar. Neoliberalisation has offset a system of flexibilisation of the economy in which workers and entrepreneurs across the world have to bear all the responsibility of finding and losing work. This is particularly exacerbated for those facing multiple forms of precariousness and forced entrepreneurs to constantly innovate, rely on personal credibility and take-on risks to remain viable (Harriss-White 2017). In this sense, they perform a form of disguised wage labour, with returns that are marginally better-off than their earnings as workers (Harriss-White 2009). Their business relations are based on longstanding relationships of trust and reputation, which in the absence of state regulation, provide the basis on which they seek work orders and remain in business (Schwecke and Gandhi 2020).<sup>2</sup> Yet, their returns are severely circumscribed. As Gill (2010) has pointed out in the case of informal recycling traders in Delhi, the risks and tenuous business relationships that they adopt to survive also require entrepreneurs to pass down costs to their workers, further entrenching an exploitative system. Using an ethnographic approach, we also argue that given the multiple forms of precariousness of land, identity and business in Mumbai, small producers’ *pehchaan*-making strategies are also limited and tenuous. Rather than offering any pathways out of structural informality, cultivating *pehchaan* also ends up being mired within the precariousness of the informal manufacturing market. The informal and tenuous nature of *pehchaan*-based practices and relationships keep alive the structural exclusions and stigmatisation against their businesses and the neighbourhood as a whole. In other words, the ways in which businesses and small producers cope with precariousness perpetuate those very life conditions. Here, unlike other studies on informal recycling and manufacturing, very few see value or future in their work (Gidwani 2013; Gill 2010). Instead, they resign themselves to the proclamation of their work, including that of *pehchaan*-building and maintenance to be a “failure” (Chatterjee 2019), most biding their time until their sons either take over their business or leave the market altogether to other sectors of employment.

## History of Intersectional Precariousness

Studies on urban India have described how the interplay of land tenures, regional, religious, or linguistic belonging, access to municipal services, voting rights and electoral affiliations mark the range of everyday challenges in the neoliberal city. For the Muslim population in Mumbai, the communal Hindu-Muslim violence in 1992–1993 forced them to seek refuge in Muslim-dominated areas as a means of securing physical safety (Khan 2007). Kasim Shaikh,<sup>3</sup> who runs a 40-machine export garment unit in Vishesh Nagar, told the authors that due to the violence in 1992, he

could not return to his family home in Worli that he had lived in since 1984. “1992 mein sab kuch khatam ho gaya [I lost everything in 1992],” he said.<sup>4</sup> On a separate occasion, Zaheer Shaikh, who runs a jeans manufacturing unit, referred to the 1992 riots when he said, “*Desh nark ki taraf ja raha hai* [The country is headed towards hell]. *Maine 1992 se bahut kuch dekha hai, lekin main kuch bol nahi sakta hun.* [I have seen a lot of things since 1992, but I cannot say anything.]” A few years later, in a move to further marginalise Muslims and migrants from making claims over the city, the Shiv Sena–Bharatiya Janata Party government of Maharashtra instituted the 1995 deadline, which mandates that only those who are able to prove residence in Mumbai prior to 1995 are eligible for state services and the provision for resettlement (Contractor 2017).

During the same period, de-industrialisation policies were also shrinking the opportunities for formal manufacturing work in Mumbai. Formal factory jobs, when available, either did not provide sufficient wages or consistent work, pushing workers (now small producers) to the burgeoning production activity in neighbourhoods like Vishesh Nagar. Sonu Vishwakarma, who came to the city in the 1990s, left his job at a company because of the lack of over-time payments in the formal system and decided to move to Vishesh Nagar, where he had acquaintances. He noted, “I wanted to stay, but I was in urgent need of money at the time. There was never 12 hours of duty [work], we only got 8 hours. That meant getting only 8 hours of payment [wages].” Shailesh Yadav came to the city 17 years ago to Vishesh Nagar to work in a diamond polishing factory. He left that job after just two years because of the lack of consistent work there.

There would be work for two days a week at most...at the time someone I knew from the company itself had set up a unit in Vishesh Nagar and offered me work. So, I left the job and started working for him first... some years later, I started my own polishing unit.

While there is not much prior research on the history of Vishesh Nagar, our interviewees spoke of how the neighbourhood had transformed over the last few decades. Samir Khan, who arrived in the city in the 1980s, attested to the fact that Vishesh Nagar had a few horse stables and brick kilns when he arrived. The neighbourhood was covered by *khadi* [marshy land], and was largely inaccessible. Over time, large tracks of land were occupied by mainly landlords from the Christian community who built compound walls around their property. These “compounds” form the main spatial unit in the neighbourhood today, each having been sub-divided into *galas* or manufacturing units. Most producers have been workers in Vishesh Nagar, and after a few years of working, recognise the increase in income, however marginal, that comes with running an enterprise, and lease *galas* directly from the landlords.<sup>5</sup> Most of them live with their families in slums close to Vishesh Nagar while workers live inside the *galas* without proper electricity connections, toilets or waste disposal provided by the state or the landlords.

Producers were forced to work and operate businesses in these conditions due to a lack of alternate options. In Uttar Pradesh, both access to jobs as well as the financial viability of running small businesses has been steadily decreasing since the 1980s (Mamgain 2019). Most employment opportunities in the manufacturing sector are concentrated in the western districts of the state, but when compared to the rest of India, even this falls short of providing sufficient opportunities for growth (Srivastava and Ranjan 2019). A social activist from Uttar Pradesh noted,

Eastern Uttar Pradesh is a particularly backward place. There is nothing but some agriculture there ... most of those who migrate to Mumbai learn skills in the city itself, and try to make business connections which would allow them to eventually transition into setting up a small enterprise of their own.

Marginal producers in Vishesh Nagar also depended on workers who they hired through their networks in eastern Uttar Pradesh, arguing that only migrants could perform such arduous work. “*Yeh sab UP walon ka kaam hai* [This is work for those from UP],” said Samir Khan, who runs a carrom board making unit, of the nature of production in Vishesh Nagar’s fragmented and informal markets. In December 2019, Aajeevika Bureau’s staff mediated a spontaneous strike between 120 garment workers and their six employers in Vishesh Nagar, over a sudden reduction in the piece-rate of shirts from INR 13 (USD 0.18) to INR 12 (USD 0.17). On the second day of the strike, when negotiations had stalled, Kasim, who employed 40 migrant workers, told the staff,

*Yeh bhaiyya log hain.* [The workers are ‘bhaiyyas’—a word used for brother in Hindi and also used a derogatory term in Maharashtra for labour migrants from the North Indian states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar]. *Aap fikr mat kijiye, do din mein apne aap kaam par vapas aa jayenge* [Do not worry, they will automatically return to work in two days.]

While small producers refer to their migrant workforce in a derogatory manner, they themselves performed waged work in similar conditions before accruing marginal capital to set up their own manufacturing units.<sup>6</sup> Even today, the thin margins of their businesses compel them to perform labour on the shopfloor. They also recognised how their regimes and conditions of work in Mumbai are unique to migrants. “Maharashtrians go to ‘duty’ [formal employment] and take days off for illness, but we cannot do that,” said Zaheer Shaikh. When the Maharashtra government announced a cash transfer scheme for registered informal workers affected by COVID-19 in April 2021, Shaikh asked, “Who is registered? Only the locals. The ones who come here from other states, and because of whom the city runs, they do not get anything [from the state].” Given these intersectionalities of being Muslim, migrant, informal, and poor in the city, small producers were faced with a range of structural challenges even before setting up businesses in Vishesh Nagar, which have been further exacerbated in the recent past.

## Stigma and Tenuous Dependencies in Vishesh Nagar

After the July 2005 floods, Vishesh Nagar was exposed to new forms of visibility. A committee, headed by Madhav Chitale identified a number of contributors to the flooding, including artificial changes to the Mithi river's course from construction activities, a lack of pumping stations to remove floodwater, and industrial activity around the river. Soon after the release of the committee's report (Chitale 2006), the state announced a three-year deadline within which industrial settlements around the Mithi river were to be removed (McFarlane 2012), ignoring other recommendations like further investigating the construction work by the Airports Authority of India, Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai (MCGM) and Mumbai Metropolitan Region Development Authority (MMRDA) that had altered the course of the Mithi.<sup>7</sup>

While Vishesh Nagar and its compounds were not explicitly mentioned by the Chitale committee's report, its recommendations deepened the spectre of illegality around informal industries and settlements, which was already prevalent due to the stigma against small manufacturing and those undertaking such work.<sup>8</sup> Vishesh Nagar's densely packed units, the use of flammable materials like wood, garments, and chemicals like naphthalene in production, and frequent short circuiting of electrical equipment have made the neighbourhood prone to fires (Parpiani 2020). Since 2018, the area has witnessed at least one large fire per year, following which the state has echoed its narratives of the unauthorised nature of this production (Bhujbal 2018; Mahale 2017). The MCGM usually responds to such incidents by penalising individual employers through informal fines.

Vishesh Nagar's small producers, however, do not view their manufacturing practices as polluting or dangerous to the neighbourhood. "It is not our chemicals, but the garbage that people who live here throw every night that creates blockages in the *nala* [drain]," says Taalim, who runs a jeans laundering unit. "But they have no choice either – where else will they throw it?" Most producers echoed the same narrative, arguing that while Vishesh Nagar is littered with garbage, the lack of planning by the state and landowner forces such small units to rely on dumping chemicals and waste wherever they find space. Khan asked,

When the landowners were renting out this land, should they not have accounted for small space to dispose garbage? Or wide enough roads for the municipal [garbage collection] van to reach us? But *unke keval paise se matlab tha* [they were only concerned about rent].

After the large fires in Vishesh Nagar, producers have blamed "dangerous" units, like those operating boilers or processing aerosols, for the destruction, arguing that garment or metal processing units are not responsible for these incidents. "We use the same materials as residential societies," says Taalim. "I use bleach and colour just like everyone does in their homes. If they are not penalised, why am I?" Other producers spoke of not having the space for separate entry and exit points for fire safety, adding

that flats do not have these provisions either, but they are never fined for being non-compliant with fire regulations.

While some producers argued that this comes from the state's neglect and stigmatisation, others believed these informal systems of production and waste collection and lack of safety are deliberately kept in place as earning mechanisms for the state and private players. Producers reported that the police and MCGM officials regularly collect payments from them for non-compliance with industrial standards, especially after accidents or fires in the area, while continuing to ignore their demands for trade and industrial licenses that would formalise their enterprises to some extent. Khan noted that even the private electricity player, which has a monopoly in the area, never fixes broken meter boxes, fraying wires or informal connections. "They can simply add up the total [electricity] usage and divide it among the units in the area," he said. "If we are truly illegally operating, why don't they just remove us from here?" Another producer argued that the state maintains these informalities because of their religious identities. "The Shiv Sena corporator didn't do anything for this area for over two decades. He never even entered this area out of *khunnas* [spite] because there was support for another Muslim candidate here."

Despite the lack of state support, producers spoke of their inability to relocate out of Vishesh Nagar.<sup>9</sup> Their industrial production involves a complex dependence on materials, suppliers, sub-contractors, and skilled and unskilled workers, which cannot be simply relocated like brick-and-mortar factories. For instance, the jeans that are stitched in Zaheer Shaikh's unit are washed and dried by a neighbouring laundering facility, and home-based workers living in nearby *chalis* cut the garments' loose threads. Once an order is completed, headloaders recruited from the nearby *naka* load the finished bundles of jeans onto a truck that is driven to the vendor. These important links with other stages of the production process and allied forms of labour make small producers hesitate to move away from Vishesh Nagar. "Business takes a long time to settle down and take root [business *jamaana*]," Shaikh highlighted. "It is not easy to just move without the right support." Another noted, "All our *pehchaan* is here," speaking of the years of reputation, credibility, and networks that they had built in Vishesh Nagar's market which made sustaining their business possible.

These structural barriers to relocation forced the marginal producers to remain in Vishesh Nagar and bear other kinds of costs to their enterprises. The lack of *pucca* roads to transport goods, subsidised electricity and water, and housing for labour, severely hindered business growth. Samir Khan noted,

Even if you want to take a larger order, the supply truck cannot enter. This road that you see has been made eight years ago. Until then we have operated here with making our own makeshift roads... In 25 years, I have never seen what government support looks like.

If moving to other locations in the city was difficult, there were also severe limitations to how much business could grow within Vishesh Nagar. For instance, in 2012,



Yadav tried to expand his current unit by renting out the neighbouring one and doubling the shopfloor size. He hired additional workers, but in the search for new orders to pay for his expansion, he started working with new buyers, many of whom ended up not paying him on time or at all. “It turned out to be a burden instead, so I reverted back to this old *gala*,” he said. The lack of steady business orders from vendors meant that small producers were restricted from expanding operations. A wrong decision – like a hasty expansion – could put them back a couple of hundred thousand rupees, leading to long-lasting consequences for their business.

In other words, small producers tried to maintain basic levels of production with the aim of simply keeping their businesses afloat. This also meant both having to put in extra hours of work and working behind machines themselves. In fact, many said that the pressures and workload were higher for them as producers running units than as workers employed on a waged or piece-rate basis.<sup>10</sup> For instance, during the COVID-19 lockdown in March–May 2020, unlike migrant workers, marginal producers were compelled to remain in the city. They had to stay and make routine trips to their unit to ensure that they were not suddenly inspected by the police or their machines stolen in their absence. Khan noted that even ordinarily, producers like him are forced to work all the time,

Even on Sundays, you will see most employers present in their units – supervising, working, fixing things. We do not know what *chutti* [paid leave/holiday] is... we don't have the time or peace of mind even on a Sunday to spend time with our families or take them out for a day somewhere.

Given these structural challenges, many of the migrant producers depend to some extent on intermediaries for their everyday survival. Employers of one particular compound noted how a former Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) had facilitated access to voting cards and helped them construct a makeshift godown for storage. Other employers also mentioned having some linkages with the ex-MLA's office, yet these, they said, were deployed almost exclusively in case of a *lafda* [dispute]. This was also articulated by Ismail, a scrap dealer who buys beer bottles from restaurants and bars in the neighbourhood, which he then sells to a wholesaler every 4–5 days. He noted, “I collected the bottles every day and until the next sale, I stored them in a *galli* [narrow street]. One day, a local goon demanded that I pay him INR 2000 (USD 27) as rent for that space.” Ismail said that he was shocked at this demand, but was able to escape the payment upon taking a complaint to a close contact of the ex-MLA. This reliance on political actors is by no means exceptional. These relations are evoked elsewhere not only to get access to basic amenities like water, electricity, and sanitation, but also for surviving the threat of evictions to imbibe a sense of predictability and continuity in everyday life (Chatterjee 2006). This being said, support by corporators and MLAs does not always work (Anand 2011) and in the case of Vishesh Nagar, it is not enough to ensure everyday survival of business. While basic services like space to store materials, water, and electricity are instrumental to operate manufacturing units and could be bought with local political support, this

cannot address the structural industry changes over the last 10–15 years that have made their businesses increasingly tenuous and difficult to sustain.

It is important to note here that unlike the leather entrepreneurs' organisations in Dharavi (Saglio–Yatzimirsky 2013) or the plastic entrepreneurs' trade association in Mundka (Gill 2010), there are no robust trade-specific associations in Vishesh Nagar. This meant that producers had to navigate businesses risks on their own and lacked any form of collective bargaining through which they could fix rates or payment timelines, which often led to distrust and competitiveness among themselves (Boo 2012). Small producers also had to compete with bigger producers in the same neighbourhood. Take the case of the garment strike of 2019 referred to in the preceding section. The producers said that their vendor had reduced the piece-rate of each shirt, which had in turn forced them to cut the piece-rate they paid to the workers. When asked why they could not refuse to provide shirts at that rate to the vendor, most producers said they were afraid of losing business to another large garment unit in the neighbourhood who could produce at a lower rate given their larger volumes. These circumstances required them to rely heavily on their personal relationships with their vendors or buyers, colloquially called party *walas*, and build *pehchaan* with them.

### **Building *Pehchaan*: Strategies and Costs**

For Vishesh Nagar's producers, stigma has consequences for the everyday operations and growth prospects of their units. Even though the state has tried to promote growth within small businesses through credit schemes for MSMEs, these were not accessible to the small producers. Private banks expressed concerns over the reliability of producers running informal enterprises, with one bank manager saying, "If they leave this area, who is responsible? These are rented units, we need [rental] agreements for 3 years. *Logon ke dhokha dene ke chances zyada hain* [They are more likely to be defaulters.]" A central government employee at the MSME department argued, "If they [small producers] want to get loans so desperately, why do they do business in grey areas? If they get GST numbers, file Income Tax Returns correctly, they will not have these issues."

Our engagement with small producers suggests that they do maintain a minimum level of documentation, including GST numbers and tax returns. Another study on the impact of GST on MSME units found that many small producers were afraid of being penalised for not having a GST number and opted to register themselves under the GST regime, despite several having financial turnarounds which were lower than the official threshold (Ghosh 2020). In addition, they are unable to keep up with the state's myriad documentation demands to prove their formality. For instance, a large number of units do not have Udyog Aadhar licenses or Udyam registrations, which are required for enterprises seeking recognition and credit support from the Central Government's MSME Department. Instead, most still cite the Shops and Establishments license, colloquially called the *gumastha*, even though it is not required for enterprises with less than ten workers.

Given the difficulties of addressing structural challenges, small producers attempt to survive in business by developing individual relationships, which they term *pehchaan* with their vendors or party *walas*. *Pehchaan* could be understood as an everyday credibility-building exercise through which migrant producers invest a certain amount of certainty and formality in business quality, transactions, and expectations. Here, the party *walas* emerge as crucial networks of dependence for Vishesh Nagar's marginal producers. They range from large hotels near Mumbai's international airport and wholesalers in Dadar's garment market to small shops in Andheri and factories in Vasai.<sup>11</sup> A producer's relationship with each vendor is unique, built upon the various ways that he maintains his *pehchaan* with the latter. For instance, building *pehchaan* involves presenting paperwork in certain ways, as Khan describes,

With big vendors, you have to conduct your business according to their terms. I make sure all my bills are printed and signed properly: after all, they are INR 1–2 lakh (USD 1359–2718) transactions. With small businesses, like my suppliers, I can afford to use handwritten bills. With big buyers, I cannot do shoddy work if I want to maintain my relationship with them and my name in the market.

For other small producers, this performative running of their micro-unit as though it were a large enterprise, remains an aspiration. Vishwakarma, whose unit has only three Lathe<sup>12</sup> machines and is 200 square feet in size, says that large manufacturers in Mumbai's Industrial Zones have big units, proper bookkeeping, and a systematic workflow. "All documents are colour printed there to present to vendors for inspection," he says. "*Apne paas vo suvidha nahi hai* [We don't have such facilities.]" However, he is quick to add that performing "high quality work" and delivering orders on time is enough of a substitute to be considered legitimate and build *pehchaan*. In fact, Yadav, whose 100 square foot unit only employs one other worker, claimed he has been able to retain one vendor for several years because he provides transport services in addition to metal polishing. When asked why he bears the additional cost himself, he said, "One has to do things to earn the trust of the buyer, provide additional services, keep quality to a premium... it takes years to build this."

Maintaining the image of a unit that delivers goods on time and provides extra services to vendors, while continuing to sell at competitive market rates comes at an enormous cost to Vishesh Nagar's labour force. On an everyday basis, this requires migrant workers – often recruited through the small producers' social and kin networks – to work for 12–16 hours per day, and for piece-rate payments rather than fixed wages. Since these units operate on extremely thin margins, repeatedly bearing additional costs like transport to retain a party *wala* compels marginal producers to cut down on machine and factory maintenance costs, placing workers further at the risk of occupational safety hazards like cuts, burns, electrocutions, and large fires.<sup>13</sup>

While fragmented markets, long hours, ubiquitous fire hazards, and the recruitment of migrant workers help the producer maintain *pehchaan*, it is precisely the

confluence of these factors that becomes the basis for state policy to relocate and remove such industries from the city. In other words, in the process of building *pehchaan* with the vendor, marginal producers reinforce their image of being illegal and polluting units in the eyes of the state. This places their businesses in a cycle of vulnerability which does little beyond providing a tenuous avenue for continued work orders from vendors, usually at survivalist rates and with grave implications for the migrant workforce they employ.

Moreover, since getting a work order from the *party wala* is one of the few ways to remain in business, *pehchaan* can only be developed if a small producer remains largely non-confrontational, even in cases of arbitrarily reduced rates and delayed or denied payments for completed orders. Small producers regularly cited this idea when asked if they had ever lodged complaints or cases against vendors who had not paid them. For instance, Vishwakarma argued, “If we take legal action, the big players in the market can easily ruin the names and reputations of us smaller players. Then who is going to give us work orders?” Khan further described how the process of developing *pehchaan* with one buyer is transitive: seeking recognition from one *party wala* invariably means embedding oneself in a closely-knit network of other buyers and vendors. He noted,

If I register a case against someone (for non-payment), or create any kind of havoc, this will have a bad effect. It is better that I lose INR 1–2 lakh (USD 1359–2718) to this buyer, because an outsider to this transaction will have a different reaction. My *party walas* are all from Gujarat, their *chachas* [relatives] and brothers all run similar shops and are all related to the people I do business with. *Yeh sab jaan-pehchaan wale hain* [they know each other well].

This does not mean that small producers never bargain or confront their vendors for gross delays or arbitrarily denied payments, but rather that the consequences of such actions involve the possibility of immediately losing vendors to other units offering lower rates. However, *pehchaan* building – and the unspoken rules and conditions linked to it – offers insights into small producers’ logics of survival in Mumbai’s precarious markets. Small producers articulated the building of *pehchaan* as a means to avoiding complete economic distress and ensuring long-term survival.

Vishwakarma articulated how not pursuing action against a vendor for delayed payment was a deliberate calculation to keep open the possibility of receiving work from that vendor later on. He observed that *pehchaan* as a credible business owner is closely linked to individual behaviour with the vendor. In 2017, his unit produced metal moulds for a large vendor, who sourced from multiple small manufacturing units like Vishwakarma’s. When the vendor went bankrupt, the remaining unit owners threatened to take action against the manager, while Vishwakarma never pursued any action. In his own words, by the end, he was the only producer with any *pehchaan* (or relationship) left with the manager, which could prove useful following this episode. Indeed, one year later, when other producers were struggling to get work orders in the market, he successfully contacted the former manager, who

had moved to another large company, and received a work order from there. He says, “Everyone else had yelled at him, sworn at him. How would they get work from him? It takes a long time to build *pehchaan*, but it breaks very quickly.”

Vishwakarma’s strategy is rooted in long-term survival in the market, rather than the small possibility of immediate gains from confrontation or legal action. While describing this logic in general, he argued, “I know people who have had steady employment in big companies... then they did union cases and came to the street. They might have gotten their due payments, but they no longer had steady jobs.” Thus, Vishwakarma chose to even forfeit payments in the hope of continuing to maintain relationships with some vendors.

As discussed earlier, the losses or forfeitures inherent to maintaining *pehchaan* are often borne by workers, who see their piece-rates and working conditions being compromised. The strike by 120 garment workers in December 2019 was a spontaneous response to the reduction of the piece-rate wage of shirts from INR 13 (USD 0.18) to INR 12 (USD 0.17). The six employers involved in negotiations argued that they were compelled to cut workers’ piece-rates to remain competitive. If they bargained, even as a group, the vendor could easily source the shirts on-demand from other garment-producing clusters in Mumbai or even within Vishesh Nagar. They asked the workers to accept the rate cut for the moment so that they were able to complete the order and not antagonise the vendor. Workers, though reluctant, resumed work after two days, and eventually accepted a rate-cut going forward. They bore the majority of the cost of maintaining *pehchaan* or amicable relations between seller and buyer.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, we have discussed the everyday unfolding of precarious work and life in an industrial neighbourhood in Mumbai, focusing on small producers who have historically faced the intersectional vulnerabilities of being Muslims and migrants while running informal micro manufacturing units. The state has provided little structural support to such small businesses, and instead repeatedly stigmatises and characterises the industry in such neighbourhoods as illegal. Without the capacity to expand production within or outside Vishesh Nagar, marginal producers are compelled to constantly find ways to work within structural fault lines and develop their own ways to invest credibility and recognition, which they term *pehchaan*, into their work. On an everyday basis, this forces both producers and their workers to incur severe costs including hazardous work environments, long workdays and low wages, even as *pehchaan* building with party *walas* provides little more than a tenuous path to survival in Vishesh Nagar’s precarious market.

In addition to its conceptual contribution, the use of *pehchaan* has helped to foreground the everyday language and vocabularies of small producers. They have repeatedly defined their relationships with vendors using this language, not only during interviews but also the strike of 2019 and during programmatic engagements with Aajeevika Bureau’s centre. As such, the unpacking of this term has been made possible

through longitudinal and multifaceted engagements with Vishesh Nagar. Our chapter makes the case for using programmes and praxis alongside formal interviews as methodologies to develop a granular understanding of everyday precariousness.

The chapter also opens up new areas of inquiry into the structural limitations to the survival and mobility of small producers in Mumbai, including those mediated by caste and religion. Mumbai and its trajectory of capitalist transformation of space, labour, and industry have created a system wherein migrant workers and small producers, while essential to its everyday economy, are rendered precarious and forced to forego any long-term claims to the city.

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## Notes

- 1 A pseudonym has been used here to protect the identity of the producers and their enterprises.
- 2 This is true of informal businesses across the world. Pehchaan is akin to the Chinese term *xinyong*, which differs from being purely a set of networks and relationships as it also reflects “the integrity or credibility or reputation and character of a person” (Tong 2014) which could both accrue profits but could also severely undermine business opportunities (Grillot 2016).
- 3 Names of all interviewees have been changed to protect their identities.
- 4 During the second COVID-19 “wave” in March–April 2021, employers like Kasim and Zaheer were forced to perform manual labour themselves to ensure the orders were completed on time and save on labour costs. Their reflections on 1992 were unprompted and accompanied by their arguments about misgovernance and the mis-handling of the economic fallout from the pandemic.
- 5 Very few small producers owned their *galas* and if they did, this was through the *pagadi* system, so even if they wanted to sell the unit, the consent of the “original” landlord had to be sought and a profit-sharing agreement with him established.
- 6 Further research would be needed into the differences of caste between producers and the workers they employ as well as the limitations for mobility up the supply chain for each of these groups.
- 7 The policy did not take into consideration the crucial role that workers in these settlements played in helping those stranded on the streets during the deluge and in clearing debris and repairing infrastructure in the aftermath (Parthasarathy 2015). Strident middle-class environmentalism activism demanded the removal of settlements as a panacea to Mumbai’s flooding problem (Doshi 2019; Zérah and Landy 2013).
- 8 Heterogeneous settlements and industrial areas are homogenised on MCGM maps, masking the details of their diverse industries, living spaces and other institutions (Kamath et al. 2020).

- 9 A handful of producers have moved their production to the city's outskirts like Bhiwandi and Vasai.
- 10 Marginal producers cited continuous rent burdens and wage payments as their biggest costs, as these continue even when business is slow or payments are delayed. In one case in February 2020, a garment producer suffered heavy business losses and could pay neither the rent to the landlord nor wages to his workers. Eventually, the landlord and workers sold his five stitching machines to recover their dues, forcing the producer to return to waged work in another unit.
- 11 The party *wala* represents only the next link in the value chain for each individual product. The entire chains are long and complex. For instance, some shirts produced in Vishesh Nagar, while sent to wholesalers in Dadar, are retailed in markets in Sudan and Nigeria.
- 12 A Lathe machine is used to perform versatile operations like cutting, chipping, and smoothening on metal objects.
- 13 During a photo exhibition hosted in December 2019 by Aajeevika Bureau's centre, members of the neighbourhood migrant workers' collective *Kaamgar Sahayata Samiti* displayed the various *jugaads* (hacks) that they had to perform on their unsafe second-hand machines to protect themselves from injury while maintaining productivity to fulfill the vendor's orders on time.

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