LABOUR RELATIONS IN THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY.  
A CASE STUDY FROM DELHI

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I. INTRODUCTION

The inspiration for this research came from the debate about the impact of globalisation and neo-liberal policies on labour markets and employment in India. The interest on labour in the informal economy – or unorganised sector – derives directly from data: about 92% of the Indian workforce is employed outside the formal sector; 92% of the Indian labour force exposed to job/income insecurity, exploitation, violation of rights and absence of effective legal protection.

The focus on the construction sector - being one of the fastest growing in the Indian economy – and more specifically on medium-big projects, brings into the picture issues related to migrant labour.

The paper starts with a brief introduction of the impact of globalisation on labour, specifically when looking at Indian informal economy. It continue with an overview of the construction industry and it is concluded by the illustration of a case study from Delhi. Detailed information is presented in the paper about the socio-economic background of the migrant construction workers, the migration patterns which have characterised their working lives, the labour conditions experienced and the labour relations they are involved in.

The information presented have been gathered during repeated visits to local labour markets and construction worksites and through participatory observation, focus group and in-depth structured interviews (41 questionnaires) at the specific construction site object of the in-dept case study presented in this paper.

The locations of the in-dept case study is one of the main Universities in Delhi, where a public institution has contracted construction work to private companies who employ largely migrant labour.

II. GLOBALISATION, THE STATE AND LABOUR. A FOCUS ON THE INFORMAL ECONOMY IN INDIA

Although this paper will focus mainly on the illustration of the findings from an in-dept case study at a construction site – on paragraph IV –, a short contextualisation will be attempted in this paragraph while in the next a brief introduction to the construction sector will be drawn.

The last decade has witnessed a renewed interest on labour. “There is growing evidence to suggest that globalization has served to increase the numbers of informal wage workers and to increase the insecurity of the existing informal workforce” (Carr and Chen 2001, 9). A fundamental publication is the 2002 ILO's report “Decent work and the informal economy”. ILO acknowledges that, contrary to earlier predictions, the informal economy has been growing rapidly almost everywhere in the world and can no longer be considered a temporary or residual phenomenon. Moreover, a

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very important phenomenon which characterized recent years is that most of new employment has been created in the informal economy. A part from those types of employment which have been always considered the realm of informal employment, there has been also an increasing flexibilization and informalization of production and employment relationships in the formal economy. “Firms are increasingly operating with a small core of wage employees with regular terms and conditions of employment and a growing periphery of “non-standard” or “atypical” workers in different types of workplaces scattered over different locations and sometimes different countries. These measures often include outsourcing or subcontracting arrangements and more flexible and informal employment relationships” (ILO 2002, 2). This process leads to a growing number of “informalised’ classes of labour”, in the words of Bernstein (2007, 6), highly differentiated and with mode of existence increasingly heterogeneous. At the same time, this situation is the basis for arguing that “informal [...] labour relations are [not] the result of a process of marginalisation of given workers in the era of globalisation. In fact, informal [...] labour practices are fundamentally incorporated in the current process of globalisation, and they do not simply survive at its 'margins’” (Mezzadri 2008, 1). This type of analysis challenges very deeply the idea of the 'informal' as separated from the 'formal' (Mezzadri 2008, 14).

The starting point for the research behind this paper is the Indian economic literature on neoliberal policies and the role of the State towards labour in the country. Various authors (for example Ghosh, 2004, and Jha, 2005 and 2003) underline how the State, from the late 1980s, started to favour capital more and more openly, to the point of questioning the existing legislation at protection of labour, arguing that it is an obstacle to investments and growth. Growth was considered to be the solution for all problems for all; every one would have benefit from it but, actually, “flexibilization of employment has worsened rather than improved the economic situation of a substantial part of the working population” (Breman 2004, 265). In the words of Jha, the “problem of non-enforcement of labour laws has been a major issue right since independence. However, during the post-liberalisation era, there has been a sea change in the state's connivance; what was earlier (...) probably inefficiency/corruption, has now become unstated policy” (Jha 2005, p. 902). Jha later also argues that “the increase in the hostility of the organs of state towards labour is intimately and organically linked to the logic of globalisation (p. 907).

According to the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (NCEUS), above 92% of the labour force is employed in the informal economy and the number of those workers are increasing over time. “Following the concepts used by ILO, the Commission has defined the unorganised workers as all the workers in the informal sector (minus a small fraction who are entitled to social security benefits) plus those workers in the organised sector who do not enjoy any social security benefits” (Bhalla 2008, p. 13).

Such astonishing percentage of this typology of workers in the Indian economy is the main motive for conducting a case study focused on unorganised workers. The necessity – due to time and resources constraints - to focus on a specific sector and the interest in looking at the mechanisms of exploitation of labour lead to the construction sector and to migrant construction workers. Very much inspiring for this research has been the work of Jan Breman. From his extensive field work in rural south Gujarat he observes that “it is quite indicative for the state of affairs that there has been no formalization of employment conditions for the huge army of field workers, whereas formality is typical for the management of (...) agro-industry in all other respects. This illustrate how much the distinction formal-informal is linked to the control over labour which is exercised by employers, both individually and collectively”. Moreover: “Instead of being contrary to a genuine development along capitalistic lines, I perceive, in the forceful advancement of the informal sector economy, an
acceleration of the transformation towards that mode of production” (Breman 1994, 38). Those observations hold also in the case of the construction industry.

The characteristics of the construction industry and of the labour employed in it are the theme of next paragraph.

**III. CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY AND EMPLOYMENT. A BRIEF OVERVIEW**

“The construction industry is the single biggest non-agricultural industry in the capitalist world” (Chang / BWI and AMRC 2008, 6). There are many reasons for choosing the construction sector for a case study on informal workers in India. The construction sector usually is a good indicator of the economic performance of a country and in the past years - and until present – it witnessed a boom, especially in big cities such as Mumbai and Delhi. Moreover, according to the National Sample Industry Organisation the growth of employment in the sector (until 2000) has been noteworthy (see Mathew 2006, pp. 33-37). “In Asia, the construction industry (...) is considered one of the most important industries for national development. Construction workers, however, are treated largely as secondary citizens, deprived of means to protect their dignity” (Chang / BWI and AMRC 2008, 5).

The construction sector is also peculiar in the sense that it offers an example of co-existence of formality and informality in the economy (contrary to some literature which considers the two sectors somehow separated).

The construction industry is made of a range of business sizes, from small artisan, often family run, units to big investors and developers. The small units still maintain their local markets, rural but also urban, but increasingly more often they are integrated in construction chains for the realization of big construction projects. The recruitment of workers varies according to the size of the project, the main communality being the extreme precariousness of employment for many workers. In the big cities it is possible to come across local labour markets where local residents gather every morning waiting for labour contractors to come and pick the labourers they need for the day or few days. In smaller cities in the local labour markets gather also daily commuters from close by rural areas. The recruitment of workers for big projects works differently: groups of workers are transported directly to the worksites in big groups from backwards states where the cost of manpower is lower, the labourers are in big need of employment and ready to enter all sorts of exploitative agreements with jobbers members of their same community and who are able to provide disciplined work force. It happens that migrants at the end of a contract stay in the same city and access other work sites. At that point, anyway, they have learned the rules and they tend to behave as cheap and disciplined work force as long as they will be granted a job and a salary. The resident construction workers find very difficult to access the big construction sites, exactly because the migrants workers are preferred being cheaper and more easily exploitable.

Being interested in labour conditions as well as in labour relations, those same types of medium-big projects, especially when realised in the middle of the urban texture, display quite openly to the citizens and the public authorities, the labour and life conditions of workers and, eventually, their families. The violation of basic norms and laws is often very obvious and rarely any measures are taken. At the same time, what can be observed in cities like Delhi and Kolkata, for example, is that the big developers, engaged in huge infrastructure constructions but also commercial and residential projects, tend to 'seal' the work sites, making them practically impossible to see and access, and make sure that the workers' accommodations are well hidden and possibly outside the construction
site. Being this the attitude, the chance to access and study a work site is even more precious. Finally, another characteristic of the labour employed in the construction sector – again, especially in cases of medium-big projects – is the migrant nature of the workers, people who are not properly settled anywhere but who are on the move, from worksite to worksite, for a variable number of years (see Mobile Créche 2008). This is particularly evident in cities like Delhi, scenario of the case study presented in the next paragraph. In India, today, “unskilled work in the construction industry is one of the few job opportunities available to migrants to the towns from the less developed states (ILO 2001, 11). Nevertheless, hardly any migrant will be able to access the construction market without the mediation of someone already inside.

After visiting both local labour markets and construction sites, a choice has been make for a study of construction sites, characterized by footloose casual migrant workers. Education construction sites proved to be more easily accessible for the researcher, so this determined the selection of the typology of construction. The selection of public education sites for the research add another dimension to the analysis, being that public institutions too often accept exploitation of labour in their premises and do not fulfil their role as guarantor of workers rights. Finally, because of the large predominance of masonry work in construction and because of the stage of the project, most of the workers staying at the worksite and who have been interviewed are masons and helpers.

Labour Relations in the Industry
Certainly labour relations have been observed from very close in the specific work site subject of the in-dept case study that will be illustrated in the next paragraph. However, before focusing on it, it is worth to consider some observations and reflections emerged from the more general fieldwork in India.

First of all, it has been observed a major difference in the access to the construction labour market in urban India: either employment can be found through local labour markets or – via an indispensable network – at medium-big construction sites. Although those two spaces of (potential) employment for (want to be) construction workers are not completely separated one from the other, they mostly serve different clients (as per size, typology of project, etc.) and are generally populated by different actors and function with different network. Let us look at local labour markets and at medium-big construction sites separately.

Every city in India – especially at this time of construction booming – has a labour market. Every morning workers willing to work for the day gather there, at the current daily rate. It is not rare that people gather to those markets also coming from close by rural areas. Big cities like Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata have several local labour markets scattered around. They tend to be in the areas of ancient migration of skilled construction workers, from states like Bihar or Rajasthan, who contributed to build those cities and settled there. Those workers every morning gather at the market place, waiting for a job that can be for a day or for few days. Most of the times is for small repairing jobs, and in fact most of the workers declared that they manage to work 2-3 days per week. Those who resorts to those local labour markets are mostly private/families who need someone for a small work at their house or small business property, although it may happen that small local contractor resort to those labour market for recruiting labour force for similar business. A very interesting characteristic of those labour market is that they are themselves populated – not surprisingly – by labour contractors, so that the markets are not spaces of free interaction between demand and supply.

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1 As per the construction of private houses, it is not rare to see family of migrant workers at work, especially in the biggest cities. With the construction boom hitting smaller city as well, the utilization of cheaper migrant labour is reaching as well, meeting the anger of local construction workers who see their position under threat.
of labour, but are mediated by contractors who negotiate with the 'client' and provide the labourers required. So, in those busy labour markets, often very much populated also until late morning – clear sign that no many have found a daily employment – every worker has to make sure has the protection of some contractors as only in this way can have more chances to find few days of work per week. When inquired about the option to work at construction sites the workers say that there the daily wage is too low, they can get at least double as much if they find work at the labour market. They say they would not be able to live, pay for the bills of their houses and for the cost of commuting if employed at the prevailing work sites rates. At the same time whoever is in charge for recruiting labour force for a proper construction work will prefer to bring cheap labour from outside than consider the option to employ local construction workers.

For as much as the construction workers from the local labour markets normally work in almost completely informal setting, so those who work in medium-big construction sites do not move anymore in the realm of 'informality' but pretty much in formal settings, where likely a client published a tender, the development of the project got allocated through a bidding competition and – at least on paper – safety and labour regulation should be applied and respected. Except that the bidding competitions are reported to be extremely corrupted (including by interviews collected by the researcher), that the labour legislation is hardly enforced even in the few states that have specific construction acts and that when it come to labour the conditions are hardly different from workers in any other informal setting. The sector is characterised by chains of subcontractors (see also Chang, 2008), which means that definitely the cut for the remuneration of labour, at the bottom of the chain, is seriously reduced. The client, the developer, the main contractor, often the bigger subcontractors are not at all concerned with the productive factor labour. Only the labour contractors get their hands dirty with labourers. And not necessarily, since sometimes the labour contractor is able to supply considerable amount of labourers to worksites, and for doing so it works with different jamadars, thekedars, mistri who bring workers they will be responsible for, coming from the same area, village, family. In the booming Indian construction industry a construction worker is likely to find herself at the bottom of a long chain, with a salary below the minimum wage fixed by law, with the risk of not receiving the money she worked for, for a number of reasons out of her control, with the risk of loosing her job any moment, with often unhealthy housing and sanitary facilities and, if she is a women, with house chores on top of her working day and no one to take care of her children. Those workers hardly settle, they are on the move, where the phone call of a relative or a village fellow or former co-worker call them, alone if they are men from North India or with all their families if they come from the Central and Southern states of the union characterized by family migration. Few families settle, manage to offer an education to their children, but most young couples worry for the future of their children and plan to bring them back to their villages, to their communities. Those are the workers building a 'shining India', who have to struggle to find a contact to access this labour market and build a network for resisting in it, or simply come from areas that are secure suppliers of cheap and disciplined labour – the poorest areas of the country – from where entire villages are on the move – from and to – and recreate the village community at the destination work site, like in the case illustrated in the next paragraph, and where social dynamics, pre-existing hierarchies and the awareness of the quantity of people ready to come to work at the same miserable conditions help in keeping the work force grateful and disciplined.

**IV. MIGRATION, LABOUR RELATIONS AND LABOUR CONDITIONS IN THE STUDY WORKSITE**

The analysis in this section is based on an in-depth case study conducted in a public institution in
Delhi. The site is very relevant because of the symbolism of the institution and because of the nature of the worksite, which is in the geographical and social hearth of the institution, exhibiting quite openly the working and life conditions of the workers there employed and settled. Moreover it was more easily accessible for the researcher and granted the easier availability of students/assistants for carrying on the research while at the same time not raising too much suspicion.

The sample
The obvious problem in defining the sample to be studied in the worksite was that some of the migrant workers employed there are highly mobile. So, although the visits to the worksite started in March 2008, the individual interviews were realised in two months – between September and November – and the workers settled in the area of the worksite mapped. The original aim of the research was to reach and interview every single worker. Unfortunately this was not entirely possible as few people were unavailable to be interviewed or refused under the impression of having been interviewed already, impression given by the fact that they were sitting with a fellow worker who was, her, interviewed. It proved difficult especially to interview women as the household chores, added to the working day, left few time off to them. There are cases in which more than one member of the same household was interviewed. This was very interesting, especially from the methodological point of view, as often the answers to the same questions were quite different. In this paper, in case of multiple respondents from the same household have been interviewed, the answers of the head of the household will be considered.

The vast majority of the workers in the sample are engaged in masonry or as helper of 'mistri' masons. This because in the studies worksite those are the residential, 'long-term' workers, while – at the actual stage of the work – specific plumbing or electrical works - but also specific jobs such as marble cutting and road construction - are carried out by very flexible and highly mobile workers provided by sub-contractors, who settle in the worksite just for the few days necessary for the completion of the task assigned to them. Because of the nature of those contracts, the intensity of the work (few of those workers performed overtime, while overtime is not otherwise observed in the worksite) and the personal limitation of the researcher in directly accessing the workers, it has proven to be very difficult to capture those teams of workers external to the ones settled in the worksite.

Nature of the project
The project, of the duration of 2 years, is mainly of external and internal reparation of a building and beautification of the surrounding area.

Characteristics of the workers
In this paragraph the personal characteristics of the workers interviewed will be outlined, together with relevant findings about their migration stories and from the employment sphere. This is done mainly for sketching the scenario in which to collocate the discussion of the focus of the research: the labour relations in the work site, object of the last paragraph.

Personal Details

2 During the first months of fieldwork appeared immediately evident that accessing worksites was a major issue. In different contexts the access was granted by trade unions, NGOs, worksite management. But all those modalities – and above all the last one – prevented a direct and unfiltered approach to the workers, which was the aim of the research and was achieved in this case study.

3 Later a deeper analysis of the available interviews will be carried on.
In the worksite there is a clear prevalence of families and young single men. Actually, the majority of the workers are male (about 2/3). Few are alone in the settlement but have their families back home, in the north Indian states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, while the families of workers come mainly from Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh, states characterized by family migration. Most of the women in the settlement work. The very few exceptions are a wife of a skilled labour who has a single child (about 7 years old), a young pregnant woman and three girls from a same family – one is the daughter in law – which looks much better off than the others in the settlement. I will return to female workers late in the paper.

The majority of the workers are quite young with small children, followed by more senior workers with children on a marriage age. There are few extended families in the settlement. For the women who belong to them, or who have daughters old enough to help them, life in the settlement is a little easier. Those who are alone with small children are the worst off. They do not get much help from their husbands and have to take often days off.

Women, more than men, are confined in the small space of the construction site, without many chances for distractions.

Most of the workers interviewed (2/3) are completely illiterate, while the few with some education often are skilled workers or wives of skilled workers.

The great majority of workers are Hindus with the exception of one Muslim and few women who declared to believe in a non better identified religion.

About one third of the workers belong to Scheduled Castes, those who belong to OBC and other Hindu castes are about on the same number (respectively 6 and 7), while Scheduled Tribes do not seem to be present in the sample. The very problem is the number of cases in which the workers have not been able to declare the classification of their caste (about ¼ of the cases)\(^4\).

The worksite was started about one year and a half ago and the company provided the materials to the workers for building their 'houses'. Workers who came later tended to occupy houses freed by workers who had left the job. The majority of those single small rooms habitation are made of bricks and tin roof and are occupied by a couple of workers by families with two-three children.

Few huts, though, are made entirely of the tin used only for roofs in the others. The floor is in concrete in most of the huts. The accessories are almost non existents, although most – mainly those who were at the settlement during summer - have a fan. Many workers do not even have a bed, but they just arrange mattresses on the floor for the night.

In the settlement there is electricity for an undeterminable number of hours per day, but the workers said they have it in the early morning before going to work and in the evening when they finish and through the early hours of the night.

Water is also available quite easily in the worksite, including drinking water. The real issues are the toilets and bathing spaces. The toilets are very few considering the number of the people in the settlement and are reported being quite dirty. Moreover, they are very close to the houses. Early in the morning is easy to spot people washing on the other side of the small road which separates the settlement from the parking and spaces for students etc. The water is taken there by a long plastic pipe which is used for working purposes during the working hours. Women, no need to specify, have to wash almost completely dressed. During the winter months must be quite painful this washing modality at the worksite.

Finally, all the workers declared that the housing expenses are not deducted from their salaries.

Children of the construction workers

In the construction site there is no crèche. There is no obligation under any law, since the number of working women does not reach the one fixed by law. The results is that women bring small children

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\(^4\) Ideally this situation will be clarified in the finalised version of this paper.
with them at the worksite, almost leaving the to sleep or play or cry in the middle of dust and dirtiness.
As soon as the children are a little grown up, they start to go around in the worksite on their own or together with the older who sometimes take care of them, while others just tease them and welcome them in the jungle that the construction site seems to be for children. None of the children on school age goes to school. Some of them were going to school in the village and had to stop once they came to Delhi. Other never started as the parents feel that it is too difficult, almost impossible, to send them to school here. Many parents are planning to send children to school once they will go back to their village. Most of the workers consider education to be important for the future of their children. Only the children of one couple of workers who moved and settled in Delhi more than twenty years ago – and are working for the same company for the past 15 years, the husband being skilled worker – went to school, in Delhi itself.

Quite a few boys, around 11 to 14 years old, are engaged in small job at tea stall and similar, entering very prematurely the labour force, even if not – likely – in the construction site.

Few girls just below 18 are working as helpers in the construction site. They belong to families where parents have declared that one of the reason for migrating is to put together money for wedding and dowry of their daughters.

Migration Details
About 1/3 of the workers interviewed are from Chhattisgarth; the next most represented states are Uttar Pradesh, Madya Pradesh and workers coming from there represent all together about half of the interviewed. Few workers are from Orissa and West Bengal.
Less than a half of those migrant workers declared to be from a flood (the majority) or drought prone areas, while 2/3 declared that in their area of origin unemployment is an issue.
A greatest majority (more than ¾) declared that they would not have migrated in case they would have been able to find a job in their area of origin. Particularly interesting have been some answers given by women: some of them declared they would have liked to come anyway, to see new places, while others lamented that in Delhi their life is confined to the settlement and that resent to be so much far away from the extended family.
The daily wages in the areas of origin are reported to be as low as Rs 20 per day (the daily wage at the work site for unskilled workers is Rs 85) and above all is lamented the high irregularity of work, meaning that a worker may be able to work only for few days per week back home.
Most workers where involved in agriculture, before migrating and many of the workers interviewed are recent migrant. The most quoted reasons for migrating have been: employment or underemployment, the availability of higher salaries, the need to earn money for the repayment of a debt or for weddings and dowries.
The workers interviewed denied to have been involved in any sort of group migration lead by a jamadar (or labour supplier), while they refer to a network of relative or village fellows who helped them to find the first employment in the construction sector and then to remain (those dymanics will be looked at deeper in the next paragraph).
Most of the workers did not leave anything behind them. A part from a kaccha house (a non-concrete house), the workers hardly have any property back home.
The patterns of returning home varies widely depending, among other factors, on the labour relations the workers entered, as it will be clarified in the next paragraph.

Employment Details
Almost ¾ of the workers interviewed are unskilled.
Practically all the workers interviewed declared that the only way to find employment in the construction sector is through a network of people who can help accessing an employment and later
move from one worksite to another. Half of the workers interviewed declared they found the present employment through family and fellow villagers networks. About a third declared he approached directly a middle man he knew already. More than half of the workers found their present employment at the work site while they were in Delhi, while almost a half of them had been informed about the chance to join this work site while they were in their villages. A small proportion of the workers was working elsewhere when they have been told about the possibility of a job in Delhi. Although those dynamics are hardly straightforward, it is worth nothing here that in particular the workers from a family of fitters working under a small contractor, who was at the same time the head of the extended family – by the nature of the work involved in a punctual and temporarily circumscribed activity in the work site – declared that they use go back to the village and rest once completed a job, and wait for someone to call them for next employment. Some young and recently migrated family, on the other hand - who declared that they are planning to go back to the village by the time their children will be on school age - spent pretty much their years in Delhi moving from one work site to another, taking only short live to go home for festivals or weddings and than continuing with the same employer.

The wage for unskilled workers at the work site is Rs 85 per day, for the skilled workers varies according to their skills and specialisation. The workers know that it is lower than elsewhere, but emphasize the fact that rarely they have not been paid, that the company is serious and that you never know what you risk when you leave your old employer for someone who offers more. Obviously this is a 'no work, no pay' work site and all what the workers have are verbal labour contracts, yet most than half of them declare that they have a kind of job security, that there will be employment for them as long as there is work at the site. The workers receive every week what they call a weekly wage advance and once per month they receive what is left of their salary. Most of the workers declare that if it is true that the salary they get is higher than what they were getting earlier at home, so are the expenses. Some manage to save and even to send remittances but there is no evidence at all of assets creation.

Finally, is worth mentioning that no one of the workers interviewed is registered with the Delhi Construction Workers' Welfare Board and that no one is aware of the existence of the “Building and Other Construction Workers' Act” (1996), designed exactly for the protection of the workers of the industry but hardly implemented anywhere.

The labour relations
A first preliminary remark I have to make is that in my fieldwork I have tried at looking at the labour relations in the work site starting from the workers' point of view. This proved quite difficult in two respects. First, the workers we interviewed proved to be very often unaware or confused about the hierarchy above them, and second, after long months spent with the workers, the interaction with the management level towards the end of the fieldwork resented from the perception that supervisors and managers had about me. Said so, it nevertheless emerged that labour relations at the worksite were quite complicated, in the sense that different agreement and hierarchies coexisted. First of all it has to be noted that the work site studied was quite peaceful and calm as per the relationship between the workers and the employer(s). All the workers declared to be absolutely free to leave and not linked by any advance or debt with the employer. The workers had no complaints about payments and declared that they had always received their money. Some of the workers lamented that the rate was too low, but most of the workers who had a long standing

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5 The workers refer of understanding employers who let some of the workers go home in the festivity seasons, as long as there is not an urgency to finish some work; this is unlikely to be the case since the festive calendar is widely respected in India.
relation with the company valued very highly the timely and secure payment and the stability of the employment, worth accepting a lower pay compared to elsewhere. Together with this bulk of workers – most of which masons and helpers – with long lasting relationship with the company and who declared to be directly employed by the same (although without any written contract), other groups of workers gravitated in the same worksite. In particular I have identified three groups: a group of road builders working for a subcontractor and who resided in the work site for a short period; a group of fitters linked by family relationships, whose leader had subcontracted (piece contract) the work from the main company and who settled for few months in the same area of the other workers; and a group of unskilled workers, all coming from a same village in Chhattisgarh, some of whom declared to have been taken to the work site by a fellow villager to whom they were paying a small daily commission. Those examples in the same, medium size, work site demonstrate that a wide variety of contractual labour arrangements co-exist even at a single work side; the same observation had been registered by Shivakumar, Sheng and Weber about 20 years ago (1991, 38). The situation of workers apparently sharing the same conditions may actually differ regarding the position they occupy in the layer of formal and, more often, informal subcontracting chains, deeply immersed in the social and cultural context and completely functional to a capitalist mode of production, where “labour has become truly capitalist labour, a particular social form of labour” (Chang / BWI and AMRC 2008, 33). “Paternalism and the unclear nature of the social relations have allowed contractor and 'maistry' to alter the rate of exploitation according to their perception of surplus they could safely extract out of the labouring masses” (Shivakumar, Sheng and Weber 1991, 36).

When interviewed, the site engineer declared that all the workers residing at the work site where employed regularly and directly by the company and receiving the minimum wage. Unfortunately not only he was not able to provide any list of workers, but not even to identify the minimum wage in the state. This case study proved once more what it had been observed elsewhere: the preoccupation with workers in the industry is the last one, admitting that it exists. Dealing with the labourers it is a burden left on the hands of the last subcontractor and no one above in the chain cares about them. In the studied work site the workers have no clear who they are working for and the management ignores who the workers are. It is crucial, obviously the chain of intermediaries that keeps together the project on paper with those who physically realize it. The case study shows something else: migrant construction workers have different characteristics and enter at different levels the subcontracting chains. There are migrants who settled in a city (in this case in Delhi) long ago, moving from work site to work site, sometimes linked to the same 'employer'; some of them even managed to send their children at school, to offer them a better life perspective. Those workers have nowhere else to go back to, if not for visits to the extended family. Their life is where they settled. In this situation they do not need necessarily to look for a jobber or mistri to be taken to a new work site as they have built a personal network and possibly have acquired some skills. The links to find a new work site may be horizontal and not necessary vertical (although, nevertheless, the 'horizontal contacts' are themselves inside vertical labour relationship). They are likely to be less vulnerable and better able to move in the labour market. In the construction sites gravitate other type of migrant workers: single males or entire families settled in their areas of origin and linked to a labour subcontractor (this is the case of the group of road builders and the group of fitters, for example) who brings them to distant geographical areas where he finds piece contracts. In the case of the group of northern Indians specialised in road building, they have been working with the same contractor for years, they work predominantly in Delhi, but not only, and on average they spend few days at home (Rajasthan, Bihar, UP) every month, when they go to bring the monthly salary to their families. They declared to have a sort of 'permanent' agreement with the person they work for, which gives them some employment stability together with a pretty good monthly salary. Those skilled workers were pretty confident that as long as their
employer would be happy with their work they had no reason to worry to loose their job and that, anyway, with their skills they would not have much problems in finding a new employment. The case of the group of fitters from Chhattisgarh it is slightly different. The group was made of men, women and children, part of a same extended family. Some of the women had left few of their children back in the village and would work as helpers, like the younger males. Those migrants would spend few months back in the village a couple of times per year, around the agricultural and/or wedding season. The horizon they are building for their children is back in the land they come from. The leader of the gang is the one who negotiate the piece rate contract with the contractor above him, the unskilled member declared to receive a daily rate, as well as the elder and skilled members of the group. Another variety of workers represented in the same worksite are those recent migrated workers, all coming from the same district in Chhattisgarh. Some of them where first comers with no clear ideas about their future in Delhi or in the industry. A few declared they were there for earning money for a daughter's wedding or for repaying a debt, and showed no intention of settling in Delhi. Some of them declared they were paying a small amount of money to a fellow villager who took them to that work site. Those workers are a step down in the subcontracting chain and pay the price of being new.

All the respondents at the work site declared that, in order to find a job in the construction industry, a network of relatives, fellow villagers, work colleagues acquaintances. The industry proves to be not such an easy labour market to access by fresh migrants, unless they have properly planned their strategy to actually penetrate the market by the right contacts.

The wages declared by the workers interviewed are below the minimum fixed by law. Yet, when the site engineer has been interviewed he declared that all the workers receive the minimum wage. India abounds of laws for the protection of workers. In the specific case of construction workers, there is a national law which has been translated into state lows only in few Indian states. Even in those few states, including Delhi, there are serious problems of implementation and monitoring and the end results is that the workers' rights are not protected at all. Inside the obscure employment relations existing in the industry, it proves very hard to held someone responsible for workers, as the very existence of this ‘factor of production’ is confined to a real of informality and anonymity which makes perfectly possible the disappearance of a group of workers overnight, as it happened in a construction site during the days of my/the researcher's visit.

V. CONCLUSIONS

From the fieldwork carried on, which touched more or less deeply few main metropolises of Northern Indian characterized by a construction boom, emerged clearly that if for some respects the construction workers employed at medium and big construction sites are privileged in terms of amount of daily wage and degree of job security when compared with informal workers in other sector, at the same time are not sharing much of the wealth they are contributing to create. Those workers are footloose (Breman, 1996), do not manage to change life and settle in a new place. They need to keep a foot in their land, to count on the support of the extended family back home, and go there where the network they started to build when they accessed the industry takes them, to start a new job, a new hut, a new infrastructure they will never enjoy, a new house they will never be able to buy.

The workers who were so nice to spend some of their precious free time to talk to me normally did not receive advance payments for starting the job, in this sense they are not bonded to the person they work for. And yet sometimes they look trapped in a condition they did choose, somehow, when they accepted a job because they really needed it and thanks to the interest of someone they
have to be grateful to\textsuperscript{6}. And as long as the construction workers may be not happy with their condition, they will hardly consider to fight for something that is not the wage they worked for. In any other circumstance, is better to go looking for another employment elsewhere.

They are part of those labouring classes that “have not benefited much from the transformation of the Indian economy” and are among the victims of an informalisation strategy through which government and capital have succeeded in extending the fragmentation of labour (Lerche 2009, 15). The strategy of capital is clear and the state is obviously on its side. The example of the construction workers illustrated in this article, victims of an industry dominated by subcontracting chains and the violation of the workers rights, is only an example among many. In the industry the strategy of capital is to use subcontracting chains for reducing labour costs and problems. At the bottom of the chain, a preference is given for the recruitment of migrant workers. The result is a labour force, in the industry, fragmented and easy to control. [.......]

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\textsuperscript{6} In this sense they are not even different for many other categories of workers in this phase of capitalism, both in advanced and less developed countries.


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