

Masculinity, Respect, and the Tragic: Themes of Proletarian Humor in Contemporary Industrial Delhi*

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INTRODUCTION

This essay will explore themes of proletarian masculinity (*mardaangi*) and humor (*mazaak*) arising from research amongst male migrant workers in a metalworking export factory in contemporary Delhi. The paper seeks to describe and critique metalworkers' vocabularies and practises of joking and horseplay, with particular reference to their homoerotic and heteroerotic imageries, as well as to their subtle auto-critiques. The paper attempts to view *mazaak*, despite its often vulgar, dualistic, and otherizing imageries, as an assertion of the *erosic* drive to affirm life, beyond the desire to merely survive, and contra the *thanotic* will to submit to the life-denying conditions of urban-proletarian existence. The paper probes the capacities and potentialities of certain styles of workers' *mazaak*, such as satirical and sarcastic humor (*vyang*), to critique exploitation, oppression, and associated dominant imageries of masculinity and work, and to suggest alternative visions and possibilities for proletarian inter-relations.

My research focuses on migrant workers working in a metal-polishing factory in the Okhla Industrial Area of south-east Delhi, exporting high-end steel artware (cutlery, serving-ware, vases, display items) for sale in department stores and boutiques in America and Europe. The employment in the factory has varied from twenty to sixty workers, all male, from the states of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, and Kerala. The workers range in age from seventeen to fifty years, and are comprised of backward castes, scheduled castes (*addivaasis*), Muslims, and Christians. Although a varying segment of workers are kept as casual workers, the majority of workers have been brought onto the company muster rolls, and receive statutory minimum wages (approximately \$2.50 per day), along with Employees' State Insurance and Employees' Provident Fund.

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Figure 1. *Mazaak* in the bathing area at the end of the shift.
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Steel polish-work is extremely strenuous and exacting work, under very dirty and noxious conditions. The polish process generates a blackish-grey, malodorous, foggy haze consisting of metal dust and fine particles, fibres from leather, synthetic, and cloth polish buffs, and chemicals and animal fats discharged from the glue and brick-like *masaalaas* applied to the buffs. The shopfloor, a single large room in a factory shed, is an excruciating place to inhabit, with fans and coolers blowing the particulate black haze rising from the machines into one's face and nostrils. Workers' tattered clothes and bodies are blackened throughout the day by metal dust, debris, and fibres. Amidst the whirring, deafening noise of the metal-cutting belt machine and the rumbling of the pollution exhaust fan-filter system, one hears the sounds of coughing, sputtering, and hawking, as workers spit out blackish phlegm into the piles of debris that accumulate in the air-ducting in front of their machines.

Polishers' bodies, while muscular, are thin, stretched, and emaciated, revealing the strain not only of bodily exertions within an ever-intensifying production process, but also of austere diets, and the difficult, congested, and unhygienic environmental conditions of the urban villages

and slums where workers reside. Colds, coughs, fevers, stomach disorders, chest pains, jaundice, and tuberculosis abound amongst these workers, and make the doctor's clinic and ESI medical dispensary the third coordinate, along with the factory and residence, of the orbits of workers' everyday lives. Bodily soreness and fatigue make a fourth coordinate of the liquor and *tambaacu-bidi-paan* shops, which dispense their own brand of medicines for the ailing body and spirit.

In this paper, I focus on one aspect of workers' factory lives, their styles of *hamsi-mazaak* (humor and horseplay), as an entry point into questions and issues of masculinity, respect, work, resistance, and proletarian interrelations. One of the first things I noticed within the factory was the style, content, and prevalence of metal workers' *mazaak*. It struck me as somewhat odd that there could be such energy, creativity, and vivacity within an environment otherwise so dark, depressing, and hostile to life. *Mazaak* begins at the very start of the workday, continues at the machines, during tea and lunch breaks, at bathing time, and while coming and going from the factory. Indeed, *mazaak* might occur whenever metalworkers gather, in meetings, in visits to each other's residences (under conditions of relative privacy), or while moving about the industrial area. I describe and analyze some of the themes of this *mazaak* below.

HOMOEROTIC MAZAAK: HORSEPLAY, VULGARITY, AND SUBSTITUTION

On the shopfloor, *mazaak* is most immediately visible in physical horseplay. When workers move around the shopfloor to pick up buffs and *masaalaas*, rest, take a glass of water, or go to the latrine, they engage in teasing, banter, and insults, sometimes escalating into wrestling, in which one worker may be brought to the ground as nearby others observe, cheer, and goad them on. A worker who feels he has been outwitted or out-insulted in banter might in frustration grab the other around the chest, pick him up, carry him out of the shopfloor, and drop him on the open road. During tea breaks, taken on the dusty road outside due to the lack of space inside the factory, one might be calmly sitting in conversation one moment, and then suddenly see two workers spring up and bolt down the road, throwing up dust as one chases the other, catches hold of him, brings him to the ground, then sits on him until some apology or request for mercy is exacted. In these ways, the factory becomes a kind of school playground for workers, especially for younger ones in their late teens and twenties, who perhaps never got enough of a childhood of play in the village, often leaving school due to the pressures to work in their family fields or in *mazduri* (wage-work in fields, stone-breaking, truck-loading, etc.). It may also be seen as an effort to seek a continuation, or a



Figure 2. A worker unexpectedly greets another with a vigorous embrace.
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reincarnation, of the childlike joy of *physical* play, within the hellish and hostile context of an urban metal factory.

At the machines, *mazaak* goes on throughout the day, punctuating and embellishing the production process. After a *kaarigar* (skilled worker) finishes with a polish buff, he removes it from his machine, and if he feels in the mood, hurls the buff with an arc-like trajectory so that it lands with a huge thud on the metal duct hood near the face of the polish *kaarigar* directly opposite him or at his diagonal. The targeted polisher, bent over into his machine, engrossed in his work, jolts in shock at the noise and tremor to the ducting. Although the *kaarigar* jerks in reaction, as one does when caught off guard, I never witnessed any accidents from this horseplay. Polish work is otherwise quite dangerous, with *kaarigars'* wrists, hands, arms, faces, and legs bearing scars, the most common injury being induced by the treacherous jean-cloth buff, which catches hold of the worker's glove and pulls the worker's hand into the machine, scraping, flaying, and burning the skin around the wrist. During my research, one *kaarigar* had his forearm pulled into the machine while working with the jean-cloth buff, resulting in permanent disability. Thus, when engaging in *mazaak*, hurlers of buffs make sure the target *kaarigar* is not working on the jean-cloth buff at the time.

This buff-throwing becomes more unruly, with small hard fiber and cloth buffs thrown at the person's body rather than at the ducting, towards the end of the shift, while *kaarigars* are engaged in final polishing and

repairing, or resting while their pieces are checked in the office above the shopfloor. This provides much diversion and relief at the end of an eleven-, twelve-, or at times seventeen-hour working day. There is a rather inclusive promiscuity of this buff-throwing, in that anyone may become a potential instigator or target, whether *kaarigar* or helper, whether from UP or Bihar or Jharkhand, whether Hindu or Muslim, whether located close by or far away on the shopfloor. While there is little attempt to hide one's agency in the deliberate, emphatic, and taunting buff-throwing that goes on during the day, in this later game, one uses various means and methods to try to hit others with buffs while keeping one's identity obscured, and if need be, implicating others as targets of retaliation. One may hide behind the cement pillars, the gas fan, or another worker's body, or keep moving purposefully across the shopfloor while underhandedly tossing the buff at its target. Surveillance and timing are everything if one is to successfully maintain anonymity. If one manages to first dab a cloth buff in white *masaala* powder, it creates an amusing and silly puff of white smoke on impact with the target body.

Much of the *mazaa* (enjoyment, thrill) of these buff-throwing transactions is in the observation, the targeting, the passionate reactions upon impact, and the subsequent retaliation, either with a buff or by getting up from the machine, pursuing and catching hold of the hurler, and inflicting some punishment, such as neck-locking or aggressive rubbing of the knuckles on the skull. Although buff-throwing is an anarchic affair, there are occasional coordinations between persons to attack a target in sync, but without any stable or reliable structure. A person who was collaborating with you a moment ago might unexpectedly hurl a powder-laden buff at you as well, from behind the obscuring ducting of his own machine, while maintaining a straight poker face.¹ A challenge of this game is also to execute one's throws and retaliations such that the foreman or managers, who may unexpectedly descend to the shopfloor from the office, do not catch you in the act, which would be taken as an affront to the pretence of discipline in the factory.

Mazaak may also take on more vulgar, homoerotic forms, in the flows and economies of touching, feeling, grasping, grabbing, and mock penetrating that goes on amongst polish workers. I watched with some astonishment how a young worker, arriving at the factory gate early on a foggy morning, went up to a fellow worker from behind and cheerfully greeted him with a large, circular, swooping motion of his left middle

1. On the fluidity and interchangeability of aggressors and targets within the context of horseplay amongst German factory workers at the turn of the twentieth century, see Alf Luedtke, "Cash, Coffee Breaks, Horseplay: *Eigensinn* and Politics among Factory Workers in Germany circa 1900", in Michael Hanagan and Charles Stephenson (eds), *Confrontation, Class Consciousness, and the Labor Process: Studies in Proletarian Class Formation* (Westport, CT, 1986), pp. 65–95.

finger directed straight into his rear end (*gaand*). Near the machines, workers may tweak the other's nipples, sometimes lowering their mouth to them in *mazaak*, or grasp the other's breast area generously with one's open hand, while making a longing, desirous expression on the face. I asked a worker, Arun, why he did this and what he purported to get out of it. "When I grab the chest of Mithilesh [a friend sitting nearby on the metal cutting machine], it reminds me of my wife, it's like I am holding her breasts. She's not here, she's far away. So one makes do with this". Arun's wife, along with many of the polishers' wives, live in the villages, and workers get to meet them only a few times in the year, at *Holi*, *Divali*, *Chath*, or during the summer wedding season. *Mazaak* thrives on a kind of substitution effect, with workers' bodies evoking for each other the tactile memory of absent, inaccessible, and desired wives.

There is also, however, the sheer delight in the play of touching, grabbing, and displaying the male genitalia, as a way of embarrassing and entertaining each other. At the end of the shift, when several workers cram into a single-person latrine and adjoining small chamber to bathe, one must not only struggle to scrub oneself off of the caked dust and grime of the day with the abrasive detergent soap provided by the company, while taking care to avoid accidental fingers, elbows, or knees in the eyes within the congested space. One must also keep a check on one's underwear, which everyone wears inside the bath, lest it be pulled down to one's knees by someone or some persons working in concert (*kacchaa kholnaa*), followed by uproarious laughter as the hapless fellow pathetically tries to pull it back up.

One worker, Babloo Khan, avoids these embarrassing possibilities by waiting for the crowd to subside before entering the bath. But he is one of the most mischievous and lascivious of the group, freely pulling down the underwear of others as they emerge from the bath and rub mustard oil on their bodies, leaving themselves vulnerable to blind side attacks. Babloo also enjoys shocking people in the changing room (a small room which houses two welding machines), by proudly flashing his phallus to whomever may be there, inviting them to be introduced to his *chotaa bhaa'i* (little brother) or his *Khaan sahib*. The spectacle is enhanced by the fact that Babloo Khan is circumcised, a marker for many of his Muslim identity, and about which there is much *mazaak* in the factory. These *darshans* (spiritual viewings) were one of Babloo's ways of retaliating and expressing pride in his anatomy.

I too was not safe or immune from such vulgar behavior, and was treated to many unexpected *darshans* of Babloo's *chotaa bhaai* if I happened to be in the vicinity, or if I was called to the site by workers as word spread of an impending *darshan*. Narayan, an elderly, beefy, and somewhat boorish polisher from Bihar, and a wrestler in a previous life, would also routinely grab at my phallus, posterior, and chest if I happened to pass by his



Figure 3. Two workers revive an unaware and drowsy polisher on the night shift.
Photograph by the author. Used with permission.

machine. He would do this surreptitiously, unpredictably, and with a straight face, sometimes not even looking up from his machine. When I would be jolted by these acts and turn towards him in objection and disbelief, he would raise his eyebrows and widen his eyes behind his thick plastic goggles, in mock surprise and feigned sympathy at the atrocity committed. But if I did not move away from the area, further atrocities were forthcoming.

The male genitalia were a constant referent in various spheres of shopfloor talk. When a worker took too long in the latrine, while someone else was waiting, he might emerge and return to the machine to hear loud speculations, “Are time lagtaa hai, yaar, muth maar rahaa thaa” (“Oh, it takes time [in the latrine], as he was masturbating there”). The worker himself might offer this as a defense to explain his delay. If a worker is walking by the water cooler on the way to the latrine, and is casually asked, “Kahaam jaa rahe ho, bhai?” (“Where are you going, brother?”), the pat reply might be, “Muth maarne jaa raha hum aur kyaa?” (“I’m going to jerk off, what else?”), or simply, “Khaanpur-Badarpur”, a reference to the bus route up and down the Mehrauli-Badarpur road of south Delhi, traversed by many workers on their way to and from Okhla. One worker treats others to his own version of the famous Hindi film song, “Pyaar kiyaa to darna kiyaa” (“If you have loved, why should you fear anything”)? with the alteration, “Muth maaraa to darna kiyaa” (“If you have masturbated, what is there to fear”)?

Babloo Khan introduced the evocative, parting phrase, “Calo, nikal lo khambaa bacaake” (“Go on, look out for your phallus and get out of here”). This phrase caught on and took on a wider, expansive social life in workers’ discourses within the residential boundaries and elsewhere, in part because its meaning was not always so clear to bystanders. In a small room in Okhla, where I conducted many of my interviews, when there were others present whom I wanted to kindly and inoffensively ask to leave so I could begin an interview with an individual worker, I needed only say, “Aap log zaraa bacaai” (“You folks please save [your phalluses]”). People would smile, chuckle, and get up immediately, saying, “Thik hai, bacaa hi rahe haim” (“Okay, we’re protecting them [and going]”).

Besides the phallus, the other anatomical referent in workers’ banter was the *gaand* (anus). No matter what might be the topic of conversation, Babloo Khan would unexpectedly interject, “Are teri gaand mem daal do” (“Oh stick it in your ass”). He might also act out these impulses. In winter time, when a space heater was used inside the store room to dry the leather buffs prepared for polishing, Babloo and others would gather near the heater at rest times. He asked workers to put the cord into his *gaand* for added warmth, and they obliged, creating a bizarre spectacle. “Are bas teri ek baar de do yaar” (“Come on, give me your ass just once”), one often heard in the banter at the machines. Such requests over longer distances, between machines diagonal from each other, were done by simply showing an “o” shape with the fingers and then the number “1” with the index finger, accompanied by a pouting expression of desire and hope. If I happened to be nearby while two *kaarigars* were so non-verbally bantering, one would appeal to me, “Maim uski maang rahaa hum, magar de nahim rahaa hai. Aap zaraa usse baat kar lo” (“I am asking [for his ass] but he is not giving it. You please talk to him for me”).

One *kaarigar*, Rampal, short, thin, and very pleasant in nature, became a favored target of many such proposals, *kacchaa kholnaa* attacks, and buff-throwing, in part because he never took offense to *mazaak*, and indeed was quite adept at initiating and retaliating. A worker explained the collective affection for Rampal thus: “Raampaal ki gaand compani mem sabse pyaari hai” (“Rampal’s ass is the most adored in the company”). I was once in the vicinity when the night shift foreman, Govind, a polisher of many years, who despite his promotion to management, still shared much of the *mazaak* culture of the shopfloor, bantered with Rambachan, a helper turned welder, who was also one of his suspected *camcaas* (yes-men). Govind was coaxing him to get onto the welding machine at the start of the shift, while the latter was sitting outside near the fire. Rambachan responded that the welding machine was under repair by the company. Govind teased him that he should then go back home, as he would not get any wages for doing no work. Rambachan replied that it was not his fault that the machine was broken, and that he should be marked “present” in

the attendance register. “Koi baat nahim” (“Okay, no matter”), said Govind, giggling. “Ek baar de do. Haajri lag jaaegi” (“Give me [your ass] once. Your attendance will be marked”).

One of the most favored taunts and threats on the shopfloor was “Maim teri gaand maarungaa!” (“I’ll f*** you in the ass!”) This could be said calmly, quietly, or in mock rage, escalating into such colorful utterances as, “Teri itnaa maarungaa ki tere ko Bihaar nazar aayegaa!” (“I’ll ream your ass so hard that you’ll see Bihar in your sights!”). In spontaneous wrestling bouts that would break out on the shopfloor, vulgar gestures and simulations of *gaand maarnaa* would be presented for the nearby onlookers. Once on the night shift, as a polisher was nodding off at his machine, two workers lined up behind him, grabbed him around the chest, and simulated vigorous sexual intercourse in a line of three, for the amusement of the rest of the otherwise weary polishers on the shopfloor. (He woke up with quite a start.)

The homoerotic sexual act (*gaand maarnaa*) could be referred to in the act of greeting itself. An elderly, grey-haired worker and master of vulgar *mazaak*, Rajender Yadav, whose every word was laden with *double entendre*, would sometimes greet me, “Kaise haim Shankarji? Atthani abhi tak piti yaa baci?” (“How are you, Shankar? Has your ass been pounded yet or is it still intact?”) If I would arrive at the factory or at a meeting, the respectful act of offering a place to sit would be folded into *mazaak* in Rajender’s greeting, “Aaie Shankarji, is par baitho” (“Come here, Shankar, sit on this”)! As he said this, he would look me in the eye, with a slight, sharp nod of the head, without gesturing to any actual chair or stool or bench nearby. A proximate bystander, suspecting a double meaning, would ask, “Kis par baithem (“Sit on what”)? “Are kursi par, yaar” (“On this chair, man”), Rajender would answer with a grin, as he pointed to a nearby vacant seat, or got up from the chair he was occupying. This expression also caught on. If a worker on cycle would see me walking in the industrial area, and his passenger carrier was empty, he might ride up alongside and greet me with the words, “Namaskaar Shankarji is par baitho” (“Hello Shankar sit on this”)!

But the vocabularies and imageries of homoerotics and masculinity took on particular valences when deployed in relation to the work of metal-polishing itself. When I would greet a certain polisher at his machine, Bhagvati, who was among the more elderly workers, and also one of the most active in vulgar horseplay, his face would be thoroughly covered with the second-hand *dhoti* fragments given to workers as pollution masks. Instead of responding verbally, which would require undoing his *dhoti* around his mouth, he would simply put his left palm under his right elbow and pump his right forearm up and down, simulating an erect phallus. Later into the shift, however, if I would go by and ask him how he was doing, he would put his left palm under his right elbow, but hold his right

forearm vertical, with the right hand limp and waving from side to side, as he made a weary, droopy face with what was visible of his eyes and cheeks (a limp, spent phallus). Sometimes other *kaarigars* would call over to me, smiling, and make this latter sign, pointing to Bhagvati, to tease and taunt him, implying that Bhagvati was done for the day, out of strength, and incapable of properly finishing his day's production. To which Bhagvati would fight back with his erection symbol, vigorously pumping, claiming that he still had energy and life (*jaan*) left in him, as he leaned into his polish wheel and kicked up black-grey smoke from the pressure and force of his exertions.

Here was masculinity identified as the capacity, energy, and power to do *mehnat* (hard labor), and moreover, as exclusively defined by one's hard, honest, and sincere work, and not by any of the other activities that one can engage in as a factory worker for upward mobility, such as *cugalkhori* and *camcaagiri* (informing, reporting, collaborating). Ironically, Bhagvati was a *camcaa*, and was teased (along with other suspected *camcaas*) by workers at large for staying on after the end of the shift for extra minutes at the bidding of the foreman, to finish up repairs on pieces. "Iske baad vo upar jaake gaand maraaegaa" ("After this, he'll go upstairs to the office and get screwed in the ass [by the manager]"), workers would say in *mazaak* as they passed him on the way to bathe. To be a *camcaa*, workers suggested, was to open oneself up to such possibilities of manipulation, dependence, and humiliation, in one's *svaarthi* (self-interested) quest for individual advancement. Perhaps such perceptions and insinuations (however true) of Bhagvati as a *camcaa* made it all the more important for him to deploy such masculine, defensive symbols as the erect phallus, as a defiant proclamation of the actual *mehnat* he felt he did at the machines.

But the idiom of *gaand maraanaa* ("getting oneself screwed in the ass") was not reserved only for *camcaas*. After Rajender had been working all day on the task of *saan lagaanaa*, a tiring operation in which hot, noxious glue and fine, sharp sand particles are applied by hand to the leather buffs, and the foreman, with about an hour left in the shift, told him to get onto the polish machines for some last minute final polishing work, Rajender revolted. He said that he had already spent the entire day working on one task, which was now nearing completion (and for which he would implicitly be entitled to a bit of rest), and now he was being asked to start on a new, different task. The foreman backed off. To me, Rajender vented, "Saaraa din yahaam saan lagaane mem gaand marvaaya, aur abhi kah rahaa hai machine par baitho aur vahaam gaand marvaayegaa?!" ("The whole day the foreman got me screwed in the ass doing this buff preparation and now he wants me to sit on the machine and get me buggered there?!")

This imagery is used with respect to polishing the metal pieces as well. When Mithilesh sat down at Arun's machine to help him polish some steel bowls (*katoris*), he directed him, "Maim upar ki gaand marvaaumgaa, tum

andar ki gaand marvaao” (“I’ll get the outer portion of the piece screwed in the ass, you get the inside of it screwed in the ass”). I wonder, however, if a hidden meaning of these references to *gaand maarnaa* and *marvaanaa* by steel polish workers is actually the tacit awareness and feeling that day in and day out, they are, figuratively speaking, “getting their asses reamed” by the difficulty of the weighty sizes and complicated shapes of the steel artware pieces, the high production levels and finishing requirements imposed from above, and the entire complex of management strategies and tactics of maintaining and intensifying discipline, control, and exploitation-oppression (*shoshan-atyacaar*).

Homeroptic *mazaak* also could slide into references to and discussions of *hijras* (eunuchs), who move about in the industrial area especially at *Holi* and *Divali* to collect customary donations from companies, and are said to engage in prostitution in the evenings inside the large storage containers stacked near the railway crossing or “siding”, as it is referred to, between the Okhla Industrial Area and Mathura Road. (Heterosexual prostitution also occurs at the siding, in the forested areas along the tracks.) References to siding would arise if one asked about the whereabouts of an absent worker: “Are vo siding gayaa, uski double kamaai ho rahi hai” [showing an “o” with the fingers]! (“Oh he went to the siding, he’s earning a double income [from the factory and from sex work]!”). Narayan was once planning to go to the village, and was saying to Hanif Khan, who was sitting opposite from his machine, that he expected a loan from him for this purpose. Hanif smiled, and answered, swaying his head as if in the trance of a *qavvaali*, “Abhi time hai. Siding jao, paisaa kamaao, apnaa balance banaake ghar jao!” (“There’s still time. Go to the siding, earn some money [from sex], accumulate a [bank] balance and then go home!”). Part of the play here is on the word “balance”, as a monetary accumulation, and also as the physical balance required of the person on the receiving end of homoerotic intercourse. Narayan, heated and flustered, shouted, “Paise nahim degaa, to teri gaand bahut maarungaa, Hanifaa!” (“If you don’t give me some money [to borrow], I’ll f*** your ass real bad, Hanif!”).

Although the words for eunuchs (*hijra*, *chakke*) are often pejoratively deployed in wider society to mean effeminate, weak, and impotent, as opposed to masculine, tough, and strong, I found very few such negative usages in the metal factory. There were continual references to weakness and impotence, say when describing workers one could not count on to be firm and stable in opposing management initiatives. But here the symbolism was of the limp hand described earlier, or in expressions such as “jiskaa land pakadne kaa dhang bhi nahim hai” (“those who don’t even know how to grab their own phallus”). Eunuchs were accorded more respect than the fully sexually equipped, but weak, flaccid, and impotent man, for *hijras* at least were true to their own gender and sexuality.

Hijras could on occasion even be invoked in solidarity, as for example

when a group of eunuchs had come for a donation upon the inauguration of a new metal factory a few blocks away, where half of the polish-workers had been ignominiously transferred by the company. The senior manager resisted giving the *hijras* a respectable contribution, in exchange for their blessings for the success of the new factory, and they stormed out in a huff, with one publicly and dramatically urinating on the factory gate. This was seen by workers as a terrible but potentially well-deserved curse on the unit and the management, given the oppressive and miserly strategies that the senior manager and the company had pursued thus far. For all the joking about the railway siding, workers did accord *hijras* certain powers to bless and curse, drew inspiration and vindication from their irreverence, and made unwitting allies of them in their own struggles against *shoshan-
atyaacaar*.

HETEROEROTICS: MACHINE AND *MAAL*

Alongside these styles of homoerotic joking and horseplay, metal workers also engaged in heteroerotic *mazaak*. Workers affixed photos of film heroines and models to their machines, cut out from the second-hand newspapers used as packing material in the factory. Sometimes these pictures were of large-busted supermodels or international actresses, wearing bikinis or lingerie, as found in say the *Delhi Times* supplement to *The Times of India*. Workers might strategically amend these photos in vulgar ways (making holes in them, etc.) and invite others to their machines to rate and comment on their selections and alterations. On the wide, square base of the fan-filter system, located close to the back wall of the shopfloor, where there was no managerial traffic, several photos would be affixed close to each other in a collage. Babloo Khan, whose machine was close to the stairs to the office, cleverly layered the scrap cardboard material above his polish wheel (used as a guard against flying debris), such that the inside layer had several affixed photos, for his own occasional viewing and displaying, but which no one could see unless he lifted the outside covering layer. Conversations otherwise referenced sightings of female prostitutes in the siding area, accounts of sexual acts observed there, as well as discussions of scenes, bodies, and activities witnessed in “blue” (pornographic) films, viewed in working-class colonies via video cable, rental VCDs, and illicit, makeshift theaters.

A dominant word which gained currency in heteroerotic *mazaak* was “machine”. “Bhagvati ki machine aa gai hai!” (“Bhagvati’s machine has come [from the village]!”), workers would shout across the shopfloor, if they learned that his wife had come to Delhi. Bhagvati might himself call me over to his polishing machine, and whisper into my ear, “Ganne ke ras nikaalnevaali machine mere paas aai hai” (“A sugar-cane juicing machine has arrived at my place”). Sometimes workers’ wives, and women in

general, might be referred to as *jhuk machines* (bending, stooping machines), conjuring the sexual *aasan* in which a woman leans forward and is entered from behind. This instrumentalized, otherizing, and life-denying terminology, where women are spoken of as sex machines, is striking and disturbing. The *mazdur*-machine relation becomes darkly transposed onto the man–woman relation.

But I have heard the word “machine” used by proletarians also for the male *gaand*, as when a worker from an Okhla factory was standing in the back of a jam-packed truck returning from a union rally in central Delhi, and was bizarrely bumping his pelvis alternately into the posteriors of two friends in front of him, while saying, “Bataao, ab kis machine mem daal dum, is mem yaa us mem?” (“Tell me, now which machine should I stick [my phallus] in, this one or that one?”).² Also, one of Babloo Khan’s favorite pieces of advice to workers, if they were showing pimples or boil-type skin eruptions (*phoraa-phunsi*), was, “Apni garmi nikaalo. Jaao, jugaar dhumdho, mobilail change kar lo” (“Get rid of your heat [semen]. Go, find someone, and change your [motor] oil”). The male body here is compared to a machine, a vehicle, whose smooth running requires periodic servicing and maintenance.³ Within Capital, the cold logic of instrumentalization spares no one.

And perhaps there is a tacit, subtle awareness of this amongst metalworkers. When Hanif Khan was getting ready for a trip to his village in eastern Uttar Pradesh, to assist with wheat cutting on his family fields, he told me that it would be very hard work, where one has to bend down, stoop, and cut for hours at a stretch. With a chuckle of discovery, he said, “Aadmi ko bhi jhuk machine banna partaa hai!” (“A man also has to become a bending, stooping machine!”). Humor is perhaps at its most radical and subversive when it pulls out the rug and reveals how we ourselves, seen from a different perspective, are actually the very same as the objects, the “them”, the targets of our jokes, slurs, and ridicule. Are not metal polish *kaarigars*, as they bend, lean, and incline their bodies into their polish wheels, rhythmically, back and forth, all day, with the foreman on their backs prodding them to go faster, not *jhuk machines* of a kind? Treated as barely living creatures by Capital, useable, exploitable, drainable, interchangeable, and discardable, made to endure noise, filth, and pollution, in exchange for subsistence wages only?

2. For a vivid illustration of how “machine” is deployed to describe the phallus, witness the discourse of the street purveyor of anti-impotence potions in Anand Patwardhan’s documentary film, *Father, Son and Holy War* (1994).

3. For a richly insightful and evocative account of language, ideas, and experiences within truck drivers’ milieus in north India, with specific reference to *mobilail change* as sexual metaphor, see Dilip Simeon, “O.K. TATA: Mobiloil Change and World Revolution”, in Rukun Advani, Ivan Hutnik, Mukul Kesavan, and Dharma Kumar (eds), *Civil Lines 3: New Writing from India* (Delhi, 1997), pp. 4–30.

In struggle after struggle in the company, workers' *taalmel* activities ("togethering") would be repeatedly broken from outside and subverted from within, with workers having to ultimately accept whatever policies or practises management was seeking to institute at the time. This was also described as *jhuknaa*, to bend down and submit to power, and was perhaps the most humiliating aspect and experience of being in this factory. I wonder if the heteroerotic expression *jhuk machine*, along with the homoerotic *gaand maraanaa*, do not betray a disturbing self-awareness, cognizance, and realization of workers' own instrumentalized, machine-ized, and humiliating condition.

The other dominant term used in heteroerotic *mazaak* was the word, *maal*, meaning things, stuff, goods, materials, stock. Unlike the word *machine*, which at least carries connotations of movement, activity, electricity, energy, and power, *maal* is generally used for static and inert objects. *Things*. In the factory, *maal* is used to refer to raw metal pieces (*koraa maal*); metal pieces polished and sent upstairs by specific *kaarigars* (*Bhagvati kaa maal*); pieces which have been designated for repairs (*repair kaa maal*); pieces which have major defects and are set aside as rejects (*reject kaa maal*); pieces which are approved, packed, and loaded into the delivery vehicle; and a range of other materials and supplies used in the factory.

What was disturbing was how this language insidiously crept into the ratings system of the looks and beauty of women as seen in newspaper and magazine photos, of workers' wives whose photos on ESI cards might be viewed and scrutinized by workers, and of women working in neighboring companies or walking along the road in front of the metal factory. *Koraa*, *repair*, and *reject kaa maal* became the terms of evaluation and adjudication of these women in this *mazaak*. Sometimes one heard the rhetorical lament, "Industrial area mem koraa kahaam miltaa hai" ("In the industrial area, one can't find any virgin girls"), reflecting the general suspicions about the sexual character of women who work in factories, not to mention that of the "modern"-dressed, educated women who work as clerical and technical staff in the industrial area. "Koraa maal cahie to dehaat hi jaanaa paregaa" ("If you want fresh, untouched girls, you have to go to the countryside only").

When this kind of talk was done outside the factory or on the streets of the industrial area, as women passed by, it came dangerously close to harassment, even if the women were not being directly addressed. At the beginning and end of shift timings, when two to three female staff members arrived and exited from the companies adjacent and opposite to the metal factory, one heard workers' comments to each other such as, "Dekho, maal aa gayaa" ("Look, the stuff has come"), "Maal jaa rahaa hai" ("The thing is going [by]"), "Machine calegaa bhaiyaa?" ("Will this machine work [for you], brother?"), followed by, "Are calegaa nahim,

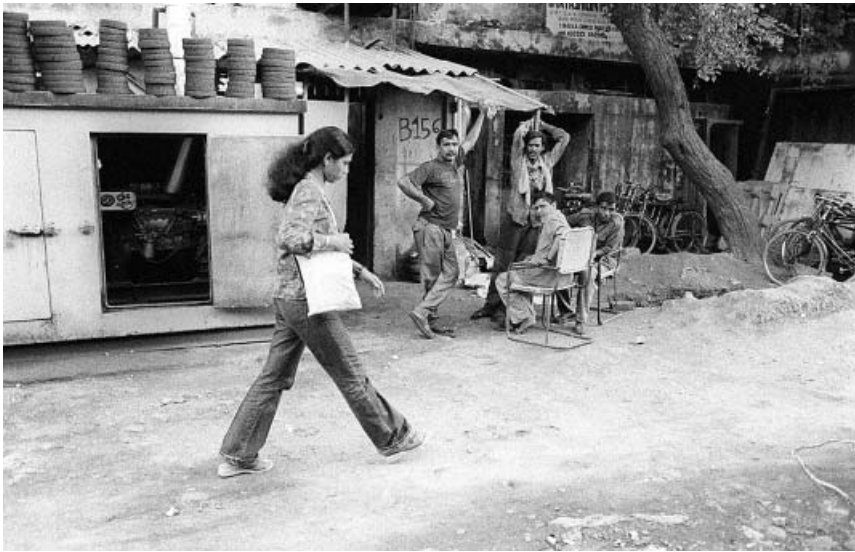


Figure 4. Workers gaze at a neighboring employee briskly exiting the industrial area. Photograph by the author. Used with permission.

bhai, daurega!” (“Oh it won’t just work, brother, it’ll run!”). While these women, who generally walk with eyes lowered, facing forward, never looking to either side, did not openly react to these comments, and also did not admit in interviews to hearing such things from the factory workers, it is true that on one morning, a male manager from the opposite company came over and scolded the workers, as one of their female employees had just walked by and heard the word *maal*, and had not taken kindly to it. Workers present at the time deployed the fall-back and rather cowardly defense that the word *maal*, if it had been overheard, could have been used by a worker in reference to any of various objects, materials, and supplies in the factory.

Although I have separated the homoerotic and heteroerotic themes above for the purpose of analysis, in practise, anatomies, genders, and sexualities flowed seamlessly and irreverently together within the crucible of factory *mazaak*, as in the phrase offered as advice to a worker, “Siding jao, gaand maraao, kuch kamaao, tabhi to apni bivi cavani de gi!” (“Go to the railway siding, get screwed in the ass, earn some money [to give to your wife], only then will she give you her vagina!”).

MAZAAK, RESPECTABILITY, AND LIFE-AFFIRMATION

When I asked workers, away from the factory, how they felt about this *mazaak*, I often got an embarrassed response. Indeed, they said that the

mazaak in the factory was as *gandaa* (dirty, filthy) as the work itself. Some suggested (in half-*mazaak*) that it was the by-product of the work, as so much *kuraa-kabaaraa* (debris, rubbish) gets stuffed and lodged in the head that it becomes difficult to express any “clean”, civilized thoughts. Because of the degeneracy of the *mazaak*, workers confessed that it degraded the *izzat* (respectability) of working in this factory.

Why then did this kind of *mazaak* flourish in the factory? One reason workers gave was that unlike in their residential boundaries, where one rarely encountered such *gandaa mazaak* (vulgar humor), there were no close *rishte* (familial, kinship, or village relations) with each other in the factory that would place constraints on *mazaak*. In the absence of such checks, the *mazaak* was free to go to extremes.⁴ But it is not quite the case that there were no *rishte* within the factory. A group of metal workers, distributed across the day and night shifts, comprised brothers, cousin brothers, and other relatives, from a single district of Jharkhand state. When they were together, on the way to and from the factory, or on the shopfloor, they made sure not to engage in vulgar *mazaak*. When they were spatially separated on the shopfloor, *mazaak* had more breathing room, so the Jharkhandis broke themselves up across the machines, as well as across shifts, according to relevant kin relations, such that *mazaak* could be less constrained.

The respect for elders also acted as a control on *mazaak* in the factory, and around certain senior workers, younger persons censored their speech and behavior to an extent. But when elder workers such as Rajender and Narayan engaged in such extreme and ceaseless vulgarity with the youngest of workers, with no eye for generational *izzat*, then social controls collapsed, permitting a downward spiral in conduct and civility. This became a symptom, for some, of the lack of proper *izzat* norms in the factory society (*samaaj*), and contributed to the substratum anxiety about the deeper and longer term effects of inhabiting such a context (*maahaul*) for so many hours of the day. Workers worried that there might be seepages and leakages of the vulgar vocabularies they picked up in the factory into their language use more generally, which could come out unpredictably at home or in the village if they did not remain vigilant in censoring their speech and thought.

In the factory sphere, there were some who consciously chose to stay away from horseplay and vulgar humor, out of practical concerns for safety at the machines, and also out of considerations of *izzat*. “Ham kaam karne

4. Management, on occasion, could also participate in this *mazaak* with workers. When it involved lower-level management, this *mazaak* could create a kind of levity and joviality across hierarchical divisions, but it took on a different, somewhat humiliating tone when the senior manager would prod and tease workers about their wives, as a way of rubbing his power in their faces, and would watch as they grew embarrassed and silent, unable to answer back fully, as they would amongst each other.

aae haim” (“I’ve come here to work”), as one worker put it. “Aatma kabul nahim kartaa hai” (“My soul doesn’t sanction [this kind of *mazaak*]”). And so some workers preferred to develop and deploy different *mazaak* styles, such as *vyang* (irony, satire, sarcasm), which relied more on wit and mental alacrity than vulgarity and profanity. Some became extremely effective at turning *vyang* into a ludic critique of the moves, deceptions, and stratagem of management in their ongoing efforts to tighten discipline and intensify production, while granting little by way of wage increases or other benefits. Expressions of the manager, such as, “hamaari koshish jaari hai (my efforts [for you] are continually going on [at the head office])”, in response to requests or demands, say for wage increases or restoration of *samosas* during overtime, became a sarcastic, circulating motto in workers’ discussions about the company and its policies.

One helper developed an entire, elaborate style of commentary about whatever *shoshan-atiyaacaar* was going on in the company, by drawing comparisons of work tasks, posts, personalities, policies, and events in the factory to what life was once like within the Red Fort. These bizarre analogies, often very cutting and incisive, would begin and end with, “Yah Laal Qilaa se kam nahim hai (This place is no less than the Red Fort)”. Hanif Khan found a way to use the term *hisaab-kitaab* (tallies, accounts) as a virtually free-floating signifier to stand in for anything he wished to refer to, which was itself a very subtle, unwitting communication, I would suggest, of the pervasiveness of economic instrumentality in human dealings in the present, decivilizing epoch (the *Kalyug*⁵ in workers’ cosmology). The veiled, non-direct quality of *vyang*, and its capacity to carry and convey also “serious” feelings and meanings, made it a very vital and useful mode of expression of workers’ discontent, particularly given the omnipresence of informers, reporters, and collaborators in the factory *samaaj*. Indeed, *vyang* also became a means of poking fun at those suspected of being agents (*mohraas*), information gatherers (*camcaas*), and loyalists (*vafaadaar log*) of management.

Workers’ non-vulgar *mazaak* could also reveal a darker underside when it articulated otherizing sentiments, competitive envy, and laden hostility towards fellow workers (*jalan*). Such *mazaak* featured terms like *Bibaari* (for those from eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar), *jangli* (wild, savage, for *aadivaasi* workers from Jharkhand), *katuaa* (a slur for Muslim), and in more discreet contexts, *camaar* and *harijan* (for Dalits). Another form of non-vulgar *mazaak*, also flowing perhaps from the narcissism of minor differences, was banter between those who lived in rented rooms in urban

5. The *Kalyug* is the final epoch in the four-*yug* cycle of cosmic time, which according to the *Mahabharata* and *Puranas*, begins in approximately 3102 BCE, but according to metalworkers’ narratives, as recently as 10, 50, or 100 years ago. The *Kalyug* is characterized by the intensifying prevalence of exploitative oppression, covetousness, deception, and stratagem, the principles and effects of which percolate into social contexts (*maahauls*) and the soul (*aatmaa*) itself.

village colonies (considered slightly more “up-scale”) and workers who lived in *jhuggi-jhompris* (slums). The former would tease the *jhuggi*-dwellers that the latter consumed extra water and time while they bathed at the factory, because they did not have adequate water facilities in their *jhuggis*. Also, if evicted, room-renters would easily adjust themselves into rented quarters elsewhere, whereas the *jhuggi*-dwellers would only leave their illegal settlements if they were kicked in the *gaand* by the government bulldozer. The *jhuggi*-dwelling workers retorted that unlike the renters who always lived under the oppressive rule of local landlords, they lived in their own houses, and even if evicted, would be entitled to a secure, legal plot somewhere else in the city.

Mazaak involving *mardaangi* and women, but of a non-vulgar kind, was also common, in the ways in which workers teased each other about their wives. Amlakant’s wife was rumored to be very thrifty and miserly, and kept a tight control on their finances. Amlakant was also one of the most stingy (*kanjus*) of the workers, never willing to loan money to or spend on others, asking *tambaacu* from others rather than offering his own, and that too, despite being one of the most senior and respected members of the *samaaj*. So when Naresh Singh was moving about the shopfloor one day, asking for small loans in anticipation of a trip to the village, Varmaji, a senior worker on the other extreme from *kanjusi*, advised Naresh aloud, stabbing at Amlakant’s *mardaangi*, “Amlaakaant se kuch nahim milegaa, har din ghar jaakar uski bivi ko hisaab-kitaab denaa partaa hai!” (“You won’t get anything from Amlakant, every day he goes home and has to report to his wife the details of whatever he spent!”). When Bhagvati returned from his village, a few days before the end of his two-week vacation leave, while workers normally stretch it and return late by a few days or even weeks, workers teased him extensively, suggesting that his wife had had enough of him after ten days, kicked him in the *gaand*, and told him to get back to the city and start earning again.

Workers’ non-vulgar, witty, and sarcastic exchanges not only indicate the plurality of forms *mazaak* may take, but also illuminate the importance of respectability within the factory, and the desires and aspirations of some workers to rise above the general styles and themes of vulgar *mazaak*. But vulgar *mazaak* flourished, and the ones who were the best at it were often the most popular. People gravitated at tea and lunch breaks, for example, to Babloo Khan, because one never knew what vulgar insinuation or insult might fly out from his raspy, deadpan voice. This had its costs for workers’ *taalmel*, because Babloo was actually a *mobraa-camcaa* (agent-informer), who never actively joined with workers in their grievances, and at critical moments in struggles would attempt to break down the *taalmel* and persuade others to comply with management wishes. Though workers suspected and even joked that Babloo shared a special, secret, and sinister relationship with the senior manager (who was also Muslim and from the

same home town in Uttar Pradesh), they often sat near to him whenever they had free time to rest and relax at the factory.

One of the deeper reasons for this *aakarshan* (attraction) to Babloo, as well as to Rajender, whose true affiliations in struggles were also dubious, I believe, has to do with the psychic desperation that workers felt for any kind of momentary diversion, distraction, and relief from the bodily strain and psychic tensions that they endured and suffered. In defending vulgar *mazaak*, workers invoked what one might call a *manoranjan* (entertainment) imperative, within the context of extremely dirty, lowly paid, and strenuous polish-work; myriad mental worries, anxieties, and pressures associated with the factory *maabaul*; financial requirements and demands in the city and village; chronic and serious illnesses to self and family members; and domestic quarrels and conflicts (*klesh*) involving wives, brothers, sisters-in-law, and parents. “Yah itni mehnat kaa kaam hai, mazaak bahut zaruri hai, yaa to phir, bas, ragaro! Aur aadmi hameshaa apni tension mem uljhega” (“This is such hard work, *mazaak* is very important, otherwise it’s just grind away [at the polish wheel]! And a person will always remain entangled in his tensions”), workers explained. With *mazaak*, however, “Admi kaa man bahl jaata hai” (“A person is entertained, diverted, distracted”). “Man parivartan ho jaata hai” (“A person’s mind/heart is transformed”).

It is difficult to overlook here the references in migrant workers’ discourses to the psyche (*man*) embedded in the expressions *maansik tension* (mental tension), *man bahlna*, *man parivartan*, and *manoranjan* (amusement, entertainment, recreation for the psyche). I suspect that in the physical energy, absorption, and concentration demanded in the very process of steel polish work, some heavily stressed workers found a kind of diversionary escape from mental tensions. But others admit they even while working away at the wheels, they cogitate on how to confront an immediate financial or medical crisis in the home, or how to accumulate enough savings to handle the next family *shaadi* (wedding) or the construction and repair expenses required in their village home. *Mazaak*, perhaps because of its unpredictable, surprising, disrupting quality, allows workers, even those who disapprove of it but nevertheless partake of it, to somehow break out of this tension-saturated psychic condition, and more easily “pass”, “traverse”, and complete some finite portion of an otherwise burdensome temporal existence (*timepass karna*, *samay kaatna*). I noticed that on free days, like occasional Sundays, some workers expressed serious difficulties in getting through the day, alone in their rooms or *jhuggis*, without the aid and stimulus of work and also of *mazaak*. And as an *ilaaj* (cure, treatment) for tension, *mazaak* does have certain merits over the alternatives of intense, mind-occupying *mehnat* under exploitative and noxious conditions; holding one’s tensions quietly and solitarily within,

making oneself vulnerable to outbursts of violent rage; passive *manoranjan* such as television which suck the conversational life out of a room; or the ubiquitous varieties of body-numbing proletarian *nashaa* (*tambaacu, bidis, paan, daaru, bhaang*). In practise, all of these *ilaajes* are resorted to in varying doses by workers. But *mazaak*'s virtue is that it *requires other people*. It cannot be done in alienated isolation. Indeed, it throws people in the direction of, rather than away from, each other.

Proletarian *mazaak* has another great virtue, beyond its negative justification as diversion, distraction, and relief "from" other things. Even in its vulgar forms, *mazaak* stimulates, energizes, activates, exercises, and gives expression to metal workers' repressed, oft-ignored, and unrecognized mental faculties (of quickness, cleverness, wordplay, the ability to answer back), creative and imaginative powers (to invent, imply, insinuate), and moreover, the sheer will to *play*. *Mazaak* is how metal workers *re-create* themselves (*manoranjan* is "recreation"), through individual *mazaak* styles, all different, and ever evolving with the changing contexts, situations, and times. Through this plurality of styles, metal workers come to express unique personalities, within a setting which enforces monotonous, dreary, physical repetition, cog-like discipline, and the hard commensurability and interchangeability of persons. In the alchemy of *mazaak*, metalworkers transform from blackened *jhuk machines* into colorful, entertaining, *tension kaa ilaaj*-dispensing characters. And in so doing, they affirm that there is more to their existence than merely grinding away into the polish wheels, and more to their lives than stress, darkness, depression, and tragedy.

Mazaak affirms *life*. This is why I wish to see in the "erotic" themes of metal workers' *mazaak*, a deeper sense of *eros*, as the psychic drive energy which asserts the urge and passion to create, connect, and unify, and the *desire to live*, contra the drives of mere self-preservation (*ananke*) and the will to death (*thanatos* in Freud). The continuous, irrepressible, constraint-denying, subterranean energies and flows of *mazaak*, within the otherwise dark, decivilizing, *thanotic* context of the metal factory, are the life-asserting, life-demanding signatures of *eros*.

MAZAAK AND MARDANGI: PERILS AND POSSIBILITIES

But what would it take to give fuller, more liberated expression to this *eros*? I discuss here three considerations for how workers' imageries and practises of *mardaangi* and *mazaak* might evolve, if proletarians are to more effectively resist *shoshan-atyaacar* and regenerate their interrelations with each other.

First, as mentioned above, *mardaangi* gets dangerously identified and associated, often through the media of *mazaak*, with hard, conscientious,

diligent, and speedy work, “getting the job done”,⁶ even when ill or injured, as opposed to the “flaccidity” of slacking, shirking, foot-dragging, *kaamcori* (stealing away from work), and *haraamkbori* (making illegitimate, undeserved earnings). While the *mardaangi* of *mehnat* was set off against the homoerotic *ghulaami* (enslavement, dependence) of the *camcaas*, who increased production and worked for extra time after the end of the shift, the imagery inadvertently worked in favor of the *shoshan-ityaacaar* regime, by giving value and legitimacy to hard, honest work, regardless of the oppressive details of the context. Hard, sincere *mehnat* is rightly valorized within a range of contexts, say in one’s efforts to study and master a skill or art, or in one’s own farming activities, or in the practise of struggle itself. And it is indeed from such contexts (the school, the farm, a life of deprivation and struggle) that migrants have inherited the *mehnat* ethic.

But when out of *majburi* (compulsion, difficulty), one is thrown into a modern factory, with its vertical hierarchies, alienating production process, and systematic methods of extracting, intimidating, and sucking workers dry (the metaphors are just these – *khun cusnaa* (to suck blood), *aadmi ko nicodnaa* (to squeeze, milk, bleed a person; the company is actually Bhagvati’s *ras nikaalnevaalaa machine* writ large)), while also holding out false promises to workers that if they simply work hard, they will be rewarded with money and mobility, then it becomes vital for workers to reconsider and re-evaluate their otherwise non-context-specific teachings about the close correlations of *mehnat* (hard labor), *acche phal* (rewards), and *mardaangi* (masculinity). Indeed, in the course of metalworkers’ repeated experiences of management’s refusals to reward *mehnat*, the witnessing of serious illnesses which befell the most vigorous, hard-working, and masculinity-asserting workers, and the development of workers’ own subtle resistance methods at and beyond the machines, the above trinity was radically disturbed.

Those who were looked up to by the *samaaj* were those who produced at quantities and speeds decided by social consensus, and who did not budge even when tempted or pressured from above. This was not considered *kaamcori* as much as working-and-resisting according to the circumstances of the situation (*hisaab se kaam karna*). Those who cut away from the *samaaj*, increased production or pace out of the desire for personal gain, or could not be counted upon in a struggle, became the “flaccid” or *dhilaa* (slack) members of the group. The ideal of sincerity and transparency, at the core of the valorization of *mehnat*, was preserved, but with respect to the *samaaj* one was trying to develop with one’s co-resistors and co-sufferers, and not with respect to the company. I would

6. See Paul Willis, *Learning to Labour: Why Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs* (New York, 1982).

also argue that “character”, rather than “*mardaangi*”, became far more important a criterion of respectability (*izzat*) within the workers’ *samaaj*.

Second, the inherited imageries and associated strategies of what one might call “militant *mardaangi*” were also disturbed by the *manthan* (internal churning) of workers’ struggles. The elements of militant *mardaangi* which were questioned included the ideal and strategy of *kbhulaa virodh* (open defiance), in say, openly removing and casting aside extra pieces which the foreman put down at the machines to induce and encourage production increases. This practise made one into a target in the eyes of management, as opposed to working away on whatever quantity of pieces that were given, but *hisaab se*, using one’s hands and *kaarigari* (skill) to decide and determine how well and how fast they actually would be made. Also, the core image of *ektaa*, as unity, solidarity, and the fist in symbolic representation, in which workers are loyal and obedient to the direction of a hierarchically constituted leadership (a parallel management?), was questioned and criticized, as the vulnerabilities of the *ektaa* model became more evident. These vulnerabilities included the dependence *ektaa* created on the actions and decrees of an allegedly enlightened few; the ease with which singular, rather than multiple, oppositional strategies could be addressed and thwarted by management; and the tacit reliance of militant *ektaa* on a palette of potentially self-destructive passions such as *krodh* (rage), *zid* (stubbornness), *ahamkaar* (hubris), and the impatient urge for immediate and extreme outcomes (*aar-paar vaali baatem*).

The practical and passionate repertoire of militant *mardaangi* rendered workers more exposed, vulnerable, and strategically constrained when confronted by management initiatives and attacks, such as bonus reductions, withdrawals of advances and of overtime *samosas*, suspensions, a lockout, and large-scale terminations. So-called leaders and tough talkers could seamlessly transform into *mobraas*, become *taalmel*-breakers, or flee from a struggle. Multiple resistance styles (in working, speaking, writing, and meeting) which flowed from the plurality of strengths and personalities of workers could at times be more effective than the naked singularity of *ektaa* strategies. And cool-headed, well-considered, prudential modes of expressing and articulating inner rage, through varied, improvised, and situation-specific combinations of open and covert resistance, could have advantages over the dominant *josh-jazbaati* (passionate) repertoire alone of demand letters, tool-downs, and public *pradarshans* (protests, demonstrations). While management knew precisely how to break down the hard fist of *ektaa* and render it limp and flaccid, it did not know quite what to do with the more de-centred, non-hierarchical, deliberative, and unpredictable resistances of workers’ autonomous *taalmel*.

Finally, there are aspects of *mardaangi* and *mazaak* which deserve to be

discussed, reconsidered, and re-imagined, particularly with respect to the dualistic, otherizing imageries of gender identity which downgrade *izzat* and obstruct *taalmel*. One of the causes of the burdensome tensions of male proletarians is the persistent clinging to a vision of the male as the sole earner, provider, and accumulator in the family. This vision might have been sustainable within a world of stable, permanent, well-paying jobs, but within a scenario of extremely low-wage, ephemeral, and perpetually uncertain work situations, vulnerable to larger forces and agencies beyond the control of the individual or even a company (markets, competition, state policies), it becomes absurdly unrealistic and punishing for workers to assume total responsibility, as individuals, for their failures to advance their incomes and accumulate according to the family's escalating needs and demands (which are themselves being shaped by larger forces including the push to the cities and the rise of market-engendered new desires). It is thus difficult for anyone in the present epoch (the *Kalyug*) to live up to the *mardaangi* ideal of "possessing one's destiny in one's hand".

And it is the impotency anxieties of this loss of destiny control that I believe are being articulated in *mazaak* themes regarding the allegedly compromised character of women who work in factories, the rising materialistic demands and *svarth* (self-interestedness) of wives, and the imperatives and exigencies of earning *paisa* (cash) at all costs, even if it means selling one's body and *izzat* at the siding, which is only a displaced substitute for the polish factory itself, where men are pounded into *jhuk machines*. By holding to dualistic, otherizing terminologies and imageries regarding women – as *maal*, *machine*, *auratjaat* (woman as caste/genus), of ever-suspect character (*triya caritra*), nagging and demanding (*pin maarmaa*), envy-infused and relishing conflict (*klesh*) – the family becomes more of a *cakravyuh* (tragic, encircling trap) than a sphere of *taalmel* and true respect (*sahi izzat*).

From workers' fragmentary confessions, however, away from the *mazaak* and *manoranjan* imperatives of the factory, one finds a different, potentially deeper set of ideas and imageries about women. These images are of woman as possessing greater strength and inner fortitude than men (*sahnshakti*), as deserving of the highest and deepest *izzat* (which they do not receive in actually existing society), and of their wives as their most intimate confidants, advisors, and ultimate refuge in this world, practically, psychically, and passionately. It is from workers themselves that I heard the most incisive (and ludic) critiques of their own *mazaak* styles regarding women, whom they say are actually *mahaan* (great), *devi* (goddess), and not fundamentally different from men, for the soul itself (*aatmaa*) lacks any specific gender. The soul is of only one kind (*aatmaa ek hi hai*), workers repeatedly asserted, and if some workers see the greatest possibilities for close, intimate, non-instrumental, truly respectful, soul-soul relations in the world (*aatmik*

sambandh) with their wives only, I suspect it is because of this deeper awareness and conviction.

And perhaps it is the task of a truer *mardaangi* to bring this awareness more to the fore, directing our attention to the underlying *erotic* complementarities and unities of soul between and across genders and sexualities, from which *taalmel*, the collective struggle against *shoshan-ityaacaar*, and *aatmik sambandh* may gain life, strength, and power (*shakti*). This endeavor might also take the vital help of *mazaak*, which instead of preying merely on dualistic imageries, might also dabble in the *vyang*-style self-ridicule of dominant, otherizing, false premises and prescriptions, as workers do at times when they see themselves in their own categories for others (such as Hanif as a *jhuk machine*). Otherizing *mazaak*, although provoking us to laugh (indeed, perhaps because the humor *is* in the distortion of the deeper truth that we are also the other), and momentarily rescuing us from our tensions, also potentially deepens our alienation, distance from one another, aloneness, isolation, and ultimately, our despair. If workers' ideas and practises of *mardaangi* and *mazaak* could evolve in these ways, they could become far more formidable weapons of life-affirming struggle against the *thanatos* of Capital and the *Kalyug*.

GLOSSARY

<i>aasan</i>	posture, position
<i>aatmik sambandh</i>	soul-soul bonds
<i>camcaa</i>	yes-man, collaborator, informer
<i>camcaagiri</i>	informing and reporting to management on workers' activities, remarks, conversations; close collaborations with management directives and schemes
<i>chotaa bhaai</i>	younger brother
<i>cugalkhori</i>	reporting on workers
<i>darshan</i>	viewing, especially in a spiritual context
<i>dhoti</i>	cotton sari
<i>ektaa</i>	unity, solidarity; one-ness
<i>gaand</i>	rear-end, anus
<i>gaand maarnaa</i>	to bugger
<i>gaand maraanaa,</i> <i>gaand marvaanaa</i>	to get buggered
<i>hamsi-mazaak</i>	(see <i>mazaak</i>)
<i>hijra</i>	eunuch
<i>hisaab se kaam karnaa</i>	to work accordingly, taking surrounding conditions and circumstances into consideration

<i>Holi, Divali, Chath</i>	major festivals in north India
<i>ilaaj</i>	cure, treatment
<i>izzat</i>	respect, respectability
<i>jalan</i>	envy
<i>jhuggi-jhompris</i>	slums, shanties
<i>jhuknaa</i>	to bend down, lean, stoop; to submit, bow down, give in
<i>kaamcori</i>	slacking, shirking, stealing away from one's work
<i>kaarigar</i>	skilled worker, craftsman
<i>kacchaa kholnaa</i>	to take off underwear
<i>kanjusi</i>	thriftiness, miserliness, stinginess
<i>Khaan saahib</i>	honorific term of address for male Muslims
<i>koraa</i>	raw, new, fresh
<i>qavvaali</i>	Sufi devotional song
<i>maahaul</i>	context, environment, atmosphere
<i>maal</i>	things, goods, materials, stuff
<i>man</i>	psyche; mind; heart
<i>manoranjan</i>	amusement, entertainment, recreation
<i>mardaangi</i>	maleness, masculinity
<i>masaalaa</i>	colored bricks used in metal-polishing made of quartz powder, tallow, wax, and other ingredients; also, the white dolomite powder used in the final stage of polishing
<i>mazaak</i>	humor, joking, horseplay
<i>mazdur</i>	wage worker
<i>mazduri</i>	wage work
<i>mehnat</i>	hard work, effort, labor
<i>mobraa</i>	worker secretly acting as a manipulative agent of management
<i>nashaa</i>	intoxicant, narcotic, hallucinogen
<i>ras nikaalnevaali machine</i>	juice extracting machine
<i>rishte</i>	relations
<i>samaaj</i>	micro-society of face-to-face relations; also society writ large
<i>shoshan-atyacaar</i>	exploitation and oppression
<i>taalmel</i>	togethering activities
<i>tambaacu-bidi-</i> <i>paan-daaru-bhaang</i>	tobacco; leaf-wrapped small cigarettes; betel leaf and nut, often taken with tobacco; liquor; cannabis
<i>vyang</i>	irony, sarcasm, satire