

Editorial

Re-Imagining the 'Public' in Public Sector: Potentials of a Democratic Engagement with the Informal Economy

At a time, when public sector logics are under severe strain as brought about by the diminished credit and deposit growth in public sector banks (Ram Mohan, 2016), in this issue, Saha and Kumar (2016) explore employee's commitment in public sector undertakings. They find that organisational culture has a positive impact on affective commitment. However, it does not have a significant impact on group commitment and job involvement. We require more investigations into the experiences of India's public sector employees. We need to understand the narratives and stories of their existence.

The democratisation of employment relations is an important composite of equity and justice (Parry, 2013). What is the imagination of the public in the public sector? Do public sector organisations operate in deliberative spheres where there is a robust discourse about how businesses operate at the intersection of society, culture and economy? It is necessary to understand how marginal and vulnerable stakeholders relate to the functioning of the public sector. It is necessary to inquire into how public sector employees relate to other sections of Indian society.

With only eight percent of India's workforce in the organised sector (Joseph and Jagannathan, 2016), it is useful to understand how public sector employees intersect with India's informal economy. Public sector employees may be connected with India's informal economy in numerous ways. In trying to understand the sociology of 'class four' employees in India's public sector, several meanings of labour are opened up for inquiry. While dignity is an important consideration for labour, many 'class four' employees experience everyday indignities in India's public sector workplaces. They may be abused by their superiors, made to do menial labour or inhabit a general melancholy of meaninglessness.

There are problematic intersections of social relations of caste and gender with the imagination of 'class four' employees (Subramanian, 2007). Several janitors across the public sector in India are likely to be Dalits. Many 'class four' women employees may be prone to vulnerabilities and harassment both in the workplace, and in their homes. Yet, 'class four' employees may have the most proximate connections with India's informal economy. They may have several relatives who do not work in organised sector and may hold precarious informal economy jobs. These relatives and friends may be dependent for informal forms of social insurance on public sector employees.

The neoliberal turn has focused its attention on 'class four' employees with several public sector organisations deciding that they must implement a freeze in recruitment of 'class four' employees in the permanent rolls of their organisations (Jagannathan, Selvaraj and Joseph, 2016). The 'class four' employee has been the first to experience the insecurities of contractualisation of work in the public sector.

With its neoliberal turn, the state has created numerous dilemmas for 'class four' employees. For the marginal employee, the 'class four' job is an important opportunity for mobility. It offers some forms of job, income and social security.

The 'class four' employee may use this form of security to finance the education of her children (Selvaraj, Jagannathan and Vijayakumar, 2015). She may also use these modest forms of security for investing in the health and well-being of an extended family. The contractualisation of work may lead to the erosion of opportunities for mobility. At the same time, the 'class four' employee should not be unduly romanticised as a figure of mobility. She may also be embedded in corruption networks and may act as a gatekeeper who prevents citizens from accessing accountable governance.

She may treat people who are more vulnerable than her with contempt and disdain ('From peons to clerks', 2012, January 21). We need to uncover complex networks of authority and subordination that are enacted in India's public sector. These complex interlinkages signify the complex location of the public sector in Indian society. On the one hand, the public sector offers the possibility of mobility and equity. On the other hand, it is embedded in a deeper state-governmental trope of corruption and subordination.

We require research that uncovers all these complexities and nuances in terms of narratives, experiences, stories, cases and complex layers of data. Narratives of the public sector need to anticipate how value is shaped at the level of community and economy. The democratisation of the imagination of public within the public sector may require newer social relations of comradeship that transcend rigid levers of hierarchy and status. Such a process of comradeship requires experimentation with models of industrial and organisational democracy (Semler, 1994). Eventually, the nature of the interface between the public sector and the informal economy needs to become more democratic.

All these issues also arise in the wake of other articles in this issue. Subramanian, Irudayaraj and George (2016) argue their case for women leadership in the context of paying attention to the gendered nature of organisations. The case for women leadership of course extends to the informal economy as well, as women try to carve out their livelihood in the midst of numerous constraints (George, 2013). The context of gender is related to the complexities of space, and in this issue, Pandey and Jessica (2016) engage with the issue of investment in real estate as a potential form of diversification in the Indian financial market. The issue of real estate is of course crucial for the informal economy as issues of urban housing are an important axis of inequality (Mahadevia, Liu and Yuan, 2012).

In this issue, Jaiswal and Uchil (2016) inquire into the potential of engaging with inflation in the context of commodity futures. Mishra (2016) analyses the role of pension funds as financial intermediaries and argues that the role played by pension funds is set to expand in the context of an ageing population. Ranjan (2016) analyses the problems associated with the implementation of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in terms of its implications for wages and minimum support prices. All the three issues of inflation, social security funds and MGNREGA have serious implications for the informal economy. In future issues, we look forward to welcoming more explicit inquiries into India's informal economy and issues of re-imagining the nature of public so that we can understand discourses, politics and tensions that suffuse our economy in deeper ways.

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