

From work to well-being through Kerala's informal labour market interventions?

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Abstract

Labour-intensive growth is often advocated as a means for both poverty reduction (through employment provision) and economic growth (through labour-intensive enterprises). However, the implicit notion that well-being of individuals and households will be enhanced through the gaining of employment is too often assumed rather than established. This paper provides an opportunity for a closer examination of the pathways from work to well-being through a case study of the headloaders sector of the informal labour market in Kerala.

The path to 'development' is often associated with the expansion of employment opportunities as a means to encourage economic growth and also enhance well-being at the individual and household level. It is such a belief that provided the backdrop to the World Bank propelled impulse for labour-intensive growth at the beginning of the 1990s (the so-called 'Washington Consensus', World Bank, 1990). However, the straight forward link between work and well-being should be questioned and one element of this is a concern with the bodily effects of effort intensive work. This paper uses a new conceptual framework (see Jackson and Palmer-Jones, 1999) to question the assumed sequential pathway from work to well-being in the context of informal labour market interventions in Kerala. A fuller understanding is urged of the assumed transformative potential of energy-intensive work through its effect on body capital, economic capital, symbolic capital and social capital. Through a case study of the energy-intensive headloaders sector of the informal labour market in Kerala this paper will firstly explore whether effort intensity limits well-being benefits of employment, and secondly if state interventions can ameliorate the negative effects of such energy intensive employment.

Kerala has for some time now been extensively discussed due to its unusual pattern of development in the Indian context. The 1975 publication by the UN which focussed on

development in Kerala arguably brought to prominence Kerala's high level of social development despite relatively low levels of income per capita in the Indian context. However, scholars are increasingly responding to what they see as the 'romanticisation' of the Kerala model by pointing out its paradox of economic stagnation despite social development¹. Indeed, some writers go so far as to assert Kerala's present situation of a progressively worsening fiscal situation, prolonged economic stagnation and lack of employment generation is causing social development achievements to lose their lead in the face of economic crisis (e.g. Tharamangalam, 1998).

Solutions to Kerala's 'crisis' often focus on neo-liberal economic development and an 'opening up' of the economy in a vein akin to the labour-intensive growth advocated in the Washington Consensus. A focus on employment is clearly central, but as has already been indicated it is inappropriate to assume that enabling people to work will automatically enhance their well-being even if overall economic growth is occurring. It is for this reason that this paper is focussing on the conditions and character of a particular type of employment to illustrate how work may, or may not, lead to well-being.

A focus on employment in the Indian context most often means a focus on the informal labour market as the vast majority of Indians work in this sector. Energy intensive manual labour is additionally work that is most often (although not exclusively) associated with this informal or 'unorganised' sector. Kerala again seems unique, however, as several writers (e.g. George, 1998 and Tharamangalam, 1998) have commented that the generally high education level of Keralites has led not only to a high levels of educated unemployed, but also to a disdain for manual work in preference for white collar work². It is perhaps this that has led to the influx of workers from neighbouring states to fill manual jobs that Keralites prefer not to occupy³. Additionally, remittances received from family members working overseas (primarily in the Gulf) may

¹ Net state domestic production per capita in Kerala is below the Indian average and there has been little growth since 1970 (Ramachandran, 1996).

² There is a paradoxical situation, however, in that Keralite men migrate in large numbers to the Gulf where they often end up labouring on construction sites.

³ Parameswaran (1998) approximates that over a million manual labourers have migrated to Kerala from Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh in recent years to fill shortages in agricultural and construction markets.

have enabled some workers to make this choice not to work manually, but there are persisting questions regarding the sustainability of such a reliance. Nevertheless, for the purpose of this discussion it matters little whether an informal worker is a Keralite or a migrant from one of the neighbouring states.

This paper will look at the content and character of this informal sector work before examining the informal labour market interventions that are particular to Kerala. It is the actively interventionist state that has facilitated informal labour market interventions alongside the activism of trade unions in Kerala. The types of issues mobilised around and acted upon through legislative mechanisms enshrined in some of these interventions may provide an indication of the issues central to labourers' concerns. To explore the pathways from work to well-being within this context, the extent to which interventions aid transformations into body capital, economic capital, social capital and symbolic capital will be examined.

The informal sector

The 1980s and 1990s have seen a significant increase in the usage of the term 'informal sector' to mirror the burgeoning mass of workers increasingly reliant on the vagaries of a globalised capitalist mode of production. There has been a tendency in earlier analyses to separate the activities associated with the formal and informal sectors at opposite ends of the spectrum with an associated linear progression over time from informal, unorganised, and sometimes illegal work to formal, organised and regulated work (Connolly, 1985, Moser and Young, 1981).

The monolithic concept of the 'informal sector', however, has become beset by conceptual ambiguities and controversies not least because of a refuting of the earlier hypothesised direct link between the informal sector and poverty (Breman, 1996). The rigid dichotomy of the informal and formal is increasingly acknowledged to be somewhat arbitrary due to there being much interrelation between the two. For example, the so-called formal economy is covertly reliant on informal sector workers in the shape of 'out-

workers' and seasonal contractual workers. Furthermore, the earlier assumption that the informal sector is the antithesis of the formal sector (i.e. disorganised, unskilled and often illegal) has been modified by writers such as Breman (1996) who observe more nuanced informal sector characteristics such as lower incomes, greater discontinuity of involvement and increased (and increasing) labour mobility of a rhythmic, circulatory character. Breman defines the informal sector as "a disparate, irregular and fluid labour system functioning in the lower ranks of the economy" (p.3). Another type-casting of the informal sector has been that it is the 'female sector', but although women are represented in greater proportion here than in the formal sector, men's contributions are pervasive and the informal sector holds its own divisions and exclusions just like the formal one (MacEwan Scott, 1991).

Despite these evolving and questioning definitional issues around the informal sector, many writers find the concept useful to capture the "fundamental distinction of the dualistic character of labour markets in the developing world" (Heller 1996, p.1063). In the Indian context, Breman (1996) finds the concept useful in referring to the 90% or so of the working-age population who do not belong to the formal sector. Although heterogeneous, Heller feels the Indian informal labour markets are characterised by two structural features. The first is the stratification of entry barriers and working conditions along gender, caste and regional lines (to which we might add 'age'). The second feature draws upon Breman's observation of 'vertical dependency relationships' and the need to invest in these as pre-requisites for labour recruitment. Thus there will be sites of fluctuating and contested relations between workers, gang recruiters and other intermediaries that define the dynamics of work in the informal sector. The Kerala informal labour market is in many ways typical of other Indian states with agricultural workers predominating, but Kerala additionally has numerically significant state-specific informal sectors such as toddy tapping and the coir industry. Also in Kerala the coalescing of the informal sector with the term 'unorganised' has become something of a misnomer due to the particular history of the state that has led to a high degree of worker organisation (Heller, 1996).

The relative lack of organisation generally found in the India-wide informal sector in comparison to the formal sector is reflectant of the characteristics of this sector already discussed. Thus the positioning of a worker in a social milieu attentive to socially ascriptive and inherited characteristics, the location of work often being mobile and dispersed, the nature of work possible being multiplicitous and the frequently large numbers of employers vis-à-vis employees have been seen to hinder the capability of informal workers to organise (Kannan, 1998). But the contemporary high degree of unionisation and mobilisation amongst Kerala informal sectors is quite exceptional in the Indian context. This can be attributed to the broad-based character of Kerala's labour movement that meant pre-independence demands by agricultural labourers quickly spread to other rural occupations. That trade unions had already been formed by independence in certain sectors was a result of an all-out political mobilisation of the labouring poor first by the Congress Socialist Party and then its successor the Communist Party (Kannan, 1998). This process of unionisation has continued over the decades and is inextricably tied to Kerala's political process which has led to a multiplicity of trade unions reflecting the multiplicity of political parties.

Kerala's informal labour market interventions

The unions that are spearheading interventions in the informal labour markets and the issues acted upon obviously depend on their particular representation, but broadly cover conditions of work, wage bargaining, dispute resolving, attempts to set up labour co-operatives and welfare measures. Recognising the power of the unions and the potential for destabilisation, the state has responded to these pressures from below by actively intervening in the informal sector through a series of direct regulatory and institutional reforms along with broader welfare measures (Heller, 1996). One such intervention which will be examined here for its contribution to enhancing well-being through work are the Welfare Boards which are modelled on the Industrial Relations Committees but applied to the major informal sectors.

These Boards are unique to Kerala and are administered by a tripartite structure which brings together the unions and employers around a negotiating forum under the auspices of the state. The resulting Welfare Fund has as its key objective to provide welfare assistance to workers during their participation in the labour force and economic security during retirement. A Welfare Fund is comprised of contributions or levies from the beneficiaries and benefactors; the beneficiaries are the workers and the benefactors are generally the employers and sometimes the government. The employers contribution is usually equal to, or a little more than, the workers. The most common usages of the funds are unemployment allowance, retiral benefits, medical assistance, education allowance, maternity benefits and accident benefits.

The illustrative example used here is the headloaders sector of the informal labour market. Headload work is commonly regarded as physically demanding work (Heller, 1996) and such workers have often been referred to using the term of 'coolies', conferring upon them a livelihood dominated by unskilled, manual labour. Organisation within the urban headloaders sector began in the 1950s in line with the larger labourer mobilisations, and local unions established wage schedules and compartmentalisation of the labour market (Vijayasanskar, 1986). However, the localised character of unions coupled with the militant nature of many male headloaders, resulted in inter-union rivalries that produced violent agitations that were far from conducive to smoothly running markets. Although by the mid-1980s the unions had achieved headloader wage rates that were 75% higher than those of factory workers (Kannan, 1992) the state government became disturbed by a series of disruptive strikes and pushed to quell the near state of anarchy in the Kerala headloader labour markets. The government acted by legislating the Headload Workers Act in 1978 designed to "regulate the employment of headload workers in the State of Kerala and to make provision for their welfare, for the settlement of disputes in respect to their employment or non-employment" (official information from Labour Secretariat, Trivandrum).

This was followed in 1983 by the inception of the Headload Workers Scheme which aims through state intervention and a Welfare Board to institutionalise contractual relations of

employment in a casual labour market (Heller, 1996). Although there have been similar attempts in western India, Breman (1996) notes that failure in regulation is largely due to a lack of Kerala's level of unionisation and workers' organisation⁴. The Welfare Board has been running since 1984 and consists of a 15 member tripartite body with 5 representatives each from the government, employers and headloaders (the latter represented by their respective trade unions). There has been an increase in coverage of the scheme; rising from 7,142 people at the end of 1991 (which only represented 4% of the total registered headloaders in the state (Pillai, 1992)) to 21,175 by February 1999. Although size of coverage has clearly increased it is still biased towards urban market coverage with shops and trading place in major market centres gaining most attention to the detriment of rural headloaders.

The Act itself is very detailed and is clearly concerned to reduce the physical strain involved in headloading work. For example, the Act contains the following stipulations; a) no headloader shall be required to carry on head or person at a time any article weighing more than 75kgs and b) the period of work each day shall be fixed and not exceed 3hrs of continuous work after which the worker must have an interval of at least 30 minutes (information obtained from Kerala Labour Secretariat). However, there are concerns regarding the possibly exploitative nature of piece-work in headloading, as the wage rates in the Headloaders Act are fixed according to the amount of physical energy spent in handling and carrying operations.

Transformations

So how have the headloaders market interventions been transformed into enhanced well-being for labourers? This question will be answered through looking at bodily, economic, symbolic and social capital pathways from work to well-being. As mentioned earlier, the informal labour markets are not homogenous and are stratified along gender,

⁴ Datta (1998), however, does document the unionisation of mathadi workers (headloaders) in Mumbai and argues they have been relatively successful in negotiating wage and employment protection measures.

age, caste and body capital lines. **The physically intensive nature of headloading work generally precludes entry by the non-able bodied and the piece-rate payment nature accentuates the advantageous position of those with physically strong body capital to draw upon. This is reflected in the ages of those typically active in this sector correlating with the life period of peak bodily capacity. Pillai (1992) found that the majority of headloaders fell within the 20-40 aged category but they do not continue to work for long periods because of the health risk involved in this type of work (70% of Pillai's retired sample had less than 20 years work).**

This feature of headload working points to the importance of a life-course perspective and indicates that the rigour of this manual labour takes its toll on workers over the years (a follow-up study of recently 'retired' workers would prove informative). **Although workers' body capital is transformed into economic capital (bearing in mind that the use and control over this economic capital will not necessarily accrue to the worker) during their active working period, this may be at the cost of degrading body capital over a life course which clearly has well/ill-being consequences. Indeed, Datta (1998) writes that in the mathadi labour market of Mumbai most workers suffer from osteoarthritis (degeneration of all joints) and PID (prolapsed inter-vertebrate disc) which are primarily a result of the physical stress their job entails.**

A further indication of work related body strain is found in Pillai's study (1992); upon enquiring about leave, the results show that of those taking leave (about 50% of total sample) 92% take 3.5 days leave a month above the usual holidays. Upon probing it was found that most workers taking leave are those who handle heavy material entailing hard work and hence need more rest or who had developed health related problems. Of those prone to absenteeism 70% reported their leave being due to health reasons. The Headload Act and the unions are concerned about bodily exploitation, and as mentioned earlier, have various stipulations and recommendations for 'best practice' in providing workers with adequate rest to counter their physically intensive labour. Yet it remains working practice to reward

those who are able to invest their body capital to greater degrees with greater economic returns. Although the micro-dynamics of the workers livelihoods are extremely complex, this may lead to a situation where those with healthy bodies get rewarded and those with poorer body capital endowments are unable to earn adequate economic returns to replenish their expended energy. Some workers may be able to continue exploiting their body capital in the short-term but with long-term consequences. Further, intra-household patterns of resource allocation and responsibility may lead to situations of workers either using economic transformations for *their* bodily well-being or passing the benefits onto *other* household members to the possible detriment of their own body capital.

Pillai (1992) finds that 85% of the Welfare Fund's available money for disbursement is spent on bonus and holiday wages which are linked to annual days of employment and annual wages (465 lakh in 1997-8). When looked at in more detail, however, it appears that **this practice of rewarding effort can be construed as inequitable and divisive, based as it is on ability to 'perform' the greatest amount of work.** Thus the workers that are most able to mobilise their body capital get the greatest rewards, in both absolute wage and bonus terms. "One can hypothesise that in a segmented labour market like that of headloaders, welfare assistance linked to wages and employment could result in intra-class inequality thereby defeating to some extent the norms of equity and justice" (Pillai, 1992, p.88).

Further, it would be simplistic to assume that all those most able-bodied workers maximised their earnings, for on top of body capital stratification there are a plethora of other identities such as gender, age and caste. For example, in Pillai's study, it was found that **the higher caste 'Attimari' workers engage in headloading only (as opposed to stacking etc.) and earn the highest wages (and receive most bonuses).** This segment could be thought of as the 'aristocracy' of the headloaders sector. The work allocations are very rigid as prior to the Act's implementation, the unions instigated a system of labour 'pooling' in order to enforce entry barriers. 'Pooling' is the grouping of workers into different categories in accordance with the nature of their work, and once workers

have been assigned a pool, they are prohibited from moving between pools. Therefore it can be easily envisaged how powerful groups of workers (e.g. the Attimari) would succeed in securing the relatively profitable pools in terms of employment and wages and thus bonuses. Indeed, Pillai notes that "one of the limitations of the welfare board...is its failure to dismantle inner-segmentation within the labour market of headload workers" (p.101) leaving wide inequalities between workers of different pools.

Labour market segmentation is a feature that has attracted the attention of scholars mostly through looking at the formal sector, but has also been examined in the informal sector (e.g. Mazumdar, 1983). Far from being an undifferentiated, homogenous mass labourers in informal sector markets, such as the Kerala headloaders, have multiple identities and different mechanisms / abilities to draw upon which may be converted into differential rewards. Mazumdar, through a case study of the Mumbai manual labour market, outlines the process by which this market tends to develop a sector of high wages (often accompanied by job security and fringe benefits) unavailable to the large number of workers outside this sector. **Such a pattern of 'labour aristocracy' developing seems to resonate with the Attimari sector of the Kerala headloaders market.**

To what extent have the headloaders market interventions been transformed into enhanced economic rewards for labourers? According to certain sources the interventions have clearly had some positive impact in regularising and stabilising employment and they also impart a certain degree of stability to income levels that have been in the past prone to seasonal and supply fluctuations (Pillai, 1992). Some workers are able to achieve quite considerable wages, for example a worker in one of the busier markets can earn a Rs. 2,500 monthly salary which is higher than the pay for lower division civil servant clerks (Heller, 1996). **However, it is likely that such a wage may be achievable only to those with healthy bodies (at least in the short term) and possibly from within the more profitable labour pools.** There is also the possibility that being a physically weaker member of a labour aristocracy affords a certain level of protection through compensatory mechanisms. The high degrees of stratification within

the headloaders market are liable to translate to different levels of transformation into economic capital.

The gendered divisions of labour within the headloaders sector may be expected to parallel the headloaders carrying water or firewood in rural areas who are almost exclusively women. However, it appears that as the headloaders sector in Kerala has become more organised; being a 'headloader' has gained an identity and respectability that has meant headloading is not merely 'women's work'. The gendered division of labour on the ground in the Kerala headloaders market appears to be of a task nature, with **certain tasks being acceptable only for men to do and others (lower wage rate tasks) filled predominantly by women and young boys** (Leela Gulati, personal correspondence). Therefore, a worker's predetermined gendered status is likely to directly influence their ability to transform their work into economic capital.

Another factor to consider is a frequently alluded to feature of Kerala that the economic consequences of labour militancy in the informal sector have been a sluggish annual growth rate and the fleeing of footloose industries to neighbouring states. The militancy of headload workers (and construction workers) is often cited as a deterrent to investment in the factory sector (Sankaranarayanan and Bhai, 1994) although this militancy is said to have been attenuated through state-backed labour market interventions. Many observers puzzle over Kerala's paradox of relatively high informal sector wages alongside poor economic growth and speculate that such a pattern may be unsustainable in the long-term (e.g. Kannan, 1992).

As has already been discussed; **the transformations into bodily and economic capital are not the only pathways from work to well/ill-being.** How has the history of organisation of informal sector workers in Kerala affected their symbolic capital ('prestige and social honour', Bourdieu, 1977)? The undeniably impressive social development indicators in Kerala together with the observably vibrant civic organisations and associational life have arguably been partially achieved through Kerala's emphasis on universal education and politicisation. Thus one of the most important gains for informal

sector workers of unionisation and organisation is that of enhanced symbolic capital. Although not disregarding the multiple identities contained in informal labourers organisations, the process of organising and the actual politicisation of individuals within a union can confer upon a labourer a sense of identity, purpose and social recognition in front of others. Kannan (1998) asserts that the "attainment of such social dignity is central to the acquisition of the ability to bargain and fight for legitimate rights" (p.364) which extends into the sphere of improving the conditions of work.

Heller (1996) talks of **the transformatory potential of the organising of Kerala's informal labour market in enhancing social capital**. Built upon a strong history of associations in the social structure of 19th century Travancore and Cochin, the civic structure and life in contemporary Kerala isn't incomparable to northern parts of Italy described by Putnam (1993). Indeed, the unionisation and interventionist Welfare Boards in the headloaders market have formalised and bureaucratised vertical exchange relations and **arguably usurped patron-client networks which can sometimes act to the detriment of social capital formation**. Thus, the informal sector market interventions examined here can be seen to enhance organisational capacity and thus social capital, but it must be born in mind that sectors such as the headloaders market remain replete with social stratifications that may mean social capital is not enhanced universally.

Conclusions

Through looking at the case of headloaders in Kerala this paper has illustrated the non-sequential nature of the pathway from work to well-being. **Rather than assuming that employment provision will necessarily enhance workers' well-being; a closer exploration is advocated into bodily, economic, symbolic and social capital transformations alongside the adoption of a life-course perspective**. The paper has shown that the energy intensive work of the headloaders in Kerala can take a significant toll on bodily well-being and the differential body capital of workers produces varying economic returns due to the predominant piece-rate methods of payment. Further, caste stratifications amongst the workers mean certain groups secure the more profitable pools

of the headload work and thus receive greater economic returns. However, the interventions in the headloaders sector do seem to ameliorate some of the more negative consequences of effort-intensive work. Symbolic capital has arguably been enhanced for the Kerala headloaders as unionisation and organisation has conferred a certain social recognition to being a headloader. The interventions have also provided the opportunity for organisational capacity to be developed amongst workers therefore enhancing social capital, although it must be acknowledged that internal stratifications amongst the headloaders make such transformations uneven.

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