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Chapter Author(s): Rachel Sturman and Uday Chandra

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## 6 JANU SISTER-SUPERVISOR OF MIGRANT CONSTRUCTION WORKERS

Uday Chandra

IT IS A CHILLY evening in late February. Thirty-odd teenage men and women are awaiting a train on the main platform at the busy Rajkharsawan station in the erstwhile princely state of Seraikela in southeastern Jharkhand. The train, which started in Kolkata more than six hours ago, will take them to Mumbai over a day and a half. From afar, there is nothing to separate this Mumbai-bound group from the rest. But if you come closer, you cannot miss the rotund figure of Janu explaining to the group what will follow.

Janu, whose real name is Sonam Purti, was once like these teenagers (most of whom—like Janu—belong to the Ho tribe) waiting with a mix of eagerness and trepidation to go to Mumbai. Today, she is their *sirdar* (boss) as she directs them to board the train and then sit together inside the compartment. In Mumbai she will also be their *didi* (older sister) as she guides them through the intricacies of life on a construction site. Two decades ago, Janu also worked on a construction site until she had developed enough contacts and courage to chart a new career as a labor recruiter. In this new role she visited their villages, mobilized her contacts accumulated over the years, and explained to potential recruits what livelihood options and wage rates were on offer in a faraway megacity.

The long train journey offers a preview of Janu's relationship with the group. She has food for everyone: *roti* and *sabzi*, and packets of biscuits for later in the journey. Inside the train, she is ready to answer every question that crops up: Where are the toilets? How long until the next station? Is it okay to lie down between the doors of the compartment? There are always first-time travelers, Janu tells me, and she is particularly patient with them. Inevitably, someone asks: What is life in Mumbai like? Or: How did you feel when you went to Mumbai for the first time? Janu has stock answers to these questions. To the first question, she replies: You'll find out for yourself. To the latter question, she says: Just the same as you do. Everyone giggles in response, but this is no inside joke. It is the nervous laughter of those who await unknown pleasures and dangers.

Without Janu, all of the travelers would need to make their own individual arrangements to travel to Mumbai and find work there. There are brave, foolhardy, or desperate souls who accept the risks involved in such an adventure, but they are the exceptions that define the rule. Mumbai is, for them, a city of dreams, and the Hindi and Bhojpuri films made in the city make it seem particularly alluring.<sup>1</sup> But Kolkata, Patna, Delhi, and Hyderabad are nearly as common as destinations to find short stints of work to supplement rural farm and nonfarm incomes back home in the villages. For their part, contractors in the city prefer paying an advance to someone who can vouch for a gang of workers to the daily hassle of rounding up freelance laborers. The latter is much too costly and cumbersome relative to the ease of doing business with a handful of known labor recruiters with deep networks back home. Every recruiter I encountered had worked previously as a construction worker, and even though Janu stood out as a woman in a predominantly men's club, she connected with former acquaintances and bosses in exactly the same way as her male counterparts did. For new migrants in Mumbai, not only is the time and effort spent finding work minimized if one seeks out the help of a *didi* or *dada*, but the likelihood of finding work in the city at all is vastly greater. Janu, in other words, brings together those who need workers and those who seek work. Without someone like her, with extensive knowledge and contacts at both ends of the labor migration process, Mumbai or, for that matter, any metropolis in India would come to a standstill.

Janu has already worked out plans for each member of her group. One of her old contacts in the city, Pyarelal, had connected her with a construction site owned and managed by Tata Housing, part of the renowned Tata family conglomerate, in a suburb located between the Mulund salt pans and the

new express highway on the eastern edge of the city. Once built, there will be six towers, labeled A to F, each with at least forty floors of two- and three-bedroom luxury apartments. Each new worker is assigned a role based on gender and prior experience (if any). Sheela and Phulmani, for instance, will learn how to mix cement with sand and water before supplying the mixture to male workers on each floor in each tower at the construction site. Ram Dular and Masihdas, on the other hand, will learn how to build brick walls according to their supervisor's instructions. There are other tasks that will not be available to the group, such as plastering walls or installing marble tiles on the floors of apartments. These are regarded by contractors and workers alike as specialized tasks for those with experience, so newcomers are not expected to undertake them. Most construction workers will not progress to specialize in plastering or tiling because only a small number of such jobs are available at any site and opportunities to up-skill are exceedingly limited.

Janu has a certain invisible, almost spectral, presence on the site. Older, more experienced workers typically take newcomers under their wing and teach them the basics as well as the finer points of the trade. But this is not a randomized process by any means. Not only are there ethno-linguistic boundaries within the workforce, but there are also fictive kinship structures that connect the likes of Janu to different individuals and groups on a construction site. Those whom Janu had brought in earlier feel an obligation toward those who have just arrived. This obligation is often expressed in the idiom of *ehsaan chukaana* (repaying a debt incurred earlier). A few notorious individuals are denounced regularly as *ehsaan-faramosh* (ungrateful) for their failure to repay their past debts. They include the likes of Dimple, who left Janu's group to chart her own career in the city, and Vijay, who was much too inebriated after work to consider his obligations to anyone. New arrivals, in turn, are expected to show the appropriate forms of deference and patience on and off the site. Uppity or arrogant newcomers are swiftly rebuked and shown their place in the pecking order. Many *bhais* and *behens* (brothers and sisters) dot the social landscape of a construction site as well as the adjoining workers' quarters. On-site romances add fresh wrinkles to both kin relations and Janu's management of her wards, but they are much too commonplace to be discouraged altogether. Norms of deference vary by gender, age, and on-site experience, and violations of these norms, however rare, can have serious consequences for individuals. Persistent rudeness or cheekiness, for example, led to ostracism and then dismissal from work in every case I followed. It is not only through speech acts that a familial structure is produced

and maintained among gangs of construction workers, but also through the everyday practices of kinship relations that emanate from their common reference point: Janu.

Janu is not present at the site or even in its vicinity at all times. She has her own rented room a safe distance away on the other side of the railway tracks. If someone needs her, they call or send a message to Janu's mobile. Indeed, her basic Nokia phone is almost always ringing or beeping, and any conversation with Janu is invariably punctuated with multiple calls and pauses to check her inbox. She is always at hand to answer any questions or solve any problems. The group that just arrived with her from Rajkharsawan is one of several groups she must tend to. All her *bachhe* (kids), more than one hundred of them at the time of this research, hail from rural districts in Bihar and Jharkhand. They speak variants of Hindi that are mutually intelligible as a lingua franca of sorts. They stick together on each site, often sharing meals, rooms, and cooking, cleaning, and *puja* (ritual worship) responsibilities in an unfamiliar city. When someone needs her, she is available for them as their *didi*; maternal responsibility toward younger siblings is very much the norm for her at home as it is at work.

Janu visits each construction site on designated days and times during the week. The not-so-infrequent problems with on-site supervisors or security personnel require deft diplomacy and special visits. Someone reporting to work in the morning drunk will not be tolerated, for instance. Misbehavior of this sort typically requires an intervention by Janu, whether by tough talking or by sending a repeat offender back home. Vijay, mentioned earlier for his drunkenness after work, often tested the limits of what was permissible on-site. Reeking of alcohol on some mornings, he had received at least two threats of suspension or dismissal from work, and a third one was certain to end in termination of his employment. Confrontations involving anyone from her group are particularly testing. Site managers and contractors in Mumbai expect the likes of Janu to handle those they bring with them. They will not get involved in unpleasant situations that they cannot handle on their own. In Vijay's case, Janu got involved to ensure that he was not dismissed without warning and, at the same time, rebuked him harshly. In general, she detests such situations for their sheer unpleasantness, but none of the parties involved view her as merely a labor subcontractor. As the most senior member of her fictive kin group, she is expected to resolve disputes speedily and firmly. It is rare but not impossible to witness Janu slap someone accused of stealing money or harassing a female worker. For instance, Phulmani accused two male peers of her cohort of leering at her

and then attempting to grab her arm. Janu summoned the two men, who stood silently with their heads down as she scolded them using the choicest abuses. No further action was needed in this case, and Phulmani later told me how grateful she felt to “Janu didi” for her prompt and decisive intervention. Usually, such a familial approach to conflict resolution works out satisfactorily for all concerned. Otherwise, it is Janu’s responsibility to send any errant souls back to their villages.

Beyond work and its problems, Janu remains the focal point of the everyday lives of her fictive kin from rural Bihar-Jharkhand. Initially, Janu (or someone she deputed) takes newcomers around to see the sights and sounds of Juhu’s Chowpatty beach, the busy by-lanes and bazaars of Dadar, or the imposing mix of Indo-Gothic and Indo-Saracenic buildings in the old colonial city. Soon they learn to take local trains to new destinations, whether alone, as couples, or in small groups, and experience Mumbai’s varied cityscapes for themselves. The fictive kinship of the workplace invariably shapes a migrant’s journey through the city, but there is much time and scope for an individual to chart his or her own course over even short periods of time. Similarly, when someone falls ill or gets injured, Janu must take care of the matter. On-site doctors are the primary source of medical advice, but occasionally second or even third opinions are necessary, and it is Janu’s task to find suitable medical assistance promptly. When a number of her *bachhe* were down with dengue fever, they recall, it was Janu who paid for their medical expenses and who later submitted receipts to seek compensation from the contractor or manager on a site. On that occasion, she also successfully lobbied housing site officials to take steps to prevent mosquitoes from breeding in pools of stagnant water after monsoon rains. On the rare occasions that someone is unfit to work for a long period of time, they are sent home with an assigned companion on the next available train. In the absence of any state-sanctioned or employer-provided medical insurance for migrant workers, Janu steps forward to become, if needed, the difference between life and death.

Besides the physical well-being of her fictive kin, their spiritual well-being is also Janu’s responsibility. To begin with, she appoints someone from her kin group as a surrogate priest. A person with the necessary talents is found and then taken from site to site to perform pujas. For special days in the ritual calendar such as *chhathh puja*, Janu negotiates extra days off work for fasting and worship. Specific individuals at each site are authorized by Janu to act as guides for their kin members. Prearranged meeting points enable different groups to mingle as part of a larger kin group, which is itself a microcosm of

the tens of thousands who gather by the seaside on *chhathh*. Pilgrimages to make offerings to, say, Jivdani Mata in the suburban area of Virar demand their own special arrangements. Rarely, if ever, does the burden of travel fall on an individual worshipper, whose ritual practices are visibly public and invariably group affairs. Last but not least, sowing and harvest festivals as well as regional festivals such as Karam and Maghe Parab for Hos require trips back home for specific durations of time. For those from Bihar, Holi or Dussehra are the typical occasions to head home for a week or two. Migrant workers pay for their own travel expenses, but Janu usually helps them book tickets and apply for leave beforehand. As long as Janu is taking care of their ritual needs, her kin need not worry about accumulating *paap* (sin) or failing to stock up on *punya* (merit).

In retrospect, one may wonder how Janu manages to do so much for so many. “I don’t know how I do all this,” she often wonders aloud, especially as a woman in an overwhelmingly male-dominated line of work. It is a physically demanding role that cannot be fulfilled by even middle-aged (let alone elderly) men (and women), who would struggle to cope. Janu is no different from male *sirdars* in this regard, and she, too, will retire at some point in the not-too-distant future. “Five or six more years,” she says, is the most she can imagine continuing in this role. In addition to a large and growing number of contacts at both ends of the migration process and two decades of construction-related experience, the deeply personal role that she plays as *didi* to her fictive kin creates its own everyday demands. It is not enough to know many contractors in Mumbai; there are, after all, male counterparts who know at least as many, if not more. The key to Janu’s success is arguably the multifaceted personal relationship she forges with migrant men and women who have followed her own journey from the distant villages of Bihar and Jharkhand to the metropolis of Mumbai. Indeed, there is a distinctly gendered character to the authority she exercises over her ever-expanding kin in the city. She is certainly a caregiver in ways that male *sirdars* are not, but she consciously avoids cultivating a maternal persona that might create a generation gap with her migrating kin. As she put it to me once, a *didi* can care for her younger siblings, but she can also guide them in ways that parents cannot. Janu is, after all, a role model for those she brings with her to Mumbai. As migrant lives are scaffolded in malleable new kin networks that revolve around the big-sisterly figure of Janu, the multiple roles that she plays in these lives respond to different challenges faced by migrants inside and outside work. By fulfilling her varied responsibilities as *didi* to her kin, Janu is able to command their respect and emerge—in their eyes, at least—as

a model migrant in Mumbai. She is also a potential trailblazer, especially for women migrants. It would hardly be surprising if one or more of them follow in her footsteps as a sirdar a couple of decades later.

**Note**

1. See Kathryn Hardy's profile of Anil Prakash in chapter 26.



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