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Article  (Published Version)

Yadav, Smita (2021) Flexibility and informalisation of labour: intangible assets, family and the informal economy in India. Journal of Asian and African Studies, 56 (8). pp. 1953-1966. ISSN 0021-9096

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Flexibility and Informalisation of Labour: Intangible Assets, Family and the Informal Economy in India

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Abstract
In this article, I demonstrate, through the use of the life course perspective, how informal work in the form of verbal wage contracts might lead to dignity and autonomy amongst the rural poor. The article draws attention to a broader comparative context of how indigenous autonomies are produced. In that they have the relative freedom to engage in a range of informal work as discussed, the Gonds’ autonomy in a neoliberal sense consists of self-governance, which draws attention to the indigenous community’s conception of the self as an economic and autonomous entity that is sustained by a range of social networks.

Keywords
Informality, India, work, precarity, economy

Introduction
The majority of scholars studying India’s informal economy have critiqued the Indian state as being a weak, formal institution, which has left the poor in desperate circumstances. These studies have certainly made invaluable contributions to the understanding of the lack of transparency and accountability in India’s welfare state (Drèze and Sen, 2013). Some recent research focusing on the poor in a rural South Asian context portrays them as victims of the social institution of caste, and tribal identities. It suggests that this predisposes them to perpetual precariousness (Breman, 2010), vulnerability, economic debility and marginalisation (Mosse, 2010). These state-centric approaches to understanding poor people’s livelihoods have revealed very little about the poor’s subjective desires for dignity and autonomy, and their need for self-reliance as they pursue food security amidst growing economic uncertainties. The conclusions from these studies are clear: only formal and salaried jobs, along with literacy and landedness, can ensure dignity and security, and lead to a viable form of living. At the same time, these studies have not offered a sufficient alternative explanation of why informality continues to be a prominent feature of India’s economic growth. The tendency of such observations is to assume that this is the general scenario in most parts of the country. However, a more local and less state-centric approach reveals more complex household
and livelihood dynamics. In the Indian context, ‘informal’ labour has often been associated with perpetual precariousness (Breman, 2010), depressed wages, irregularity, temporariness and insecurity (Gupta et al. 2002; Rogaly, 2003). Some studies have focused on the ‘entitlement’ such labourers should receive from formal institutions, for example, the developing Indian state (Sen, 1999). Others have focused on the need for transparency and accountability in terms of wages and working conditions, arguing for a more organised labour market (Bremen, 2010; Breman et al., 2009). Even less is known about how the poor experience dignity through unskilled and informal work, how dignity is not necessarily associated with formal and secure work arrangements, landedness and literacy and how the informal economy is reshaping the lives of many, including female-headed households in rural India, by creating long-term care and security for their families despite facing real threats of starvation. The case studies below will aim to address these shortcomings. This article considers the micro-level narratives that are revealed within the work–life histories and empirical accounts of the Gonds and their families. I offer selected life course-based case studies of Gonds who have experienced debt-free life and have escaped poverty by taking up informal jobs and, thus, have experienced dignity and asserted their agency. I compare and contrast these Gonds’ experiences of dignity and autonomy and consider why they differ when analysed according to the following areas: family size, gender, marital status and education level of the household head and land ownership.

The Gonds

The Gonds are amongst the 90% of Indian workers employed in the informal economy and who perform a wide range of casual jobs (Harriss-White, 2003). These informal labourers perform gruelling and often dangerous work such as digging and hauling in fields, quarries and mines. At present, the Gonds in the Panna district in the state of Madhya Pradesh are undergoing sweeping economic, social and cultural changes. These are a result of varied factors such as the closure of stone quarries, increased legal restrictions on forest access, migration and recent infrastructure developments that include new expressways and bus routes linking their villages to adjacent cities and other Indian states. The Gonds, like many tribal communities, were once able to sustain their lifestyle by utilising the open access to forests for hunting and fishing. Today, they are losing this traditional forest-dependent way of life because of conservation and the construction of nature reserves on land which they have historically inhabited. On the other hand, social assistance schemes from the government that help with housing, schooling and rural employment are available; however, currently, as Gonds cannot read or write, they are unable to benefit fully from these; in addition, they are absent from their village for most of the year because they migrate for work. In this case, the normalisation of informality is due to deteriorating living conditions in the old form of forest-based livelihoods and the inevitable impact these have on the Gonds’ subjective and social lives.

Research on tribal populations such as the Gonds has focused on their limited agency (Guha and Gadgil, 1989). My research shows the contrary. The Gonds are tenacious and resilient despite a weak state and have embraced the informal economy, integrating it into their social, cultural and economic needs, and their obligations towards their family members and even other fellow villagers.

On the other hand, there is a general shortage of labour in the region because most people, including graduates, migrate for better prospects. In turn, this causes a labour shortage in non-farm work and, here, demand outstrips supply. This has given the Gonds an advantage. They have created a niche for themselves in the precarious unskilled regional and sectoral labour market, which is dependent on manual and unskilled labour. As a result, the unorganised labour market in the form of labour contractors and labour intermediaries has made its presence permanent and the
Gonds have established long-term linkages with it, to the extent that the presence of the labour intermediaries is more visible than the state and always there. It is this ever-present supply of unskilled wage work both in and outside of Panna that helps Gonds meet and fulfil their social aspirations and desires, making the state even more redundant. Based on the fieldwork, it is important to note that the Gonds primarily labour to escape bondage and starvation. Therefore, it is a temporary escape strategy, but gives immediate relief from falling into debt traps. In the long run, Gonds too desire permanent and more secured forms of work.

Informal work, the informal economy and welfare in rural India

A study of informality reveals how people navigate everyday spatial geographies of uncertainty about work and how informal work is performed across different generations, genders and economic sectors. In this article, the narratives are shown against the background of escaping debt and/or facing food starvation. The district of Panna in which this fieldwork was conducted is categorised as one of the 250 most backward regions in India. A tiger conservation project has brought the economy to a complete halt and has had a direct impact on the forest-based livelihoods of tribal populations (adivasis) who have not yet been compensated or provided with an alternative work option. The National Rural Employment Guarantee scheme (NREGA) has not had any significant impact on people’s lives because NREGA work is offered to households, not to individuals, and most Gond households consist of at least three generations. Therefore, the money earned through NREGA is not sufficient, and in such remote and isolated regions there is no real work because of the autocratic Forest Department. In such a case, informality has emerged as the most reliable option, thus challenging our views of the economic and labour geographies of labour unions and access to permanent forms of work. By using the life course perspective in relation to migrant labourers, the article shows how in a highly agrarian and informal context, labourers navigate risks and vulnerabilities successfully; despite not necessarily having their desired way of life, they still manage to remain debt free when the welfare state is too weak to reach out to the most vulnerable of its population in areas such as Panna, in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh.

The Gonds’ agency: Grounding precarity and informality

The politics of development in the context of indigenous populations around the developing world is full of contestations in relation to resource control, governance and the struggle they face to continue with their existing forest-based livelihoods. However, development becomes even more complicated in the context of the fractured state institutions that govern people’s lives. The precarity of the Gonds I describe below needs to be grounded in their continuously present and ongoing indigenous life experiences prior to the dawn of the developing state in the region, including its welfare aspects. To formalise the Gonds’ social worlds and relationships, the state requires an inclusive framework rather than one that is more suited to the literate and urban world. Current critiques of development institutions in the developing world have not expanded enough on the limitations of the formal state when it comes to helping a less urban and heavily tribal population who have been stripped of their access to the forests. For such populations, the worlds of work, labour and social life, and social reproduction cannot be disentangled, replaced or formalised. As a result, the cases of precarity and informality discussed below are also relative in nature. The different case studies of informality are embedded in very different kinds of social relationships and subject to very different types of constraints and vulnerabilities that it is not possible to regulate or formalise. The article attempts to link diverse forms of the Gonds’ informal livelihoods by giving centre stage to their agency, which arises because of their engagement in the informal economy.
Before looking at the case studies, I discuss three social institutions within which the Gonds traverse their life courses. Their agency is to be understood in the context of limited assistance from governmental institutions, and the informal and unorganised labour markets that allow desirable, flexible and temporary forms of contract work and labour arrangements. This agency is not grounded in material aspects of poverty such as income and assets, but on the intra-household decision-making, the ability to carry out heavy jobs, the household development cycle in the form of marriage, birth and death, the Gonds’ collective ability to provide for their family’s needs and the role of social relationships when looking for a job and negotiating wages in a dignified way. Further, the agency stems from their desire to escape poverty and varies according to their income sources.

By diversifying their livelihoods, such families pursue economic independence by demanding higher wages than the minimum set by the state, and they experience dignity by drawing on social assistance and social networks from their closest kith and kin and labour market intermediaries. Additionally, they endure harsh working conditions using their body capital, and they aspire to upward mobility through newer forms of consumption such as modern elaborate weddings. In my understanding of agency, I draw on Kabeer, who affirmed that no single definition of agency or access can be fixed; instead, agencies and access are contextual (1994). The agency of Gond families will be further elaborated through the case studies below. Specifically, the autonomy demonstrated by these case studies has to be seen in the context of seriously limited opportunities for making a living in the regional political economy as well as having unequal access to political and bureaucratic power by which the local developing state can be influenced. The political and legal space in the region is dominated by an autocratic forest regime that has overtaken the governance of the region, including the everyday state and basic social welfare, for example, decisions with regard to who can receive housing, employment and education. The article examines the ‘indigenous autonomies’ of the Gonds that operate in the daily practices of labouring, enabling us to look beyond the autocratic forest regime that has significantly curtailed the ability of the indigenous population, the Gonds, to have control over their forest-dependent subsistence lives. The Gond autonomy arises in the dichotomous situation in which even though constitutional recognition of their forest rights exists, it is undermined by the same state that is supposed to bring them social change. Further, I also find Kathleen Millar’s views on relational autonomies helpful in the context of informality. As mentioned by Millar (2014: 35), in her case study on waste pickers in Brazil, “... the relationship between precarious labor and precarious life is articulated depends significantly on the specific history and experience of capitalism in a given location, both in the sense of a geopolitical site (e.g., Brazil) and a social position (e.g., urban poor in the periphery of Rio).” This is especially demonstrated in the case of Kakoo Bai below who was not qualified to work under the formal state rules of NREGA; however, in the informal economy, there did not seem to be any pre-conditions with regard to her qualifications or ability to earn money and be self-sufficient. The Gonds work as informal and unskilled wage workers. It could be argued that the current literature on rural livelihoods needs to be contextualised according to the specific life courses and life cycles of the workers to reveal how the rural poor assert their agency. This empirical study is based on a wide variety of Gond households in terms of age and gender who engage successfully in the informal economy despite being poor.

**Data collection**

The primary data for this fieldwork in 2012 were collected by ethnographic observation, informal interviews and participant observation. Prior to this, a household survey of the entire village over a period of three months was conducted. This survey revealed household size in terms of family members, the gender, marital status and education level of the household head, land ownership
and sources of income accessed by family members. Based on the need for diverse forms of livelihood, the households chosen were a representative sample. More importantly, to follow the ethics guidelines for ethnographic research, only those households were selected from the survey that were willing to participate and be mentioned anonymously in the results.

The family

The family is a significant informal institution because, historically, it has been a continuous, permanent and reliable entity in the lives of the poor and for peasant societies such as the Gonds. It is a feature that constantly adapts to changes in the wider economy and society that are even more noticeable in cases in which capitalism and its attendant access to formal jobs and work is not available to most. The article highlights and builds on what the Gonds have, which is family, rather than what they do not have, which is material assets, to remain debt free and avoid starvation. The Gonds make this possible through trust and belief in their family members, which goes a long way towards creating long-term and durable reliable forms of care when their labouring bodies fail to work. We still do not fully understand how the internal dynamics of social and interpersonal relationships can offer relatively reliable support systems, or how other fall-back strategies that rely on solidarity amongst family members can create care, security and a dignified means of living. Neither do we fully appreciate the functionality and rationality behind the Gonds’ desire to engage less with the state.

Social exchanges, and networks as social capital

According to social capital theory, when people do not own any material assets and feel disenfranchised and deserted as a result of continual neglect by the state, they resort to resources of social capital (McGregor et al., 2009). This helps labouring families to secure work from trustworthy and reliable contractors so that they get paid on time and can obtain security and welfare for their families. Social capital emphasises the social relationships and family ties available to income-poor households such as the Gonds’ that establish relationships of trust and mutual benefit through the exchange between labour and land arrangements. According to Moser, social capital is ‘reciprocity within communities and households based on trust derived from social ties’ (Moser, 1998: 10). Studies on the subjectivities of social relationships and welfare amongst rural and poor communities carried out in non-Indian agrarian contexts show how welfare is expressed in two different ways: doing good and feeling good. Sarah White found that the latter form of welfare was more important for village communities because it defined their ‘place in the world—which is critically associated with how one is in relationship to others’ (2010: 9). In White’s analysis of social capital in development practice, she shows that relationships are unlike social capital possessed by an individual: ‘rather people become who and what they are in and through related as to other’ (2010: 9). The relationship as conceived by White is a material concept that people possess and is not an absolute characteristic. The Gonds’ experiences of engaging with informal institutions show how the social mobility and social aspirations of income-poor populations need to be contextualised according to the ideologies of wellbeing assumed by the families and according to the mutually beneficial relationships with others in the village. As is evident in Gond families, these social relationships are very important, distancing them from the formal state institutions that rarely intervene in their lives.

The Gonds’ world of contracted lives

The Gonds have a dual identity as marginal subsistence farmers and as temporary migrants or unorganised workers. Despite conditions of hardship at work, the Gonds are in control of their own
contractual arrangements. However, they experience critical physical limitations because of the inhuman working conditions at their work sites and lack of access to health insurance. These limitations are exacerbated by depressed wages, which do not meet all the needs of their households. According to my household survey, the average size of a Gond household is nine.

While labouring, Gonds’ ‘bodies of work’ become the marker of their ability to have as much control as possible over their means of making a living. Men boast about how they can leave and start a new job or take long breaks before resuming work. The behavioural attitude of Gond men towards their livelihoods is casual when compared with Gond women, whose behavioural attitude matches their deep concern about ensuring income. Unskilled wage work symbolises their ‘employment’ or ‘occupational’ status, and they take pride in their ability to break stones or display bodily strength in other ways. The Gond men compete in their ability to predict where good stones rather than large stone boulders can be found, which suggests the land is non-productive and worthless for farming as well as non-farming purposes. Male Gonds have specialised in stone mining and cutting, although this is now shifting towards road construction for younger men. In all forms of labour, there is an unwritten contract drawn up by word of mouth involving an advance payment that the contractors deduct from the final wages.

The livelihood strategies employed by Gond households involve them taking a calculated risk rather than compromising their ability to make an independent living and to have control over their choice of ‘work’. The Gonds influence the labour market and negotiate their own contractual arrangements. According to Dev, a Gond from the younger generation, the Gonds and the contractor are mutually dependent for their livelihoods. This is because they are not as politically organised as the other privileged and landed communities in Panna who can demand more social assistance and access rural benefits from the state. In addition, this mutually dependent relationship works in favour of the Gonds. Almost all of them live Below the Poverty Line (BPL) and there is always a need for money because the amount of land owned is disproportionate to family size. This means the Gonds are entirely dependent on their labouring skills to meet their needs. However, they utilise strategies such as flexible working arrangements, multiple livelihood options and demanding an advance on their wages from the contractors. The Gonds use this advance money to run their households during times of family emergency while the men are away working for a number of days. Payment for contractual work is either weekly (the minimum length after completion of work) or on completion of the contract depending on how long the work will take. Most Gonds prefer work that does not require them to stick to a contract because they like to switch from one job to another or do multiple jobs at the same time. Labouring contributes to keeping the Gonds debt free and also autonomous so that they can switch to a different job or jobs while they are still completing another. In addition, the Gonds do not usually need to look for jobs anymore because the labour contractors come to the village to recruit them, which gives the Gonds their bargaining capacity.

Before starting a new contract of work, both the employer and the labourer have to come to an agreement on an average sum of money to be paid for the whole job. If not, then one particular aspect of the complete work needs to be finished to receive a payment. In this arrangement, the labourer is free to finish the work whenever he can. He can take more or less than eight hours to finish the task, take breaks or stop work altogether. However, the more work he does, the more money he will make. All in all, making money under thekedaaari (a piece-rate basis) depends on his physical ability. This is the most common form of work in stone quarries for the Gonds in Lalitpur because it allows the labourer the freedom to start and finish the work as per his capacity, even in the middle of the contract. As a result, the contracts are more flexible because the Gond can choose to work as much as or as little as he likes, based on his need. It is also less permanent, which means he can do other work while also doing contractual work.
Contractual work is mostly found in the stone-mining sector and is done by highly skilled stone cutters. When the employer or the labour contractor comes to collect the labourers in the village, he first explains the work to them, and the Gonds assess their capability to complete that type of work. If the labourer feels he can finish the task earlier than the time the employer has set, then he prefers to have a contract (a type of lease arrangement) because it is more profitable and he can take up another task while working on the existing one. Under a contract, the labourer will choose an area of the stone quarry and mine it at his own convenience (see the case Kishore below). The value of the work will be fixed between him and the employer’s Munshi (accountant). Such kinds of agency demonstrated by unorganised workers in the informal economy are also seen in Talib’s (2010) case of stone quarry workers in New Delhi. He found that for the poorest, agency took the form of honesty, hard work and dutifulness (Talib, 2010). Through this cultural script of everyday life, the workers normalised their day-to-day existence as stone miners and led stable lives despite working under harsh conditions in labour-intensive artisanal mines.

Working in quarries is highly desirable because it is all-year-round work, is well paid and allows the Gonds to be flexible so they can start and finish the work as and when they desire. Although there are many types of work available, these contractual jobs are only temporary. The main reason Gonds like to rely on multiple sources of income for their livelihoods is to reduce bondage to labour contractors. Flexible work arrangements that do not tie them down to one kind of work or under one contractor and allow them to work on their own terms and conditions give them the freedom to earn more and pay back any outstanding debt. Except for agriculture, all other sources of livelihood are chosen by the Gonds for their temporary nature, and the length of most temporary work ranges from a week to two months. Their preference for flexibility also allows different generations to select different livelihood options at different times of the year. In most households, women do forest-related work and help during the agricultural season, and men undertake majoori (earn a living through migration to cities such as Delhi, Jaipur and Jammu), or work in the mines. Women are also employed in the stone mines but undertake relatively less physically strenuous parts of the work, such as crushing stones with their hands. Working in mines and construction sites allows them to start and stop work whenever they want to, after they have found a suitable replacement person to complete the work they initially started.

The absence of an organised union of Gond stone quarry labourers does not imply that the Gonds are submissive to the labour contractors or any other employers. Primordial loyalties and primordial mentalities (Parry, 1999) dominate the labourer–capital and the labourer–thekedaar working relationships in the region’s stone quarries. The stone quarry industry in Panna does have a labour–capital structure, but this is based on the traditional landed elite and operates according to verbal agreements of trust between the labourer and employer who have known each for several generations before the informal economy and the modern welfare state existed. Besides, as temporary workers, the Gonds earn double the state-assigned NREGA wage and their primary and reliable means of sustenance remains farming. Potentially, any scenario that involved permanent work would not be practical or sustainable because they might lose their flexible working conditions and higher wages. In addition, as mentioned by Rogaly, ‘Temporary workers find it difficult to unionise because of the spatio-temporalities of agricultural work’ (Rogaly, 2009: 1980).

Dev, a young Gond who regularly works in such quarries, says:

We don’t mind permanent forms of work but we don’t like to be under someone or work on their whims and fancies. We fix our own rates and work at our own pace. Our rates will always be more than the market price. This is especially true amongst those who don’t migrate. However, if the situation gets desperate then we will be forced to undergo bondage.
Furthermore, Dev says that both parties, the Gonds as labourers and the thekedaars as mine owners and contractors, are indispensable to each other because the mine owners have the capital and land but need labourers and the Gonds can labour but do not have the necessary capital to meet the consumption needs of themselves and their families.

**Case studies**

In the following, I discuss the various case studies of Gond households, followed by discussions on precarity, family and work.

**Case study 1: ‘There is no work’ – Bharat Gond**

Bharat Gond is about 40 years old and his family is totally dependent upon mining. However, he is not in debt. He has three boys and two girls. In the monsoon, there is no work because the stone mines are flooded. He is originally not from Panna so cannot get jobs through the Panchayat under the NREGA scheme. At a slack time, the only way to earn a livelihood from the mines is to crush stones into very small pieces. Many Gond households in this village are seen crushing stones by hand using a hammer, and they wait for a middleman to buy their crushed stones. Each crushed stone volume is sold at ₹7 and the Gonds can sell up to 10 per day if they crush enough, or *tasla* in Hindi. These stones are used for the roofs of old-style homes built in Panna town, which displays a distinct rural architecture. In the summer and winter seasons, Bharat clears the mud in the stone quarries, which pays him around ₹100 per day. Bharat came to Lalitpur about 10 years ago from another village called Bandhi roughly 15 km from Panna because there was absolutely no work in his original village, especially for landless people like him. The only option for him in Bandhi was to be an attached labourer and under permanent bondage to a rich landlord. Bharat is displaced from his original village. In Lalitpur, he cannot buy groceries at a discount price because his BPL ration card is not accepted outside his original village. As a result, he has been spending a substantial amount of his wages on buying groceries despite being very poor.

Bharat does not attend meetings held by his current village Panchayat because they need to have some proof of identity that he belongs to Lalitpur. There are many people in Lalitpur who share the same problem of identity as Bharat. Their original ration card is not from Lalitpur because their names do not appear on the voters list. Their names will eventually appear when there is a census, but this is only held once every 10 years. However, sometimes, the Gonds are not available when the census survey team visits their homes because they might have gone away for the day to earn a living. Because of this, they are deprived of the many benefits to which they could be entitled. Getting a voter’s card is politicised; only those who vote for the incumbent government will get one.

Bharat’s wife is a stone crusher who works at construction sites. At times, when Bharat is unable to get work during the monsoon, his wife supplements their income by selling wood from the forest. None of their children work in the mines. Selling wood makes only ₹60 (less than £1) because nowadays people in Panna town use gas and not firewood for cooking. As a result, the demand for firewood has decreased. Earlier, when gas and electricity was still not easily prevalent in the region, the demand for firewood was high and it could fetch upto ₹100. Bharat himself looks all skin and bone and he was not well when I met him, hardly being able to speak clearly, although his wife appeared to be quite strong. Bharat’s health conditions do not allow him to undertake strenuous jobs such as stone slicing, and so he is jobless at the moment.
Case study 2: ‘I didn’t get NREGA because the state thinks I am too old but I am not old!’ – Kakoo Bai

Kakoo Bai is the main household head in a family of three sons and two daughters. All the children are grown up and married and the sons and their wives live with her. She is a widow. Kakoo Bai was migrating alone to Gwalior, a city not far from Panna, until March the following year. She says she has been migrating to earn money for the past three years. She is used to working and so is happy to migrate because she wants the money. She lies about her age because she wants to take advantage of the government scheme for senior citizens.

Her complaint is that the Panchayat in her village does nothing for them. If the Panchayat followed NREGA seriously, she would work in the village itself for 100 days and would not have migrated. She says that the Panchayat does not give work to people like her because she is now too old to be doing heavy work. In Gwalior, Kakoo Bai will earn about ₹140 (£2) per day but will be paid every 15 days, and there is no limit to how much debt she can borrow from the labour contractor. This is a permanent job for about eight months, and there will be flexibility in the division of labour. Unlike in her village where only laborious but unskilled tasks are paid, in the cities to which people migrate, any labour is paid, whether skilled or unskilled, and there is no discrimination in wages based on the difficulty of the work. Kakoo Bai’s household has four BPL ration cards because there are four separate households sharing the same home. This way, the whole house always has enough to eat and is self-sufficient for food throughout the year. However, expenses multiply because the parents seek a more secure future for their children, and this is how most end up borrowing money for higher education and marriage. Debt is taken out mostly for marriage purposes to ensure a good family for the daughters. Kakoo Bai gets money from the government through two rural schemes: housing, and the widow compensation scheme. The widow compensation scheme brings in about ₹200 (£2) every month. For the rest of the year, the male members of the household go to Panna town and seek labouring work on a short-term or daily basis. The female members of the household collect and sell wood from the forest throughout the year. There are few mining-related jobs in Kakoo Bai’s village and only those who are in debt are seen to be doing the skilled work in stone mines, which is that of creating chips from stones that are mined, and stone slicing. In the village of Badour, the mines are illegal because they are very close to the Project Tiger reserve. One of Kakoo’s sons has borrowed up to ₹2000 (£30) and to repay this, he is manually stone slicing the rocks that will be sold at more than 300% of the value of his wages. His wage would be ₹15 per stone, which the money lender would then sell to the market for ₹200. The son will not have to pay any interest because the money lender will make more profit by selling the sliced stones, which are used in both commercial buildings and housing. According to Kakoo Bai, if all the working members of the household earn a daily wage, they can earn up to ₹500 (£7) per day combined.

Case study 3: Livelihoods of the households of the younger Gonds – Kishore

Kishore is aged 24 and works as a stone miner. He is actually a young maistry (a professional stone cutter) and is one of the few entrepreneurial stone cutters in the village. His only occupation is stone mining and he is the only one from the younger generation of his family to do this kind of work. He is a young father of two infant children and lives with his wife and his parents. His mother holds the ownership of their three acres of farmland. I observed him twice declining offers of work in road construction, even though this type of work is very popular amongst young men. Doing majoori in Panna town, although less lucrative, would be less risky to Kishore’s life because the risk of contracting TB and silicosis is reduced (it is now well known from studies of the Gonds’
work in the stone quarries that breathing in the silica from the stone damages their lungs and leads to TB and silicosis). However, he mostly works on a piece-rate basis. This allows him maximum flexibility and gives him the autonomy to work as and when he wants. Kishore dislikes permanent contracts and prefers to make money within a specific period of time, and then take a break. By choosing which contractor and mine owner to work for he can avoid any form of bondage.

**Case study 4: Change and the household development cycle – Nandu**

Gond livelihood practice is also influenced by the household development cycle, which changes according to the needs of the household. For example, Nandu Singh has three acres of land and did not have to migrate for work until the time came when his two daughters were to be married. He also has a widowed daughter-in-law and other relations living in the same house who depend on his farm for their food security. Altogether, there are four families who are dependent upon the agricultural output from the three acres of land. Nandu’s wife collects wood from the forest and sells it. Both husband and wife work on the farm and sometimes the grown-up children will help to guard the fields at night. Nandu has slightly more land than other Gond households (the average household landholding in Lalitpur is one acre). His household does not have a BPL ration card because his political sympathies differ from those of the elected Sarpanch (village head). At present, he depends completely on his farm to make a profit as well as be self-sustainable, but struggles to meet household expenses because he has to buy supplies at the regular market rate, even though his household is still considered BPL. Compared with other Gonds, Nandu is relatively secure in terms of landholding size, which has allowed him to make commercial use of his farm. In the past, he has worked for the Forest Department as a labour contractor, recruiting for jobs such as gardening and building roads through the forests. He would pay the labourers from his own savings before receiving money from the Forest Department. There are several instances in which the thekedaar (labour contractor) is himself a Gond who has a surplus of money, or can raise it by other methods. This gives him the means to pay wages and make extra money by working as a labour contractor. Nandu started saving money for his daughters’ marriages a few years in advance of the weddings. However, his medical costs increased recently because he was diagnosed with throat cancer, and he has also suffered some losses in land dealings. This has forced Nandu to find waged jobs in Panna town and migrate for work, to meet the wedding costs. This year, for the first time, Nandu migrated to Jammu, along with his eldest married daughter. He needs to start saving for his 12-year-old daughter who will get married in the next few years.

**Discussion of case studies**

As can be seen, despite the growing forest restrictions and the fact that traditional forms of forest-based livelihoods are disappearing, Gonds have shown tremendous flexibility in finding gainful sources of economic independence doing precarious forms of work. Despite having a limited education and few material assets such as huge landholdings, the Gonds’ labouring lives should be seen as a concrete example of indigenous people’s politics for self-governance and a struggle for autonomy. Even Gonds like Bharat, who are the most desperate and neglected, can manage to stay out of debt. When he gets well, he will be able to work in the quarries again, the main source of quick income for Gonds in the region. Another reason the Gonds’ life stories are different is that their life courses, household size, education, marital status and family and kinship relationships are not the same either. The case of Bharat and his family is one of the most common but desperate cases; they have arrived in Panna from an even more remote village to escape bondage. However, working in quarries has also weakened Bharat’s health and put all the burden of earning an income
on his wife. The children are still too young to make a contribution. At the same time, the family are waiting for the children to grow up and start migrating to help the household. They are aware of village schooling opportunities but do not feel confident that these will lead to their immediate financial rescue because there are quite a few young people who have dropped out of school and returned to being labourers in the informal economy to help their families earn a living. These families see very little use in education because formal jobs are non-existent in the state. The only available work is labouring in a stone quarry. Kakoo Bai is a case in point of how an older Gond, despite having an able body and being willing to labour, is denied assistance from the welfare state in her own village in favour of prioritising the younger Gonds. Therefore, older Gonds choose to migrate in the informal sector instead where they do not experience age discrimination. On the other hand, Kishore, the younger Gond with a young family, continues to work in the stone quarry because he finds he can secure a much better contract as a result of the shortage of labourers willing to work there. However, he prefers not to labour too far from his village because there is already plenty of work available to him in the village itself and, most importantly, he has better food security because he has a small piece of land where he and his family grow food throughout the year. His life course suggests the problem of ignoring the subjective impact of informality and explains how the need to explain agency, autonomy and dignity arises – labourers still face an uncertain economic future due to the lack of regular employment. Although on the one hand young Gonds like Kishore are eligible for state benefit schemes and can make the most of these compared with older Gonds like Kakoo Bai, the commodification of agriculture means they are unable to remain dependent upon such schemes. For Gonds like these, it is imperative to engage in the informal economy so they can finance their food security and become food secure. If there were no labour shortages for informal and precarious work, Gonds like Kishore would have to go into debt, severely curtailing their autonomy, and entitlement to state benefits would not rid them of their debt. This situation has given migrant labourers like the Gonds a strong bargaining position, despite their vulnerabilities to debt and food starvation. As a result, they are flexible with regard to carrying out work and able to meet the demands of the owner while still being paid on time without having a formal binding contract. In this sense, workers shape their own labour geography, and their aspirations and desires too, out of the work they do even in the face of high employment insecurity.

The last case is that of privileged Gonds like Nandu, who own more land than the examples in the other case studies. He migrates to do wage work outside of the village only when he faces a family emergency such as needing money for a marriage. However, irrespective of their differences, all the Gonds discussed have shown that they prefer informal, insecure labour, including migrating to find it, to avoid debt and bondage and to try and ensure food security for their family. Geoff Wood refers to this kind of behaviour in poor households as a ‘Faustian Bargain’ (2003), according to which such families are unable to foresee the consequences of their current circumstances. The newer economic opportunities in the area, and the physical connectivity with nearby affluent states in the country, have allowed Gonds like Nandu to become debt free, even though the majority remain landless and with limited or no literacy.

**Conclusion**

I have examined how the nature of informal work has an impact on both the land-poor and income-poor families in rural tribal India, particularly the Gonds. They are a tribal and forest-dependent community whose identity is defined by their indifference to the state, and by their employment in the unorganised and informal labour market. Informal work prevents formal unionisation amongst such labourers, a fact which is often overlooked in labour geography studies of the non-western
world. This study has shown that the impact of informal work on agency and dignity is related to the type of household, landholding size, ability to bargain and negotiate with the informal economy and the ability of the labourers’ bodies to endure harsh working conditions. There are many types of household, the particular type depending on various factors such as family size, the gender, marital status and education level of the household head, land ownership and access to sources of income. However, all types of household share the ability to make the most of their opportunities to remain economically independent, debt free and self-sufficient as far as food is concerned. It is worth emphasising that the actions taken to secure labour described above by various Gonds show they are aware of the grave threat that secular democratic institutions can pose to their indigenous form of living. In that sense, this article calls for more attention to be paid to the role of social networks and immediate kin networks in helping households cope with hardships and income poverty.

This article is based on micro-processes and uses empirical analysis. It has shown the complex role of the informal economy as a non-state actor or an agent of change. This allows us to understand under what conditions the co-dependency between the Gond labourers and the informal economy has been structured. On the one hand, Kakoo Bai’s life course shows how she can continue to find work and support her family and, thus, experience some degree of autonomy. This would not have been possible had she been further restricted by the current state institutional norms. Her decision to work in the informal economy arose when the state refused her work on the grounds that she was too old. However, in the informal economy, she did not face any such discrimination and all that mattered was her ability to labour and to endure the physically demanding nature of precarious informal work. She experiences agency by engaging in migration. The study also shows that the co-dependency between labourers and the informal economy is a characteristic result of the interplay between a number of regional economic factors. There is a shortage of labourers able to perform unskilled wage work. This has worked in the Gonds’ favour because they can demand double the standard market wage offered by the NREGA scheme and is why the informal labour market is considered more reliable than the state as the main provider of welfare for Gond families. In short, the Gonds diversify their income sources not only to meet basic needs but to avoid two kinds of debt: to contractors and to kin. On the other hand, Bharat Gond’s household has not necessarily experienced agency because they are a young family, because Bharat himself did not have any documents to tie himself to the state or because he did not have any tangible support. For such households, who must rely completely on informality and their ability to adjust to temporary work in the informal economy, this situation is not empowering as such, and the ability to work in precarious conditions does not lead to any subjective experience or empowerment. However, it does certainly allow them to remain debt free and they can quickly bounce back to more regular and predictable forms of work once the family’s general health improves and the children grow old enough to help the families stay afloat.

Furthermore, this article has examined why the Gonds prefer such flexible economies, what decisions are made with regard to the labour undertaken and what risks and opportunities these choices present to them, their families and their communities. It has also shown how the Gonds’ experience matters more broadly as a study of autonomy, agency and dignity when help from the state institutions is not yet accessible to the less literate populations in India. At the same time, the article does not imply that the formal state institutions are not desirable. Indeed they are. However, with the autocratic rule of the Forest Department, the welfare state lacks the power and influence to make any meaningful change to the Gonds’ lives, and these people are amongst the most vulnerable populations. However, although they have fewer assets, they make the best of options available to them and create their own forms of social protection.
The article has moved away from the formal institution (the welfare state) to the informal institution (the family), and has considered how it is integrated into the informal economy in ways that are both contested and accommodating with regard to the Gonds’ lives. Through the study of the Gonds’ working lives, I have demonstrated how their household situations are negotiated through flexible labour in the informal economy by using examples of Gond households that restructure and undergo a ‘household life-changing’ experience (Pennartz and Niehof, 1999) as they perform informal types of work in the unorganised informal economy. Thus, through informal work, the Gonds have embraced the informal economy, even though it does not guarantee them secured and regular work, because it allows them to experience some degree of economic independence, remain debt free and be self-sufficient in relation to food security. At the same time, the article does not conclude that formal state assistance should not reach the poor. Indeed it should, but in the context of multi-generational households such as the Gonds’, social assistance from the government, for example, NREGA, is insufficient, and the only viable option is to diversify their livelihoods, becoming migrant workers in the informal economy as well as undertaking daily wage work in farms and quarries where they can command higher wages than NREGA offers and also remain debt free. Access to work, even if informal and irregular, is vital for the Gonds because informal employment does not discriminate based on the size of the family, the gender, marital status and education level of the household head or landholding status, unlike social assistance payments from the state, which are few, not as flexible and are often delayed.

Funding
The author received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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Note
1. The Gonds are a scheduled tribe as per the Indian constitution. The Gonds discussed in this article are located in central India in an area bordering the states of Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh also known as Bundelkhand.

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