**Muslim artisans, ethics, and skilled work: A case for the professional "underclass"**

A paper presented for the conference:
"Mobile Muslim Professionals: Trans-regional Connectedness and (Non-state) Cooperation in Asia and the Middle East"

April 14-15, 2016

Mira Mohsini
Eastern Michigan University

## Introduction: Indian Muslims and the Constitution of an Underclass

In 2006, the Government of India published a report on the social, economic and educational status of the Muslim minority — the first of its kind to be published since Independence in 1947. Commonly known as the Sachar Report, it highlighted the high levels of marginalization experienced by Indian Muslims. The report concluded that despite being the most urbanized community in India, Muslims had fallen behind in educational achievement and rates of urban poverty among Muslims had, for the first time, surpassed rural poverty levels. One of the structural reasons identified in the report as causing high rates of poverty was the exclusion of Muslims from India's liberalizing economy. Since many Muslims remain in traditional occupations such as craft-work and petty trade, most are self-employed or employed in small, informal enterprises. According to anthropologist Paul Hansen, "These businesses are small, low-investment and as a whole outside, if not wholly excluded from, the new economy in India" (2007: 51).

The "new economy" that Hansen mentions is an assemblage consisting of unfolding neoliberal reforms since the 1980s alongside older postcolonial Nehruvian social welfare policies. This new economy exemplifies a condition described by Aihwa Ong (2006) as "neoliberalism as exception." These spaces of exception, where neoliberal logics have increasingly organized both economic and social relations, have been particularly salient and consequential for millions working in the informal sector. Forced to carve out a meaningful existence amid tremendous structural barriers, some have referred to this group as the urban poor (Gooptu 2001). This category methodologically and analytically differentiates the lived realities of working in the informal sector as opposed to being part of the organized working classes, largely situated in factory settings and special economic zones. While the term "urban poor" is a useful category to think through the complex dynamics associated with different kinds of working conditions, in this paper, I will use the somewhat controversial term,

"underclass," in order to consider what it means to be a highly skilled, yet unorganized and marginalized worker. The term underclass emphasizes the emergence of class difference in particular political-historical moments, and forces us to think about how certain kinds of citizens come to be constructed as valuable while others are deemed expendable. Members of the underclass, which was first theorized by Gunnar Myrdal (1962), are those who are chronically unemployed or underemployed, who are cut off from the labor market, often spatially segregated, and whose work is devalued. According to Myrdal, the historical formation of the underclass occurred as the numbers of people and communities excluded from Western Europe's postwar capitalist expansion increased tremendously. I argue that a similar trajectory of marginalization has occurred in India, exacerbated by reforms brought on by the globalization of capital, whereby even skilled workers, such as artisans, are constituted as unskilled laborers through the demands of globalized capital.

**Professionalization as Dialectic**

The antithesis of this underclass is the burgeoning Indian middle class made up of "new rich" entrepreneurs and professionals who work in the private sector (Fuller and Narasimhan 2007). Information technology workers, in particular, have come to embody the professional class, differentiated from the "older middle class of bureaucrats, lawyers, bank officials, [and] teachers" (ibid: 122). Within the auspices of the middle class, a newer category of professionals is emerging in India's cities — the creative class. This group largely consists of the so-called millennial generation who are young, formally educated, urbanized, and who often have experiences of transnational mobility. The creative class in India refers to a recent departure from "good" middle class jobs in IT, business or medicine, and instead it refers to a desire to pursue careers in less technical fields such as design, music and the arts. The "professionalization" of design in particular, accomplished primarily with the growth of accredited design schools, has relied on encounters with the underclass for its development as a profession. The following excerpt from an online news source illustrates the dynamics of this encounter:

"Back at the ISDI towers, the first batch of design students has a special project. Like all their projects, it's based on their home city of Mumbai. They need to find an unusual tradesperson, like a balloon seller who peddles his rainbow-colored inflated balloons through the streets, and map the entire process of creation, business and daily life" (Carr 2014).

This encounter suggests that professions do not emerge in a vacuum, but instead within a dialectical relationship. To be considered a profession, the work must be framed, and officially recognized, in contrast to that which it purports not to be. Thus a significant amount of boundary work needs to be accomplished in order for professions to exist. A designer is a professional because her work is deemed markedly different from the work of a street peddler, even though she appropriates the specialized knowledge of the peddler for her own professional advancement. The designer becomes the idealized middle class worker-citizen, in stark contrast to the peddler who remains bound to an underclass status.

Furthermore, in considering how certain types of work have become professions and been accorded with privileges and status, I would be remiss not to briefly comment on the influence of neoliberalism on techniques of governmentality. Processes of professionalization in the context of late capitalism entail aligning the moralization of work with a neoliberal ethics of efficiency, productivity, the cultivation of individual responsibility, and profit-seeking, thus producing the valued and valuable worker. The segmentation of workers along an axis defined by neoliberal ethics has resulted in what Aihwa Ong (2006) calls "graduated citizenship." As professions emerge in response to the requirements of globalized capitalism — IT or design professionals, for instance — differentiated strategies of governing also develop in order to administer and control diverse populations. Ong writes that these strategies "are informed by biopolitical considerations ('biopower') or 'explicit calculations' about human life in terms of its growth and productivity" (2006:78). While the devalued worker, typified by Ong as the unskilled or low-skilled factory worker, is subjected to disciplinary power (heightened surveillance in the workplace, extreme restrictions on labor rights, including punishment for collectivization), the valued worker is the recipient of a pastoral mode of care that focuses on "nurturing and special care…while also attending to individual needs of survival and competition" (2006:79). The idealized consummate professional is shaped and legitimized, therefore, by technologies of governmentality and the requirements of global capital, which promote entrepreneurial sensibilities and reward individualized success.

While technologies of governance enable the professions to be constructed dialectically — primarily by using a rights discourse to afford privileges and status to some forms of work at the expense of others — does this mean that professionalism does not exist among the underclass? If professions emerged historically through "elaborate systems of instruction and training, together with entry by examination and other formal prerequisites... [and] normally possessed and enforced a code of ethics

or behavior" (Abbott 1988:4), then can the professions include forms of work typically associated with the underclass? For the remainder of the paper, I will present a case for the "professional underclass," by examining the work practices of skilled artisans in Old Delhi. I will especially focus on the issue of ethics as a way of thinking about professional work beyond its alignment to the demands of global capital and neoliberalism.

**Work, Devotion, and "Sufi Ethics" among the Professional Underclass**

I began this paper by describing the extent of marginalization faced by Muslim artisans in India, a group that is largely excluded from the benefits of India's economic growth. Although their work is critical to the globalized handicraft and textile industry, they remain exploited by the complex dynamics of global supply chains. This lack of access to economic and social capital is not unique to this group — skilled artisans around the world face similar challenges (refs). However, what may be particular to Indian Muslim artisans is how their stigmatization hinges on their relationship to notions of authenticity within the postcolonial nation-state. I have argued elsewhere that Muslim artisans, especially those who have historically resided in urban centers, are not viewed as "authentic" producers of Indian culture. As a discursive project realized in the postcolonial nation and propelled by the rise of Hindu nationalist politics, the essentialization of culture locates authenticity in the idealized Hindu village (Mohsini DATE). Nationally sponsored craft fairs and exhibitions, whose main purpose is to represent the diversity of craft traditions in India and provide artisans a direct link to markets, are overwhelmingly designed to replicate the village aesthetic. Despite this systematic erasure, I argue that an important way in which Muslim artisans continue to defend their work, and consequently their sense of identity and belonging, is through the lens of ethics informed by Sufism. Sufi ethics, I propose, offers a way to conceptualize this particular professional underclass.

According to Abbott, professionals are experts who can apply "esoteric knowledge to particular cases" (1988:4); they have "elaborate systems of instruction and training" (ibid); and they possess "a code of ethics or behavior" (ibid). On all accounts, the skilled artisans with whom I conducted research exhibit these characteristics. In addition to training for years in structured apprenticeships and learning the age-old techniques of metallic embroidery work known as "zardozi," it is common to go through formalized stages of progression, whereby at each stage the apprentice receives a

certificate of approval (ijaza) by the master artisan (ustad). But it is in the realm of ethical practice that artisans could truly differentiate themselves as "consummate professionals."

Devotion is a common trope through which artisans discuss and embody work practices. The relationship between practices of Islamic devotion and work is explored in Daromir Rudnyckyj's ethnography of a steel plant in Indonesia. During "spiritual training" seminars lead by consultants, Islamic piety and, in particular, calls to cultivate ibaadat or devotion towards one's work are deployed strategically to produce "more disciplined, less corrupt" workers. In what he calls "spiritual economies," work as a form of worship is connected to the increase of economic productivity and framed as necessary for successful participation in the global economy. Devotion, therefore, is instrumentalized to produce better Muslims who, through their increased piety, will become better workers.

For artisans, I argue, the connection between devotion and work is different. During my research, artisans were foremost concerned with producing high quality work, which often put them at odds with the demands of the market. Nevertheless, the capacity to do high quality work was paramount as it created a way to distinguish their status from others who had more recently entered the textile industry. Those who had completed years of training and apprenticeships, and had high levels of social and symbolic capital in the old city and beyond, distinguished themselves from newcomers, such as recent migrant workers from eastern India, by referring to themselves as "asli kargiar" or authentic artisan. In contrast to the migrant worker who typically had less embroidery training and was employed in workshops that produced low quality textiles, the asli karigar defended his or her work as being "pucca" (literal translation is cooked, but refers to the quality of work being skillful), "baariq" (referring to precise needlework), "saaf" (literally meaning clean but referring, again, to the precision of workmanship), and "asli" (real or authentic). An artisan I visited regularly, Mansoor, regarded the quality of work he produced as being fit for kings. He said that originally zardozi was meant to adorn the wardrobes of rich people and nobility. The hey-day of "asli" zardozi was during the time of the Mughal Empire, but he had carried on the knowledge and tradition of quality work to this day. While for Mansoor the value of his work derived largely from its place in history, for Gulzaar, another artisan I came to know well, the value of high quality work was found in its relationship to the non-material world. He said, "when I was young and learning the craft at home, the elders used to say that whenever there is a darbar [court] in heaven, all the cushions are

embroidered with zardozi." He followed up by saying that doing "asli zardozi" serves as a reminder that God approves of this kind of work, so much so that it is good enough to be found in heaven.

Producing high quality work, however, involved more than having the specialized knowledge to execute patterns and stitches. It was also about adhering to a particular code of ethics, which both Mansoor and Gulzaar exemplified. Doing zardozi required sitting cross-legged on the floor for hours with no back support. It required the meticulous yet quick weaving of a small needle into a piece of textile that was stretched tightly between a rectangular wooden frame. It required unbroken concentration and high levels of patience. In order to achieve these attributes and levels of discipline, artisans approached their work through embodied devotional practices. Gulzaar explained how this could be achieved. He said that when he was an apprentice, his teacher required him to sit for hours with his wooden frame, repeating the name of God for each movement of the needle. He said that this helped him with his posture, helped him focus, and made the hours pass by quickly. He contrasted this devotional form of work discipline with what he observed in other workshops that produce poor quality embroidery work — he said that instead of invoking the name of God, artisans sit in noisy spaces with Bollywood music blaring from the radio. They cannot focus and they do not have patience to do the work for hours. Gulzaar often complained that these "other" artisans are only interested in making a bit of money — they are not committed to the work.

What Gulzaar and others described is a manifestation of what I call "Sufi ethics." The repetitive invocation and remembering of God's name is known as "zikr" and is a common devotional practice performed in many Sufi traditions. The performance of zikr requires the cultivation of specific embodied characteristics, such as concentration, consistent breathing, and rhythmic movements. William Chittick writes that the "[p]erserverence in remembering God…will eventually entail a certain concern with technical aspects of controlling one's thoughts and focusing one's attention, and this cannot ignore posture and breathing" (2000:53). Historically, the practice of zikr has been used by Sufis as a form of outreach to the lower classes and castes. Richard Eaton (2000) has argued that Sufis in India were able to successfully convert many of low caste status to Islam by incorporating the basic messages of the tradition into everyday work practices, which tended to be repetitive, such as operating the grindstone or the spinning wheel. In the Sufi tradition, work was a form of devotion to and worship of God. Sufis were able translate the principles of Islamic ethics into an ordinary ethics of work through the idiom of devotion (cf. Das)

The code of ethics — or what I have called "Sufi ethics" — that has developed among those who consider themselves to be "authentic" artisans promotes work as the performance of devotion. This is why work must be of the highest quality, because it is through doing good work that one pleases God. And it is through the desire to please God that an artisan becomes a better Muslim. In Rudnyckyj's ethnography, workers were taught to be more pious – to become better Muslims – for the purpose of becoming a good worker — "good" as defined by the logic of neoliberalism. In contrast, the artisans in Old Delhi considered work in itself as a form of devotion, and they excelled at it not for the purpose of becoming more efficient workers, but instead with the intent to produce high quality work that would please God. In this way one becomes a better Muslim. This particular code of ethics and behavior, with its genealogy in Sufi traditions, serves to produce a disciplined worker in line with the requirements of professionalism — and thus, I contend, produces what I have called a "professional underclass". However, these techniques for ethical self-fashioning and discipline do not necessarily depend on the development of a neoliberal subjectivity and disrupt the seemingly naturalized alignment between professionalization and the requirements of global capital.

**Some Concluding Reflections on Mobility (to be further developed in the workshop)**

To conclude this paper, I would like to make some preliminary reflections on the topic of mobility. The liberalization of India's economy has provided artisans with more opportunities for transnational travel, whether through government sponsored "cultural diplomacy" programs or via personal and kin-based networks. Most commonly, artisans travel to the Gulf states and, to a lesser extent, Central Asia. In light of these new engagements with Muslim cosmopolitan spaces, in what ways has the increased transnational mobility of artisans enhanced or eroded aspects of professionalism as conceptualized in localized ways? In particular, I am interested in understanding how the code of ethics, which I discussed above, with its idioms and practices embedded in Sufi traditions emerging in the Indian context might change as a result of encounters with other Islamic traditions. Furthermore, if the tendency within Muslim cosmopolitan spaces is to align religious practices with the demands of global capital (e.g. Osella and Osella, Vohra, Rudnyckyj), how might this affect the strong sense of self and belonging that many Muslim artisans in India have cultivated? These are questions that I will continue to reflect on and hopefully I will have time to share some initial thoughts during the workshop.