


Relational care and ordinary repair in diverse craft economies

Rishika Mukhopadhyay 

Department of Geography, University of Southampton, Southampton, UK.
Email: r.mukhopadhyay@soton.ac.uk.

Abstract: *The commentary attends to India's rapidly changing craft economy to notice how individual economic actors in the craft sector make complex and often contradictory ethico-political choices realising hopeful possibilities. Through the mode of care and repair, the commentary examines how the artisans operating within diverse economies negotiate with exploitative labour regimes and survive a dwindling craft sector. It considers how a woman owner-artisan creates an atmosphere of togetherness and extends her notion of family by cooking for her team of workers. Care ethics, in this analysis, is not only a gendered feeling but realigns with co-dependent economic exchanges essential for collective survival. The second case focuses on the everyday repair of musical instruments as an alternative act of ordinary ethics. The commentary argues, even when these small doings do not bring immediate and intentional change in the economic organisation of the two crafts, they require pivotal consideration as already existing alternative value systems anchored within everyday world-making practices.*

Keywords: *care, craft, labour, ordinary ethics, repair*

Introduction

Over the last decade diverse economies scholarship has consistently established that there is a host of more-than-capitalist economic activities, which work alongside as well as against the hegemonic capitalocentric narrative. To recognise the alternative ethical, equitable and just practices some of these diverse economic practices have been imagined as having potential postcapitalist futures. Some scholars have critiqued this framing for overlooking non-capitalist yet exploitative relations (Samers, 2005). This commentary offers suggestions to both these lines of enquiries; emancipatory postcapitalist futures afforded by ongoing ordinary practices in a diverse craft economy, and how they mediate the challenges posed by capitalist as well as non-capitalist production relations within it.

I engage with two registers, care and repair within diverse economies scholarship. They are often put forward as 'intentional' performances to usher in a hopeful future (Gibson-Graham, 2006: 97–101). However, the commentary departs from this claim and calls attention to the artisans'

essential, life-sustaining, socio-economic practices implicated within existing gendered and labour relations. These are not 'performed' as an intervention to bring change in the larger socio-economic order but are weaved into their ways of being in the world. The focus is on individual economic actors in the craft sector who make complex and often contradictory ethico-political choices within and alongside changing modes of production. Thus, the craft sector becomes a dynamic economic space where gendered roles and close attention to crafted objects intersect, challenge and subvert the purely capitalist mode of organisation. It presents everyday, routine and ordinary world-making to recognise the value of such small efforts and argue the significance of noticing intimate worlding practices.

What follows below is a brief discussion of the existing scholarship of care and repair within the framework of diverse economic thinking. The commentary then takes up two stories from religious clay idol-making and Indian classical musical instrument-making craft sector. This section teases out the already existing quiet 'moments of possibility' (Morrow

and Dombroski, 2015: 86), which raises contradictions and cuts across the non-capitalist and capitalist forms of engagement. The research for this commentary is drawn from ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2018 and 2019.

Gendered role in providing collective care infrastructure

Care ethics in diverse economic scholarship highlight how care work and care provisions are organised, valued and supported by gendered division of labour. They are often unrecognised as economic activities yet contribute towards economic production and accumulation processes (Dombroski *et al.*, 2019; Dombroski, 2020). In addition, social reproduction theory has long argued that women's care work in domestic spaces creates and nurtures an invisible infrastructure that facilitates economic production. For instance, Shah and Lerche (2020) locate how in India caring social infrastructure anchored in kinship ties at home enables the migrant seasonal labourer to work as a means of economic production in various sites. Hence, Alam and Houston (2020) argue for a reconceptualisation of care as an alternative infrastructure not limited to personal responsibility, nor can it be located solely within an institutional infrastructure. Rather, contemporary research seeks out spaces, subjects and affective relationalities of care in the cities (Power and Williams, 2020). Such work argues care is a relational and reciprocal ethics through which communities and strangers take care of each other upholding a 'politics of togetherness' (Amin, 2010: 7; Williams and Tait, 2022). Through these studies, care emerges as often invisible yet essential forms of support, which make economic work possible. The commentary enquires how unspoken economies of care embedded within the ethos of the gendered roles, familial ties, relational togetherness and shared struggle for survival enable craft production. Following Tronto and Fisher (1990: 40) caring can 'maintain, continue and repair our world' forging an affective tie. It also extends our sense of self to broader collective thinking. Nonetheless, in the women artisan's routine of cooking, care is expressed not only as an affective feeling towards artisanal workers but also as a duty and

dependency facilitating the collective effort of economic production.

Repair as 'ordinary ethics' instead of a lifestyle choice

In the global North, repair has been identified as an emerging phenomenon of lifestyle movement. It is underpinned by collective action and political intention of ethical production and sustainable consumption practice (Graziano and Trogal, 2017a, 2019). Repairing practices, in these instances, goes much beyond profit-driven business motive as it assumes a political and moral role against the incessant linear consumer culture. Repair extends 'ecologies of care' towards objects and environments developing a sustainable relationship between them (Isenhour and Reno, 2019). According to the authors, by refusing to give in to the excessive commodification and throwaway consumer culture, customers are choosing to resist exploitation of the environment and simultaneously rebuild relationships with broken objects. A new meaning and generative value is being ascribed to materials asserting that 'brokenness is never final' (Martínez, 2017: 349). Within craft scholarship repairing act is lauded due to its ability to cope with a resource-scarce future involving intimate forms of labour (Carr and Gibson, 2016). However DeSilvey *et al.* (2014) argue that even without contemporary ecological sensibility against throwaway culture and sustainable resource use, a commitment to reuse, restoration and renovation can be part of business ethics.

This form of 'ordinary ethics' (Martínez, 2017: 349) in which I am interested, is also visible in informal economies where the active involvement of shop owners and workers in repair activities ensures the repairing process remains part of their business ethics. Nevertheless, the involvement of wage labourers further complicates the nature of production. The case of interest in this commentary goes beyond the typology of repair shop/cafe and looks at a retail shop which does not disqualify repair activities as part of their trade. For instance, repair culture and reuse practice has been thoroughly studied in the e-waste economy of India (Corwin, 2018).

Here the author questions the very notion of 'waste' and the end of lifecycle of a product and emphasises how 'inventive and resourceful workers' (Corwin, 2018: 18) bring the broken material back in the cycle of production. In this economy, repair is driven by the producers as much as by the conscientious consumers making them close allies of solidarity economy. At the same time these life-sustaining activities question the framing of repair as a 'backyard informal process' (Corwin, 2018: 16) in the 'poor economies' (Graziano and Trogal, 2017b: n.p.). I situate repair work in the heterogenous realm of the diverse economy where producers and consumers make necessary ethical choices on an everyday basis beyond the conscious lifestyle choice.

Female owner-artisan's everyday cooking: Unsettling the capitalist labour relation

The clay idol-making industry caters to a thriving market of religious festivity in Kolkata. This craft cluster's economic organisation has gone through considerable changes in the last one century. Due to the increase in demand in the peak season, seasonal wage labourers skilled in making idols migrate to Kumartuli (the neighbourhood in which this craft is concentrated) from villages of West Bengal.¹ For the master artisan, idol making is not a family-based subsistence economic activity anymore as varying scale of accumulation is observed for individual enterprises (Mukhopadhyay, 2023 for a detailed discussion). During the main season of 2018–2019 around 500 *malik* (signifying male owner-artisans) and 2800 *karigar* (artisanal labourers) were working and living in Kumartuli. Additionally, since the turn of the century, women are entering this profession as owners marking an incremental change in this predominantly male-dominated craft.² This section will specifically look at one such artisan to understand how she introduces a different aspect of value within this craft economy.

China Pal in her 40s is one of the few women owner-artisans (five during the fieldwork in 2018–2019) in this craft industry of Kumartuli. In the hereditary caste-based craft tradition of idol-making where sons learn the craft from

their father or other male members of the family, she is an exception. Being the fourth girl child in the family, her parents decided to give her a name that translates into '*chai na*' (not wanted), hoping it would prevent having more girl child in the family. After her father's sudden demise in 1996, when none of her two brothers showed interest in taking over, she stepped in. Along with bearing the pain of being least wanted, she recalls massive resistance and boycott posed by senior artisanal workers and the larger artisan community in her initial years.

Similar to other medium scale enterprise in Kumartuli, now she leads a team of seven artisanal labourers (*karigar*) during the peak season. The workshop loft is the workers' space for sleep. They use a public toilet in the neighbourhood and takes bath in the river. China Pal does not live a significantly different life. She lives in a small and damp rented room accessed through a narrow alley right behind her workshop with her 90-year-old mother. Unlike the male owner-artisans, every day from six in the morning, she does her household duties of cleaning, washing, grocery shopping, cooking and praying. She maintains her household chores along with her craft work in the workshop till midnight.

The *karigars* work for a 12-hour shift (8 am–8 pm) with a two-hour lunch break in the afternoon. As the day of Durga *puja* (worship) approaches, they work overtime till midnight. In the West Bengal owner-artisans' organisation, of which China Pal is part, there is no overtime payment; instead four meals – breakfast, lunch, evening snacks and dinner – are provided.³ Providing food instead of payment can be considered a gesture of compensation for the unpaid labour time, which has been decided by the owner-artisans for their convenience. When a male owner-artisan provides food, he supplies cooking arrangements and the workers cook, or they are provided money to arrange food for themselves. However, when a woman artisan assumes the role of owner-artisan, she does not just provide food but cooks elaborately, which a male artisan would not consider doing (Fig. 1).

I noticed for over a month in China Pal's workshop, she cooked lunch and dinner for her seven *karigars*. When asked why she cooked for her workers as it had not been mandated by the artisans' organisation, she said,



Figure 1. China Pal working and cooking in her studio and home at Kumartuli Source: Author. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

We are all working together in the studio as a family. They too are human beings. What we normally eat in the family, I cook the same for them. I cook and serve the food and we eat together ... We are earning because of them. Moreover, eating from a hotel is not good for health. (Conversation with China Pal, 5 October 2018)

Her narrative illustrates two somewhat contradictory notions of care: one where she feels for the workers' well-being and another where care is an essential infrastructure personally provided by her to run the worker-dependent production regime, which generates her income as well as the workers' wage. Both care values are inseparable, co-existing and they operate together making care a social value as well as part of the economic logic of production.

To elaborate, there is a clear indication that the notion of family has been extended from her and her mother to seven *karigars*, all inhabiting common humanity. Through cooking, serving and eating together, the separate material worlds of the owner and the worker collapse into one where they co-constitute each other's familial worlds. In this world, as a family they share a meal, spend time together and take care of each other's health. This family of owner and worker encompasses a relational, mutual and reciprocal world. She recognises in the above statement that their lives are interconnected and realises that on an intimate scale, by cooking and providing food she can introduce a different value and

practice worlding through care ethics. While explained through this mode of care ethics, the process of cooking, serving and eating together ruptures the capitalist relation between seasonal wage labourer and owner.

However, in the next half of the statement, her economic reliance on her workers is more prominent rather than the mutual reciprocity. Echoing de la Bellacasa and other feminist scholars I do not limit care to a symbol of 'warm pleasant affection or a moralistic feel-good' gesture (de la Bellacasa, 2017: 2). Her discernible commitment towards their physical well-being is not only underpinned by love and affection towards her extended family but caring becomes implicated within the economic relation of production.

Repairing broken musical instruments: Against throwaway material politics

The next example is from the musical instrument-making sector of Jorasanko, locally known as *tablapatti* (an area where *tabla*, a pair of twin hand drums are made). I focus on Star Harmonium, a 115-year-old musical instrument making store; one among the three surviving stores out of the original 25 from the twentieth century in the area. It is inherited by two sexagenarian brothers: Sukdeb and Basudeb Saha. They barely manage to keep the store open after being displaced from its previous location in the same area due to a road widening project. According to Sukdeb, the

production of musical instruments used to be dependent on *karigars*. During their father's time, when the shop had a much bigger premise, 16 *karigar* used to work (interview on 29 December 2018). With the structure of wage labour and private ownership of the business in place, it may resonate a small-scale capitalist production relation. However, when I started to observe their everyday business more closely, certain threads seem to sit at odds with any business establishment's profit accumulation and maximisation strategy. They deserve more attention because the languishing enterprise would have profited more if they encouraged new purchases.

Basudeb, the younger brother and co-owner works alongside one *karigar*, Ashok Ruidas. Ashok is a resident of the nearby district Howrah, learnt the craft from his father and elder brother in childhood. He owned his musical instrument making store in Howrah but decided to close it and work in Kolkata, probably for better livelihood opportunities. The brothers of Star Harmonium, on the other hand, are barely keeping their business alive after losing their ancestral house and original store due to a redevelopment project. They now rent a strip of land on the ground floor of a house and use the pavement, passageway and space under the staircase of the house as storage. The mass-produced musical instruments made out of synthetic materials such as plastic and electronic musical instruments threaten their livelihood of making traditional instruments. The lives of the *karigar* and the owner are conjoined by their joint struggle for survival and keeping alive this craft tradition. Yet rather than switching their business to a more profitable business strategy their work shows a deep commitment towards continuing their legacy of making and repairing broken instruments.

In Star Harmonium, two kinds of work take place: assembling to sell new objects and repairing. The store mainly assembles various parts of traditional percussion instruments such as *tabla*, *khol*, *dhak*, *dhol*, *nal*, *pakhawaj*. They depend on a trusted network of places and suppliers of parts. The wooden and metal (steel/copper/brass) exterior of these drums and the leather are sourced from villages in southern districts of West Bengal. Large-scale factories in Kolkata

and even Merat in Uttar Pradesh, North India supply some of the materials. The intricate process of making and repairing the drumheads from goat skins, weaving vertical leather thongs (sourced from cattle skin) attached with the head and preparation of *gab* (the central black spot on the head made with iron dust and rice) are done in the shop. The instruments are left on the pavement for a day to be dried in the sunlight. Afterwards, the drums are tuned to achieve a perfect sound. Having a good knowledge of music, both Basudeb and Ashok can perform this task. From the conversation with Sukdeb, I gathered their repair is not limited to percussion instruments. String instruments (*tanpura*, *setar*, guitar) and the most popular and common musical instrument, harmonium (reed organ) often are brought to them for repair. Due to the significant use of leather and animal fat in making the instruments they are often eaten by small insects and mice. The iterative process of repairing and remaking holds the instrument together. I observe how Ashok pays careful attention to mend a rare *Sri Khol* (Fig. 2) for over two days. It has a clay exterior and was sold by Star Harmonium five years ago.

The surplus generated after the act of the painstaking restoration process is considerably less than a sale of a new instrument. Instead, the value and the life of used musical instruments are extended and reproduced through a process of patchwork and repair. During my fieldwork I observed how the owner and the *karigar* together engaged with the non-human world of mice, fat, leather, water, sunlight, wood, clay and metals to make the broken objects create sound again. They repeatedly assured customers that the instruments should not be disposed of and can be passed on through generations. The fragile objects come together with their touch while some visible impression of the fixing might remain. A relevant comparison would be the traditional Japanese craft of *kintsugi*, where broken ceramics are repaired and the cracks remain visible showing 'an aesthetic appreciation of broken and repaired objects' (Keulemans, 2016: 20). Hence this often unacknowledged yet already existing material practice anchored within ordinary business ethics of continuous mending and repairing of instruments should be seen as reinscribing meaning into the material relation with objects.



Figure 2. A damaged *Sri Khol* is being mended by Ashok Ruidas at Star Harmonium Source: Author. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/apa.12390)]

Conclusion

The commentary pays close attention to two economic actors in the craft economy who introduce collective, caring and ethical values. Clay artisan negotiates an exploitative labour regime by introducing her care-value while the musical instrument maker struggles to survive an impoverished craft sector, yet keeps repairing broken instruments that does not generate enough profit. The commentary does not dispel that increasingly craftwork involves wage labour and mass production of craft goods. However, it asserts that intimate ordinary processes are rendered invisible by dominant narratives. Thus, it pays attention to more-than-capitalist processes, which complements the life-sustaining work of artisans.

It considers how a woman owner-artisan creates an atmosphere of togetherness and extends her notion of family by cooking for her team of *karigars*. This unusual act, which no male artisan conceives of doing create a fissure within the unequal structure of labour relation, between a wage labourer and the owner. The decision also recasts the meaning of care as it challenges us to look at care beyond a gendered, affective, altruistic and righteous value. Care ethics here

realigns with co-dependent economic exchanges essential for collective survival.

The second case looks at a musical instrument-making store and proposes to view the process of everyday repair as an ethical act towards carefully crafted objects intimately made and grounded by labour. Even when exclusive sell of new instruments can generate more profit, a struggling business commits itself to extending and regenerating the value of handmade instruments, interrupting capitalist throwaway culture.

By attending to intimate geographies of care, foregrounded by cooking and repairing, the commentary calls attention to possibilities, which do not bring intentional and immediate change in the economic organisation of the craft sector but certainly is a testament to existing values of the alternative world making.

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Notes

- 1 This sector reaches its peak demand of embellished clay idols from aristocratic families and public organisations in September–October when Durga Puja (Durga: name of the deity; puja: worship ritual) takes place. Following the worship over five days, the life-size clay idols of deities go through ritual immersion in the river Hoogly maintaining the yearly and seasonal economy of the craft.
- 2 The artisans usually belong to the *Kumbhakar* community with the *Pal* surname. One can trace at least three generations of present *Palmasais* (veteran male master artisans with *Pal* surname) who came and settled in Kumartuli from the surrounding rural areas in the state of West Bengal since the beginning of the eighteenth century.
- 3 Second wave of clay sculptors settled in Kumartuli after India's independence in 1947 resulting from the partition of Bengal creating East Pakistan aka present Bangladesh (erstwhile East Bengal) (see the genealogy of the neighbourhood in Mukhopadhyay, 2020). As a result, the craft community is represented by two different artisan organisations with their own sets of rules. Kumartuli Mritshilpi Sanskritik Samiti represents the West Bengal artisan union. The joint secretary of this organisation elaborated that their organisation has agreed upon 10 hours of work with the provision of food for the workers. During overtime the same rule applies. Whereas Kumartuli Mritshilpi Samiti, for the idol makers from East Bengal limits the work to 8 hours. The workers arrange their own food in this instance. During overtime, they are paid for the extra time (interviewed 14 February 2019).

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