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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Ashraf, H. (2017). The threads of time in Bangladesh's garment industry: coercion, exploitation and resistance in a global workplace. *EthnoScripts: Zeitschrift für aktuelle ethnologische Studien*, 19(2), 81-106. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:gbv:18-8-11771>

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The Anthropology of Work and Labour

Jahrgang 19 Heft 2 | 2017

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Coercion, Exploitation and Resistance in a Global Workplace

Ethnoscripts 2017 19 (2): 81-106

eISSN 2199-7942

Abstract

In this paper I discuss the work in Bangladesh's Ready-Made Garment industry by focussing on the work process itself, on the moralities surrounding it as well as the spatial and temporal structures framing it. My aim is to show how relations of authority, inequality, gender and class are made on the shop floors of the garment industry by managers, supervisors and the workers themselves and how this "making" is shaped by demands from global corporations, i.e. the ever faster and cheaper production of garments. These demands result in extraordinary intensive and long work-days and in the spatial arrangements allowing for the tight control of the workforce, which garment workers describe as "garment-time" and "garment-world". I will argue that these notions of the industry's distinct world and time indicates its distinctly non-local, global character.

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eISSN: 2199-7942



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The Threads of Time in Bangladesh's Garment Industry: Coercion, Exploitation and Resistance in a Global Workplace

Hasan Ashraf

A morning in Mirpur

Starting around 7:30 am, long processions of young women and here and there some young men take over the sidewalks and streets in Mirpur, a district in Bangladesh's capital Dhaka. Holding their *timecards*, a tiny piece of paper, in their hands, they walk very fast, faster than other pedestrians to swiftly disappear into one or the other of the high-rise buildings flanking Mirpur's main roads. At the gates, jostling may occur when the young women and men take off their sandals and flip-flops before entering. These buildings are the well-known and notorious factories producing ready-made garments and knitwear for the rest of world, in particular for Western Europe and North America; and workers are supposed to enter them barefoot and in time, by 8am sharp. At the gates of Asha Garments, where I conducted long-term ethnographic research in 2010 and 2011, Toslim, the timekeeper, stands every morning to collect the timecards from each worker. He scolds at late-comers and marks the late-coming on their timecards. A worker with three marks of late-coming in a month gets one day's wage cut. As sewing machine operator Jamila describes her morning:

"It feels like a supernatural power that drags me to the factory. It feels like invisible powerful threads of time pull me out from the bed even when I don't want. But I can only sleep a little longer if I skip the breakfast; at the factory I must report on time. And once you are in, you have lost control of your time. Management has taken it over."

In this article I will engage with the experience of work in Bangladesh's garment industry, with the invisible threads of time dragging workers like Jamila every day to the factories and with their loss of control during work. The industry is now in its fourth decade. It slowly started with the opening of a few factories in the late 1970s with technical knowhow from South Korean industrial giant Daewoo and its development accelerated in the mid-1980s when factories started to mushroom in and around Bangladesh's capital Dhaka. Since the 2010s, the total number of export garment factories amounts

to over 5000.¹ In 2011, Bangladesh turned into the 2nd largest readymade garment exporter on earth. At the same time, this industry accounted for almost 80 per cent of Bangladesh's export earnings. This reveals the country's dependency on the ready-made garment sector which, in turn, is based on its ability to provide the industry with cheap labour. The rapid expansion of the sector depended on a mass influx of workers from rural areas into Dhaka's factories and employs more than four million workers, of whom nearly 80% are women, and who are rated among the world's cheapest labour force. At least since the collapse of the factory complex at Rana Plaza in 2013 that killed 1.135 workers and injured more than 2.000 in Bangladesh's capital Dhaka, the country's garment industry and its notorious working conditions are much discussed. However, so far, these discussions abstract from the lived realities of working in the industry.

Thus, policy experts and economists usually discuss the chances the garment industry holds for Bangladesh's economic development under changing global conditions (Islam and Quddus 1996), from the perils and potentials of the expiration of the so-called Multi-Fibre Arrangement restricting trade in textiles and garments between developing and developed countries between 1974 and 2004 (Bhattacharya 2002; Razzaque and Raihan 2008) to the effects of the global recession of 2007 (Taslim and Haque 2011), and how to increase Bangladesh's access to global markets and its competitiveness under these changing conditions (Rahman and Anwar 2006; Titumir and Ahmed 2006; Haider 2007). When work in the garment industry is discussed, this is most often done in developmentalist terms for its potential for "women empowerment", for reducing wage gaps between men and women, for changing traditional gender roles and for reducing the power gap between men and women in intra-household relations (Kibria 1995; Wahra and Rahman 1995; Jamaly and Wickramanayake 1996; Siddiqi 1996; Sultan 1997; Zahir 2000; Absar 2001; Paul-Majumder and Begum 2006; Hossain 2012). In a more critical light, other scholars have discussed the adverse health implications of working in the ready-made garment sector (Zahir and Paul-Majumder 2008 [1996]; Paul-Majumder 2003; Steinisch et al 2013, 2014; Akhter et al 2010); they have shown how wage labour in the garment industry has imposed new forms of regulating women (Siddiqi 1996, 2000, 2009; Feldmen 2009), how it has exposed women to new forms of sexual harassment at work and beyond (Siddiqi 2003), but also how the largely women workers in the industry engaged in collective action (Kabeer 1997, 2002, 2004; Hossain and Jagjit 1988; Nuruzaman 1999; Dannecker 2002; Morshed 2007; Ahmed and Peerlings 2008; Rahman 2010; Rahman and Langford 2014; Siddiqi 2015).

1 The actual number of export garment factories in Bangladesh was much debated after the Rana Plaza collapse. Figures range between five to seven thousand depending on the definition of the category "factory", whether small sub-sub-contracted workshops are counted among them or not.

None of the above-mentioned publications engages in depth with the everyday labour processes in the garment industry. However, as Geert de Neve (2005) has shown in his research on the South Indian textile industry, a labour process-centred approach is crucial for understanding how relations of authority, (in)equality, gender and class are made on industrial shop floors. He thereby also shows how the teleology and essentialism around notions of gender, class and caste that prevail in scholarly and lay debates on labour in India can be overcome. In his work De Neve draws on Michael Burawoy's concept "relations in production", that he has coined to emphasise that conflict and consent on industrial shop floors cannot solely be explained with reference to the antagonistic relationship between capital and labour, the relations of production, but that they are also outcomes of the particular way the labour process is organised on particular shop floors. Akin to De Neve's and Burawoy's approach, Dina Siddiqi, in her work of Bangladeshi garment workers (2000: L-11, 2009, 2015 and 2017), calls for foregrounding the lived realities of work in the ready-made garment industry in order to avoid reducing garment workers' lives to yet another local variation of the global narratives of the "universally subordinated women" and "the global worker exploited by capital." Her call to take into account the global dimension of work in the garment industry and at the same time to problematise the relationship between the global and the local resembles Michael Burawoy's (2000a, 2000b) methodological call for "grounding globalisation". By that, Burawoy cautions us to remain wary of alleged isomorphisms between the global and the local, to not assume that global forces and connections directly imprint themselves on local levels (ibid: 343), but to instead "ground" the globalisation-narratives by "extending out from the micro-processes to macro forces, from the space-time rhythms of the site to the geographical and historical context of the field" (ibid: 27).

Likewise, in this article, I argue that the dynamic of social relations on factory floors in Dhaka's garment industry can only be understood with reference to the politics of development, class, gender and morality peculiar to contemporary Bangladesh, and that at the same time the conditions under which ready-made garments are locally produced are decisively shaped by demands from global corporations. As I further argue, notions of "time" prevailing in Bangladesh's garment industry provide a particularly useful window for looking into these entanglements and the power asymmetries that constitute them. In the first section, I show how the labour process at Asha Garments produces relations in production coined by lateral conflicts among workers, not only between management and workers. As I show in the second section, in addition to intentionally instilling these lateral conflicts, management also frequently reminds workers of their debt to and their dependency on the company, and it resorts for that purpose to local notions of family, religion and nation. In the third and last section, I show that at Asha Garments

(as well as other factories) workers, supervisors and managers alike consider the ready-made garment industry as a distinct world, a “garment-world”, separated from the rest of Bangladesh not only by walls and guards, but also by the “garment-time” that rules within it. The “garment-time” refers to the constant time pressure under which they work to fulfil production targets set by corporations and their almost weekly changing micro-seasons of “fast fashion”. As the notion of both garment-world and garment-time show, the ready-made garment industry in Bangladesh is inherently global in nature.

Working for Asha

In Mirpur, a district of around 1,000,000 inhabitants in the west-northern part of Dhaka, there are more than 600 woven, knit and sweater export garment factories of different sizes and types. I grew up in Mirpur in a middle-class family and from my days at a local boarding school, I knew some people who had opened garment factories themselves. As a childhood acquaintance, one of them allowed me to conduct ethnographic research in his factory, Asha Garments. I started in August 2010 and worked at Asha for the next six months, until March 2011. Since then, I have regularly visited many of the workers and supervisors with whom I had developed friendships, and I revisited the factory for a couple of weeks in 2012 and 2014 respectively. The ethnography presented in this article draws on my participant observations during these periods and also on a survey on the labour relations and social composition of the workforces I conducted in 75 further garment factories in Dhaka.²

Around the same time that I started working at Asha Garments, Naima, a twenty-nine-year-old woman, sought a job here, too. As I was soon to realise the way she got her job at Asha's was fairly typical and hence worth retelling in detail. Naima had lost her job in another garment factory in the middle of the month and since life in Dhaka is expensive even if one shares rooms in the small sheds of corrugated tin in one of the thousands of labour colonies in Dhaka she couldn't afford to stay unemployed for long. What made things worse, her previous employer had retrenched her and other workers, because of financial problems. Hence, Naima wasn't sure when or whether they would pay her remaining salary plus overtime. When she approached the gateman at Asha Garments he introduced her to Rahman, the line supervisor who is in charge of production lines of around 50 workers on 20-25 sewing machines and who, in turn, referred her to Khairul, the production manager, or PM, who is in charge of all the overall production on the sewing floor and the key person in the relation between management and workers. The latter told her, “after we observe your ‘production’ for a day we will decide about your job”,

² In addition to work in the garment industry, my ethnographic research in Dhaka focused also on social life in the labour colonies and on the labour movements and labour protests in and around the industry.

despite the fact that Naima had worked in the garment sector already for ten years. Naima instantly sat down at the sewing machine assigned to her and started to work. Since she needed the job she put all her efforts to perform well. She outdid the hourly production target and she did so for the twelve hours we worked on that day. At the end of the workday, Khairul told her to return the next day and that he would discuss her job prospects with higher management.



Fig. 1: Cardboard with calculation of hourly production target. Photo: Hasan Ashraf

The following day, he was reluctant to talk about her appointment but accused the line she was working at of not working fast enough. Naima did not dare to raise the issue of her employment and continued to work at a very high pace. During the lunch break, Naima told the other workers and me that she wasn't sure whether she would get the job and not even whether they would pay her for today and yesterday, and how urgently she needed the money to pay for her expenses of living in Dhaka. We felt very sorry for her,

because she was friendly, and we got on well with her. On her third day after lunch, Khairul asked Naima's line supervisor about her performance and the latter reported that she had outperformed the target of 50 sewing processes per hour and did not make mistakes. Khairul told her line supervisor to note this as her hourly productivity in her records and to see that she won't go below that. Thus, the maximum efforts that Naima had put into getting the job was now set as her minimal standard. Furthermore, the PM then told the timekeeper to issue Naima a timecard from next morning onwards which meant that they would employ and pay her only from then on. Shamima, the operator to whom I was assigned as a helper that day, whispered to me "*maddarchod*" ("motherfucker"), I knew it, they won't pay her for the three days she has worked here on probation!" Shamima, Naima and all others knew of course, too, that Naima had no other choice but to consent.

During the following four months of my time at the Asha Garments, we produced around 265,000 pieces of different types of ready-made garments for global brands from few EU countries and the US. These were tank tops, ladies' tops, light jackets, and gowns of different sizes, but the bulk of production was made up by tee shirts. In what follows, I will give a detailed account of how we worked on one order of t-shirts for a brand in Germany.

One day before the start of this new work order, the PM Khairul, told us to come to the sewing floor on time – or not to come ever again. A new work order always meant that the production line, the arrangement of the different types of sewing machines in a sequential order, had to be adjusted according to the specificities of the garments to be produced. This line layout was the responsibility of the line supervisors. In our case, this was Shamol, a man in his late twenties who had left college in order to get a foot into the garment business. He had figured out the required line layout already before the preceding order came to an end. A continuous production is vital for individual companies to stay in business and for that they have to secure a continuous series of work orders from garment brands. The shift from one work order to the next is a critical moment. Bangladeshi garment companies like Asha Garments operate with tight profit margins and time schedules and they cannot afford losing too much time in getting ready for a new order if they do not want to risk contractual penalties.

The order from Germany only contained basic t-shirts. Hence, the rearrangement of the line layout was a rather easy task for Shamol this time. But the workers were worried as usual when the production lines were rearranged. Workers preferred to work on sewing machines they knew well, because adjusting to the peculiarities of a new one always costs time which they weren't given. What made things worse is that management declared workers responsible for the smooth running of their machines. Equally important, workers preferred to work alongside friends and/ or persons from the same village or region. Shamima, e.g. had developed close friendship with Wahi-

da and Nilofar over the months they all worked at Asha. They shared their lunches, tried to help each other at work and with the difficulties of urban life in Dhaka. However, this time Shamol assigned Wahida to another line and separated her from her peers. Wahida and her friends knew that this was a reprisal for quarrelling with Shamol over extra-long work hours recently. However, Shamol himself also emphasized that it is good management practice to separate friends into different lines from time to time. As he said, “it is harmful for a steady pace to let the same worker work at the same machine. It creates groups and when one of them talks back to the management, the rest supports her. It creates disobedience in the line.”



Fig. 2: Production line at Asha Garments. Photo: Hasan Ashraf

In Shamol’s line, there were 26 sewing machines arranged in two columns of 13 machines each. There were two workers at each machine, one operator who sewed, and one helper who assisted her. The first sequence of production was at the input table where two helpers, both teenage women, matched the back and front part of the tee shirts inside-out, bundled them and passed the bundles on to the first pair of machines. There, Rahima, a twenty-five-year-old who had learned to master the overlock sewing machine required for this task, sews together the shoulder joints and passes it to her helper Kohinoor, a young woman at the age of fifteen. Kohinoor checks the seams and cuts the extra thread on both sides of the shoulder joints and passes on the t-shirts to the next machine. There, 21-year-old Rita prepares the neck ribs by sewing together the ends of a small strip of fabric on a plain sewing machine while her helper checks them before passing them on to another machine where the

neck rib is sewn on to the t-shirt's body. Before that takes place, on another plain sewing machine, Marufa prepares the stripes of piping that are to be attached on the inner surface of the neck on the back part of the t-shirt body. The work station where the neck rib is sewn together with the t-shirt body is considered as the critical part of making the t-shirts. It was done with an overlock sewing machine that is more difficult to handle than a plain or a flatlock sewing machine, and it also required finer skills to sew the round neck and to glide the body fabric together through the needle feet close to the machine knife. At this machine sits Kamal, a twenty-seven-year-old male worker and an "all-rounder machine operator", i.e. a worker who can operate all different kinds of sewing machines. The line supervisor Shamol called him the most important worker on the line. Kamal was proud of his image of an allrounder and enjoyed outdoing others with his pace of work and precision. The following, the sixth and seventh production steps were done at four plain sewing machines, all operated by women. Here, the necks are finished by sewing the neck piping on the back and by attaching the German garment brand's size and brand labels beneath the neck piping on the middle of the back part. These four operators are assisted by two female and two male helpers who mark the places where to attach the labels and check the results. After that, the sleeves are sewn on to the t-shirt body, again at an overlock machine. The helper standing here checks 'shedding error', i.e. whether the colours of the sleeves and the t-shirt body match exactly, and then marks with chalk the point on the sleeve where the machine operator is supposed to start sewing them on to the edge of the shoulder joint. Following that, at the ninth work station the side seams on both sides are sewn together and then the care label with washing instructions are attached on the left side of the t-shirt, all at overlock sewing machine. The helper here cuts extra threads from the edges of the sleeves and the bottom of the t-shirts and checks the attachment of the care labels. Production steps number ten and eleven are sewing the hems at the sleeves and at the bottom of the t-shirt with flatlock sewing machines which is again checked by the helper who also cuts off remaining threads. After that, she passes the finished t-shirts on to the output table where three quality checkers stand to closely inspect all seams. After a stint of six weeks as a helper at the sewing machines, it was at the output table where I mostly worked during my six months at Asha Garments.³ We put Quality Checked (QC) stickers on the "okay bodies" and send them off to the factory's finishing section for the final inspection, ironing, poly-packing and to make it ready for shipment to – for this order – Hamburg. Wherever we detected mistakes, we put a red arrow sticker and send the t-shirt back to

3 In addition, I also worked as a so-called assembly line quality checker who checks the work processes at all work stations of a line. That had the advantage that I could go to different sewing machines and talk with workers while checking different parts of the t-shirt in the making.

the specific machine to correct the mistakes, or – in shop floor parlance – to “alter” them.



Fig. 3: Garment workers sewing nickers for a different work order. Photo: Hasan Ashraf

As this detailed description of the production process shows, there exist various differences among the workers on the production line, in terms of skill, gender and age.⁴ Most crucial in this regard is the difference between operators, helpers and quality checkers because their relationship was conflictual by design: line supervisors constantly pressurized machine operators to speed up production at the same time as they urged the helpers and the quality checkers to closely check the work of the operator and not to pass on to the next machine or, in the case of the quality checkers, to return any

4 In fact, there are also conflicts between two different kinds of workers working at Asha Garments as well as many other garment factories. These are the *betoner lok*, i.e. those holding timecards and receiving a monthly salary or salaried workers of the factory treated as employees of the factory. For the sake of space, in this paper, I restrict my discussion to the *betoner lok* who make up ninety per cent of the workforce. Apart from them, there exist also so-called *contract-er lok*, workers working under a contractor who is contracted for technically difficult production steps and also in times of emergency, close to shipment deadlines. The *contract-er lok* are high skilled machine operators, they are paid piece rates and they receive their wages from their contractor. The *contract-er lok* are almost exclusively male; they are given more freedoms on the shop floor, but they are few. At Asha Garments there were only 12 to 16.

alter pieces. The tension between quantity and quality of production leads to an internal conflict between workers differently positioned in the production process, not only between the workers and the management staff.⁵ Thus, similar to what Michael Burawoy (1979) describes for the Chicago machine tool factory where he had undertaken ethnographic research in the 1970s, the conflict between management staff and workers gets translated into a lateral conflict among workers. However, as the following episode of an inspection visit by buyer's representatives and the ensuing conflict on the shop floor shows, management did not solely rely on mechanisms in the labour process to inhibit workers' solidarity, but also constantly moralised the relationship between capital and labour.

A moral economy of garment production

On one workday in November 2010, it was extraordinarily quiet on the sewing floor. Only the usual buzzing and rattling of the sewing machines filled the space. The workers were even more concentrating on their work, and also the production manager and the line supervisors were only talking in muted voice. This day was the day of a so-called "buyer's visit" – an inspection from the representatives of the garment brands. The whole floor had been cleaned up for it. When two *buyer quality inspectors* ("buyer quality" in shop floor parlance) arrived they first summoned the *sewing floor quality in-charge* Mamun to bring the *master measurement sheets* of the women's tops we were sewing. Then the inspection round began and Mamun was following the inspectors holding the measurement sheets in his hands. Mamun was very anxious when they meticulously checked the work processes and results at different machines. However, when they left the sewing floor after two hours, they seemed satisfied. The buyers then went down with Mamun to meet the factory management. After some time, Mamun returned to the sewing floor alone. He and the line supervisors were talking about the checking that was going in the store. We also heard that the inspectors were given nice snacks in the conference room.

However, suddenly, the PM rushed to the sewing floor like an arrow and ran up to floor quality Mamun. He screamed at him, "how did it happen that buyer inspectors rejected 300 tops from the finished carton. Where have you been?" The reason for the rejection was that one of the two cardigan pockets on the top mismatched the sample top and the measurement sheet by almost

5 At the same time, management aims to provoke competitions between the different lines on the sewing floor. The production manager or the line supervisors write down the hourly output figures achieved by each line on a huge black board that hangs on the wall in front of all lines. And they constantly point to these digits when pushing lines with lower figures to produce faster. Sometimes, managers also used monetary incentives to entice the lines to compete with each other and thereby increase production.

two millimetres. An eerie silence groped the shop floor immediately. We were all disappointed by the buyer inspectors' decision and anxious what would happen next. The PM appeared vulnerable, nervous, panting and nevertheless angry. He suddenly slapped Mamun in his face and shouted, "this is entirely your fault! Get lost!" Mamun was visibly shocked. He tried to defend himself, "there might be a few items with faults, but not the entire work order!", but this didn't convince the PM. Mamun continued defending himself, "our work is hand-work and one or two millimetres deviation is allowed!" Tears were rolling down his chins. The PM replied, "the buyer quality wants to reject the entire work order and if you cannot ensure the quality that they want, you may leave the factory." Mamun was fired on the spot. He left the factory at once, crying and dejected, not only for being fired but also for being openly insulted and ashamed. The workers and I were speechless. We had thought this kind of humiliating and violent treatment was reserved for workers and now we witnessed a mid-level manager being treated the same. This revealed how precarious everybody's stand was in the garment industry. However, there wasn't much time to contemplate about it. As soon as he had finished with Mamun the PM turned around to us and screamed, "you all are busy bugging; you do not do any work properly!"

There was also more to follow in the aftermath of the inspection. The owner of Asha Garments had pleaded the buyer's representatives not to reject the entire work order, but only 300 pieces of it. The latter agreed, but announced further inspections until the work order was completed. The rejection was a loss for him, but it would have been worse had he lost the whole order or even the buyer. After the buyer representatives had left the factory, the owner called all supervisory staff of the factory to his office as well as a few key machine operators. I was among them. As usual, we were expected to take off our sandals before entering the owner's office and we were supposed to stand in front of his desk with a lowered head. The owner did not speak to us immediately and we could sense the tension in the room. After a few minutes he started drawing on a white paper a circle, and then several others around it. He then stopped and asked as whether we know what this is. Nobody dared to say something, so he said,

"This is a pond. The way you are looking at it, this is what you used to do back in the village. Someone else was digging a pond and you all used to look at that without having a business there being unemployed. I have enough to live on. If I close this factory you all then will have to go back to the villages you came from. If you don't care then go back to the village, be unemployed and wander around. I do not need to keep up this tense business here if you neglect your tasks and put all of us in front of the buyer inspectors. I do this business for you!"

We were then all told to return to our work. The operators and helpers who had remained on the sewing floor were anxious if someone else was fired. The 300 tops were half a day's work, and the management decided not to enquire into who in the assembly line was responsible for the wrongly attached pocket. Instead we were subjected to lecture on management's "moral economy". After we came back from the owner's chamber the PM Khairul asked all of us to gather close around him on the sewing floor. He then told us to touch the factory floor and to swear an oath in the name of Allah to work "properly" to achieve the optimal level of production without any flaws. Before he started with the oath he sermonised at length:

"The helpers work at the bottom of the factory hierarchy, but they are the pillars of this factory. A wrong pattern marking by a helper leads to the wrong needlepoint by the operator. One mistake leads to another. After few machines the supervisors or the line quality [checkers] will anyway detect whose mistake it was and return that to her to alter. It costs time, delays the target and renders arguments and disorder in the [assembly] line. Mistakes are often irreversible. If any confusion arises you can come to us [the PM and supervisors] or compare with the sample body approved by the foreign brand. You should not fear that we could beat or scold you for that. We are like your elder brothers.

Even the tiniest mistake causes financial loss to our owner. We must not cause any loss to our malik ("owner") who pays us. From the top to the bottom – from the MD (Management Director) to the helpers – we all are equal to run the factory like a family. We are like an engine, work in a chain system. Each small part is important to run it. A malfunctioning bobbin or a broken needle hampers production and reduces output. Our MD pays the electricity bills and we get electricity to operate the machines. He manages work orders from the foreign buyers and only then we can work. I am there for you. You are here for us. Many a little makes a mickle. At the moment, the market situation is really depressing and obtaining a work order is getting increasingly difficult and the buyers are reducing the CM (Cost of Manufacturing) day by day.

We need coordination in the line and discipline on the floor. You have to stop laughing, eating and gabbing at the lines and must not leave your machine without permission. You all are given targets, and production is a competition not only between the helpers and operators or between the lines but also against yourself! Minimise the production time and avoid mistakes. Don't forget that the time you pass in the factory, every minute

is paid. This is the company's time not yours, the company owns it. It works like a taxi meter, counts minutes and fair only goes up. You must make your income halal [i.e. permissible according to Islamic law] and do not buy food with taka (Bangladesh's currency) that is haram [opposite to halal, forbidden by Islamic law]. If you do not do what is asked from you then your salary becomes haram.

The bhat ("cooked rice") we eat comes from a successful chain system. We work, receive salary and make a living. Having a meal is ibadat ("worship") and so is work. We salam ("honour") a piece of rice when it falls from our plate because wasting rice is sin. We also salam the salary, even kiss the money and touch it on the forehead on salary day. We respect our salary as we respect the rice. We then must respect our work and this company as well. Now we are going to take an oath and recite after me. You all sit and touch the ground. Since this building is on the ground, technically we are touching the earth."

After this, we all bent over and were about to touch the ground. Suddenly, the operator Shima, whose helper I was on that day, looked at me slightly shaking her head, winking and whispering, "don't touch the floor. If you touch, you will be trapped and then become obliged to follow his orders. You do not have to recite what he says, just hum. Don't touch the ground. He won't read your mind or see you!" I followed her advice and only pretended to take the vow. In fact, it was only the first inner circle of workers right around the PM who touched the ground and who recited with him loudly the following oath,

"bismi-llāhi r-rahmāni r-rahīm [“In the name of Allah; The Most Gracious, the Most Merciful.”] We, the workers and supervisors of Asha Garments, are swearing this oath in the name of Allah that we shall be changed from today. We made a mistake and we shall not repeat it ever again. We shall cooperate with each other, respect the bosses and work responsibly. If we do not understand a task we shall ask the bosses. We shall be pro-work and work with adequate concentration. We will work hard to meet the target. We will keep our workplace and machines clean and running. We will not talk, laugh or eat or leave our machines during work. We will love and respect our company as we love our family and the country. We will not cause any harm to our company. We shall make our money halal and not eat haram, amen!"

The PM then continued his lecture,

“Keep in mind that we cannot work alone. An inflamed finger affects the whole body. If one of you becomes idle, slack and neglects work, it affects the whole line like infectious disease. I will instantly kick you out through the factory main door if you do not work properly or show any disobedience. There is no space for a haramkhor (who eats haram) in this factory. Do not force me to punish you. There is no need to scold you and it is not at all necessary. An ideal son or daughter is not supposed to let his or her parents be scolded.

An ideal worker always respects her machines, does not break or quarrels with the tools. Everyone has to keep their machine clean to avoid oil-spots on the fabric. The foreign customers are clean and much more developed than us. They love cleanness and are not dirty like you. We cannot dissatisfy them. Losing our reputation would reduce the possibility to get a new buyer let alone losing the existing one. When you cut a thread using your tooth instead using the cutter, your lipstick or remaining of the turmeric on your lips from lentil or the curry sauce stains the fabric. The factory is not a place for fashion show. I will not tolerate any mistake or alter in the line or at the output tables. The line quality will count the number of alters and the workers with higher number of alter will be punished standing in front of all holding their ears, get absent in their timecard, if not enough, will be kicked out with an old-shoe garland on the neck.

We all are eating bhat (cooked rice) [living] on company's money. This is your onnoren (rice debt). This is not easy money. Our family members, our mother, father, brother, sister, husband or whoever depend on this. If you continue alter in the line you will not get money to support them. Aside those, thousand others are depending on your money too. You buy vegetable, fish and drink tea so the farmers in the village, the fishermen on the river, tea workers in Sylhet and the vegetable, the fish and the tea sellers in Dhaka are depending on you. You buy a cloth and ride a rickshaw; the weaver and the rickshaw puller and their families depend on your money. If one factory shuts down, more than 50,000 peoples' rizq (sustenance) will be stopped. Now, can you imagine the role of one garment factory and how huge your responsibility is? The whole country's economy is depending on your shoulder. We love our country, don't we? Try to feel it. You have to be honest (shot), enthusiastic (agrohi o utshahee) and loyal (anugoto) to your work and the company.

Today we have sworn the oath touching the earth. If you break this oath then the earth will not take you after death. You all know what will happen when you will die. The grave will press you so hard that you will suffer until the keyamot (judgment day), the day – millions of years to come or might happen any-time. The tunnel between the heaven and your grave will be cut off. Do not forget that you touched the ground.”

After this lengthy lecture the PM left the sewing floor. We became busy asking each other who touched the ground and who did not, and then we engaged in discussions about the PM’s moralising talk. Most workers called it a *bhater khota*, literally a “spiteful remark on eating rice”, a Bangla expression for talking about livelihood provision and relations of dependency. In Bangla, *bhatar* means “provider”, someone providing *bhat* (“rice”) to dependents.⁶ Such *bhater khota* can be found in all social, economic and political domains in Bangladesh, from agrarian patron-client relations (Islam 1974; Schendel 1981; Karim 1990; Siddiqui 2000) to the gendered household relations (Baum 2010) as well as the partisan culture practiced by political parties to denote party loyalty (Centre for Governance Studies 2006, chapter two). Those engaging in *bhater khota* emphasise that the provision of income, food and shelter incurs upon the recipients a “rice debt” (*onnoreenn*) for which the provider can expect unquestioned loyalty and service. A typical feature of *bhater khota* was also to wrap the relations of dependency, debt and subservience in moral notions of kinship and religion. The PM’s *bhater khota* bears all these characteristics. He claimed for himself and other supervisory staff the role of elder brothers vis-à-vis the workers.

The PM cautioned workers that they have an obligation to make their wages *halal*, not *haram*, i.e. to give in a fair day’s work for a fair wage and to seal all these obligations by a religious oath in the name of the Allah. Furthermore, it is very revealing that the PM not only emphasized the debt and loyalty the workers owe to their *malik*, but to the nation at large; and his reference to the Western buyers made it clear what was at stake for the nation: Bangladesh’s path to cleanliness, development and modernity. Of course, the relevance of kinship-and-gender ideologies, religious moralities and national development for labour relations is not particular to Bangladesh. Though in slightly different guises, they have also been prominently researched in South India’s textile industry (De Neve 20005: 204-238) or in Java’s spinning mills (Wolf 1994) or in the steel industries in India (Parry 2009a; Sanchez and Strümpell 2014) and Indonesia (Rudnycky 2012), to name a few prominent

6 In the same vein, *bhatar* is also a synonym for husband, because he is said to provide rice to his wife. The notion of *bhatar*, is also indicative of the significance of *bhat* (“boiled rice”) as a staple food and as a symbol of livelihood and vitality in general. In dictionary form, *bhati* is a classical Bangla adjective that means “enslaved to another for one’s food or maintenance”.

examples. Workers at Asha Garments stand out because of their wholesale rejection of the moralism their employer, managers and supervisors clad in terms of religion, family and nation. They reject it not because they are e.g. disbelievers. Rather the contrary, they all described themselves as devout Muslims (and in a few instances as devout Hindus). They reject the *bhater khota* of the PM and other managerial staff because they regard it as highly offensive: their wages are way below of what they produce for the company and they are hence more than *halal*. Or as Lucky, one of the operators, poignantly put it,

“I am not married to you, or to the owner or to this factory that you can demand more work from me without paying. I work here for money. You can get what you pay. It has become your hobby to extract more work by sweet words, but you don't pay for that extra work.”

Beyond the blatant rejection from the workers, what the PM's talk also clearly reveals is that the moralism on which he draws in his “sweet words” is largely a local one, one that – with the exception of the idea of national economic development – is particular to contemporary Bangladesh. However, as I will show in the following section, everybody involved in Bangladesh's ready-made garment industry, whether owners, managers or workers perceive this industry as constituting a world that is highly distinct from its local surroundings.

“garment-world” and “garment-time”

The world of work in the ready-made garment industry I have just described is also often referred to as the *garments-er jogot*, which literally translates as the “garment-world”, a world that sharply differs from the *bahir-er jogot*, the “outside world” surrounding it. For everybody in Dhaka, the separation of both spaces is manifested in the well-guarded factory walls and gates. They are guarded round the clock by dedicated professional male sentry, and the larger factories also employ armed guards. The six-storied Asha Garments factory was surrounded within high concrete fence with barbed wire on the top. The main entrance was an iron-gate with a low height pocket door on the one side. Without prior permission from management it was not possible to enter the factory premise. Unannounced visitors had to wait at the gate for security clearance from inside – which never came if one didn't have established acquaintances at the higher management level. At the entrance gate the workers had to undergo a “body check” each time they entered or left the factory compound. Male workers and midlevel staff being checked by the male guards in the guards' room next to the entrance while female workers were checked by the female cleaner at a covered corner situated next to the

gate leading to the sewing section. As one of the guards repeatedly claimed, it would be a gross mistake to trust the workers, because “if they got the chance, they would empty out the factory in less than an hour.” Concerns about theft were also the reason why at the least the sewing floors of the garment factories had barred windows in order to prevent workers from throwing out garments items.⁷

Given the barbed-wired walls, the grilled windows, the body checks and the constant surveillance, it does not come as a big surprise that workers often called garment factories “jails” (*jailkhana*), and described their life in them an imprisonment (*bondishala*). At times, especially when referring to the grilled windows on the sewing floor, workers at the Asha Garments described themselves as *khacha-r pakhi* (“caged birds”). Workers described themselves as jailed in the garment-world also explicitly with regard to the time they are obliged to spend in it. They must be at the gate at 8am sharp and the regular workday lasts until 5pm. However, only on rare occasions could workers leave the factory then. Usually they had to continue working far beyond that. Normally, the workday was prolonged by 3-5 hours overtime or sometimes even whole night shifts though workers every day again hoped that today they could go home early. Management announced its decision on overtime only shortly before 5pm, as they said, in order not to frustrate workers too early and hence vitiate the employees’ working morale. When overtime was announced workers vented their anger and tried to persuade management to withdraw the decision, but while I was working at Asha Garments, always in vain. Managers and supervisors reacted with again alluding to the workers’ debt to the factory owner and to the nation and with abusing them and threatening them with wage cuts if they won’t consent. In some instances, I witnessed threats with physical violence or indeed being beaten.

7 The secrecy around the garments items produced at the factories has two further reasons. Firstly, the global garment brands are anxious that their new designs are leaked and in order to prevent this they contractually oblige Bangladeshi garment companies to keep them under tight wraps. Secondly, the secrecy also serves to conceal the connections between particular garment brands and local producers in Bangladesh. Trade unions and labour NGOs, that are usually similarly global as the brands, have often in vain attempted to collect brands’ labels at particular garment factories in order prove the connection between them and the brands, and to hold the latter accountable for the working conditions or for the fatalities there. In Amsterdam, the IIAS archive preserves the garment brands’ labels found on the ground of the Spectrum Sweater Factory that had collapsed in 2006 and the global labour rights groups also had to prove brands’ presence at the factories by careful documentation of the labels found on the factory premise in the events of Tazrin Factory fire (2012) and Rana Plaza collapse (2013). In both cases (and in all others), most of the brands rigorously denied their involvement in these factories and until it was proven disclaimed any responsibilities for the dead workers and their families.

Hence, workers often said that they are forced to live in the factory, i.e. that they do not have much life on their own or with their families.⁸ The following comment by a male sewing machine operator well encapsulates the workers' experience of being in the garment-world,

“Once you step in, you cannot go outside the factory building according to your own wish. You can join the world of garments or you come inside the factory to work on your own wish, but your wish won't work when you need or want to go out.”

The incessantly long days they had to spend working in the factory was only one problem for the garment workers. Another one was getting paid for them. It is only for the working hours that are noted on their timecards for which they can claim wages including overtime payment. When managers and supervisors e.g. threatened them with wage cuts if they won't consent to overtime hours, they most often threatened to cancel the overtime hours of previous workdays noted on their timecards. The timecard is a small piece of blue coloured paper, folded once in the middle that each worker gets issued monthly.⁹

Date	IN	OUT	LATE	O.T.	SIGN	SIGN
1	7:25	5	-	1.5		
2	H					
3	7:25	5	-	1.5		
4	A					
5	7:10	5	-	1.5		
6	7:4					
7	7:30	5	-	1.5		
8	7:4					
9						
10						
11						
12						
13						
14						
15	8	5	-			
16	H					
17	8	6	-	1		
18	8	5	-	1		
19	A					
20	8	5	-			
21	8	5	-			
22	8	5	-			
23	H					
24	8	7.5	-	2		
25	A					
26	8	5	1.20			
27	8	5	30			
28	8	5	80			
29						
30						
31						

Fig. 4: Timecard by author after the first month at Asha Garments. Photo: Hasan Ashraf

- 8 In cases of extreme emergencies when workers were allowed to go out, but only if the production manager issued a gate pass that had to be signed also by the line supervisor of the respective worker. They only signed and issued the gate pass if production would not be hampered, i.e. if someone else would take their place for the time being which was rarely possible. In case it was issued, the gateman noted down for how long she or he was out and afterwards recorded this in the timecard, too.
- 9 In some factories, an electronic punching machine is used instead of paper timecards, but they are few in number.

In Bangla the timecard is called *hajira* card which translates as “attendance card”, but everybody calls it a timecard. On the first page the timecard contains information on the worker’s name, position in the factory, the card number, the month and year, the total workdays, the overtime hours, days of unauthorised absence, holidays and late arrivals. At the bottom of that page is space for signatures of the factory manager and the chairperson. On the second and the third page of the timecard a table of 7 columns and 31 rows is printed. Here is noted for each day a worker’s in and out time, late arrival, and her overtime hours. The last two columns in each row are reserved for signatures, one by the timekeeper who signs every day and another one by the factory management who signs at the end of the month. However, the timecard is not merely an attendance register. Since garment workers are usually not given working contracts, the timecards are the only written document they possess that testify their working hours and in fact their working relationship with their employer.¹⁰ They are therefore extremely cautious to not lose it and they also feel uneasy about leaving their timecard with the factory timekeeper during their workdays.

Taslim, the factory timekeeper at Asha Garments, collects the time cards of each worker each morning when they arrive at the factory. Taslim is a man of 45 years and thus much older than the workers. At 7.45am, he positions himself right next to the entrance gate and stands there for 15 minutes collecting the workers’ timecards and noting their time of arrival on them. He counts tardiness by the minutes and only for a short while. After that Taslim always left the gate and goes to his desk on the shop floor where he copies the arrival times he noted in the timecards into the factory time-book.¹¹ He returns the timecards to the workers only at the end of the workday, i.e. when management decides that the workday is over, in rare instances at 5pm and usually after overtime three to five hours later. Workers constantly fear that Taslim – at the behest of management – records lesser working hours than they actually have worked or that he even cancels already recorded working hours; and they know that this will happen if they protest against working hours or working conditions or if they make too many mistakes. Hence, the timecards are an important means by which management solves one perennial problem of capitalists, that workers not only come to the factory, but that they also work when they are there (Parry 2009b: 105). Consequently, workers often described the timecards as “remote controls” or “video game buttons” through which management controls them.

10 Asha Garments later started to give separate ID cards with a photo of the worker on it.

11 During factory inspections the factory time-book is regularly checked for the maintenance of legal provisions regarding working hours. Workers and unionists in various factories are convinced that managers maintain a second, “clean” time-book for these occasions.

Also beyond the “timecards”, “time” was an obsession in the *garments-er jogot*. Indeed, among the most important aspects in which the *garments-er jogot* differs from the *bahirer jogot* is time. As I was often told, the garment-world is ruled by “garment-time” or *garments-er time* in Bangla. Time is always chased on the shop floor, and is referred to as something that can be saved, hoarded or stockpiled. Line supervisors constantly look at bundles of un- and half-finished t-shirts to re-calculate hourly production targets and pressurize workers to outperform them, all to make sure that they get out the maximum production. As the Production Manager Khairul liked to say in English followed by a Bangla translation, “time and tide wait for none!” Less prosaically, he also constantly reminded workers that, “a minute you waste to finish your tasks incurs loss on our *malik* (“owner”). We must not do this to our *malik* as we are living from him!” As this shows, *garments-er time* is not the same for workers, management staff and owners. Management’s main concern is to increase the length of the workday as well as the intensity of work (or to maintain them at high levels) or, in Marx’ classic terms, to obtain both absolute and relative surplus value (ibid. 2015 [1887]: 358ff).

It is important to note in this regard that this obsession with time is also directly related to the global production chain that constitutes the ready-made garment industry. The garment industry lives on fast fashion that is mass consumed in the cities of North America, Europe and elsewhere, and that is mass produced in places like Asha Garments and other factories in South and East Asia (and elsewhere). The garment brands set the producers so-called lead-times within which the ordered garments must be produced, and which correspond to the fast-changing fashion seasons.¹² As already mentioned above, the schedules these lead-times set are very tight, and in the usual contracts between global brands and Bangladeshi companies the latter are declared fully responsible for sticking to these schedules. Any delays lead to contractual penalties that the Bangladeshi companies try to avoid at any cost, e.g. by an expensive shipment by air freight instead of the usual sea freight. Hence, the obsession with chasing and husbanding time in factories like Asha Garments. Thus, the time regime here is not “local”, but “global”, and so is the “garment-world” where this regime applies.

12 The fashion brands get together in major ‘fashion weeks’ around major cities in the world, from traditional fashion hubs in New York, London, Milan, and Paris, to new ones in (to name a few) Berlin, Tokyo, Los Angeles, São Paulo, Shanghai or Amsterdam. The proliferation of fashion weeks also broke down the traditional Spring/Summer (January-June) and Fall/Winter (July-December) fashion seasons into by now almost 52 “micro seasons”, so that today’s new t-shirt is out of fashion next week.

Conclusion

The stress workers, supervisors and managers in Bangladesh's garment industry place on the divide between the *garments-er jogot* and the *bahir-er jogot* substantiates Burawoy's and De Neve's argument for the importance of labour-process oriented approaches to industrial work. The "garment-world" is separate from the "outside world" and can only be understood from an insider's perspective. Relations and notions that pertain to the *bahir-er jogot* in Dhaka and Bangladesh, regarding gender, class, authority, morality and the nation, are brought into the garment-world, but they are renegotiated here, put to new uses (e.g. in PM Khairul's speech) and contested and resisted in novel ways (e.g. workers' refusal to take the oath or their insistence of the wage relation). Thus, workers, supervisors and managers, as well as the nation and morality are made on the shop floors in Bangladesh's garment industry. As I have also shown, the spatiality and temporality of the garment factories in Mirpur and other sites in Bangladesh can only be understood when placed in the context of a global garment industry. The relentless grind in Bangladesh's garment industry with imposed overtime, timecards, the withholding or cancelling of payments etc. is a result of the pressure to fulfil daily production targets and to remain within the lead-time of the order as determined by the global brands; and the *garments-er time* that is thus constituted can only be enacted in a corresponding world, a *garments-er jogot*, in which factory buildings have grilled windows, are surrounded by barbed-wired walls that leave only narrow entry gates that are often even locked in order to prevent garment workers from sneaking out.

Furthermore, highlighting the globality of the garment factories in Bangladesh is important beyond academic debates. The ready-made garment factories in Bangladesh are known for their notorious working conditions. These hit the headlines of the global press and news channels after one of the frequent accidents has killed dozens or hundreds of garment workers, such as (to name the most recent prominent examples) the collapse of the Rana Plaza complex in 2013 or the fires burning the Tazreen Fashion factory and the Aswad Composite Mill to the ground in 2012 and 2013 respectively. In the aftermath of these catastrophes, the global garment brands disavow any responsibility for the deaths and the working conditions provoking them until it has been proven that the factories had been working on their orders. Even if that is proven, the global brands present the working conditions in Bangladesh's ready-made garment industry as Bangladesh's problem for which the governments and companies of Bangladesh are responsible. In their depictions, the fact that Bangladeshi governments and companies don't solve the problem is due to their corruption and/ or their lack of concern for workers' and human rights which the global brands in turn present as typical for Bangladesh and Bangla culture. There are of course also many international actors launching well-meant initiatives, e.g. Dutch or German development

aid programs financing projects for building integrity, electric and fire safety in Bangladeshi garment factories. Indeed, in many instances, the factory fires had proven so lethal because the factory gates or the gates of the sewing floor had been under lock and key, so that workers could not leave the burning factory or the sewing floor. However, these programs narrowly focus on technocratic solutions and abstract from the global realities shaping the actual everyday labour processes.¹³ By turning a blind eye to these realities human resource development projects depoliticise them. As I hope to have shown in this paper, the re-politicisation of these realities requires, following Burawoy (2000a), addressing both the actual micro-practices of shop floor relations and management, and the ways these are embedded in the macro-forces operating through the garment industry's global production chain.

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13 For further and more detailed information on these programs and their effects see Siddiqi 2015; Ashraf 2017; Prentice and Neve 2017; Ashraf and Prentice forthcoming.

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