

Reconceiving the grain heap: Margins and movements on the market floor

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This article returns to what was once an ethnographic staple in the sociology of India: the post-harvest grain heap. Having long occupied centre stage in analyses of a moneyless, redistributive transactional order widely known as the jajmani system, it has also been the subject of influential critique, where it has been argued that the misconceived heap sustained a powerful anthropological fiction. Moving beyond these positions, which seem to have left the heap grounded in the past, the grain heap in this work is reconceptualised as a critical entry point and analytic for the study of contemporary commodity markets. Based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork in an agricultural market (mandi) in Madhya Pradesh, it finds that it is along the seams or internal margins of the market, at routine sites of physical transfer and exchange, assembly and dispersal, integration and disruption, that heaps of agricultural produce materialise. An analysis of critical aspects of the heap—its position, composition, measurement and distribution—provides sharp insights into the changing dynamics of the market and its complex relationships. In the process, it also reveals important yet often unnoticed shifts in the sources and distribution of economic and social margins, and their diverse and differentiated effects on market life and livelihoods.

Keywords: markets, materiality, commodity exchange, agriculture, central India

I

Introduction

This article returns to what was once an ethnographic staple in the sociology and social anthropology of India: the post-harvest grain heap. For generations, anthropologists have travelled—in person and via the imagination—to the quintessential village threshing floor of ‘traditional

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India' (Dumont 1999 [1970]: 104). Here, in visit after visit, they observed and recorded the division of the grain heap among different members of the village community, 'the *locus classicus*' of a moneyless, redistributive transactional order widely known as the jajmani system (Vasavi 1998: 43).

In such accounts of the grain heap, village exchange between high-caste landowning patrons and their service-providing clients was modelled on an analysis of the division of labour in society and observed to have always been made through payments in kind. The entire system was based within a 'non-market economy regulated by customary rights and privileges and intrinsically bound up with caste relationships' (Harris 2005: 527). Over the years, the dominance of this transactional order was challenged in field studies of grain-based provisioning transactions that differed significantly from the jajmani system (Vasavi 1998). A more fundamental critique has also argued that the jajmani system did not constitute a system at all, and was really the construction of a highly successful 'anthropological fiction' (Fuller 1989: 34). Most significantly, even as the anthropologists of the time debated among themselves as to whether the jajmani system was 'integrative' or 'exploitative' (Fuller 1989: 35), they shared a singular view of the market as a relatively recent phenomenon, 'an alien imposition', fast threatening to break down traditional society (Vidal 2003: 1342).

In an important essay, entitled 'Misconceiving the Grain Heap', C. J. Fuller contrasted this preponderance of anthropological writings on the traditional, unchanging and non-monetary rural economy with an extensive historical archive, from the pre-colonial period onwards, documenting the role of markets, monetary exchange and cash revenue systems across diverse regions of agrarian India (1989: 33). In light of this evidence, Fuller argued that the anthropological insistence on purely customary payments and payments in kind was a disciplinary embarrassment. It erased from view the co-existence of private and exclusive rights, the extensive use of monetary instruments of exchange, and did not take into account the complex roles and penetration of the colonial revenue state, which often extracted its share through payments in cash. Fuller concluded his critique of the concept of the jajmani system and its 'bucolic symbol' with the hope that his deconstruction might finally 'clear the path to more productive analysis of forms of exchange in Indian society, including those which centre on the grain heap, as well as to better comparative understanding of money and the market' (ibid.: 45, 57).

Unfortunately, in the three decades since the publication of that essay, the grain heap seems to have fallen out of fashion and has, thus, largely remained both empirically and analytically grounded in an Indian past. In this regard, while Fuller suspected that anthropologists had allowed themselves to be all ‘too readily beguiled’ by the grain heap (Fuller 1989: 34), is it possible that in reality we have not allowed ourselves to be beguiled nearly enough? For it is not only the market that has remained hidden in the anthropological analysis of the grain heap, but the heap that has been missing from the anthropology of the market.

This essay, then, marks both a departure and a return. Far from its original (anthropological) place as a symbol of a traditional, unchanging and non-monetary economy, the grain heap is here reconceptualised as a critical entry point and analytic for the study of contemporary commodity markets. The primary site of observation and analysis now moves from the threshing floor to the market yard, and from the village to the *mandi*, an agricultural market commonly found in market towns and cities across India. Of course, we know that agricultural produce does not move directly from field to *mandi*, and heaps form at different times and places as materials flow in and out of market yards and other sites of exchange within complex commodity systems. But we focus here on the *mandi* as the most important site for the state regulation of agricultural marketing and exchange between primary producers and the agents and buyers of agricultural commodities. The ethnographic centre of action is Harda *mandi*, a notified market yard overseen by an Agricultural Produce Marketing Committee (APMC) located in Harda, Madhya Pradesh (MP), a small but bustling market town with a population of around 74,000 (Census 2011) and the administrative headquarters of an agriculturally productive district by the same name.

In this particular market, open auctions are conducted directly from covered platforms, where a small number of bullock carts and a much larger number of tractor-trolleys filled with produce from the surrounding villages are lined up by farmers for sale. As the auction proceeds, heaps of grain (wheat), oilseeds (soybean) and pulses (gram) build up over the course of the day in a rectangular compound that one enters immediately after crossing the auction sheds. Traders’ shops and godowns line the yard and two electronic weighbridges and numerous manual weighing scales dot and define the area, where produce is weighed, deposited, mixed, bagged, stitched, dragged, stacked and stored or dispatched according to the day’s plans for different buyers. It is here, along the seams or internal

margins of the market, at routine sites of physical transfer and exchange, assembly and dispersal, integration and disruption, that one finds heaps of agricultural produce materialise in the mandi. Magnetic and mundane, there is good reason for an anthropologist to be drawn to them. Based on four consecutive agricultural seasons¹ spent field-working among the heaps of Harda mandi, this article seeks to explain why.

What follows unfolds in four scenes, or along what we might think of as four ‘seams’ of commodity exchange, each centrally concerned with one or more aspects of the heap—its position, composition, measurement and distribution. In each case, the analysis of the heap and its movements reveals critical insights into changes in the structure and organisation of the agricultural market and the changing relationships among and between its major players—farmers, traders, labourers and market functionaries. Finally, in each instance, we find that the heap is the material centre of moral dilemmas—on questions of quality, weight, wages and welfare—that are deeply, if not always openly, contested on the ground.

It is in this respect that this article marks a return. Both on the threshing ground and market floor, the grain heap seems to derive its enduring power and analytical purchase from a common source: relationships. The problem, then, was not so much the anthropological enchantment with the heap, but the perception that the market was an altogether abstract, impersonal and self-regulating mechanism of exchange. Today, however, as we shall see towards the end of the essay, the problem is no longer that the market remains an abstraction outside the analytical grasp of the heap. Instead, it is the mandi and its messy heap that is increasingly perceived by the policymakers charged with its regulation as too embedded—materially and socially—for the technocratic visions of an integrated and uniform market. This is precisely where renewed ethnographic attention on the grain heap may provide the analytical clarity and complexity that the study of the market demands. For what we see and sight in the movements of and within the heap is the constant interaction and interrelations between materiality and abstraction, ‘logics’ and ‘logistics’ as they work themselves out in economic life on the ground (Guyer 2016). It is to this relational complexity, then, that we now (re)turn.

¹ The fieldwork on which this article is based was primarily conducted over 18 months between 2008 and 2010, with the several shorter visits conducted over subsequent years, most recently in February 2017.

II

The mixing of the heap and the making of the ratio

During one of my very first days in the mandi, a senior trader walked me along the auction platform, where post-harvest arrivals of soybean were lined up for sale. A group of traders and commission agents gathered around each tractor-trolley and sampled the produce parked there before the bidding on the lot commenced. They did this by digging into the trolley with their bare hands, often sinking elbow deep to pull up fistfuls of the yellow oilseed. They then sifted the sample around in their palms, making a visual assessment of the lot. After this, they popped a few soybeans into their mouths and chewed on them, continuing to chew and spit as the bidding proceeded.

My tutor transferred some soybean into my hands and drew me aside. Soybean purchasing, he explained, works in relation to a particular quality specification—the FAQ—an important market acronym that stands for Fair Average Quality. For soybean, the standard FAQ is the ratio 2:2:10.

The 10 represents the acceptable moisture level: here, 10 per cent. ‘Stick your hand into the trolley’, he ordered. ‘What do you feel? Can you feel how cool it is? That’s one way to judge moisture: the cooler it is, the moister.’ Chewing is the other important way to test moisture: the softer the soybean, the higher the moisture content. Crack your teeth on it and you know it’s good and dry. ‘Chew for yourself’, he directed, watching with a smile, as I awkwardly chewed on soybean for the first time and tried not to choke myself.

Next, there is a 2 per cent allowance for damaged seeds. These green, discoloured and misshapen seeds can be spotted as you sift the soybean between your hands and make an assessment as to their proportion in a particular lot.

Finally, there is another allowance of 2 per cent for foreign material (FM): mud, stones, twigs and all manner of things that might naturally accompany freshly harvested agricultural produce from field to market. Here, the trader paused. ‘Don’t mind it’, he grinned. ‘This is bad foreign material, not fancy foreign material like you!’ He laughed heartily, delighted at his joke, while gently tossing the sample around in his cupped palms and then gradually spreading his fingers to make a sieve, just wide enough to let the FM pass through.

When commission agents receive a price point at which to make the day’s purchases on behalf of their principals (usually soybean processors),

it is assumed that the price is for 'FAQ *maal*', that is, for produce that meets FAQ specifications. This is foundational to those working inside agricultural markets: price is never generic and is always quoted with a certain commodity-specific standard of variety and quality in mind.² For commission agents, maintaining the ratio is vital, because if they fail to deliver on the specifications, the plant receiving the consignment will make deductions on their fixed commission. On the other hand, if they err in the opposite direction and buy only superior quality produce that is well within the standard ratio, they may not suffer deductions, but are effectively delivering produce that should have fetched a price higher than FAQ.

In practice, mandi commission agents buy different lots of soybean, below, around and above FAQ in the auction. The challenge is to mix these different lots to 'make the ratio' (ratio *banana*) in such a way that it will pass the quality checks at the plant, minimising deductions and maximising margins. This skill—the ability to assess and buy multiple lots of produce of varying quality and sizes at competitive prices in the auction, all the while maintaining the overall ratio—is one that traders prize and for which the best in the business are known for their 'mastery'. But, the making of the ratio is not only a matter of traders' skill; it is also made through manual labour. After the auction, the soybean bought from numerous farmers by a particular trader is deposited, layer upon layer, in a heap on the floor outside that trader's shop. As this happens, a group of women labourers physically mix the produce by transferring it back and forth from one heap to another, using rectangular tin scoops, their multiple, swift and simultaneous actions mixing the material as evenly as possible as it eventually gathers and forms a new, more homogenous heap. This practice is known as the *paala*.

In the mandi, the *paala* is a common and controversial market practice. For soybean processors, it is a 'major headache', demanding constant scrutiny and the enforcement of conditions in their relationships with mandi commission agents. Processors also feel that this mixing serves as a disincentive for farmers to take steps to clean their produce before bringing it into the market. Unsurprisingly, mandi traders hold a different position. In a context where produce is of highly variable quality, grown and harvested under the diverse conditions and constraints of smallholder

² In analysing the meaning of price for global cotton, Çaliskan (2010) writes about Strict Low Middling (SLM) as the 'measurable and negotiable constant' in setting the specifications for commodity purchasing and trade (pp. 242–43).

cultivation, they argue that this ability to take different lots of seed—moist and dry, bold and shrivelled—and to turn all of it into one large lot, to make it into one ratio (*ek jaise banana*), is not malpractice, but is the real *ras* or essence of mandi trade. Now, several months into fieldwork, this is how one of Harda's 'mastermind' traders put it to me:

When you do the paala, you are working with what you have, what is already there. You are simply making the most of the different qualities of maal (produce) that come into the market. This is not the same as adulteration (*milawat*). I'm not taking mud and mixing it into super quality seed and then passing it off as something else. I am finding the margins inside the ratio. That is *vyapaar*, trade.

As evening fell, the rhythmic sounds of the *paalawalis*³ swishing filled the market yard, as the soybean was mixed into new heaps, ready for bagging, weighing, loading and dispatch. The trader continued. 'It's because of the paala that everything, even foreign material, has a place and purpose in the mandi. After all,' he chuckled, 'We even managed to mix you in!'

It is hard to convey the sense of acknowledgement that I felt being mingled in with soil, sticks and stones that day. But by then, I knew that treating me as nothing other than a bit of FM was the best thing that the traders could do with me: treat me as another presence to be mixed in the mandi without ruining the ratio. Perhaps more significantly, I had come to realise that the practice of the paala and the debates that it provoked cut to the heart of one of the most critical dilemmas of commodity marketing: the question of quality and 'the moral economy of grades and standards' in contemporary market life (Busch 2000).⁴ Here, as is the case with most vital aspects of agricultural marketing, one must begin by taking into account the contexts and relations of agricultural production.

First and foremost, the practice of the paala points to the remarkably heterogeneous quality of produce that comes into the mandi for sale. In Harda, the arrivals are composed of lots of varying sizes, which are transported via a range of vehicles to the market yard by farmers from the 196 villages in the mandi's catchment area. Even a relatively untrained eye

³ Paalawalis are women labourers performing paala.

⁴ For another expansion on the concept of moral economy and contestation around norms around transparency, naturalness and freshness of perishable commodities and their trade, see Freidberg (2014).

scanning the platforms will pick up on the variations in quality across the waiting lots. These reflect the very diverse production conditions that farmers with different landholding sizes and differentiated access to resources must contend with, not only from season to season but within any given agricultural season. This includes significant variations in the quality of soybean produced by the same farmer, often cultivated on different plots of land, harvested on different days and by different methods, and stored in different kinds of spaces and structures over different lengths of time.

In some cases, the produce has also been further handled by village and town-based intermediaries, who have already mixed together soybean from multiple small farmers and labourers. The produce from these *phutkar* or marginal (retail-level) exchanges outside the regulated market is then aggregated and brought for sale in the mandi. At other times, especially following the harvest, one might also find a few landless labourers, who have managed to assemble a bag of soybean, gleaned from the fields after the harvesters have powered through. Having rented space on a 'per bag' basis on a tractor, they have now come to sell the seeds of this labour in the market town.

It is in this context that mandi traders argue that practices like the paala essentially enable greater inclusion and integration in the market. The presence of multiple buyers allows for competitive bidding across varieties and qualities, including by those who specialise at both ends of the quality spectrum, from superior seed to moist, muddy and damaged soybean. The mixing of various lots into passably homogenised heaps is what creates the possibility for all kinds of sellers with different qualities of produce to find a buyer in the mandi and for all kinds of buyers to search for margins from mandi trade. But, what some consider the mandi's great virtue is thought of by others as its cardinal vice.

'These kinds of practices, throughout our commodity system, have ruined Indian soybean. As a result, our reputation is as good as mud in global markets.' I repeatedly heard versions of this complaint from soymeal exporters and large trading corporations, expressing their frustrations with soybean procurement and processing in MP. In their view, the persistence of practices like the paala generates the scope for the widespread irregularities and inefficiencies that riddle Indian agricultural markets and prevent 'channel control' by large, organised, integrated corporate players. Most of all, the paala signals to farmers that quality does not matter and foils attempts to introduce strict processes for grading and quality control in

primary markets. In fact, processors and trading corporations argue that the paala encourages the ulterior ‘tendencies’ of cultivators, who not only resist cleaning their produce but may actively layer lots with mud and push moist soybean to the bottom of their trollies, passing off poor quality produce at better prices than it deserves.

Quality assurance is one of the grounds that large agribusiness corporations emphasise in their demands for market reforms to enable direct procurement from farmers outside regulated mandis. In corporate procurement hubs, field managers can use digital moisture meters and other more rigorous methods of sampling to ascertain the quality of their purchases. However, as recent research on private procurement and contracting systems in MP and elsewhere have revealed, these arrangements generate their own conditions of inclusion and exclusion (Kumar 2014; Narayanan 2012). Unlike regulated mandis like the one in Harda, which is open all year round, private procurement operations open and shut based on their own commercial calculations and targets, depending upon location and varying from season to season. Moreover, corporate procurement channels tend to restrict access to an exclusive network of farmers linked to the company, usually through their own local agents and intermediaries. Finally, farmers who do access these single-buyer procurement channels are likely to experience fairly high rates of rejection, as produce often fails to meet the demands of the FAQ standard. In places like Harda, such farmers would then eventually have to make their way to the mandi auction. Here, this once-rejected, below-FAQ lot will almost unfailingly fetch some price for its producer and then find itself transferred and mixed via the paala into a larger heap prepared for onwards sale.

The paala, then, is a practice that is essential to the material assembly of a globally traded commodity: FAQ soybean. In this regard, the mixing of soybean in mandis in MP to produce a larger, more homogenous lot is similar to the ‘cleansing movement’ of Melanesian social objects as they move ‘back and forth between heaps’ in the assembling of prestations in Ambrym ceremonial grounds. It is through this process, which explicitly rids it of any relation to the person who brought it, that the object, as Rio puts it, ‘becomes large-scale’ (2009: 296–97). But, in the mandi, the very same cleansing and assembling practice—the mixing of the heap to ‘make the ratio’—also simultaneously (and quite literally) muddies the market. So, does the paala exemplify the ‘integrative’ character of the mandi

system or is it a malpractice that epitomises its most ‘exploitative’ and inefficient attributes?⁵ Isn’t it necessarily both at once? When it comes to contemporary debates over quality in Indian commodity markets, we find the mixing of the soybean heap in the mandi yard poses questions in terms that are strikingly similar to those provoked earlier by the division of the jajmani heap on the threshing floor.

III

The weight of the heap and the balance of power

We now turn from the composition of the heap to the vexations around its weight. In the mandi, no other market practice, not even the paala, can compete with the descriptive intensity, audacity and moral indignation that animates conversations around weighment.⁶ Across mandi actors—farmers, traders, labourers and market functionaries—there is unequivocal agreement that weight is a central element of market exchange and one of the most sensitive measures of the changing balance of power in the mandi. The position of the heap in this process is of paramount importance. The question here is: Does the heap come before the weight or the weight before the heap? The implications, as we shall see, are manifold.

In Harda, for the greater part of mandi history, it was the heap that came first. After the auction, farmers would deposit their produce in a discrete heap outside the commission agent or trader’s shop. Each individual lot was then bagged and each stuffed *bora* (gunny bag) was individually weighed by the *taulauti*, the trader’s weighman, who worked the manual three-legged scale, spinning the bag and balancing it adeptly using his foot. The weight of the bags was then added up to arrive at the final weight for the lot. For farmers, much was lost—in terms of produce and pride—between the heap and the weight.

First, the manual weighing scale was susceptible to tampering, including the use of faulty weights and the *taulauti*’s dextrous feet. But, even before it got to the scale, this system allowed for the widespread siphoning

⁵ For a summary of the debate on the ‘integrative’ versus ‘exploitative’ positions on the jajmani system, see Fuller (1989: 35).

⁶ Weights and measures and the common malpractices associated with them have long featured in studies of the market and in marketplace ethnographies. See, for instance, Braudel (1982), Kula (1986) and Mintz (1961).

of grain, as produce was purposefully spilled and swept up without ever making it into the bag. Often, entire bags were also reported to have been lifted and stolen away in broad daylight. These acts, both subtle and audacious, were committed in collusion with traders and commission agents, and were executed by male *hammals* (labourers and head-load workers) and *taulautis* (weighmen), and by female *soopdawalis* (sweepers) employed by the traders to collect the spilled produce. Recalling their days on the other side of the heap, farmers in Harda described the anxiety, helplessness and humiliation they experienced each time they waited for the weighing to conclude.

Then, at the turn of this century, in the year 2000, an electronic weighbridge was installed in Harda mandi and put into action for the first time. The weighbridge changed the entire process. Now, farmers drive their tractors onto the weighing platform twice, first full and then empty, and are given a receipt for each weight taken. The weighbridge operator who takes the two readings that determine the weight of the lot is employed on contract by the Mandi Committee. Unlike the *taulauti* in the manual system, the weighbridge operator is not tied to a trading firm. For this service, farmers pay a fee of ₹10. In between the two weights, they deposit their produce in a heap outside the trader's shop. Increasingly, this deposit is made by activating a hydraulic pump that raises the trolley to empty out its contents in a matter of minutes. More generally, farmers no longer need to wait as they did in the past for the time-consuming process of individual bagging and manual weighing to be completed. Once the second weight has been taken, they can immediately proceed with their weightment slips to the trader for payment. The mixing, bagging, stacking, storing and dispatch of the produce are solely the cost and concern of the trader. Most importantly, since the weight is now taken before the heap, if grain is stolen from the market floor, it no longer goes missing from the farmer's payment, but from the trader's account. It should not come as a surprise, then, that soon after the activation of the weighbridge, reports of grain theft in the mandi declined sharply.

The electronic weighbridge seems to have worked as an effective technological fix for the problem of manual weightment, replacing manipulation and appropriation with a quicker, cleaner, upgraded process for assuring secure and accurate weighing of agricultural produce. The success of the weighbridge in Harda, however, cannot be understood without taking into account the changing balance of power in the mandi. Indeed, the struggle

over the weighbridge was often described as the mandi's *mahayudh*: the epic battle for control over one of the market's most vital everyday practices. It was a battle, moreover, that was fought inside the market yard, but was fuelled by the changing dynamics of agricultural production in Harda's fields and the reaping of its political crop.

To begin with, the viability of the weighbridge as the primary mode of weighing in the mandi is itself an indicator of the economic status of its farmers. By the time the weighbridge was introduced in 2000, Harda had experienced nearly two decades of irrigation-driven expansion in agricultural production, beginning with the arrival of canal irrigation in the early 1980s and the steady replacement of rain-fed cotton (and a range of intercropped cereals, pulses and oilseeds) with the mono-cropping of soybean and irrigated wheat. During this period, this major public investment in irrigation was followed by considerable private investment in agricultural production by Harda's farmers, a significant proportion of who are medium and large cultivators.⁷ One sign of this was that by the late 1990s, the bulk of Harda's agricultural produce was already being transported by farmers to the mandi in tractor-trolleys and not in the bullock carts that had carried cotton into the old mandi.

Any serious student of agricultural markets, however, would know better than to assume that increases in production or the presence of tractors would logically translate into improvements in the accuracy of market weighing. Many mandis across India, including larger markets than Harda, do not have electronic weighbridges. Moreover, in Harda itself, during the sharpest rise in production in the decade and a half before the weighbridge, farmers suffered significant losses due to theft and faulty weighing at the hands of traders and labourers. What, then, tipped the balance in favour of farmers in Harda mandi at this time? A large measure of the answer is tied to the growing assertiveness and political strength of a particular caste of cultivators: the Jats.

Among the four, main landowning agricultural castes in Harda—the Gujjars, Rajputs, Jats and Bishnois—all of who are recorded to have

⁷ Harda is located at the tail end of the Tawa Command Area and has benefited from canal irrigation from this source since the early 1980s. Further, in MP, this small district stands out for its relatively large landholdings, which are roughly double the size of the MP average (4.43 ha in Harda to 2.02 ha in MP) and correspondingly, for the high proportion of medium and large farmers (63 per cent in Harda versus 32 per cent in MP).

travelled from Marwar and settled in these parts around 200 to 250 years ago, the Jats, while numerically small, have been the most aggressive buyers of land. Their rising political clout in Harda, however, is much more recent and is usually dated back to 1993. This was the year that Harda's first Jat member of the state legislative assembly (MLA) was elected to a seat he held onto for four consecutive terms. Older members of the mandi remember Kamal Patel as a young boy, waiting outside his commission agent's shop for small sums of cash during the dry days of cotton cultivation. Now, a young man, recently returned from his studies in Indore, Kamal Patel represented the freshly irrigated aspirations of Harda's farmers, especially of the Jat community. His first electoral victory coincided with the near-complete replacement of cotton in Harda's fields with the introduction of a new cash crop—soybean—followed by the rapid expansion of a second crop of irrigated wheat. But, it was not just the fields that were changing colours. This conjuncture was commonly described by Harda's residents as a period of political transition in town and countryside, from the mercantile grip of the Nagar Seth, a Congress cotton trader from the oldest and largest Marwari firm in the mandi to the growing prosperity and political power of a soybean farmer fielded by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and with him, to the rising political capital of the Jat community.

As one might expect, the realities of local political leadership and constituency-building were ridden with in-fighting, violent feuding, factionalism, and uneasy alliances within and across party lines, castes, and among individuals with multiple, competing economic interests. Equally, it is no surprise that these political power dynamics were expressed and consolidated in the local agricultural market, which has long been an arena for the launching of political careers in diverse agrarian regions of India. The mandi was, therefore, a natural site for Kamal Patel's early political activities, which included public protests against traders and their multifarious malpractices. By the time the fight for the weighbridge got underway, the mandi was already a site prepared for mobilisation.

Leading the charge were two groups of activist farmers, both led by Jats—the local chapter of the Bharatiya Kisan Sangh (BKS) and another local organisation called the Kisan Panchayat (KP). In the mandi, credit for spearheading the campaign is almost always given to the charismatic young leader of the KP, a 90-acre Jat farmer with an MSc degree in agriculture. He convinced a doubtful district collector to order a one-month

field trial to see if the weighbridge could be made to work. Then, diving into the thick of action in the market yard, he personally supervised the implementation at the weighbridge, repeatedly explaining the new process, and intervening whenever disputes erupted, both among anxious farmers and between farmers and traders.

As a result of these individual and organisational efforts, farmers from the BKS and KP were able to overcome both administrative inertia and resistance from local traders. The trial period was extended and a few months later, electronic weighing became the sole, permanent system of weighing for tractor-trolleys in the mandi. In the years that followed, moreover, it was the constant vigilance and frequently, the agitational presence of farmers that ensured the continuous operation of the weighbridge in the market yard. In this regard, the Jats provoke mixed responses among the wider population of farmers in Harda, many of whom are wary and frustrated by their aggressive behaviour in the mandi and the routine flexing of political muscle for personal gain. At the same time, farmers across castes also acknowledge that consequential improvements in market practices for all producers in the mandi, such as the weighbridge, would not have been attained in Harda without Jat-led political activism.

The weighbridge marked a turning point in more than one way. As Gopal, a Gujjar farmer, put it, 'It is hard to explain how weak it made you feel, watching your grain treated like it didn't belong to you. They were shameless and we were desperate, so they had their way with us and with our grain.' After long years spent feeling humiliated, watching their produce being lifted, spilled, spread out and siphoned, for farmers in Harda securing an accurate weight for their produce meant the recovery of a sense of ownership in the mandi.

'If you want to know how strong farmers are in a market look first at the mandi floor', Vermaji, one of Harda's oldest market functionaries, once advised me:

If grain is scattered all around, spilled and swept up by others, as farmers scramble to secure their loads, you know that the farmers are weak. In Harda today, the platform is clean and spillage is minimal. And if you try to flick any more than a sample requires, a fight is certain to erupt. It is a good sign that farmers here are strong, that they can hold their own in the mandi.

IV

Working the heap and the wages of labour

In my many conversations about changes in the techniques of weighment in the market yard, it was Harda's senior hammals and *mukkadams* (labour organisers) who were the most ambivalent about the effects. On the one hand, they readily admitted that farmers had been deeply wronged under the old manual system of weighment. At the same time, they recounted with great humour and some pride, their part in the various ploys by which grain had been siphoned and stolen from hapless *kisans* (farmers) in the past. More seriously, they pointed out that their ill-gotten access to agricultural produce had over many years slowly but substantially augmented their incomes from labouring in the mandi. The electronic weighbridge brought an end to this important additional source of earnings for market labourers. Its arrival also resulted in the departure altogether of certain kinds of labour and services from the mandi floor.

As already mentioned, under the old manual system, trading firms had employed women sweepers, who were responsible for gathering the spilled produce outside traders' godowns. Here, a well-developed understanding was forged between traders, hammals and soopdawalīs, as produce was liberally diverted from waiting heaps and deftly spilled during bagging. As one old labourer evocatively recalled, the soopdawalīs were quick and clever and would 'fan the grain on the market floor with their hands... the way a peacock spreads his feathers', minimising the appearance of spillage before briskly sweeping it all up. For their labour, the sweepers retained a proportion of the spoils as payment. The extent of such accumulation was reported to be significant. It was often said in the mandi that 'houses have been built in Harda from sweeping the market floor'.⁸

Soon after the installation of the weighbridge, the energetic teams of soopdawalīs found at each shop disappeared from the mandi. The reason was evident enough: the removal of the exposed, un-weighed heap under the new system now foreclosed the theft of farmers' produce from the

⁸ Aman Sethi's (2011) book *A Free Man* has a short, fascinating description of accumulation and enterprise built on sweeping grain from the market floor. The story of Kalyani, known in Delhi's Naya Bazar as 'chidiya—the little bird who scratched around for grain'—shares much in common with the stories I was told about the most enterprising soopdawalīs in Harda mandi.

market floor. And with the end of intentional spillage, the prospects for groups of sweepers also dried up. Instead, today only three elderly women labourers appointed by the Mandi Committee (and not by individual trading firms) trail behind the auction, sweeping up the small quantities of soybean, wheat and gram that may have fallen during sampling.

The new dispensation also brought to an end the old practice of taking fistfuls of farmers' produce from open carts and trolleys as customary 'contributions' towards social causes and services. For instance, a family of Brahmin water carriers tied to the oldest trading firm in the mandi had long been compensated for their services by liberal payments in grain taken from farmers' loads. Earlier, farmers were in no position to refuse these demands no matter how much they resented them, which small as they might seem, added up to a significant sum of deductions from the producer's returns. In conjunction with the weighbridge, mandi modernisation initiatives saw water coolers replace the water carriers. Furthermore, if men were now employed to serve water to traders and their staff, they were paid directly by the traders in cash.

This account of the distribution of farmers' produce, taken by custom or stolen by collusion, takes us back in a number of ways from the mandi to the village, in India and elsewhere. Here, the gleaning of grain from harvested fields and customary payments for services made in kind have long featured in agrarian history. In 18th- and 19th-century Britain, for instance, gleaning was a significant source of income for the poor, especially, for women and children from labouring households. Consequently, gleaning rights also became the subject of significant conflict and contestation (Ditton 1977; Humphries 1990; King 1989, 1991). As we have seen, payments in kind are not restricted to non-market village exchange, but are also common features of the transactional order inside Indian agricultural markets. In Harda, however, the prevalence of these particular kinds of payments, including as shares of grain from the market floor, decreased dramatically as the heap moved from *before* to *after* the weight was taken, cutting off access to farmers' produce. Once the losses from theft had to be borne by the traders, excessive spilling and sweeping were swiftly curtailed. Moreover, as hammals in Harda were quick to note, around the same time that payments in kind were disappearing, commodity prices in the mandi were starting to rise significantly. Wages in cash, on the other hand, remained relatively static, barely moving up by 25 paise per bag over several years.

Hammals now depended entirely on seasonally variable cash payments, which were based on the total number of bags handled among all the members of the team (*toli*) tied to a particular trading firm. The total figure for the week was divided among all members of the *toli* and distributed by the *mukkadam*, who was also an important source of credit for the labourers during lean months and other times of need. The weighbridge had further eaten into these wages by cutting out certain key tasks from the labour process. For instance, the electronic weighbridge and hydraulic system built into most trolleys meant that farmers no longer had to factor in separate labour charges (*hammali*) for weighing or even for offloading their produce. These charges had been previously deducted by traders from the final payments made to farmers. In the process, traders who needed to perform the *paala* also saved themselves the costs of emptying out and re-heaping produce after manual weighing, since farmers now simply deposited their produce in a common heap once they had electronically recorded the weight of the lot. This eliminated another set of activities that hammals had earlier been paid for. Altogether, market labourers felt these losses acutely.

It was for all these reasons that in May 2008, during the peak season for wheat procurement in the *mandi*, the 400 or so permanent hammals in Harda went on strike. Their action lasted for a full 20 days, causing massive pile-ups of produce in the market yard and enormous stress for traders and *mandi* functionaries. Eventually, after multiple rounds of negotiation, the rates for each key task were revised upwards, amounting to an increase from ₹5.10 per bag (per *toli*) to ₹7 per bag. The rate went up further to ₹8.15 per bag two years later. For hammals, this was undoubtedly a significant victory.⁹

Unsurprisingly, however, the strike brought with it difficult consequences, particularly for the relationships between labour and traders. For instance, in the year following the strike, a number of traders withheld credit that they usually advanced to their *mukkadam*s for further lending to hammals during the off-season and, especially, at festival time. But, the

⁹ To put this in perspective, just in the period between 2005 and 2010, commodity prices for both soybean and wheat had roughly doubled, from ₹1200 per quintal to ₹2000 per quintal and ₹600 per quintal to ₹1200 per quintal, respectively. During my fieldwork in 2008–10, therefore, these were the figures that hammals frequently quoted in relation to the lack of movement in their wage rate.

tensions with traders also reflected the wider effects of the ongoing concentration and consolidation of both the soybean and wheat trade in fewer, larger hands in the mandi. As a result, one finds that hammals in Harda, like informal workers in other sectors elsewhere, are trying to reduce their reliance on private employers and are increasingly directing their demands for recognition and social protection towards the state (Agarwala 2008). These claims are not going entirely unheeded. In recent years, the state government has launched a series of new welfare schemes for mandi hammals and their families, including a scholarship scheme for school-going children, a maternity benefit scheme, and financial support towards accident insurance and funeral expenses. In this regard, the labour strike was strategically mounted to advance wage and welfare claims during a marketing season in the mandi when the state of the heap came to be looked upon as the face of the state.

V

The state of the heap and the division of logistics

The labour strike in Harda mandi in 2008 was launched in the midst of a massive and highly politicised expansion in the public procurement of wheat in MP. During this season and the next, buoyed by a dramatic increase in the centrally-declared Minimum Support Price (MSP), boosted by a widely publicised MP state ‘bonus’ for farmers, and backed by large-scale physical procurement by government agencies across major mandis, wheat prices in primary markets in MP rose to some of the highest in the country. As a result, in a matter of a few short years, a state where the vast majority of farmers (unlike their wealthier counterparts in Punjab and Haryana) had never even heard of the MSP, now emerged as one of the top regional contributors to the central pool of foodgrains.¹⁰ Agriculturally productive districts like Harda were at the heart of the action.

In the mandi, the entry and expansion of *sarkari khareedi* (government procurement) dramatically altered the logic and logistics of wheat marketing. Now, for a limited window each year, the market was defined by a fixed price and fluctuating processes. *Sarkari khareedi* compressed the duration

¹⁰ In an earlier article (Krishnamurthy 2012), I provide a detailed analysis of the political economy of public wheat procurement in MP, its organisational dynamics, logistical life and diverse effects.

of the season, changed the cast of characters involved in procuring grain in and around the mandi, reconfigured the organisation of marketing activities, affected the ways in which both time and space were managed in the market yard, led to the mobilisation of certain kinds of social and political connections, and generated high levels of tension, as well as new forms of assertion and exclusion. As the state descended upon the market yard, vast, towering heaps of grain materialised and climbed to their highest points yet. Here, in the blistering heat of April and May, the monumental wheat heap stood at once for both the undeniable will of the state and its limitless woes.

The speed and scale at which public procurement unfolded in MP was widely viewed among citizens in Harda as a powerful demonstration of what the state is capable of doing when the *prashasan* (administration) is backed by political will. During the first few seasons after the launch of the policy, the state literally took over the market as the single largest buyer of wheat in the mandi, pushing both regional traders and national and multinational agribusiness corporations to the sidelines of the action. 'Nobody can stand in the way when the sarkar decides to take control like this', I heard mandi people say repeatedly as the scale of the operation and the determination of the authorities became apparent.

In practice, however, this dominant entity unfolded into multiple agencies and functionaries, each operating under directives from different levels of government, located within different 'line departments', and simultaneously discharging roles that were often in direct competition or contradiction with each other. The actors included: the Food Corporation of India (FCI), MP State Civil Supplies Corporation (CSC), MP Marketing Federation (Markfed), the village-level Primary Agricultural Cooperative Societies (PACS), District Cooperative Banks, the State Warehousing Corporation, the District Collector and the Mandi Committee, represented by the mandi secretary and his staff of market functionaries. Along with the state agencies, government procurement also brought into the picture a whole range of local and regional *thekedars* or contractors, who had managed to claim contracts for specific elements of the process, including labour, gunny bags, stitching, stencilling and transportation. Collectively, these individuals and agencies had to deal with the full force of wheat arrivals that thundered into the mandi, thousands of quintals at a time. As the pressure rose and nerves frayed, vast dunes of wheat covered the market floor and great walls of stuffed gunny bags went up all around the mandi yard.

If the division of the old jajmani heap has been analysed in terms of the division of labour in village society, the accumulation and dissipation of the sarkari heap in Harda mandi needs to be understood in terms of the division of logistics in the public grain procurement system. Here, the excessive ‘build-up’ of wheat in the mandi was a sign of ‘breakdown’ in the organisational machinery charged with the movement, maintenance and distribution of foodgrains. The multiplicity of agencies and the complexity of logistical arrangements involved in government wheat procurement meant that this was, at least initially, an all too frequent occurrence, as scope for confusion, miscommunication, mal-coordination and ‘temporal logjam’ (Guyer 2016: 38) opened up at critical sites within the system.

For instance, in the initial seasons, farmers found themselves facing a wait that sometimes lasted 2–4 days to sell their wheat to government agencies. If the societies responsible for procurement were inundated with processing paperwork, or if their heaps grew because labour could not keep pace, or if the trolley traffic at the weighbridge became impossible to control, purchasing would grind to a halt, sometimes for hours. In such situations, farmers with the ‘right settings’ (i.e., social and political connections) in the mandi would do their very best to bypass the queue. Instead of waiting like everyone else to have their slips issued on the auction platform, the well-connected worked the system to have market functionaries ‘cut *parchis*’ (issue slips) in their names. The cutting and circulation of *parchis*, especially during the first two seasons, caused both personal and public tensions in the mandi. Mandi staff was put under tremendous pressure to give into the demands of local political figures, while simultaneously trying to calm irate farmers, who threatened to explode as favoured trolleys passed them by in the yard. In subsequent years, the district administration put in place an SMS-based pre-registration system for farmers aimed at eliminating the ‘*parchi* problem’ by staggering and streamlining the arrivals into the mandi during the three-month procurement window.¹¹

For their part, the local societies depended on coordination between the CSC and Markfed to keep things moving in the field. Here, there were almost daily breakdowns in the system. To be fair, the division of logistics left plenty of room for dysfunctionality. For instance, during an initial season,

¹¹ The circulation of *parchis* in agricultural marketing is not peculiar to MP. See Jeffrey (2002) on the social dynamics of the distribution of sugarcane slips by Cane Society officials to farmers in Meerut district in Uttar Pradesh.

responsibility for transporting the produce from the procurement centre to the local warehouse was with Markfed, while transportation from any point within the district to a location outside the district fell to CSC. It was CSC's responsibility to ensure that adequate gunny sacks (*bardhan*) were delivered from outside the district to Markfed's headquarters in the district, but from that point on, delivery to the final destination, that is to the village or mandi procurement centre, was in Markfed's hands. As a result, these two battered agency representatives chased each other around the town and traded blows at the collector's daily review meetings. As transportation failed to arrive on time and gunny sacks failed to materialise when needed in the field, there were frequent halts in procurement in the mandi and, especially, in village-level procurement centres. In this case as well, processes were ironed out and strengthened over subsequent seasons to improve coordination. But, in the meanwhile, the build-up of the wheat heaps left out in open fields and in market yards was grounds for a constant public stocktaking and commentary on mismanagement at the hands of the state.

Finally, as they lay there, by all appearances inanimate in between the lifting and the loading, the jute sacks and the wheat heaps were making their own microscopic movements. A jute sack, I learned during a series of agitated coordination meetings, lost some 165 grams of weight over time, as it dried and the moisture evaporated from the tight bundle in which it had arrived. In the meanwhile, the wheat itself, exposed to the beating sun and the occasional downpour was losing both weight and quality. Given the scale of public procurement, these losses in weight along with those due to diversions and siphoning at various stages of the process, amounted to thousands of missing quintals from the state's account. But, accountability for these losses was harder to fix, as the multiple arms of the state dipped in and out of its multiple pockets. As the wry and experienced district manager of the State Warehousing Corporation pointed out one afternoon, the absurdity of this accounting was not lost on anyone: 'While the wheat naturally and unnaturally loses weight, we are supposed to magically show a weight gain in each bag, and I, like Vishwakarma, the divine architect, am supposed to build brand new warehouses overnight!' Outside, against the massive stockpiles of wheat, one could see the small figures of old women and young children stooped over the cement market floor, sticking their fingers into fine cracks and sweeping the roads with their bare palms trying to gather even the smallest quantities of fallen grain. The starkness of the state was on full display.

VI

The market in the heap, ethnography along the seams

In the end, the vast and exposed heap of sarkari wheat is seen as a public failure, when grain meant to secure the basic needs of citizens is left out to rot. When grain builds up in such proportions, it breaches the faith: a sign of breakdown, where public systems and logistical arrangements are inadequate to the task. Increasingly, this view—of the unseemly heap as a form of system error—is not only confined to the state's direct role in foodgrain procurement, but is driving a larger regulatory imagination of cleaner, more direct market exchange and seamless integration.

This is the imagination behind the government's flagship agricultural reform, launched in 2016, to build a National Agricultural Market (e-NAM): 'a pan-India electronic trading portal which will network existing mandis to create a unified national market for agricultural commodities'.¹² The e-NAM is a 'virtual market' for buyers and sellers that seeks to overcome the limitations of physical trading to facilitate the 'seamless movement' of agricultural produce across district and state borders. In this system, mandis, through which materials must still flow, are conceptualised as the 'back end', sites to be 'plugged-in' and integrated into a nationwide electronic exchange. Once logged onto the platform, heaps of agricultural produce and multiple other points of physical handling, assembly and movement, disappear from view.

If this article opened with the 'anthropological fiction' of the jajmani system and its market-less heap, we are now perhaps observing the construction of the technocratic fiction of an electronic trading platform and the prospect of a heap-less market. But, it should also be apparent that what we have here are two sides of the same coin: in kind and cash-less, both buy into and maintain the idea that the market is a detached, impersonal, and self-regulating mechanism for exchange. It, therefore, makes perfect sense that the analysis of the socially embedded village heap misses the market right in front of it and that the vision of the virtual NAM erases from view the heap at its back end.

Against such conceptual seamlessness, the anthropology of agricultural markets is an engagement with life at the seams. And it is here, at

¹² Government of India, NAM: http://www.enam.gov.in/NAM/home/about_nam.html#. Accessed on 25 September 2017.

the seams of commodity exchange, that we find that heaps of agricultural produce are most likely to materialise. As we have seen in this study of the heaps of Harda mandi, these seams are sites of conjunction and disruption, points of both integration and interruption, of assembly and transfer, of aggregation and distribution. The seams are the internal margins of the market, central to the processes of commodity exchange. The heaps that form along these internal margins are therefore highly dynamic—made, mixed, measured, managed and moved—by diverse and particular market actors, calculative devices, material practices, and forms of reasoning and judgement. They also mark the points of overlap between systems of production, exchange, trade, circulation and consumption, complicating the simple analytical distinctions that we place between them.

Should the paala, for instance, be considered a part of the production process of a quality-specific global commodity (here, FAQ soybean) or is it a trading practice, where local traders search for the margins inside the ratio? Surely, it is part of both production and trade, both of which, in turn, are related to processing and agro-industry. Similarly, movements across spheres of production and circulation are the stuff of logistical life. In global systems of commodity circulation and trade, transportation, as Cowen points out, needs to be recognised as an ‘element of production rather than merely a service that follows production’ (2014: 2). The same is true of storage, which along with processing and transportation, also transforms commodities qualitatively and quantitatively at various points in the process (Harriss-White 2008). Finally, weight is not only a central element of market exchange, it is a series of activities that includes payments for labour and services, made in cash and in kind, including shares from the spoils of the heap swept up from the market floor.

Most of all, as we have seen in each instance over the course of this essay, movements of and within the heap, are always materially significant and therefore inevitably politically charged and morally ambivalent. If we train our attention on these movements, as we have done throughout, they reveal important, deeply contested, and yet often unnoticed shifts in the sources and distribution of economic and social margins in the mandi. It is then that the stakes of the heap become most vividly apparent and here, at the seams, that the market may be seen and sited in its full relational complexity.

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