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Precarity and Dignity: An Inquiry into the Socio-Economic Lives of Contract Security Workers at Jawaharlal Nehru University New Delhi

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Abstract

The private security industry has become a significant employer in India's urban economy, drawing large numbers of contract-based workers through outsourced agencies. Despite the appearance of formality like uniforms basic training, and licensing, employer and employee's relations for private security guards remain profoundly precarious. This study is aimed to investigate the unstable contracts, arbitrary deployment, low and delayed wages, irregular working hours, and weak social protection. the research is grounded in ethnographic fieldwork involving semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, and of contract security guards deployed in JNU. the research shows how agency contracting and institution cost-minimization sustain an "informal core" within a seemingly formal sector. Guards frequently experience redeployment, lack of leave, absence of accident/medical/insurance benefits, poor remuneration, and a persistent sense of disposability, producing feelings of disrespect, diminished self-worth, wanted to work overtime but have not, resulting in less wages, and a "lack of future." Complementing these findings, studies such as *Doing Dignity Work* illustrate how guards attempt to navigate this structural marginalization. While those at low-status sites face acute dignity loss, guards at large reputed organizations perform "dignity work" cultivating client trust, disciplined conduct, and relational stability to reclaim social respect. Yet such gains remain fragile due to contractual instability and psychosocial stress, demonstrating how Precarity fundamentally shapes both material conditions and dignity at work.

Keywords: Contract security guards, Precarity and Dignity at work, Agency contracting, Working conditions, Social protection, structural marginalization, Semi-structured interviews.

INTRODUCTION

The private security industry has emerged as one of the fastest-growing sectors in India's urban labour market, driven by large institutions, universities, and corporate bodies that rely heavily on outsourced protection services. Although private security guards appear to be part of a formal labour system marked by uniforms, licensing procedures, and basic training their everyday working conditions are shaped by deep structural precarity. Contracting through private agencies creates a labour regime characterised by unstable contracts, frequent redeployments, arbitrary dismissals, and delayed or low wages. These contradictions between formal presentation and informal labour governance are especially visible in large

institutional settings such as Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), where contract guards are central to campus security but remain outside stable employment and social protection.

Existing literature provides significant insights into the informalisation of the private security workforce. Gooptu (2013) describes how the sector reproduces "organized informality," where guards occupy a marginal position despite being part of a formally regulated industry. Studies on contract labour and service work further highlight the erosion of worker dignity through low pay, disrespect and lack of entitlements. More recent work such as *Doing Dignity Work* shows how guards at high-status sites attempt to reclaim respect through disciplined conduct, relationship-building, and emotional labour. However, these studies primarily analyse general precarious conditions and dignity negotiations; they do not explore certain lived realities specific to university-based contract guards.

A notable research gap emerges here: no previous study has documented that many contract security guards actively desire *more* duty hours and overtime not less in order to increase their wages, revealing a paradoxical coping strategy shaped by chronic underpayment and economic insecurity. This unique pattern, observed during fieldwork at JNU, demonstrates how precarity not only imposes instability but also shapes workers' aspirations, pushing them to normalise excessive working hours as a necessary survival mechanism. Moreover, there is limited research on how guards employed within major public universities specifically negotiate dignity loss, disrespect, psychosocial strain, and an uncertain future.

Addressing this gap, the present study aims to:

1. Examine the everyday forms of precarity experienced by contract security guards deployed at JNU.
2. Analyse how agency-based subcontracting and institutional cost-minimisation produce instability, low wages, and lack of social protection.
3. Investigate the psychosocial consequences of precarity, including diminished self-worth, disrespect, and a perceived "lack of future."
4. Explore the strategies through which guards attempt to restore dignity such as disciplined behaviour, and the desire for additional duty/overtime for higher income.

The scope of this study is limited to contract-based security guards employed through outsourced private agencies and posted within JNU. Permanent guards, supervisor, and agency managers are not included. Grounded in ethnographic fieldwork consisting of semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, and observations, the study focuses on understanding how precarity shapes both material working conditions and dignity at work within a single institutional environment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Organized Informality and Labour Precarity in the Private Security Sector

A central theme emerging across the selected literature is the structural precarity embedded within organized informality in India's private security sector. Gooptu (2013) provides the most extensive historical and ethnographic account of how security guards form a key part of India's expanding interactive service economy but remain trapped in "organized informality," where formal corporate structures coexist with informalized labour practices. Gooptu demonstrates that private security companies operate through a highly disciplined, hierarchical structure that gives the impression of formality, yet workers lack stable contracts, social security. This dual structure produces a paradox in which guards are essential to urban governance but experience profound insecurity in wages, tenure, and working conditions (Gooptu, 2013). Similarly, Venumuddala (2020) explains that informal labour in India persists not due to the absence of institutions but because of the subcontracting, and the normalization of precarious work

arrangements across industries. His broader analysis helps contextualize the experiences of private security guards within national patterns of fragmented employment, subcontracting chains, and low bargaining power. For security guards, this implies low wages, near absence of social protection, and dependence on intermediary contractors—creating a systemic condition in which precarity is structurally produced (Venumuddala, 2020). When these two works are read together, the private security sector appears as a microcosm of India's urban informal economy, where companies profit from low-cost labour while guards carry the burdens of surveillance responsibilities without corresponding rights or protections.

Dignity, Social Status, and Everyday Negotiations of Respect

A second major theme is the ongoing struggle for dignity among security guards, who attempt to assert self-worth in a job perceived as low status. Noronha et. al., (2020) introduce the important concept of "dignity work," arguing that guards continually engage in cognitive, emotional, and behavioural strategies to cope with disrespect, stigma, and the hierarchical treatment embedded in contract security arrangements. Their study shows how guards attempt to construct meaning by emphasizing discipline, uniform, responsibility, and service ethics as qualities that elevate the value of their work despite social devaluation. This everyday moral labour becomes necessary because contract systems often expose guards to humiliation from supervisors, clients, and the public (Noronha et. al., 2020). Gooptu's (2013) ethnography further reinforces that guards are positioned as "servile sentinels," expected to show obedience, docility, and overt deference in their interactions. This service-oriented behaviour is not merely an individual personality trait but a structurally enforced expectation that restricts the guards' social standing, leaving them in a paradoxical position of authority without authority. The combination of uniforms, strict discipline, and continuous surveillance of their own conduct produces an identity grounded in subordination, shaping how guards perceive their standing in society. The literature thus indicates that dignity is not an inherent feature of work but must be actively constructed in settings where social respect is systematically denied. Both Noronha et. al., (2020) and Gooptu (2013) show that guards attempt to reclaim self-worth by reframing their service role as essential civic labour, yet the underlying structural and symbolic hierarchies continually challenge these efforts.

Psychosocial Well-Being and the Emotional Costs of Precarious Security Work

A third theme that emerges across the four works concerns the psychosocial consequences of precarious labour on the well-being of security guards. Fathima et. al., (2021), focusing specifically on security personnel in educational institutions, highlight how long hours, rigid surveillance duties, uncertainty in contract renewal, and exposure to disrespectful interactions can generate chronic stress and emotional fatigue. Their study shows that guards often experience role conflict, emotional exhaustion, and feelings of marginalization, which affect both psychological well-being and perceived dignity. Importantly, the educational institutional setting normally assumed to be safe and stable still reveals patterns of invisibilized emotional labour and vulnerabilities that parallel those in commercial or residential security environments. This indicates that precarity is not sector-specific but embedded in the occupational logic of private security work itself (Fathima et. al., 2021). Noronha et al., (2020) connect emotional distress to the broader process of negotiating dignity, noting that when guards encounter disrespect, they must engage in "dignity repair" to manage humiliation, which demands significant emotional energy. Gooptu's (2013) findings complement this by showing how the strict regimes of discipline and surveillance imposed on guards create a psychological environment of constant monitoring, which restricts autonomy and increases pressure. Venumuddala (2020) adds that informal labour conditions generally reduce worker agency, increase job insecurity, and produce psychosocial risks due to unstable livelihoods and lack of institutional

protection. When synthesised, these works clearly indicate that psychological well-being is profoundly shaped by the convergence of informalized labour practices, stigma, and emotional demands, making stress and anxiety integral.

Precarity, Contracting Systems, and Structural Power Relations

A final convergent theme across the literature is the role of contracting systems and structural power relations in shaping guards' precarious conditions and limited ability to negotiate rights. Gooptu (2013) shows that the private security industry operates through multi-tiered layers of contractors, subcontractors, and agencies, each extracting profit while distancing themselves from direct responsibility for workers. This system creates a fragmented employment relationship where guards are unsure about who their real employer is, reducing their capacity to demand fair treatment. Noronha et al., (2020) explain that such contracting structures produce dignity deficits because workers must interact simultaneously with agency supervisors, client representatives, and institutional managers, each holding different expectations but none accountable for improving working conditions. This intermediate position forces guards to comply with contradictory demands and accept degrading treatment in order to retain their contracts. Furthermore, Fathima et. al., (2021) argue that contract-based deployment in educational institutions similarly leads to ambiguous accountability, as guards negotiate between security agencies and campus administrators without clearly defined channels for grievance redressal. Venumuddala's (2020) national-level analysis reinforces that such fragmented employment relations are not exceptional but emblematic of India's larger neoliberal labour regime, where subcontracting and flexible hiring weaken collective bargaining and institutional protections.

METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a qualitative research design to investigate the intertwined dynamics of precarity and dignity in the socio-economic lives of contract security workers employed in Jawaharlal Nehru University New Delhi.

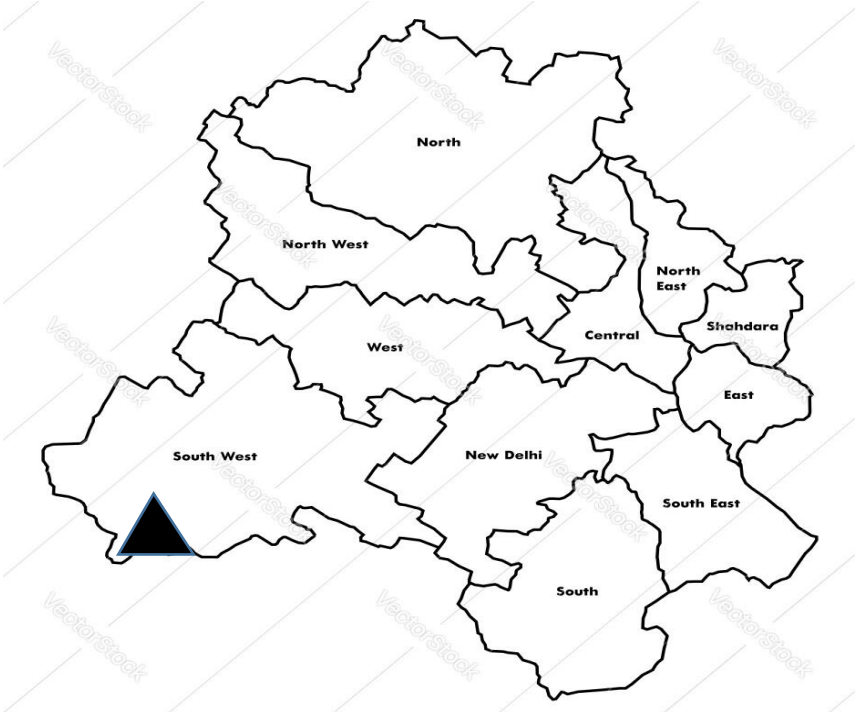

Fig. 1: Map of Delhi State (Published by Vector Stock, 2024)

A qualitative approach was chosen because the experiences of insecurity, disrespect, vulnerability, and everyday negotiations of dignity among security guards, cannot be meaningfully captured through numerical indicators alone. Instead, they require an in-depth understanding of subjective meanings, interactions, anxieties, and routine practices that shape the lived reality of workers situated at the margins of institutional labour systems.

Within this qualitative orientation, the study relies primarily on semi-structured interviews as the central tool of data collection. A purposive sampling method will be used to select participants, Semi-structured interviewing offers flexibility while retaining a thematic focus: it enables the researcher to ask predetermined questions related to employment insecurity, wages, working conditions, social protection, and dignity, while also allowing participants to elaborate on issues that they perceive as important. The semi-structured format created enough conversational space for guards to share such narratives freely, while ensuring that core research concerns remained systematically explored across interviews (Kothari et. al., 2024)

The participants for the study consisted of 20 contract security guards employed by outsourced security agencies and stationed at JNU. The participants ranged in age from 21 to 50 years, with 20 men. Data was gathered through 20–25 minute semi-structured interviews, conducted at or near the participants' duty posts during break hours and at the end of their shifts.

To make sense of the rich qualitative data, the study employed thematic analysis. Thematic analysis proceeded in several iterative stages. First, all interview transcripts and field notes were read multiple times to develop familiarity with the data. This close reading enabled the researcher to identify initial codes related to insecurity, wages, working hours, supervision, disrespect, strategies for self-presentation. These initial codes were then gradually refined and grouped into broader categories that captured underlying conceptual similarities.

FINDING/RESULT

Theme	Core Focus	Key Findings (Based Only on Your Data)	Evidence From Guards' Responses
1. Background Profile and Work Experience	Age, family background, education, entry into security work, years of experience, work locations	Guards aged between 21–55. Mostly from lower middle-class families. All joined through private agencies. Education ranged from Class 10 to Post-Graduation. Experience ranged from 3month to 16 years. Posted in universities, centres, private companies, industries, residential apartments. Some also work part-time (Swiggy, Zomato) to support income.	Participants include only male guards. Some guards take part-time work to meet family needs.
2.Employment Insecurity and	Recruitment system, job clarity, threat of removal	All guards hired through agencies after paying ₹12,000–₹30,000. No written contract; only an	A guard's friend was removed for saying "kitna pyara

Absence of Clear Contracts		appointment slip. Fear of sudden removal/transfer is common.	kuta hai." Guards confused about job rules due to no written documents.
3. Low Wages, Benefit Gaps, and Financial Hardship	Salary, deductions, benefits, supplementary work	Salary around ₹23,700 but insufficient for livelihood. - Monthly deductions of ₹1,000–₹2,000. Only, PF and weekly leave; no ESI, no paid leave. Guards do extra jobs to survive.	Borrow money during difficult months. Benefits inconsistent; not aligned with needs.
4. Disrespect, Poor Working Conditions, and Loss of Dignity	Treatment by people/management, working conditions, uniform identity	Basic facilities exist (water, toilets, shade), but environment stressful. Disrespect common from some staff, students, visitors. Management humiliates guards (scolding, salary cuts, apology letters). 17 feel neutral about uniform, 2 ashamed, 1 proud.	Management deducted ₹1000 after forcing a guard to write a sorry letter. Guards feel society undervalues their work.
5. Stress, Health Impact, and Ineffective Support Systems	Mental/physical health, grievance system	Job insecurity causes stress, anxiety, headaches. Duty stoppage (3–7 days) leads to salary loss and emotional burden. Complaint system exists but does not function well; guards often blamed.	Guards hesitate to complain as "no one listens." Stress increases when falsely accused or removed from duty.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal a multi-layered picture of precarity and dignity among contract security guards deployed in an institutional setting. The background profiles of the participants show a consistent pattern: guards from lower middle-class or economically constrained families, aged between 21 and 55, who possess varying levels of education from Class 10 to postgraduate degrees. Although their educational qualifications suggest potential access to diverse forms of employment, all were channelled into security work through private agencies, indicating a structural reliance on outsourced labour markets. Their earlier postings across universities, private companies, industries, and residential apartments show that mobility within the sector is common, though not accompanied by upward professional advancement. The fact that several guards engage in part-time delivery work underscores the economic pressure that compels them to diversify income, reflecting broader national trends where urban workers increasingly depend on multi-employment to meet household needs.

Employment insecurity emerged as one of the strongest themes, as every participant reported being recruited through agencies after paying fees ranging from ₹12,000 to ₹30,000, yet receiving only an appointment slip instead of a formal written contract. This mirrors the current research landscape in India, which consistently highlights the contradictions within the private security industry: the outward

appearance of formalization coexists with informal labour practices, weak documentation, and a lack of accountability. The guards' experiences of arbitrary removal or transfer such as the instance where a worker's friend was dismissed merely for saying "kitna pyara kuta hai" demonstrate how power operates in unpredictable ways. The absence of written rules further amplifies confusion and dependence on the agency hierarchy.

Financial hardships were evident across the sample. Although the nominal salary of ₹23,700 suggests compliance with some regulatory standards, guards consistently described their income as insufficient, especially after monthly deductions of ₹1,000–₹2,000. With social protection limited only to PF and weekly leave but no ESI or paid leave workers remain deeply vulnerable to financial shocks. The necessity of borrowing money during difficult months, combined with supplementary work in other institutions or delivery platforms, illustrates the living reality of urban precarity. Current debates on labour rights in India emphasize precisely such gaps between legal entitlements and lived experiences: the proliferation of low-paying, insecure jobs with inconsistent benefits, even within regulated sectors.

Disrespect and poor working conditions further compound the vulnerability of guards. Although basic facilities such as water, toilets, shade, and equipment were available, the broader work environment remained stressful. Disrespect from staff, students, and visitors was described as common, while management practices such as scolding, salary cuts, and forced apology letters created a climate of humiliation. The case where a guard was fined ₹1,000 after being compelled to write a "sorry letter" clearly illustrates the power imbalance inherent in contract-based employment. The mixed feelings about uniform identity 17 neutral, 2 ashamed, and 1 proud highlight how dignity is negotiated within structures that simultaneously offer recognition and devalue workers. This resonates with contemporary studies that show how guards engage in "dignity work" to reclaim moral worth, yet remain constrained by their marginal status.

Sudden duty stoppage for 3–7 days directly affected wages, reinforcing the precarity of their livelihood. While a complaint system technically exists, participants repeatedly described it as ineffective guarding being blamed instead of supported. This aligns with current research that identifies weak institutional grievance mechanisms as a defining feature of precarious labour. The guards' hesitation to complain summarized by the phrase "no one listens" demonstrates how structural power suppresses workers' voices, leaving them without meaningful channels for redress. The emotional strain caused by false accusations or abrupt removal from duty further intensifies psychosocial stress, indicating that insecurity extends beyond economic hardship to shape mental well-being.

Overall, the findings portray a work environment where precarity, disrespect, financial instability, and weak support systems converge to undermine both material conditions and dignity.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to examine the working conditions, precarity, and dignity of contract security guards, focusing on employment insecurity, wages, benefits, psychosocial well-being, and coping mechanisms within institutional workplaces.

Findings indicate that guards face insecure employment with no formal contracts, frequent fear of removal, low wages with inconsistent benefits, disrespect from management and the public, stressful working conditions despite basic facilities, and health impacts including stress and anxiety. Some guards take supplementary work to meet financial needs, reflecting persistent livelihood insecurity. Uniforms provide mixed feelings of identity, further illustrating complex dignity challenges.

These findings highlight the need for institutional reforms, including formal contracts, consistent wage and benefit structures, functional grievance systems, and respectful treatment of guards. Strengthening these measures can improve both material security and psychosocial dignity, enhancing workforce stability and morale.

Future research should explore systemic reforms in agency contracting, institutional accountability, and mechanisms for safeguarding both the dignity and economic well-being of contract security workers across different urban institutions. Comparative studies across sectors could further illuminate structural precarity patterns.

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