



Studying Labour Culture in India: The Missing 'Everyday' of Industrial Work¹

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Introduction

This paper relies on the sociological literature on industrial workers in India to explore one of the many significant tensions that characterise the contemporary practice of the discipline in the country. This tension is frequently explained as a difference in approach, or a legacy of the cross-continental traditions of sociology/anthropology that India has inherited, and often attributed to distinguished practitioners in select university departments (Uberoi 1968; Singh 1965; Bottomore 1962). In contemporary discussions of this theme, the tendency is to acknowledge the tension while brushing it aside as a matter that is either irrelevant or resolved, as a ghost from the past that is at best marginal to the questions that sociologists in India (should) attempt to raise today. In the following it is argued that this tension is far from resolved, and that its consideration is even more significant today. The suggestion is also that the 'legacy' explanation, although helpful in understanding the temporal particularities of sociological practice in India, hides more than it reveals on the methodological impacts that the tension has created on approaching the question of social change, specifically in understanding industrial labour.

Barring a few honourable exceptions, the body of work that constitutes the corpus of industrial sociology has largely been undertaken in periods of fleeting or nomadic interest by scholars, at best as their subsidiary inclination. Recent commentaries confirm this characterisation, as also its relatively unchanging status over many years (Parry 2012). Located as it is in the said web of indifference, the core interest of this paper is in understanding the apparent confusions that pervade industrial sociology in India as it exists. While these confusions traverse the terrain of standard polarities, it is argued that their roots can



be traced to the consistent tendency within the practice of the discipline to segregate and dichotomise 'anthropological' and 'sociological' approaches to Indian society.

The 'Sociological/Anthropological' in Studying India

The debate on the reflexive turn in the social sciences provided to sociology in India refreshing new ways of thinking about its history. Questions about the content of sociological enquiries were buttressed with curiosities about the choice of specific themes. Contemporary discussions on the distinction between sociological and anthropological approaches in India, and consequently their methods, are careful in their delineation of the genealogy of this distinction and its origins in the colonial project (Patel 2011).

As a result of such efforts, sociology in India is now aware, and cautious, of the various colonies its method and theory inhabited in the foundational period, and in some sense, the resilience of such hegemony even today. What it also provides us with, is a more nuanced sense of the thematic trajectories within specialisations, the ability to see the dialectic between the pulls and pressures of the heritage of colonial anthropology and the aspirations to develop a distinctive 'national' body of sociological knowledge, and the compromises inherent in its establishment (Patel 2011, Chaudhuri 2010). Thus, as influential as the theoretical orientations of the pioneers of sociology in India might have been in the history of the discipline's growth, the analysis would be incomplete, or even misleading, if we were to overlook the necessity of institutionalisation that early sociologists perceived in choosing areas of research. For instance, critical evaluation of policy, when it did take place, was also a manner of convincing the establishment of the necessity of sociology, of the significance of the sociological perspective that no other discipline can provide, a perspective that is vitally relevant in policy making (Srinivas, Shah & Ramaswamy 1979).

Historians of the discipline are now exploring the institutional trajectories of sociology, and drawing up crucial links between colonialism, the influence of various schools of thought, the general atmosphere of exuberance about nation-building and the administrative/bureaucratic meanderings of sociology between various university departments to find a place of its own (Patel 2011). The engagement of anthropology with Indian realities has been understood in these accounts as a two phased process. The first admittedly colonial/administrative in motive,



arrogant in its philosophy and elitist in method, and the second, more recent reflexive turn initiated by anthropologists from the west which subjected the knowledge produced in the first phase to scrutiny and called for a reorientation of approach. Following this, Indian scholars have drawn up agendas for the pursuit of the anthropological approach in contemporary times:

What is it about the discourse of anthropology that needs to be considered anew? [...]. More than anything else, anthropology needs to reorient itself to the social and political reality of the everyday world. [...] As anthropologists, we need to self-consciously and emphatically assert that we are not in the "spectacle business" (Friedman 1987: 169) of only providing pictures of strange events, exotica and other trivia but more into a meaningful, transformational anthropology that sets out to understand the world in all its thorny, complex aspects. (Thapan 1998: 5).

It is now suggested that much of the eclecticism in method pondered upon in metropolitan locations comes naturally to sociologists/anthropologists working in post-colonial societies and the complex intersections of hierarchy they operate in, leading Patricia Uberoi to comment that it is a "rather non sensical distinction from the perspective of a non-western sociologist/anthropologist." (Uberoi 2007)

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Thus, in terms of drawing up of agendas, the confusion seems to be resolved. The issue here is not so much the interdisciplinary drawing of methods, but the lack of the methodological insistence that the contemporary is a product of history. Discretion on the use of method should subsequently be drawn from knowledge of the trajectory of contests in the specific history of the field. However, the diverse connotations and ideological inflections represented by the 'anthropological' and the 'sociological' and the contradictory worlds of meaning that they frequently seem to inhabit continues to contribute much to the dilemmas of sociology in India. In the days of the nascent effervescence of sociology departments, the former was diligently identified with the colonial approach, the latter with the promise of the emerging nation. There was anthropology to study the old, the static, the local, while there was sociology to look into the new, the transformed, the national. Industrialisation presented a significant challenge to this division of labour, although the challenge was never confronted. In what follows, it is attempted to demonstrate that the realignment of agendas does not seem to have borne fruit in the Indian case, using the instance of the sociology of industrial work.



The Sociology of Industrial Work in India: The Beginnings

A part of the preliminary foundation of the branch in India was the legacy of American functionalist thought. The problems thrown up by the golden age of capitalism had triggered off a series of studies on industrial behaviour in the West. The inspiration from functionalism is underscored by the insistence on considering industrial systems as their unit of analysis. The fundamental assumption, as is characteristic, was that the maintenance of industrial harmony was the natural inclination of an industrial system. Consequently, features that were construed as 'veering away' from this systemic tendency were studied – lack of productivity, industrial unrest, worker attitudes and behaviour, structure of industrial organisations, role assumptions within worker groups etc.

Referring to the permeability that Sociology allows with respect to its disciplinary boundaries, Thompson argues that a case in point for such relaxation was the study of industry where no clear disciplinary demarcation was possible until the first half of the twentieth century (2003). The preoccupation with effective management was a key feature of the early sociological approach to industry, which, in its emergence in the inter-war years, was coterminous with concerns of increasing productivity characteristic of the time. Consequently,

[t]he two major impediments were seen as: lack of clarity about the principles of good administration and management, and conflict resulting from restrictions on output by workers. It was towards the resolution of these twin problems that much of the early writing on management and organization was directed. (Thompson 2003: vi)

The inherent bias towards the management in this approach has subsequently been pointed out by many researchers who do or do not subscribe to the rubric of the sociology of management and organizations (Thompson 2003; Lupton 1965). In fact, Lupton's post Second World War work on shop floor relations was one of the early studies to incorporate the perspective of trade unions in understanding problems of industry (1965), and a critique of the prevalent model of Hawthorne Experiments and the Chicago/Harvard approach to industrial unrest as characteristic of deviance or anomie.

A similar thrust in Indian sociology can also be detected in the years after independence, when the focus of the state was on increasing industrial production. The popular approach of the times was one of industrial integration and the peaceful management of conflict. The



emphasis on worker motivation and commitment as keys to industrial productivity, and the influence of the Harvard/Chicago school on such a conception are unmistakable in studies of this period.² Most of the preoccupations of industrial sociology in the developed countries were transposed to a newly independent India, and many studies were conducted on these lines. However, the presence of nationalism as the osmotic membrane did have a significant impact on the tenor of these discussions. While a part of this impetus came from academicians with a nationalist political leaning, a part of it also emerged from studies by trade unions (Sheth & Patel 1979).

There has been acknowledgement of the fact that industrialisation as it was inaugurated in the country under Nehru presented a new way of life for a section of the working population in India (Breman 1999). The nascent nation had a vision of transformation, which was sought to be shared by university departments including those of sociology. However, the manifestation of this vision had two important and curiously contradictory after effects. The first, mostly led by non-Indian scholars, is a certain hurry in jumping to conclusions about the unpreparedness of Indian people for an industrial way of life (Lambert 1963, Holmstrom 1976, Vaid 1968), while the second, led by Indian sociologists, features the insistence on heralding the 'arrival' of the industrial working class (Sharma 1968 & 1974; Khurana 1972). Studies of this set attempted to show that constraints of traditional life had no effect on the industrial way of life.

The refusal to consider industrialisation as a process was visible on either side, reflected in the 'before-after' treatment the subject eventually received. The preoccupation with the 'commitment thesis' belies the same reluctance to look at processes that constitute the industrial cycle as a totality. At the point of M.D. Morris' suggestion that the nature of economic activities of the rural worker is the significant factor that prompted the frequent back and forth between town and country (1965), sociological enquiries were content with studying the factory and associated urbanity as a standalone reality, while the 'village' was being explored by those with 'anthropological' leanings. For instance, most reviews of the time suggest that enquiries into the profile of workers focus on their residence in an urban milieu (Holmstrom 1976; Lambert 1963; Ramaswamy 1983; Sheth 1968). The tension is most apparent in reflections on their fieldwork by pioneering practitioners of the time, which present an interesting picture of both the self-image of the sociologist in the new nation as well as a dichoto-



mous notion of national reality and consequently the task of social enquiry that such a milieu nurtured.

It is now clear that the early and central debates in India regarding industrialisation were about the relevance (or otherwise) of "traditional Indian culture" for the "acceptance and promotion of the values and norms associated with industrial society" (Sheth 1979). Subsequent approaches tried to show that several of the "Indian values and norms" in fact facilitated the industrial way of life. Early reviews of the status of the discipline are aware of the restrictions imposed by the uncritical borrowing of western conceptual models in studying industrialisation in India, and the problems inherent in a discernible ideological commitment to certain patterns of behaviour as desirable within an industrial setting (Sheth & Patel 1979). Later reviewers saw the need to break out of this dichotomy. However, one can still detect a definite thrust towards modernisation that academic evaluations also considered necessary, even as late as 1979, which in a general sense marked a period of disenchantment with the said promise and the role of the state in achieving the same.

One of the questions at the beginning of this section was how responsive sociology was to the euphoria surrounding the emergent nation. State-led industrialisation was a project of enormous political significance. The corollaries of this political project influenced all fields of activity, which made it imperative for sociology as well to engage with it. However, the impression that one is frequently confronted with is that there was very little consideration of the nature of the state enterprise, even in limited empirical settings. The discipline's role vis-a-vis the state was neatly divided between participative and evaluative. The pressures of institutionalisation had a role to play in the instrumentalist thrust. But nothing seems to indicate that there was any distinction made between state and private initiative in industry. There were hardly any enquiries into institutional subcultures within newly emergent industrial settings. Sociology did not distinguish between public and private sector led industrialisation as giving rise to separate institutional cultures.

This is despite the fact that an important policy motivation of state led industrialisation was the redress of regional imbalances in development. The deliberate choice of so-called backward areas as centres for the establishment of new industries should have provided opportunities for sociologists to delve deeper into the dilemmas of migration or the rural urban transition. However, most enquiries on institutional culture



or the industrial neighbourhood have examined conditions within private industry, which invariably flocked to established centres of capital.³

The earliest systematic investigations into the conditions of industry in India were carried out by the Royal Labour Commission and Census Reports (Sheth & Patel 1979). The data provided in these and the colonial Gazetteers acted as a launching pad for some detailed investigations on the condition of industrial labour in India from a nationalist viewpoint. Keeping in mind the importance of assimilating the working masses into the nationalist struggle, some such enquiries delved into the living and working conditions of labourers in several industries in the period around independence. It might be surprising today that the earliest academic publications on industrial life in India appeared in the *Indian Journal of Social Work*, featuring a series of studies on industries in south India and the working class.⁴ Similar investigations were also conducted by trade unions of the time, primarily of the Communist Party.

Early reviews of the status of the discipline are aware of the restrictions imposed by the uncritical borrowing of western conceptual models in studying industrialisation in India, and the problems inherent in a discernible ideological commitment to certain patterns of behaviour as desirable within an industrial setting:

While earlier studies led us to believe that traditional institutions were bound to change in the direction of the western industrial framework, it was gradually discovered that traditional institutions and values can and do co-exist with modernity and may often help in achievement of the goals implied in modern society. However in real life we do observe traditional institutions and values (pertaining to religion, caste, family, language regionalism etc.) compelling people to indulge in destruction, waste, indolence and corruption. Research in this area therefore needs to go beyond observations on the degrees of mix between tradition and modernity and *concentrate more on identifying the specific factors blocking a concrete effort at modernisation.* (Sheth & Patel 1979:4) [Emphasis added]

Revival of Interest: Traditions of Social Anthropology and Social History

However, the disenchantment with the promise of capitalist modernity rippled across the world and led studies of labour take on a different hue. The post war-reconstruction years also saw the ebb and tide of



strong working class action across the globe, in the sixties and seventies in America and Europe and in the seventies and eighties in the post-colonial world. One set of responses to these developments consisted in exploring the notion of class consciousness and whether there existed any serious possibility of unified class action in varied industrial contexts. In practice, this translated into enquiries on worker behaviour and attitudes, determinants of class consciousness etc. The result was a number of formulations on the embourgeoisment of the working class with industrial prosperity and the consequent redundancy of the idea of revolution; on the contradictory nature of opinions held by the worker and class consciousness; on favouring analytical categories like group, informal models of communication, occupation, skill set etc. over class as central in understanding worker behaviour. The worker's psyche was an area that called for dissection, and several interdisciplinary studies were up for the challenge (Mann 1973 and Marcus 1974).

The most distinctive features of this phase of writing are the following. First, the exclusive focus on the systems approach gives way to competing yet divergent perspectives. One of these laid emphasis on "human relations" as the rubric of analysing developments in industry (Thompson 2003). Another set of responses to the inadequacy of the management approach, the industrial integration approach and the organisational approach to the study of industrial labour sought to point out the need to consider worker's lives in their entirety to understand processes of class formation and action. Influenced by methodological developments in history and strongly rooted in the approach of social history, such attempts variously sought to unravel the relative roles of structures and agents in working class life. Unlike the earlier period, the focus on the working class was not exclusively in the context of their agitations, but in longer processes that led to their emergence, their everyday lives and the world of meaning that inhered within (Passerini 1989, Chakrabarty 1989, Ludtke 1995). To these authors, such explorations provided clues that are far more valuable in understanding collective action than compartmentalised approaches to industrial integration. In such attempts, the legacy of social anthropology of considering life under study as a totality was revitalised, sometimes in historical reconstructions and sometimes in ethnographic explorations.

The classical inspiration for much of this work was drawn from Friedrich Engels' study of the conditions of the English working class in mid-nineteenth century London. In taking forward this exploration on a



broader historical scale, E.P. Thompson provided a detailed reconstruction of the times and terms of the emergence of the English working class in 1963 in *The Making of the English Working Class*. In Thompson we find an articulation of the centrality of the historical eye in sociological explanation:

If I have shown insufficient understanding of the methodological preoccupations of certain sociologists, nevertheless I hope this book will be seen as a contribution to the understanding of class. For I am convinced that we cannot understand class unless we see it as a social and cultural formation, arising from processes which can only be studied as they work themselves out over a considerable historical period. (1963: 11)

The making led to a number of 'biographies' of the working class in several parts of the world. They attempted in parts and extended in parts, Thompson's efforts led to the unravelling of tensions within both ruling and working class situations in eighteenth and nineteenth century England that were inimical to the emergence of the working class as it did. The seminal contribution of "The Making" to the study of labour can be seen in three important aspects. It rescued the study of the working class from economic crudeness and significantly established that class needs to be looked at as a political and cultural phenomenon as much as an economic one. It rescued the study of history from the error of retrospective normativity and argued for understanding actors in history as they lived, reasoned and acted in their times and set aside evaluations of success and failure. It provided theorisation the courage to unhesitatingly explore blind alleys and dead ends as possible keys to puzzling phenomena of another point in time.

The emphasis on the importance of contextualising working class lives led to attempts at dismantling binaries that were considered to dominate studies of industrialisation in India- rural/urban, agricultural/industrial, traditional/modern etc. More importantly, the thrust in favour of modernisation and the perceived role of the social sciences in facilitating the same came under scrutiny. The studies that emerged in this phase (which commenced primarily in the 1980s), mostly with an interest in the history of the colonial period, explored a narrative of loss that characterised the movement into an industrial way of life for the working class, and also pointed out the various ways in which the working class attempted to make sense of their new worlds, and retain aspects of what they had left behind. A series of investigations on the making and unmaking of the industrial working class in several industrial centres of India like Calcutta, Bombay, Ahmedabad, Kanpur,



Coimbatore etc. form a body of work on this theme (Breman 2004; Joshi 2003; D'Monte 2002; Chakrabarty 1989; Heuze 1996; Sen 1999a,b; Chandavarkar 1994; Nair 1998).

Among the Indian efforts in the methodological direction offered by Thompson, Rajnarayan Chandavarkar's examination of capital labour relations in Mumbai, roughly a hundred years after the emergence of the English working class resulted in *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India: Business Strategies and the Working Classes in Bombay 1900-1940*, published in 1994. Contrary to popular perception about nascent industrialism and the characteristic features of an emergent working class, Chandavarkar pointed out the significant casual or unstable nature of employment in the textile mills of Bombay at the turn of the century. In exploring the impacts of such a pattern of labour recruitment on working class life, he argues that alternative sites of mobilisation like the neighbourhood and the street corner are equally important as the worksite or the mill in understanding mobilisation. This has been attributed to the strengthening of the ties of kinship and community in securing jobs in the face of mounting instability in mill employment. The strength of such ties also led to labour competition swiftly developing into communal clashes. Chandavarkar challenges the conventional assumption of industrial expansion leading to homogeneity within the working class and points to the revived articulation of difference with the stiffening of competition:

In the maelstrom of popular politics, various competing and often uneasily co-existing identities played upon each other. The question of social identity and its relationship to political action has often been misleadingly posed as a choice between exclusive choices, loyalties and allegiances. In fact, the working classes combined a wide range of identities, from family to class, from caste to religion, from neighbourhood to nation, and their expression depended upon the social and political context in which they were articulated. Class consciousness should no more be regarded as inherent to or immanent within the working classes than affinities derived from caste or tribe, religion or nation, family or neighbourhood. The interaction between them took complex and often unexpected forms. (Chandavarkar 1994:429-30)

The perception within the working classes of the state as its chief antagonist was important in the resonance of nationalism within its ranks. In Chandavarkar's formulation, working class consciousness was constituted in opposition to the state and not in opposition to capital. Consequently, although the working class was divided in terms of caste and kinship ties, appeals of unification on these lines did not find much



resonance within its ranks as the general thrust of caste or community based politics operated within the framework of the state:

Although caste and religious differences could be exploited to open up differences within unions, to break strikes and undermine neighbourhood and political alliances, they did not capture, contain or comprehensively describe the political networks, perceptions and action of the working classes. (ibid: 431)

In Chandavarkar we find a careful dissection of crisscrossing ties of power, affinity, tradition and solidarity within the working class. His pertinent submission is that their particular combinations at particular points in time resulted in the complex developments surrounding the working class in early twentieth century Bombay:

Political action has often been most securely grasped in terms of given social categories. It is perhaps more important to recognize that these social categories were not given in the first place but politically constructed, and that the process of the social formation of the working class was shaped by an essentially political dimension at its core. (ibid: 432)

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Another narrative of the same period from colonial Calcutta was presented in Dipesh Chakravarty's *Rethinking Working Class History: Bengal 1890-1940*. He concludes on the basis of his evidence that working class consciousness in the jute mills of Calcutta was enmeshed with elements of culture that was steeped in pre-capitalist sovereignty, and that since the working class movements operated on the basis of these very ties, they never saw the full-fledged development of class consciousness. He elaborates that in conditions where developing capitalism was deeply penetrated by pre-capitalist relations, the transition to the former was not particularly straightforward or obvious. The thrust of his exploration is that the persistence of ascriptive categories of identity acted as a roadblock in the emergence of class consciousness among the jute mill workers of colonial Bengal.

A recent contribution to the documentation of working class lives in India is sometimes referred to as 'unmaking' studies, or studies of the conditions of displaced, retrenched or unemployed industrial workers confronted with shutdowns in several industrial centres. The earliest contributions were made immediately after the first wave of shut downs in the 1980s (Patel 1988). Recent contributions, like Jan Breman's *The Making and Unmaking of an Industrial Working Class: Sliding Down the Labour Hierarchy in Ahmedabad, India* (2004) trace the processes involved in the emergence and decline of an urban



working class over a hundred and twenty years. Chitra Joshi's *Lost Worlds: Indian Labour and its Forgotten Histories* (2003) captures a similar trajectory of the working class in Kanpur. Meera Menon and Neera Adarkar (*A Hundred Years, A Hundred Voices*, 2004) and David D'Monte (*Ripping the Fabric: Mumbai's Decline in a Global World*, 2002) have recorded the conditions of erstwhile millworkers of Bombay after the shutdown of mills in the early eighties. Recent evaluations also suggest that the true complexity of labour in contemporary India can only be unravelled if we examine informal labour more closely (Bhowmik 2009, 2012). While this paper acknowledges this point, the attempt herein is to subject a neglected aspect of organised worker's lives to closer scrutiny. This aspect of studying labour culture is considered in the next section.

Studying Labour Culture

Responses to the established conventions within the study of labour outlined here emerged towards the end of the twentieth century. The body of work that was produced in this phase also commenced an insightful repartee with the ongoing disciplinary confusions between Sociology, Anthropology and History in studying labour. Two significant bodies of work have been pivotal in providing insight and new directions to explore. The first of these is the continuing interest within labour history, which, following the Thompsonian inspiration, has attempted to explore the worker's 'everyday' at closer quarters. This branch, known in German as *Alltagsgeschichte* (everyday history) was revived by Alf Lüdtke, whose explorations into everyday Fascism in inter-war Germany provided fresh new directions to understand working lives. Useful explorations of worker's lives, leisure, recreation etc. and the role these activities play in shaping lives have been provided by several scholars in this tradition for European contexts (See Lynn 1992; Passerini 1987; Lüdtke 1989; Wulf 2013). The effort to bridge the gap between understanding workers associations as well as labour culture need not be a contradictory project, as German labour historian Lynn Abrams has succinctly stated:

Everyday life and labour movement studies are not really doomed to conflict. Research into the labour movement should also consider the experiences of the workers, while those who seek to discover the worker's 'subjective experience' should not forget that this was influenced by political decision making and socio-economic structures. An alliance between the methodology of social history and the history of political structures is called for in



order to place the history of workers' leisure in the context of social relations and the dynamics of political change. (Abrams 1992: 5)

Similar stirrings were also occurring in labour history, as scholars from Australia, Canada and Africa sought to re-imagine the study of labour culture. The economy, the polity and history are all constitutive of labour culture in this approach. In other words, the approach would be fruitful only if scholars looked for both the daily negotiations of workers with each other as well as larger negotiations they undertook at the collective level (Taksa 1994; Friesen & Taksa 1996).

The second is the anthropological turn in the study of industrial work evident in the scholarly efforts pioneered by Jonathan Parry, Massimiliano Mollona and Christian Struempell, Gert de Neve, to name a few. Internationally, the formal beginnings of this trend were marked by the revival of industrial anthropology and new directions within it. A common trend across this body of work is the endeavour at a definition of culture, not as a residual category of what remained if one removed economy and politics, but a revival of the legacy of the everyday, the way lives are lived, the nuances of working lives within and outside the shop floor. Community in this approach cannot be seen as a product of the intervention of any agent or group of agents. It is a product of the intermeshing of actors, forces and institutions. The examination of working class lives in this framework would essentially mean exploring how workers lives are refracted through other lives, other structures and other institutions. In other words, the preferred eye, even in historical exploration, is the ethnographic. In summing up the relevance of such an approach in the general introduction to *Industrial Work and Life: An Anthropological Reader*, Massimiliano Mollona argues that

[e]thnography is central to understanding the radical socio-economic changes of the last twenty years, including the current financial 'crisis', which, if anything, shows the gap between models and reality in the economy. Ethnographies of work often challenge the universalistic and ethnocentric assumptions that constitute the core of 'economics', in particular its view of society as a field comprising rationalizing and individualistic actors in mutual competition for scarce resources. By revealing the human dimension of work – the importance of self-realization, creativity, collaboration and solidarity – and plurality of forms of livelihood, ethnography opens up alternative economic visions and political possibilities. (Mollona 2009: xii)



The Neglected 'Everyday' in the Sociology of Industrial Work in India

Mark Holmstrom remarked in 1976 that "the anthropology of urban work – in the sense of a careful description of workers' lives, which relates their action and thinking to their situation – has hardly begun in India" (Holmstrom in Parry 1999a). Twenty years later, Jonathan Parry pointed at the continuing relevance of the statement:

On the other hand, in sociology, notwithstanding a handful of heroic exceptions (like Breman 1994, 1996 and Heuze 1996), progress has been less impressive and there is little reason to qualify Holmstrom's complaint of more than twenty years ago. (ibid.: vii)

The absence of thorough empirical considerations of industrial life, and the lack of a comparative angle it offered with history continued. The puzzling elements in this remarkable absence are two, as Parry delineates them. First, it is surprising that despite the talk on India's emergence as a leading industrial power in the eighties and the nineties, India's foremost sociological journal, *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (henceforth *Contributions*), had published but one paper on the theme in 1985. This element is used in cautioning us to an uncritical acceptance of the foundational mission of *Contributions*, which located the sociology of India at the confluence of Sociology and Indology. Sociology's relative neglect of the theme of industrialisation leads Parry to remark that

The proportion of recent sociological field research that has been devoted to the social processes and consequences of industrialisation is surprisingly small in view of the obvious significance of the topic. But small is not negligible; and it is principally the *Economic and Political Weekly* which has published papers on the industrial workforce. (ibid.: viii)

Second, in highlighting the problem of a disjunction between the study of industry and the study of traditional institutions, Parry reiterates a problem that was hinted at earlier in this paper – that Sociology in India has chosen to follow an either-or approach to the study of industrialisation. In such an approach, the thrust is either on treating the industrial worker as a model of advanced capital's rationality, or in treating him as synonymous with his culture, which has interestingly been construed as a 'black box' term that does not need explanation, breaking down or specification, a typical 'divine intervention' as he amusedly notes. The result of such a use of 'culture' is a certain obli-



viousness in the discipline on the actual workings of modernity and tradition and their innovative and interesting interplay:

But though its icon is there on the desktop, its actual content is safely tucked out of sight. So what Ram Singh Yadav from Saran actually thinks about the machine he handles in the jute mill, how he negotiates his relationship with the Chamar from Champaran on the next machine, and whether he flirts with the Telugu women in the same shop, is left largely unexplored. (ibid.: vii)

The relevance of a balance of perspective that prevents us from either subscribing to the evolutionary teleology which characterises much work on industrialisation or entangled in the specificities of the particular situation is the most crucial aspect of this undertaking. Such caution, along with an eye to the movements of global capital would thus be an ideal starting point today:

If it may seem rather bland to conclude that the Indian experience of industrialisation is in some respects particular to it, and in other respects the shared product of a logic intrinsic to industrial capitalism itself, it at least has the merit of reminding us that we cannot afford to lose sight of either dimension. (ibid.: xi)

Missing in action have been ethnographies of religious practice, observations of caste practices, ritual orders, kinship and family relations in an industrial milieu.

The suggestion is that contemporary explorations spend much time on the intersectional position in which the worker is situated, while industrial work and the accompanying context seems marginal to this picture. For instance, the study of labour organisation in India has almost exclusively focused on trade unions and neglected a range of other associations that workers form, within and adjacent to their industrial work lives (Ramaswamy 1977, U. Ramaswamy 1983 and Patel 1994, 1997, 1998, 2011). These associations, formed on a number of different bases, form important sites to study the interaction between modern and traditional collectivities. Their existence, functioning and practices reflect the rich interplay of the invocation of modern as well as non-modern aspects of their history and lives, and why they choose the modalities they do, to negotiate these tensions.

The 1999 volume of *Contributions* dedicated to the theme of industrial labour in India suggests that research produced from fieldwork in the first decade of liberalisation has a trenchant lot to say on the penetration and interplay of the 'non-industrial' and the industrial prevalence of bonded labour in urban workshops (Kapadia, Engels-



hoven, Breman 1999), cyclical nature of industrial and agricultural labour and therefore migration (Breman, Parry 1999b), the articulation of everyday resistance through primordial solidarities etc. (Simeon, Joshi 1999). In other words, the first stock taking of work on industrialisation in India did suggest interesting avenues to be pursued.⁵

The continuing nature of industrialisation in the country needs no reiteration; neither does the entirely new range of issues it has produced. The nature and spatial dynamics of production have witnessed significant changes in the last two decades, but to read into these changes a sharp decline or sudden break from the industrial way of life would be misleading to say the least. The need for a basic sociology of the industrial neighbourhood, a sociology of production in view of the diffused spatial character of manufacturing, a sociology mindful of the need to give and take from the best in both traditions of the discipline in India was suggested by Parry in 1999. However, over the fifteen years past Parry's concerns on the near neglect of the theme in a leading journal of sociology in India, *Contributions* carried a mere five pieces in this area. In relegating the study of values, norms, belief, meaning and the proverbial black box of culture to the (social) anthropological approach, and restricting the study of industrial life to organisation, interest, conflict and industrial relations, sociology in India has given up its privilege of exploring the 'everyday' in an industrial setting with all its attendant complexities.

There have been a handful of attempts to break out of this deadlock, particularly through work on public sector industry (Parry 1999b, 2003, 2010, 2012, Strümpell 2008). For instance, at the end of fieldwork on the spatial and ritual dynamics of caste in a public sector company settlement in Orissa in 2003, Christian Strümpell noted that

The institutional negation of caste among workers on SHE(J)P shop floors and among neighbours in Chatamput's labour colonies rests on a company culture that places strong emphasis on the working class as a vanguard of a new, modern, casteless India. That the settlement is 'outside', spatially limits the negation of caste, and this has presumably eased the migrants' appropriation of their role as a vanguard working class. (Strümpell 2008: 379)

The suggestion is also that paucity of literature is not a function of lack of interest in industrialisation, but a gaping hole in the way the story of industrialisation has been told, or not told, in India. Subsequently, the understanding that the production process in itself affects the making



of the worker and that workers enter the workplace with histories and ideologies from their past has not gained much ground in the sociological treatment of industry. This understanding, more methodological than theoretical, it may be argued, has made its way into historical enquiries which explains the rejuvenation of interest in Indian labour history over the last two decades. Significantly enough, the founding motif of this rejuvenation is the everyday, a conceptual rubric that rightfully belongs to the sociology/anthropology tradition.

Concluding Remarks

In this paper it has been suggested that the treatment of industrialisation within sociology in India seems to be stuck in a time warp, assisted by a misleading division of labour wherein the preoccupation with the urban/modern and the eager anticipation of a working class cleansed of tradition colours those with a sociological inclination, while the immediate impacts of transformation, an associated lifestyle and attendant insecurities form the focus of enquiries with an anthropological bent. The result is an appalling lack of balance on processes of transformation that have characterised industrialisation in post-independence India. While the former tends to ignore the grimy details of the effects of alienation of land and livelihood in focusing on the long term effects, the latter is neglectful of inter-generational trajectories of life and to a certain extent the broader course charted out by the working class in India over several decades.

What are the fallouts? First, in terms of the sociology of knowledge, it forces us to rely on a phase-wise understanding of industrial sociology- the initial euphoria leading to 'applied' research on industrialisation and its impacts, and the contemporary disenchantment with the industrial way of life leading to its neglect. Second, and more relevant to the disciplinary divide at hand, it forces us to choose between explanations that hold on to a universal logic of industrialism, frequently featured in 'sociological' approaches, and explanations that swear by a cultural logic intrinsic to each context, as seen in 'anthropological' approaches. Third, by suggesting that paucity of literature is primarily a function of massive changes in the structure of production and the consequent shrinking of industrial spaces it masks the fact that the disciplinary divide actually shaped our very consideration of industrialisation as a fractured process. It converts an error of commission into an error of omission, further obliterating the path of the discipline in understanding the process of industrialisation in India.



As the discipline lilt and loiters in its attempts to address issues of taxonomy, the interstices are being explored variously by economics, history and literary theory. So what can, or should, the sociology of industrial work in India in the twenty-first century offer? In the first place an avenue to re-enter the themes that have been the significant strengths of sociology in India over the years, in understanding industry. Secondly, to delve deeper into the shaping of the industrial order and the specific effects of culture and social structure in that industry. Finally, to factor in the value of historical work on the theme while acknowledging the limits of archival sources, to fortify one's foray 'into fieldwork'.

Endnotes

¹ Sections of this paper were presented at a workshop titled "Theorising the Social: Locations and Hierarchies" organised by the *Centre for the Study of Social Systems, JNU* and *Indian Council of Social Scientific Research, JNU* (22-23 January 2014). I am grateful to Maitrayee Chaudhuri, Arjun Sengupta, Gayatri Nair, Mahua Bandopadhyay, Uppal Chakraborty and Manish Jha for comments on earlier drafts of the paper.

² See for instance, (i) Baldev R Sharma's 1968 piece titled "Commitment to Industrial Work: The Case of the Indian Automobile Worker" on the importance of developing a committed workforce in an industrial society and the compatibility of Indian culture with industrial values. In 1978, Vijaya Puneekar and E Hari Babu proposed a change in this approach to commitment to include the value component within it (ii) S K Khurana's 1972 paper on 27 "Industrial Relations in Public and Private Sector Industry in India" which looks at criteria in the management of industrial conflict in Indian industries in post-independence decades. One of the earlier considerations of Trade Unions appeared in 1972, in terms of an analysis of strike as a tactical tool in the case of the INTUC and the triangular tension between the industrial policy of the country which tried to avoid strike, the national level policy of the INTUC which supported this, and local level strike action by the INTUC (Wolkinson & Dayal 1972).

³ The responsiveness of the study of labour to class action in industry has been one of its notable features. Each wave of writing on the working class would correspond to a wave of working class political action. Charles Fabel has noted how this leads to the phenomenon of enquiries beginning with a particular set of questions in the wake of class action and leading to quite a different set with the ebbing of the tide (1982).

⁴ See for instance, Bouchardiere 1941, Edward 1941, Mukhopadhyay 1946, Moorthy 1946, Sambasivan 1946 and Kulkarni 1946. The themes covered ranged from strikes through wages to living conditions of workers in factories.

⁵ The location of researchers who continue to be interested in these aspects of life in industrial settings is significant. The 1999 volume of Contributions which revisited the theme of studying industrial labour in India had ten papers, seven of which were by authors located in foreign universities, two of them with Indian origins. The three authors, who were based in Indian universities, were all formally trained historians.



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