The sociology of labour in India

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Labouring in ‘village’ India

While it is now a challenge to review the expansive sociology of labour in India, it was not until the 1970s that labour became an explicit theme of study for anthropologists and sociologists of the subcontinent - with some notable exceptions such as the hugely influential early work of scholars like Breman (1985, 1993, 1994, 1996) and Holmström (1976). Until then, the study of labour was largely subsumed within broader studies of agrarian relations and village economies, and broadly focused on two types of relationships.

The first was the study of the ‘jajmani system’, which for long offered an almost hegemonic image of village labour relations. The jajmani system was conceived of as a ‘traditional’ division of labour between dominant agrarian castes and a range of specialised castes that served the former in exchange for various customary payments by the jajman (patron), either in kind or cash (Fuller 1989, Kolenda 1963). The labour involved in such relationships was conceptualised as the delivery of ‘services’ and ‘duties’ strictly regulated by hereditary occupations. While Dumont (1970: 108) considered these as part of wider caste-based reciprocal relationships, his perspective was later criticised not only for projecting an orientalist view of a closed ‘village India’ removed from money and markets, but also for ignoring the power imbalances shaping the interdependencies. Indeed, jajmani relations played a pivotal role in the maintenance and reproduction of the economic power of dominant, landed castes, who used the purity-pollution axis to secure long-term subservience from the labouring classes (Mencher 1974). The debate about the nature of jajmani relationships was fixated on the structural and functionalist dimensions of the institution, leaving little space for an exploration of how such relationships were actually enacted and reproduced, let along lived and experienced.

A second preoccupation with labour focused on the interactions between landowning castes and those huge swathes of the rural population outside the world of jajmani reciprocity: the predominantly landless agricultural labourers whose relationship with landowners was fraught with exploitation and patronage, and marked with either casual employment or permanent attachment (Breman 1985, 1993, 1994). Breman’s study (1993) of landless
labourers in South Gujarat presents one of the most comprehensive pictures of how exploitation worked to keep low caste and tribal communities at the bottom of the heap. Patronage provided the minimal subsistence required to reproduce a rural labour force whose toil was essential to agrarian production. Bonded labour made up the underbelly of patron-client relationships and was pervasive in agriculture until only a couple of decades ago (Brass 1990, Carswell and De Neve 2013a). Generations of farm servants were permanently tied to landowners, paid in kind (later cash), and effectively prevented from freely selling their labour in the market. Brass contends that ‘worker attachment is a form of unfreedom, the object of which is to discipline …, control and cheapen labour-power by preventing or curtailing both its commodification and the growth of a specifically proletarian consciousness’ (1990: 37). Unfree labour was often coercive and exploitative, and located at the centre of the class struggle between dominant landowners and agricultural labour. Capitalism in India, as indeed elsewhere, is clearly not incompatible with unfreedom – it actively thrives on it and produces it.

Particularly central to Breman’s oeuvre are his accounts of the changing nature of agrarian labour relations in the post-independence era. The rapid casualization of rural labour in the latter decades of the twentieth century not only removed much of the patronage that once provided basic security to landless labourers, but also gave rise to a footloose proletariat hunting and gathering for waged work (Breman 1994, 1996). Increased labour mobility and access to new forms of off-farm work were accompanied by two new processes of labour recruitment, both of which transformed - but rarely alleviated - the exploitation that rural labour had been subjected to. On the one hand, the gradual expansion of the non-agrarian economy led to an intensification of labour circulation, with landless labourers now scanning rural and urban areas in search for work. This set a trend towards the deployment of labour on a casual basis and towards a decline in job security as cheaper and more flexible migrant labour came to displace local workforces (Mosse 2002, Rogaly 1996, Rogaly and Rafique 2003). On the other hand, while bonded labour had by and large disappeared from agriculture by the end of the twentieth century, it re-emerged across non-farm sectors, including brick kilns, powerlooms, stone quarries, gem cutting workshops and construction sites (Breman et al 2009, De Neve 1999, Kapadia 1995a, Picherit 2009, Srivastava 2009). It was Breman who aptly coined the term ‘neo-bondage’ to capture the novel ways in which labour mobility continues to be curtailed to the benefit of employers (Breman 1996). Bondage is now based on debt (usually through loans against wages), takes the form of a less
personalised and more contractual employment relationship, is time-bound rather than permanent, and tends to be mediated by a jobber or contractor who recruits and manages migrant workforces (see also Breman and Guérin 2009). The high incidence of debt bondage outside agriculture and involving predominantly migrant labour points to the nature of contemporary capitalist accumulation in India, which continues to thrive on unfreedom, soaring levels of indebtedness, and the vulnerability of marginalised social groups at the lowest levels of society.

Whilst the harshest forms of bondage continue to undermine any expression of labour agency, ethnographic accounts also revealed that labourers have their own ways of challenging and resisting employers’ attempts to immobilise them. Active strategies of repaying debts and shifting factories as well as subtle tactics of foot-dragging, indiscipline and even escape often successfully undermine employers’ desperate search for a stable and permanent workforce (De Neve 1999, Kapadia 1995). The binding of labour can paradoxically undermine employers’ power to discipline their workforce as the latter cannot be easily dismissed in case of poor performance. As a result, employers and labour contractors are often wary of binding labour for longer periods of time, and instead prefer temporary immobilisation over permanent attachment. Rural labour processes clearly need to be understood in relation to the vagaries of neoliberal capital, which itself thrives on a range of labour deployment strategies that include bonded labour at one end, temporarily tied and contract labour in the middle, and casual or flexible labour at the other end (Guérin 2013).

Agrarian labour in India has undergone two further transformations more recently. The first is the increased use of contract labour, in which teams of male or female workers take on contracts for a specific agricultural task and move between rural employers (Carswell 2013, Kapadia 1995b). While this frees employers from any long-term commitments to workers, it leaves the latter with a much more precarious employment situation and forms part of the broader process of casualization that marks much of India’s informal economy today. The second is the feminisation of agricultural work. In a review of rural India, Harriss-White and Janakarajan conclude that ‘women have come to dominate the labour input into agriculture and [now] provide over half of all farm labour, largely as casual wage labourers’ (2004: 172). This feminisation of agricultural labour, in which women often perform backbreaking work for low pay and on casual contracts, has been observed across a range of recent case studies (Carswell 2016, Garikipati 2008, Guérin et al. 2014) and reflects a gendered pattern of opportunity in which men avail of the mobility and flexibility required to access off-farm
work, while women’s options often remain limited to what is available within the village economy. However, the recent roll-out of various social welfare schemes, and of MGNREGA in particular, is offering rural women alternative sources of income, while producing more encouraging effects, such as a rise in female agricultural wages and a strengthening of women’s bargaining power vis-a-vis rural employers (Carswell and De Neve 2013b, 2014; Pankaj and Tankha 2010).

**From field to factory: mapping changing landscapes of labour**

Rural and agrarian labour, however, form only a part of the study of labour in India today. As labour came to town and factory, so did the sociology of its processes and transformations. With the study of industrial labour, sociological research was given a new impulse, and fields of investigation that had long been neglected began to attract scholarly interest. The recruitment and deployment of labour in factories and industrial workshops; the mediating role of jobbers and labour contractors; the practices of subcontracting and outsourcing; the role of the state in regulating and protecting labour; and the transformation of social structures and identities in industrial environments all received unprecedented attention.

A first map of industrial labour was sketched by Holmström in 1976. Epitomised by the image of the ‘citadel’ of security and relative prosperity, he depicted a dual economy, and hence a dual society, marked by a sharp boundary separating those inside the citadel of secure organised sector employment – the ‘aristocracy of labour’ - from those outside who live in a world of insecurity and informality, desperately trying to climb the walls (1976: 137). Later, however, Holmström corrected this image as too simple and suggested:

> The organized/unorganized boundary is not a wall but a steep slope. Indian society is like a mountain, with the very rich at the top, lush Alpine pastures where skilled workers in the biggest modern industries graze, a gradual slope down through smaller firms where pay and conditions are worse and the legal security of employment means less, a steep slope around the area where the Factories Act ceases to apply …, a plateau where custom and the market give poorly paid unorganized sector workers some minimal security, then a long slope through casual migrant labour and petty services to destitution (1984: 319).

In this picture, there is no single path ‘up’ but rather countless trajectories of upward and downward mobility across a range of jobs, firms and industries. A key point of debate concerns whether the majority of the labouring poor can access the better paid and more rewarding jobs on the higher slopes.
In Breman’s view, few are able to do so. Offering his own map, he argues that ‘the landscape of labour has the appearance of a vast plain broken by many larger and smaller hills’ (1996: 225). The hills are zones of work where the top jobs resemble formal sector employment, while the vast plain is where the massive underclass is found who lack the assets and equipment necessary to undertake the uphill march. Those who do try to climb up encounter all sorts of obstacles, while the majority are forced ‘to stay at the bottom and have no choice but to go out hunting and gathering a wage’ (Breman 1996: 225). A key feature of this labour landscape that became accentuated in the post-liberalisation era is that ‘employers in every branch of economic business encircle themselves with a fairly small core of permanent workers through whom a reserve of casual workers can be drawn in and dismissed, in accordance with the need of the moment’ (ibid.). It is such processes of casualization and informalisation that produce the ‘flexible’ labour required by the capitalist production regimes of post-liberalisation India.

This distinction between permanent secure employment and casual work is one which Parry has picked up more recently in his research on the state-run steel plant in Bhilai. He contends that while the sociology of India has long considered the distinction between manual and non-manual labour the defining feature of what separates the ‘working’ from the ‘middle’ classes, the distinction between naukri (secure employment) and kam (insecure wage labour) forms in fact ‘a sharper and more socially salient marker of class boundaries’ (Parry 2013a: 349). While the Bhilai Steel Plant had around 65,000 employees on its direct payroll in the late 1980s, this regular labour force has been reduced by half and replaced by much cheaper and irregularly employed contract workers over the last 25 years. Apart from illustrating the drastic informalisation of work among what was once the aristocracy of labour, Parry’s ethnography also reveals how the two kinds of workforce – regular and contract labour – have come to form distinct social classes, in terms of both the material rewards and security of their employment and the life-styles, consumption patterns and aspirations that mark their social worlds (Parry 2013b). Not only has the gap between these two labour forces widened with the liberalisation of the economy, but the boundary between them has become increasingly impenetrable. To put it in Holmström’s language, the citadel itself has shrunk and any hope of climbing its walls have largely evaporated in the post-liberalisation era. Even where it once existed, secure employment is rapidly being replaced with temporary, contract-based and casual work that offers little hope of mobility or security in the long run.
A particularly insightful analysis of the changing position of labour in contemporary India is offered by Sanyal and Bhattacharyya (2009; 2011) who examine the new locations of labour in relation to the nature of capitalist development. They highlight intensifying processes of ‘dispossession without proletarianisation or exploitation’ (2009: 3), which lead to the exclusion of labour from the accumulation economy. This new ‘surplus’ labour force consists of ‘dispossessed producers whose traditional livelihoods were destroyed but who were not absorbed in the modern sector’ (ibid.: 36). Crucially, excluded or surplus labourers do not constitute a reserve army of labour waiting to be employed, but a population that is altogether ‘surplus’ to the needs of the capitalist economy and hence no longer contributes to capitalist accumulation (see Li 2010). This excluded labour force, they argue, is relegated to the informal economy, parts of which are linked to the circuits of capital via subcontracting and outsourcing and parts of which constitute a space outside capitalist accumulation altogether.

Sanyal and Bhattacharyya suggest that such an ‘understanding of the informal economy places it right at the heart of capitalist development and yet outside the circuit of capital – an outside that is expanded along with and in proportion to capitalist accumulation (ibid.: 37).

Self-employment and petty commodity production, alongside the most dire forms of casual employment, mark this ‘outside’ or ‘need’ economy, where economic activity aims at meeting subsistence needs. While the extent of this labour force’s disconnection from capitalist production can be debated, it is certainly fair to state that increasing populations remain excluded ‘from the more dynamic sectors of the economy and engage in activities of such low productivity as barely to allow for survival’ (Corbridge et al: 99).

**Class, consciousness and collective action**

Apart from theorising the ways in which capitalism actively produces excluded labour forces, Sanyal and Bhattacharyya’s analysis also revives old conversations about the nature of class formation, consciousness and collective action among India’s labouring classes. A now extensive revisionist historiography has critiqued earlier essentialist and teleological explanations of class formation on the subcontinent. For quite some time, India’s incomplete industrial transformation was understood in essentialist terms: primordial loyalties, rural attachments, caste- and community-based identities, and a religious worldview were taken as the ‘cultural essences’ that prevented industrial capitalism from emerging in its universal (read western) form and that suppressed class consciousness. Chakrabarty, for example commented that the Calcutta jute mill workers related to the factory and its machinery
through a ‘rural’ – read ‘primitive’ – outlook (1989: 89) and that they had not yet acquired the industrial mind which long-term familiarity with industrial work is supposed to breed. Peasants coming to town, would always remain peasants, irrespective how they were integrated in capitalism production processes. It was suggested that the formation of an Indian working class would remain incomplete and fragmented because of persistent ‘pre-industrial’ or ‘peasant’ identities. Such an understanding of class formation, however, was rooted in a strikingly narrow understanding of class as a homogeneous, static and inherent feature of capitalist production.

The sociology of Indian labour is greatly indebted to the work of the historian Chandavarkar whose monumental work on the origins of industrial capitalism and the nature of labour politics in late colonial India brought politics back into the study of class. Rather than assuming the static identity and consciousness of novice urban labour forces in India, Chandavarkar pointed to the unavoidably fragmented nature of class formation, the diversity of overlapping and intersecting working class sections, and the gradual – and often temporary – shifts in workers’ consciousness. Importantly, he emphasised that workers’ politics can only be explained ‘in terms of the playing out of diverse sets of power relations rather than simply as an effect of their relationship to the means of production’ (1998: 9). In doing this, Chandavarkar considered the workplace and the urban neighbourhood as the pivotal sites where class consciousness, collective solidarities and social identities are being produced, negotiated and challenged (1994: 1-11; 1998: 8-10). This revisionist historiography informed subsequent ethnographic studies in a number of ways. First, historians showed that class is never the only identity that informs one’s consciousness and actions. Gooptu argued for an examination of ‘the interaction and overlap of diverse forms of political action and social identities of the poor based on class, labour, caste, religion or nation’ (2001: 5), without giving any of these a priori relevance. Sociologists and anthropologists subsequently developed this approach by zooming in on relations in production, on shop floor interactions and on neighbourhood networks to reveal how labour politics always emerge within specific historical, cultural and spatial contexts (De Neve 2005).

Second, class identities are themselves constituted - and fragmented – by the modalities of caste, kinship and gender among others. In a fascinating study of women and labour in late colonial Bengal, Sen critiqued the view that the ‘male experience of class is thought to stand for class experience as a whole’ (1999: 100), and examined not only how women experienced being ‘working class’ differently from their male co-workers but also how the
‘working class’ was fragmented along spatial and gender lines. Sen argued that skill in particular was a social construct; it was never ‘an objective economic fact, it was an ideological category imposed on certain kinds of work by virtue of gender and the power of the workers who performed these tasks’ (ibid: 105). In a study of Calcutta’s jute mill workers, Fernandes further de-constructed the perspective that sees the working class as a monolithic entity, by showing how the ‘working class’ is itself constructed through the politics of gender and community (1997). Differences of gender and community create factions within the ‘working class’ that not only prevent the consolidation of a single working class consciousness, but also protect the interests of particular sections of the labour force, such as male workers or workers from specific regional or religious backgrounds (ibid: 27-88). Indeed, working classes are always historically and socially produced through the shifting and overlapping constructions of gender, religion and community, and it is in the intersectionality of these diverse categories that multiple, yet partial, expressions of class consciousness emerge.

A powerful ethnographic illustration of the highly gendered and fractured nature of the ‘working class’ is found in Kapadia’s study of the gem cutting industry in Tamil Nadu, which revealed that labour relations are not always or primarily mediated by class; they may as much be mediated by caste, gender or other social identities. In the gem cutting workshops, women’s relationship with their employers were wholly mediated by their husbands, who received a joint wage, negotiated cash advances, and interacted with the workshop owner on behalf of both of them. Kapadia concluded that women formed an altogether different working class from men, and one which enjoyed considerably fewer freedoms: ‘while men were the acknowledged bonded labourers [of employers], women workers were the unacknowledged bonded workers of men’ (1999: 340). Such novel perspectives encouraged a more comprehensive understanding of worker identities as made up of caste, gender, kinship and religion, as well as class, and promoted a more open-ended and less teleological analysis of labour politics.

Finally, historians and other scholars of labour have pointed to the shifting nature and meaning of caste in contexts of industrial employment. While caste identities and powerful patron-client relationships with employers and contractors can constitute a divisive force on the shop floor and hinder the rise of a wider class consciousness (Picherit 2013), at times, as Breman has shown among migrant workers in town, ‘caste consciousness can undergo scale enlargement in such a way that it approaches class consciousness: recognizing members of
other sub-castes as fellow sufferers and feeling solidarity with them’ (1996: 257). It can rarely be known a priori what sorts of solidarities caste or religion will produce or prevent. Chandavarkar rightly argued that rather than to explore divisions, tensions and rivalries within industrial workforces, it might be more productive to ask why and how workers, who are often deeply divided by opposed interests and fragmented labour markets, manage to come together at all, and around what specific issues they manage to mobilise resistance (1994: 401).

Sanyal and Bhattacharyya raise novel questions about the changing nature of working class mobilisation in the post-liberalisation era. With the decline of traditional trade union representation and the exclusion of working populations from the circuits of capitalist production, novel forms of associational power are emerging that are more community based and follow new tactics of mobilisation (2009: 41-42; Roychowdhury 2003). The ‘dispossessed fight back through silent encroachment on property’ (Sanyal and Bhattacharyya 2009: 42) or by resisting dispossession and eviction from urban land that sustains their livelihood (Raman 2015). Such mobilisations reshape capital-labour relations: rather than focusing on the exploitation of wage labour, their primary aim is to protect access to the basic sources of subsistence that keep the excluded alive. It is in this struggle that new alliances and forms of activism emerge, and that labour politics begin to take an altogether new shape in the struggle against capital.

In India Working, Harriss-White made the fundamental point that while much work in India falls outside the purview and regulation of the state, this does mean that such work is not regulated at all. Rather, informal or unorganised work is regulated by the social structures and institutions of accumulation, which include caste, gender, religion and space as well as the social fragmentation of labour markets (2003: 241). Importantly, recent processes of liberalisation are ‘not dissolving this matrix of social institutions but reconfiguring them slowly, unevenly and in a great diversity of ways’ (Harriss-White and Gooptu 2001: 90). While caste and gender have been well researched, Vera-Sanso’s important study of the labouring poor in Chennai has highlighted a much neglected yet vital social dimension of accumulation: age. Vera-Sanso’s findings reveal that the aging poor - and older women in particular - continue to make substantial, yet under-recognised and under-valued, contributions to family, national and global economies until well into old age. Older women not only work till much later in life than commonly assumed, but they ‘are often self-supporting, support husbands and subsidise the incomes of younger relatives’ (Vera-Sanso
2012: 324), and their activities are critical to the functioning of the urban economy, such as through domestic work and street vending. Yet, at the same time, older women not only suffer cumulative disadvantages in the labour market, but globalisation and liberalisation policies are further undermining their livelihoods (ibid.: 325). Indeed, urban labour market restructuring, downward wage pressures, the rise of international retailers, and urban beautification projects increasingly squeeze them out of their already marginal urban niches and threaten their earning abilities. Such transformations seriously challenge their livelihoods and those of the families they support at the bottom of urban society. Clearly, even in the absence or failure of direct state regulation, the social institutions of accumulation regulate workers’ lives and, in the era of liberalisation, they further squeeze the opportunities of already marginalised workforces - often female, low-caste and ageing – while excluding others (Sanyal and Bhattacharyya 2009, Vera-Sanso 2012).

New sites of labour: SEZs, IT and the service economy

Over the last decade or so, sociologists and anthropologists of labour in India have turned their attention to novel labour forces and newly emerging issues. Labour in Special Export Zones (SEZ) and industrial enclaves, employees in the thriving IT and software industry, and the fast-growing service sector workers who sustain India’s expanding consumer culture have become new subjects of ethnographic research. While studies ask ‘what’s new?’ about such forms of employment, the answers point to remarkable continuities and consistencies with the fate of labour in the ‘old’ economy of agrarian production and industrial manufacturing. Cross, for example, explored the ‘structural continuities and dynamic interconnections’ (2010: 355) between working lives inside the Visakhapatnam SEZ in Andhra Pradesh and the world of informal work outside of it. Both in Worldwide Diamonds located inside the SEZ and in the informal economy surrounding the zone, terms and conditions of work were broadly similar, working lives were marked by precarious and insecure livelihoods, and political subjectivities lacked the inalienable rights and entitlements that guarantee formal citizenship (Cross 2009). The boundary between the zone and the surrounding informal economy was porous, and if anything, Cross concludes, SEZs ‘merely formalize conditions of precariousness and political subjectivity that already characterize working lives in much of South India’ (2010: 355). As quintessentially neoliberal products, India’s new economic zones are anything but exceptional – they merely legitimise the forms of labour control,
informality and precariousness that have long underpinned capitalist production across the subcontinent (ibid.: 370).

In similar vein, studies of India’s booming IT industry have indicated how recruitment and employment in the new ‘knowledge’ economy starkly reflect privilege – usually shaped by a combination of caste and educational background - and tap into the cultural capital of the existing middle classes (Nisbett 2013; Fuller and Narasimhan 2007; Upadhya 2011). While a discourse of ‘merit’ publicly represents this industry as an avenue for upward mobility, a growing body of evidence suggests that social capital remains key to access, that IT labour markets remain fragmented by gender, age and education, and that the sector itself thrives on and reproduces middle class/upper caste ‘culture’ (Fuller and Narasimhan 2014; Nisbett 2013). Moreover, rather than transforming gendered identities, the IT industry tends to reinforce notions of respectable femininity in the workplace, in which women’s professionalism, career and ambition are tamed by a work culture that emphasises conservative values, ‘Indian’ culture, and women’s domestic roles of wives and mothers (Fuller and Narasimhan 2008; Radhakrishnan 2011; Mukherjee 2008; Upadhya 2008).

Studies of the IT shop floor have also thrown light on shifting modes of labour control and novel labour processes. While work processes remain closely monitored, with surveillance now taking place through electronic devices, or the so-called ‘information panopticon,’ Upadhya and Vasavi also point to simultaneous processes of individualisation that turn software employees into ‘entrepreneurial’ workers who are forced to ‘fashion their own careers through strategies such as job-hopping, self-improvement courses, and constant online and on-the-job learning’ (2008: 24). Enterprising individuals are compelled to take responsibility for both company production targets and personal (career and life) trajectories (ibid.: 25). As such, IT workers end up in a double-bind: they remain the subject of top-down surveillance through relentless online monitoring, while at the same time being made personally responsible for their performance.

Emerging research on the rapidly expanding urban service economy has precisely honed in on the discursive practices through which an ‘enterprise culture’ is created and neoliberal subjectivities are instilled into a range of service sector workforces. In a number of fascinating studies on organised retail workers and private security guards, Gooptu has demonstrated how processes of liberalisation have promulgated a new enterprise culture rooted in ideas of self-management, self-governance and self-discipline, and driven by
powerful aspirations for self-improvement and social mobility (Gooptu 2009; 2013a; 2013b). Labour processes and recruitment practices are increasingly geared towards generating a new, neoliberal subjectivity and transforming the individual into an enterprising self. Soft skills training and personality development courses increasingly contribute to the inculcation of neoliberal values of self-making and autonomy. Moreover, as much service sector work – from sales assistance to domestic and care work – involves intensive embodied and emotional engagement, scholars have rightly turned their attention to the affective dimensions of labour. In the service economy, employees’ public appearance, body comportment, and corporeal presentation become particularly important tools of the job and are therefore increasingly subject to training, discipline and scrutiny (Gooptu 2013; Upadhya and Vasavi 2008; Upadhya 2016). Indeed, service sector work has been shaped by what Gooptu aptly calls a regime of ‘organized informality,’ in which ‘recruitment and training … are systematically institutionalized and formalized by private agencies with the imprimatur of the state’ (2013a: 9), while actual work conditions and employment relations remain informal, insecure and highly exploitative. Indeed, like most informal sector workers, disposability is service workers’ main asset for employers. Moreover, the work environments themselves - such as homes and shopping malls - are permeated with a culture of subordination and servility that not only obstructs career development and upward mobility but is also emotionally draining, robbing low-end service workers from any sense of dignity at work (Gooptu 2009, 2013a).

Crucially, these new sectors not only promote novel labour processes, training strategies and subjectivities, but their particular employment relations and workplace cultures have also come to fragment the labour force and undermine collective action (Gooptu 2009: 46). For IT and service sector workers alike, risks and responsibilities have become privatised, while neoliberal discourses encourage ‘individualised responses and personal strategies for coping with problems of work and employment’ that are predominantly structural in nature (Gooptu 2009: 46). Soft management techniques that encourage team work and identification with the company divert attention away from the monotonous, regulated and stressful nature of work (Upadhya and Vasavi 2008: 30; Upadhya 2016). Failure is blamed on personal inadequacies or lack of ambition. The only remaining sense of agency, Gooptu asserts (2013a), lies in workers’ ability to make choices and devise personal strategies rather than in their capacity to challenge the structural forces that shape their employment. This has significant implications for the deepening precariousness of service sector work as well as for the politics that workers engage in – or indeed fail to engage in. Political organisation and collective action
have largely vanished as imagined possibilities from workers’ minds, with dire consequences for the politics of labour in India’s new economy.

**The road ahead**

The rise of new arenas of work in the post-liberalisation era has made it ever more challenging to draw a comprehensive map of Indian labour. What we do know, however, is that employment has enormously diversified at the bottom of the labour hierarchy; many employment relations have become indirect and mediated by recruiters and agencies; insecure, casual and irregular work is increasingly shrouded in a cloak of formality and regulation; and, yet, informality remains the root cause for the precarious livelihoods of the majority of labouring poor in India today. While increasing numbers of workers are migrating across regions and states in search of employment, and while ever larger numbers have joined a swelling urban workforce, the millions of workers who continue to labour in the agrarian and rural economy, often in the most humiliating, exploitative and unfree circumstances, continue to deserve scholarly attention too. And although we now know a good deal about the making of neoliberal subjectivities at work, there is plenty of scope for further explorations of how new identities are actually experienced and lived, as well as embodied and resisted at work, and how they intersect with ‘older’ identities and concepts of personhood that remain rooted in caste and community, thrive on patronage and dependency, and reproduce a more nodal or dividual understanding of the self.

Holmström made the point early on that factory work should not be studied as a closed system of relations, but that studies of industrial work need to look beyond the shop floor at the social organisation of neighbourhoods and communities where workers live and interact (1976). Connections between workplace and the neighbourhood are vital not only to the recruitment and control of labour, but ‘also to the organisation and conduct of collective action’ (Chandavarkar 1998: 8). Sociologists of labour would do well to heed this advice in future studies of work in India and to locate their informants within the wider social environments that sustain their livelihoods and shape their politics.

Finally, politics and power matter too. Little can be understood about labour outside the framework of how both state and capitalist production relations are being reconfigured in the post-liberalisation era. How do electoral democracy and fragmented party politics represent the rights of workers? Are new state social welfare policies able to alleviate the worst forms
of deprivation among the labouring poor? Are labourers able to act as rights-bearing citizens in contemporary India? And, how is capitalist production itself being transformed, fragmented and relocated in the era of late capitalism? While much work lies ahead, sociologists and anthropologists of Indian labour have in any case a wealth of insights to think with and build on.

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