Contesting Class: Gender, Community, and the Politics of Labor in a Calcutta Jute Mill

This article is based on a detailed ethnographic study of Calcutta jute mill workers, with the argument drawing on interviews and observations of everyday politics and conflicts at the factory level. In an attempt to transcend the problem of essentialism in the study of working class politics, the article presents a theoretical reconceptualization of class, arguing that class is a contested category, one that is constituted by conflict, exclusion, and a hierarchical representation of interests. The "making" of class politics in India thus represents a continual process of reconstruction and conflict rather than a predefined teleology. In this process, it is maintained that both the structural and ideological/cultural components of class are constructed through the politics of gender and community.

by Leela Fernandes

Introduction

Studies of industrial relations, labor movements, and working class politics have tended to be centered around certain assumptions regarding the political behavior of industrial labor forces. Such studies have tended to measure the effectiveness of the political activity of workers in relation to formal organizations such as trade unions and labor parties. The absence or weakness of such organizations then becomes an exceptional phenomenon that must be explained, whether in terms of structural reasons, issues of "consent," or as a collective action problem. There is no better demonstration of this than the case of India, where the absence of a unified national trade union movement has conventionally served as proof that class-based ideologies have failed to take root.

While the working classes in India have not conformed to visions of a revolutionary vanguard, I will argue that neither have they "collapsed" into precapitalist identities of religion or caste. The construction of the working class represents a political process that is both constituted and contested by the politics of gender and community. I am using the term community here as a broad category that encompasses identities of caste, ethnicity, religion, and language. In order to gain an understanding of the dynamism of class politics in contemporary India we must shift our focus away from the national level of union politics and pay greater attention to the grass-roots politics that unfold on the shop floor. At this microlevel, the "making" of the working class involves a continual process of reconstruction that creates forms of opposition between workers and managers and simultaneously (re)produces hierarchies between workers.

My argument builds on a conception of class as a culturally constructed category. Such an approach is represented by a wide stream of literature, much of which has built on or been influenced by E.P. Thompson's landmark work, *The Making of the English Working Class*.[1] Thompson's argument has effectively pointed some of us in a direction away from purely structuralist or "objective" conceptions of class and restored questions of agency, consciousness, and experience to the center of analyses of the processes of working class formation. Meanwhile, innovations by labor historians have questioned essentialist approaches that assume that the working class must follow a single model of behavior.. Let us consider this point through a brief look at two attempts to address this problem of essentialism, Ira Katznelson's *Working Class Formation: Nineteenth Century Patterns of Class Formation in Western Europe*

1. See, for example, William Sewell Jr., *Work and Revolution in France: The Language of Labor from the Old Regime to 1848*, (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1980); Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working Class History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989); and Ira Katznelson and Aristide Zolberg, eds., *Working Class Formation: Nineteenth Century Patterns in Western Europe and the United States* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986).

and the United States and Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Rethinking Working Class History: Bengal, 1890–1940.*

Both Katznelson and Chakrabarty have presented important criticisms of E.P. Thompson's interpretation of class and culture. Ira Katznelson has argued that Thompson's work "fuses essentialist and historicist perspectives" and implicitly re-creates a version of the "class-in-itself/for itself" model.[2] As Katznelson points out, in Thompson's approach, "once a working class is 'made' by the impact of external conditions, people sharing a fate will "make themselves" into a class capable of affecting history."[3] Chakrabarty's project, on the other hand, is to deconstruct the assumptions of English bourgeois culture that are embedded in Marx's category of capital and in Marxian analyses of working class formation. He thus criticizes the assumptions in Thompson's understanding of culture:

> But consider the wider problem that arises from the way he [Thompson] poses the question of culture. If the particular notions of "free-born Englishman," or of "equality before the law," and so on were the most crucial heritages of the English working class in respect of its capacity for developing class consciousness, what about the working classes—for instance, the Indian one—whose heritage did not include such a liberal baggage? Are they condemned then forever to a state of "low classness" unless they develop some kind of cultural resemblance to the English?[4]

The formulations that are proposed by Chakrabarty and Katznelson attempt to integrate questions of culture and difference in the study of working class formation. As Chakrabarty argues, when unquestioned, such assumptions of culture imply that "workers all over the world *experience* 'capitalist production' in the same way. Since there cannot be any 'experience' without a 'subject' defining it as such, the propositions end up conferring on working classes in all historical situations a (potentially) uniform, homogenized, extrahistorical subjectivity."[5] Katznelson, on the other hand, conceives of class in terms of four interconnected layers—structure, ways of life, dispositions, and collective action—in order to develop a comparative framework that can account for variations in working class formation in Western Europe and the United States.

My analysis will build on the attempts of Katznelson and Chakrabarty to reconceptualize "the working class." While Katznelson addresses differences that exist *between* working classes, my concern is to address the question of difference *within* a working class. I will specifically question the assumption that the "making" of the working class must culminate in a final product, one that acts or must act as a unified subject with common interests. For example, the presence of such an assumption leads Chakrabarty to argue that in the formation of the jute working class, "Their sense of identity as 'workers' or 'poor people' was always enmeshed in other narrower and conflicting identities such as those deriving from religion, language and ethnicity."[6] Chakrabarty's assumption that workers must share a common identity that transcends "narrower" cultural identities[7] can be traced back to Marx's teleology in his theoretical formulation of the progression of class politics. Thus Marx described the creation of class through the process of homogenization inherent in industrial capitalism, where "with the development of industry the proletariat not only increases in number; it becomes concentrated in greater masses, its strength grows, and it feels the strength more. The various interests and conditions of life within the ranks of the proletariat are more and more equalized, in proportion as machinery obliterates all distinctions of labor, and nearly everywhere reduces wages to the same low level."[8] I will argue that an understanding of working class politics cannot be founded on an unquestioned assumption that workers are governed by identical interests. This is not to say that at certain historical moments or in specific social and political configurations workers cannot share common interests—the issue of fighting for higher wages is an immediate example of a potential shared interest. However, I believe that we would be regressing into a form of economic determinism if we assume that the class identity and interests of workers can be reduced merely to specific monetary concerns.

The labor market is shaped by the patriarchal nature of access to employment. In this process women are implicitly restricted from access to factory work.

Recent feminist research has pointed to ways in which we can attempt to address conflicts and differences between workers. Feminist scholars have challenged conceptions of class that are limited to a focus on the workplace and have shed light upon the significance of links between wage labor and domestic labor performed in the home.[9] Other scholars have focused on the gendering of work through the sexual division of labor and the creation of unequal wages between men and women.[10] Joan Scott, for example, has effectively argued for a conception of class in which:

2. Katznelson and Zolberg, eds. *Working Class Formation*, p. 11.

3. Ibid.

4. Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working Class History*, p. 222.

5. Ibid., p. 223.

6. Ibid., p. 194.

7. For a similar conception of contemporary Indian workers, see Kuriakose Mamkoottam, *Trade Unionism, Myth and Reality: Unionism in the Tata Iron and Steel Company* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982).

8. Karl Marx, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert Tucker (New York: Norton, 1972), p. 480.

9. See, for example, Michele Barrett, *Women's Oppression Today: The Marxist-Feminist Encounter* (London: Verso, 1988); and Annette Kuhn and Ann Marie Wolpe, *Feminism and Materialism: Women and Modes of Production* (London and Boston: Routledge and Paul, 1978).

10. Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale* (London and Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Zed Books, 1986); and Alice Kessler-Harris, *A Woman's Wage: Historical Meanings and Social Consequences* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1990).

The question turns away from consciousness to the organization of representation, to the context and politics of the representational system. Identity becomes not a reflection of some essential reality but a matter of political allegiance. Feminist history approached this way changes Thompson's story. It refuses teleology and retells it as a story of the creation of political identity through representations of sexual difference. Class and gender become inextricably linked in this telling—as representation, as identity, as social and political practice.[11]

My understanding of class in terms of differences of gender and community builds on the insights of such approaches developed within the fields of feminist research and women's studies. I argue that the definition of the interests of workers occurs through a political process that is constituted by conflict, exclusion, and hierarchies between workers.

I have based my argument on a study of contemporary working class politics in the Indian jute industry. The industry is regionally centered in West Bengal, a state that has been under uninterrupted rule of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) since 1977.[12] My examination of everyday factory politics draws on the results of ethnographic research that I conducted in one jute factory in Calcutta. The research is based on methods of participant observation that I used in the factory and workers' residences on a daily basis over a period of eighteen months in 1990–92. During this time I conducted formal interviews and engaged in spontaneous conversations with workers, union leaders, and managers, observed spontaneous labor conflicts, and participated in community activities such as religious festivals organized by different groups of workers. Due to the limitations of space, in this article I will limit my focus to politics within the boundaries of the factory.[13]

My analysis is based on interpretive methods that recognize, as Clifford Geertz has argued, that "social actions are comments on more than themselves; that where an interpretation comes from does not determine where it can be impelled to go. Small facts speak to large issues, winks to epistemology, or sheep raids to revolution because they are made to."[14] Furthermore, the confrontation between the ethnographer and the "field" can in fact add significant depth to the research. For example, I was able to deepen my own understanding of the politics of class and gender by analyzing reactions to my gendered position as ethnographer in the factory. Consider the following example of an interaction early on in my fieldwork. Management had specified that I should travel to the mill by taxi rather than by bus. In this way I would not have to stand outside the factory waiting for a bus. The well-intentioned purpose was to protect me from any undesirable "incident" as the surrounding industrial arena was considered unsafe. However, this notion of protection embodies a much deeper ideology of protection that shapes the life of middle- and upper-class Indian women. Since one of the goals of my fieldwork was to break these protective boundaries, I would stop the taxi at the factory gate and then walk the length of the factory to the management building. On the third day, the gate watchman (*durwan*) came up to me and exclaimed in frustration, "Why do you stop at the gate? Why can't you just take the taxi in?"

What we find is the creation of significant hierarchies within the work force, with some workers who are relatively well-off and can accumulate economic and political power in the factory and others who are trapped in a form of bonded labor since they are never able to pay off the debts they have incurred.

This anecdote brings together some of the central theoretical and methodological issues that are the basis of this article. On one level, the watchman's response signifies the centrality of the spatial reproduction of class divisions; I would be breaking rigid hierarchies by walking in the mill compound and sharing the same physical space with workers. However, the reason provided for preserving the spatial separation was presented in terms of my vulnerability as a woman. Gender thus served as the means of reproducing a form of class hierarchy. Meanwhile, my own action was placing the gateman's job in jeopardy. If some "incident" were to occur he faced the potential of being fired. Hence the gateman's response must be understood in terms of this class relationship articulated through a dominant social conception of gender. If I had continued my act of walking into the factory with the aim of breaking class and gender boundaries, I would in fact have been asserting my own class position by superseding the gateman's authority. Needless to say, from then on I stayed inside

11. Joan Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 88.

12. Note that the jute labor force has been represented by a long history of militant trade union activity. The jute labor movement can be traced back to early protests in the colonial period that culminated in general strikes in 1929 and 1937. Since independence the jute unions have organized six industrywide strikes that have effectively shut down the industry for prolonged periods of time. An analysis of this activity is beyond the scope of this article. However, I have addressed the industrywide and national contexts of labor politics in India in "The Gendered Worlds of Class and Community in India: The Politics of Organized Labor in the West Bengal Jute Mills" (Ph.D. dissertation., Department of Political Science, University of Chicago, 1994).

13. For an examination of arenas of politics beyond the factory floor including the family, community organizations, and an in-depth analysis of the politics of religion, see ibid.

14. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 23. For a further discussion of ethnographic representation, see essays in James Clifford and George Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986). For a critique of the use of survey methods in studying working class politics, see Rick Fantasia, *Cultures of Solidarity: Consciousness, Action, and Contemporary American Workers* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988).

Table 1: Labor Force Estimate for the Jute Mill[15]

Regional Patttern of Labor Force	
Bihar	66%
Uttar Pradesh	15%
Orissa	7%
Bengali	7%
Andhra Pradesh	5%
Breakdown by Religion	
Hindus	80%
Muslims	20%
Breakdown by Caste	
Goalas	60%
Dalits	25%
Other (including upper castes—Brahmins and Rajputs)	15%

the taxi. I have begun with this anecdote in order to shed some light upon the methodological principles that shape my study of the politics of the jute working classes.

The analysis that follows will draw on my ethnographic research and focus on the making of class politics through both the "structural" and the "ideological-cultural" dimensions. First, I will examine the structuring of class in terms of the organization of the labor market and workplace practices. Second, I will examine the cultural and ideological aspects through the praxis of class politics in the mill, that is, through the dialectics of authority and resistance in the factory.

Gender, Community, and Class Structure: Constructing an Internal Labor "Market"

The class formation of the jute workers has been shaped by the creation of an internal labor market[16] whose boundaries and rules are constituted by distinctions of gender and community in the mill: job differentiation, recruitment, and the allocation of particular occupations to workers. The total daily work force employed when the mill is being run at full capacity is approximately 4,200 workers. The labor force is comprised of Hindu and Muslim rural migrants from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Orissa, and Andhra Pradesh and a small proportion of Bengali workers.[17] Management is mainly Bengali with the exception of some department managers and supervisors who were from the Marwari community. The caste composition is also diverse, with the main categories represented by the *goala* (buffalo herder) and *dalit* (untouchable or Scheduled) castes (see table 1 for estimates). Finally in terms of gender, there are a total of approximately 180 women employed in a work force of over 4,000 workers.

One of the primary sources of differentiation between workers that produces conflict and competition in the factory lies in the determination of job status and security. Employment in the mill is divided into six categories in decreasing order of preference for employment: permanent status, "special *budli* (casual)," casual, temporary casual, seasonal, and extra temporary seasonal. Permanent workers are guaranteed full employment and all benefits as specified in the industrywide tripartite agreements. Special *budli* workers are also a form of permanent workers as they are guaranteed employment for 220 days a year and also receive full benefits. The four categories of casual workers are given no guarantee of employment, although they may receive some benefits such as the yearly bonus.[18] Casual workers must report at the factory gate on a daily basis in order to preserve their place on the casual work force list. According to estimates of factory gatemen an average of three thousand workers report to the mill on a daily basis. While job status is not directly linked to seniority and there is no formal method for determining the employment status of workers, management is often able to link job security with worker production, efficiency, and discipline. It is perhaps not coincidental that a bulletin board in the general manager's office had a small poster with the proclamation "Fear of the Sack: Insecurity is the Key to Efficiency."

Employment and recruitment procedures in the factory are routinized through the mill's labor office. The office, run by the personnel manager, five labor officers, and clerical staff, is formally responsible for recruitment, disciplinary action, and the resolution of worker conflicts and grievances. The office is responsible for monitoring, classifying, and documenting workers. Thus, for example, identity cards with a photograph and signature or thumbprint are issued to all workers. In the determination of job status, for example, there is wide leeway for decisions based on relationships of political patronage with both management and union leaders. It is not uncommon for some workers to gain permanent status if they have curried favor with a particular manager or if they have strong union ties while others employed for thirty years are still categorized as casual workers.[19]

15. Statistical data and records are not kept in a systematic fashion in the factory. These figures are based on estimates provided by management. The table is meant to provide a sense of the *pattern* of communities represented in the mill rather than absolute figures.

16. Peter Doeringer and Michael Piore, *Internal Labor Markets and Manpower Analysis*, (Lexington, MA: D.C.Heath, Lexington Books, 1971); and David Gordon, Richard Edwards, and Michael Reich, *Segmented Work, Divided Workers: The Historical Transformation of Labor in the United States* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

17. For an analysis of the historical origins and patterning of this migration, see Ranajit Das Gupta, "Migrant Workers, Rural Connections, and Capitalism: The Calcutta Jute Industrial Labor, 1890s to 1940s," Working Paper Series, Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta, 1987; and Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working Class History*.

18. Casual workers are not legally entitled to social security and other welfare benefits.

19. Note, however, that union ties are more important than management approval since trade unions have the capacity to exert significant pressure on management if they do not approve of a particular worker. They are also able to exert pressure on the worker.

The recruitment of workers occurs through several possible routes within the web of authority in the mill. Historians of working class formation in the Bengal jute mills have demonstrated that the primary mode of recruitment during the colonial period was represented by the "*sirdari* system." Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued that in this system the *sirdars* (worker-supervisors) were given absolute authority over workers recruited on the basis of community relationships.[20] As in the colonial period, the *sirdars* continue to act as agents of control over the labor force. In the contemporary period, *sirdars* are on occasion able to use their critical position as intermediaries between workers and managers to influence recruitment decisions. As one department manager indicated: "The *sirdars* are chosen by the company's favor. The *sirdar* is part of the supervisory staff. It is important for him to have control over the workers. . . . The *sirdars* are not changed much. You have the same people over years. They are only changed after retirement."

The permanent nature of the *sirdar*'s status provides leeway for the consolidation of personal power. Thus *sirdars* may use their position to influence recruitment decisions and to gain employment for their relatives or kin. However, while the *sirdar* represents a symbol of authority in the mill and enjoys a clear position of power in relation to other workers, recent years have witnessed the decline of the *sirdar*'s absolute authority. One union leader argued: "They [*sirdars*] are basically *coolies*. They have to fix the machines and supervise about thirty workers. The supervisor just walks around. If a machine is broken they don't even stop to look at it. They don't bother. The *sirdars* have to see to the machines. They are like *mistris* [mechanics] now. The burden on them is big. They cannot manage. The machines are so old there is always something wrong." This description is particularly significant since the *sirdar*'s control over employment has for most purposes been replaced by that of the trade union leader.

Trade unions exert a considerable degree of control over recruitment procedures in the mill. According to one labor officer, the standard practice if a large number of vacancies arise is to divide the jobs equally between the trade unions. In the more typical situation in which there is a single vacancy, a union leader will usually make a plea on behalf of a particular worker. In this situation there are two primary ways a person can get a union leader to support his or her case. In the first case, the applicant must use his or her family or community ties. A worker who is a member of a particular union may go to the leader and attempt to persuade him to employ a relative or a particular community member. In the second case, a person without union or community ties may make a payment to the leader and essentially purchase the job.[21]

Supervisory and disciplinary staff are also able to use their own positions of authority to accumulate personal power and influence recruitment. In one case described by the personnel manager, "The *burra sahib* [general manager] had sanctioned the appointment of a worker's son. Even after that the worker still offered Rs. 100 to my colleague [the labor officer]. They think that is the way here." Workers understand that the rules of employment and discipline are such that they must make a payment in order to gain entry into the factory. However, while management retains formal authority over recruitment, there is an informal understanding that they must consult with and satisfy the main trade union leaders.

Hence the labor "market" poses a paradox for conventional economic theories since workers must first purchase the capacity to sell their labor. Employment is treated as a form of "capital" that is under the control of intermediaries such as the labor officer, the *sirdar*, or the union leader. This in turn consolidates the system of authority within the factory. Workers must often take out loans at exorbitant interests rates, as high as 10 percent per month, in order to buy employment. In some cases, they agree to give a percentage of their salary to the "broker" in question. Hence, they never receive the full wages they are entitled to and in many cases they fall into a "cycle of debt." Thus while factory work appears to represent relative security and high wages when compared to jobs in the informal sector of the economy, this is in fact a misleading notion. What we find is the creation of significant hierarchies within the work force, with some workers who are relatively well-off and who can accumulate economic and political power in the factory and others who are trapped in a form of bonded labor since they are never able to pay off the debts they have incurred.[22]

The perception that a woman worker sitting on a chair was subversive provides a stark picture of the intensity of class hierarchy in the mill.

Notions of "free" wage labor, the "contract," and formal "rules" governing the labor market prove to be inadequate in our understanding of such forms of capitalism. The point is not that "premodern" or "precapitalist" forms of exploitation persist within the factory, but that the "system of capitalism" is constituted by such forms of patronage and dependence.

Let us turn then to the third dimension of the recruitment system in the mill. Given the declining economic position of the jute industry, the typical recruitment situation is not large-scale hiring but hiring against "natural loss," that is, when a worker retires or dies. The conventional procedure consists of what is called the "*khandani* system" of recruitment whereby the job is first offered to a relative of the deceased or retired worker. While in exceptional cases the widow or daughter may be considered if they can strongly plead their case and demonstrate sufficient economic destitution, in general this relative is preferably a son of the worker. Employment and the positioning of workers on

20. Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Communal Riots and Labor: Bengal's Jute Mill-Hands in the 1890s," *Past and Present*, no. 91, p. 151.

21. Note, however, that even workers who are union members or applicants with family or community ties may have to make a payment.

22. Such hierarchies are of particular significance since moneylenders and job brokers are often rich workers employed in the factory.

the factory floor is contingent on male kin relationships. The idiom of family, through the *khandani* (which literally means family establishment/heritage) system is thus used to construct the working class. Hence, the labor market is shaped by this patriarchal nature of access to employment. In this process women are implicitly restricted from access to factory work. Recruitment through blood ties underlines the personalization of this process of constructing the jute working class. The factory thus re-creates the extensive ties of the joint family rather than the impersonal ties assumed to be the characteristics of industrial capitalism and wage labor. The significance of this system of employment is underlined by the fact that it is the primary, official means by which a person may obtain work in the factory. Thus while workers (male and female), unions, and managers confirmed the centrality of this system, the labor office also had specific written documentation that indicated that the *khandani* system would be used to allocate vacancies in the mill.

My understanding of class in terms of differences of gender and community builds on the insights of such approaches developed within the fields of feminist research and women's studies. I argue that the definition of the interests of workers occurs through a political process that is constituted by conflict, exclusion, and hierarchies between workers.

Meanwhile the factory has increasingly been transformed into a male sphere through the dual processes of displacement of women workers and curtailment of any new recruitment of women. Management representatives provide a wide range of justifications for their refusal to hire women. The standard arguments used are that women workers are more expensive since they are eligible for benefits, and they cause scheduling problems because they are not allowed to work during the night shift. However, one of the starkest statements was made by one high-level management representative who elaborated on the above factors at length and then finally asked me with a measure of annoyance, "If there is a large supply of male workers, why should we hire women?"[23] Implicit in this response is the assumption that women form a reserve army of labor that can be relegated to the "private" sphere of the home and that women's employment needs are subsidiary to men, an assumption that discounts both the subsistence needs of women in female-headed households and the importance of economic contributions of working-class women to the survival for working-class families.

The *khandani* system has allowed a few women to gain entry into factory employment. Thus the wife or daughter of a deceased male worker will be given the job if she has no adult son or male relative to support her. While a widow may attempt to use family ties to her benefit, this situation nevertheless reproduces the patriarchal nature of these ties whereby a woman is entitled to the job only by virtue of her ties to a male worker. The *khandani* system thus contributes to the creation of a form of patriarchy in the factory. Thus the labor market is constructed through a gendered ideology embedded within cultural and social codes of power and hierarchy.

The positioning of workers in these production departments has resulted in a gendered and community-based classification of work on the shop floor. On the one hand, certain tasks are thought to be performed better by workers of a particular community. For example, supervisors argue that work in the beaming department is best performed by workers from Orissa. On the other hand, some categories of work are described as essentially male or female. Women, for instance, are said to be better at hand sewing because they are more patient and have "nimble fingers."[24]

This classification of work has to a certain extent been reproduced through the concrete practices of recruitment and training used in the factory. As the general manager of the mill indicated:

> We are supposed to recruit from the employment exchanges [official bureaus where unemployed workers can seek jobs], but in practice we just recruit from the unions and leaders. Jobs are sold and bought by the workmen themselves. Vested interests are created. But it is in the management's interest to let this be since then we don't have to worry about training. At the moment they [workers and leaders who recruit] help in training. If management stops this type of recruitment they [management] will have to institute a training scheme. And money spent on training is viewed as a wastage. Management thinks 'let them be trained by a leader or a *sirdar* or by a father or brother or mother.' With such training money always changes hands. Workers have to pay to get training.[25]

Job training also becomes a resource that must either be bought or that can be acquired through family or community networks. In some instances, this may result in the reproduction of caste occupations within the factory structure. Thus Muslim workers from the weaving castes form a majority of the workers in the weaving department.[26]

Supervisors in the mill explain the classification of work in terms of the natural ability of workers from different

23. Union leaders usually confirmed these arguments or indicated that it is an issue that management must take up.

24. Such stereotyping of women's natural ability in terms of patience and dexterity or "nimble fingers" has been noted in other cases. See, for example, Maria Patricia Fernandez-Kelly, *For We Are Sold, I and My People: Women and Industry in Mexico's Frontier* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1983); and Aihwa Ong, *Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline: Factory Women in Malaysia* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1987).

25. Note that the manager was speaking in reference to all mills in the industry.

26. However, there is no overall correspondence between caste and work, and it is important to realize that the argument does not imply that "caste is class" in India. Caste merely provides one resource for entry into the factory. For an extensive discussion of such questions, see Partha Chatterjee, "Caste and Subaltern Consciousness," in *Subaltern Studies, vol. 6*, ed. Ranajit Guha (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989).

communities. Thus they argue that Oriya workers are employed in the beaming department simply because they are the most efficient in this work. As one supervisor argued, "In the weaving department, there are mainly Mohammedans. Mohammedans are more efficient. They know weaving better. It is according to history. They have been weavers for generations [since the Muslim workers are from weaving castes]."

This process of naturalization is perhaps most clearly evidenced in the gendering of work in the factory. Both supervisors and union leaders share the conception that certain departments are women's work. The winding, sack-sewing, and finishing departments are considered appropriate departments for the employment of women. Furthermore, supervisors argue that women are efficient as "feeders" of raw jute in the batching department. This classification contains an implicit logic that links gender, skill, and ability. The assumption that women are not capable of handling machinery has resulted in a concentration of women workers in unskilled work that does not entail the use of machinery such as in the hand-sewing and finishing departments.[27] In the everyday language of mill work these departments are called *maghikal*, that is, low-level "women's work." According to management, such work is looked down upon as the lowest form of labor on the shop floor; such work is devalued because it is considered "women's work." Thus while on the one hand women are excluded from work that is classified as "heavy" or "hard labor," on the other hand it is assumed that work performed by women must be "easy" and therefore of less value. The result is a gendered construction of "skill" and work. This gendering of work is often couched in terms of the difficulty of the work and on the physical strength needed to perform work in the mill. However, certain types of occupations reveal the contradictions in such justifications. For example, hand sewing is classified as women's work, but women are not recruited to operate sewing machines.

It is important to note that this categorization cannot be reduced only to a rational attempt of management to divide workers. In my interviews with both local union leaders in the mill and industrywide representatives in the central union offices in Calcutta I was given the same description and justification of this gendered and community typing of work. Furthermore, while some leaders were willing to argue that workers could cross over the community-based categorization of work, they expressed significant resistance to the possibility of dissolving the boundaries between "men's work" and "women's work."

Before we fall into the tempting assumption that such conceptions represent a unified form of consent to the division of labor in the factory, I should point out that there is significant resistance to the gendering of work. In my conversations with workers in the factory, several women emphasized that they could and wanted to work in any occupation in the factory. As one woman worker asserted, "If you allow a woman to work, if you give her a chance to be in any department she can do it. She can operate any machinery." On occasion some women did express an unwillingness to work in mechanized departments, thus appearing to confirm the assumptions of management and union leaders. However, consider the following response of the only female sewing machine operator in the mill when I asked her why other women did not run the machines: "The men will get angry, that's why. I got permission from the *bara sahib* [general manager], that's why I was trained. So no one could say anything. And my husband does not work. So the male workers don't mind. But otherwise there would be trouble. The men will say, 'We are not getting work and being trained to run machines, why are you giving it to them.'" Another woman who was a hand sewer argued in agreement: "They know my husband also works. So they would be very angry if I learned to run the machine. That's why women don't want to work the machines. They prefer to be helpers. You need permission from the *bara sahib* to be allowed to run the machine. There is no protection for us if we run the machines." Thus there exists a form of ideological resistance to the hegemonic conceptions of work and skill that shape workplace practices. Hence the construction of class at the structural level, that is, through concrete procedures of recruitment, training, and job allocation, is a contested rather than a natural or neutral product of economic processes.

Contesting Authority: Tactics, Confrontation, and Organization

Driving up to the mill one passes small tea shops where workers sit waiting for their shifts to begin. When the car turns to enter the gate, workers sitting and standing nearby stop their conversations and turn to watch. All attention is on the vehicle and its passengers. The car, whether it is a taxi or a private car, symbolizes power. Only those affiliated with management, with the "big people," are driven into the factory. Workers and lower-level supervisory staff walk in through the gate. The first act of bodily entering the factory represents an act of entering a domain governed by a strong system of the codification of power articulated through movement, space, and position. It is this representation of power that structures politics and agency within the mill.[28]

The stage of jute mill politics is spatially compressed within a clearly demarcated area. On one side of the street lies the factory compound containing both the factory as well as quarters for management and supervisory staff, while across the street are the worker residences. Workers and managers work and live side by side—the distances between the factory, the quarters of the general manager, and the workers' *bustees* (group of huts) are as short as a five-minute walk. Yet the wife or daughter of a

27. The only machinery handled by women is in the winding department. However, this department is considered to consist of the simplest and therefore most undervalued technical task.

28. By speaking of structure as the codification of power through movement, space, and position, I mean to transcend the dichotomy of structure and agency. Furthermore, my analysis is not based on any version of the "class-in-itself/class-for-itself" model. While structure is a central component in my conceptualization of class it is not "determinate"; structure is itself constructed through conceptions of gender and community. For theoretical discussions of the "structure-agency" problematic, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1977); Anthony Giddens, *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism*, vol. 1: *Power, Property, and the State* (London: Macmillan, 1981); and William Sewell, "A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation," *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 98, no. 1 (July 1992), pp. 1–29.

manager living in the mill compound for twenty years is unlikely to have seen the inside of a worker's house.[29] Although the geographical proximity of the private worlds of management and workers does not permit a class-based segregation of workplace and residence, gender codes become a central means of preserving class distinctions.

Meanwhile the movements of women working in the factory are also restrained through the gendering of space. Women are never seen in the tea shops or sitting in groups in the factory environs. One of the ironies in my field research lies in the fact that the only possible way I could speak with women workers in private was to use the personnel manager's office during his four hour lunch-break. However, even during this time, while I would lock the office from the inside, a labor officer would often knock with the excuse of retrieving some file. This often resulted in a small set of theatrics in which the women workers would quickly move from their chairs and stand or squat on the ground before the door was opened. The officer would thus be reassured by the visual embodiment of hierarchy in our positions and by the mundane conversation we would have shifted to. After the officer would depart we would return to our original seats and our conversation. While the dynamic no doubt had a humorous tone, the perception that a woman worker sitting on a chair was subversive provides a stark picture of the intensity of class hierarchy in the mill.

Management "control" of trade unions does not preclude protest or negate a leader's capacity to mobilize workers. However, the mobilization must occur within boundaries that are acceptable to management.

Surveillance and the control of time and movement form the basis for the preservation of authority and domination in the factory. However, these methods are complemented by a form of countersurveillance used by workers and union leaders to monitor the movement and activities of management. This subaltern surveillance is based on an extensive intelligence network that exists in the mill. On one level, information "trickles down" from management to clerks, labor officers, *durwans* (watchmen), union leaders, and workers in the factory. On another level, workers and leaders track the movements of management in the mill. For example, if the general manager goes from the management building to the labor office, a *durwan* leaving the labor office will inform workers that the "*burra sahib* is in the labor office." The process is facilitated by the mill drivers who are responsible for the transportation of all high-level management representatives. Thus if management representatives hold a meeting at the owner's house, a driver immediately informs one of the *durwans* who in turn spreads the news in the mill. I found that with time, as my position in the mill was routinized and it was known that I was speaking with union leaders, I too became incorporated in this intelligence network. While I was sometimes able to provide information regarding the whereabouts of a particular manager, I found that my research was greatly facilitated by my being able to track down managers I needed to interview with the help of this network! However, I should also point out that my own movements were monitored both in the factory and in the *bustees*, dispelling once again the omniscient aspirations of the field researcher.

This form of subaltern surveillance brings us to the possibility of resistance to the power and authority that structures workers in the factory. Recent research has questioned the exclusive identification of politics with authority systems and social order and pointed to the significance of subaltern agency and resistance.[30] Such work has revealed the limitation of conceptualizing politics through an exclusive emphasis on the state and formal political institutions and on mobilization through formal, large-scale organizations. However, the upsurge of such literature has resulted in the paradox that the attempt to widen the theoretical boundaries of "resistance" increasingly risks the possibility of transforming resistance into an all-encompassing concept that undermines its analytical rigor. Clearly if the term "resistance" can be used to describe a union strike, a form of clothing, or a peasant's theft of grain, some clarification is warranted in its usage. In my interpretation of resistance in the factory, I will therefore make analytical distinctions between tactics, confrontation, and organization.

The structuring of workers in the mill is continually subverted through everyday practices described by management as "loitering, gossiping, wasting time." Management notices continuously denounce "criminal activities" in which workers are allegedly "tampering with [weaving] loom pick meters, sitting and sleeping on the cloth, bags, roles, and bales in the finishing and sack-sewing department," and "leaving work on the pretext of attending nature's call/drinking water/to have tea. . . . they spend 30 to 45 minutes in and around the canteen."[31] These acts represent the "tactics" workers must use to negotiate within the fields of power that structure their workplace practices.[32] Workers seize opportunities to circumvent the eye of management in order to combat high workload levels and circumvent the various rules that govern the factory.

29. Note that these spatial workplace/residence contours that I am outlining are not unique characteristics of the mill I am describing but are typical of the industry. These quarters (for both management and workers) were built by British companies during the colonial period.

30. James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985); Ong, *Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline*; Jean Comaroff, *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance: The Culture and History of a South African People* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985); and Ranajit Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies*, vols. 1–7 (New Delhi: Oxford University Press).

31. The tactics of the jute mill workers in this battle over the arrangement of time, space, and movement are reminiscent of James Scott's analysis of the "everyday acts of resistance" in *Weapons of the Weak*.

32. Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), p. 37.

Worker resistance is not, however, limited to such isolated, hidden tactics. One of the common forms of mobilization of workers in the mill occurs through spontaneous incidents that are distinct from both individual tactics and the planned organization of interests through trade unions. In such incidents, class conflict is often transformed into moments of open confrontation involving a struggle over the symbolic representation of authority.

Take, for example, the following incident that occurred on the factory floor. A high-level management representative was conducting an inspection in the factory when a power failure occurred. During the blackout, three large bobbins used in the spinning department were thrown at the manager. The manager was able to grab a flashlight from an electrician and quickly make his way out of the factory. The force of the incident was embodied in the transformation of a part of the means of production, that is, the spinning bobbin, into an instrument of resistance. The attack was able to momentarily displace the manager from his position of power on the factory floor. Consider now the management's reassertion of authority in response to the incident. After power was restored, the manager first returned to the exact location where the incident occurred, thus reclaiming the territory and reasserting his position of authority on the factory floor. He then summoned eight laborers who were working in the spinning department into his office, thus dissolving the collectivity of workers in the department. Finally he took them to his office, gave each of them a paperweight, and said, "Now hit me. Come on, hit me in the light. Why do you do your dark deeds in the dark?" The reassertion of management power thus takes the form of the symbolic appropriation of the act of resistance. Under the passive veneer that is almost Gandhian in nature, the manager in fact dictates when, where, and with what weapon the workers should resist.

Such confrontations do not necessarily culminate in the victorious reassertion of management authority. Consider one instance in which a worker was collecting his wages from one of the mill accountants. After receiving his wages the worker went back to the clerk and claimed that he had been given Rs. 100 less than he was due. The clerk denied the error and a loud argument began to take place. During this confrontation, approximately 60 workers had appeared on the scene within two minutes, leaving their department in order to defend the worker. During the mounting tension in such an incident, the conflict rapidly surpasses the monetary discrepancy at hand and centers instead on the worker's honor. The language of resistance used in the incident stressed the fact that the worker was a "poor man and an honest man." Meanwhile, a union leader appeared on the scene and quickly briefed a higher management representative. The manager then went to the worker, gave him the Rs. 100, and told him to forget about the incident. The manager in question later admitted that the situation could have turned into a very serious conflict if it had not been diffused immediately.

The resolution of the incident I have described was largely accomplished due to the timely intervention of the trade union leader. The question that we must explore is then one that addresses the relationship between trade union organizations and the potential and practice of worker resistance. There were seven trade unions in the factory: the Center for Indian Trade Unions (CITU, affiliated with the Communist Party of India-Marxist), the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC, affiliated with the Congress Party), the All-India Trade Union Congress (AITUC, affiliated with the Communist Party of India), the Hind Mazdoor Sangha (independent union without a formal party affiliation), the Forward Bloc, the Forward Bloc–Marxist (composed of regional leftist political party unions in West Bengal), and one union formed by an "outsider," that is, a nonworker. The CITU and INTUC were the most powerful unions in the mill, with each union claiming a membership of over 3,000 workers. Unions play a central role in the everyday process of the resolution of conflict and the redress of workers' grievances. These encompass a wide variety of concerns, ranging from workplace issues of leave requests and transfers between departments to resisting management disciplinary actions to facilitating requests for the repair of a worker's house. In addition to such everyday issues, union leaders negotiate with management over longer-term questions of workload and production and job status levels.[33]

I specifically question the assumption that the "making" of the working class must culminate in a final product, one that acts or must act as a unified subject with common interests.

While trade unions have attempted to counter management offensives with regard to workloads and retrenchment and in the case of individual complaints of workers, the strength of particular leaders often implicitly rests on the authority of management.[34] On one level, management reinforces the leadership of trade unions since they generally do not listen to or act on grievances or issues brought directly by workers. This chain of authority functions even in the case of minor bureaucratic issues. For example, in one situation a worker brought a doctor's certificate to the labor office in order to account for his absence from work. The labor officer on duty refused to sign it because it was the wrong form. At that point a union leader who also happened to be sitting in the office nodded to the officer and asked him to sign it. The labor officer took the form and turning to me said, "See, because he is sitting here I will sign it." Workers are thus

33. Mill managements have been steadily increasing workload levels and reducing work forces in order to reduce production costs. In addition the mill management attempts to counter union resistance by linking increases in workloads to the job status of workers. For example, during the period of my fieldwork, the major trade unions were attempting to gain permanent status for five hundred casual workers. The management agreed to this demand provided unions would guarantee that there would be no resistance to the replacement of existing weaving machines by paired looms, thereby doubling the workload of weavers. However, this represents a Catch-22 situation for unions and workers since such increases in workload eventually result in the retrenchment of workers.

34. Note that all trade union leaders in the mill were male.

placed in a position in which they must gain the help of a leader if their grievances are to be effectively addressed and if they are to survive the endless bureaucratic procedures governing their work[35] On a second level, management is also in a position to indirectly "build up" particular leaders since if a particular leader is able to gain favors for his members his support among workers is likely to increase. As one union leader argued, "Several unions exist because of the *maliks* [owners and management]. They have no actual leadership, no organization, no rules, no existence. But management will say they exist. You can make a union even out of one person. But is that a union? If the *maliks* call a meeting, they will call all these people and so they become union leaders." This multiplicity of unions then plays an important role in undermining the bargaining strength of trade unions.[36] In recent years unions in the mill have recognized this and have demonstrated an increasing ability to cooperate or at the least to restrain their rivalry to competition rather than violent clashes. However, management is nevertheless often able to use a "divide and rule strategy" by playing on differences between unions and by favoring particular unions that do not significantly challenge the boundaries of their authority.

The dependence of unions on management is consolidated by the prevalence of bribery and patronage. It is common knowledge in the mill that union leaders, regardless of their party affiliation, utilize their authority to supplement their incomes, and often preserve this source of income by accepting management norms and backdoor deals. While this was confirmed by both management and workers, during my fieldwork I personally witnessed the negotiation of one such transaction, where the leader of the largest union in the mill received a "gift" of Rs. 20,000 for his daughter's marriage. It is interesting to note that the language of gift giving is used to formally characterize such transactions. Leaders thus often are not paid off simply to resolve a particular conflict or incident; the "gift" represents a form of insurance that is aimed at containing and directing future action of the leader in question. There is also no guarantee that the leader will show restraint in every incident that arises in the factory.

Bourdieu's call for the introduction of temporality in an analysis of gift giving provides useful insight into the politics of patronage and "corruption."[37] It is not sufficient to state that all union leaders are "bought off" and "controlled" by management since this argument misses the timing and complexity of patronage and dependence in the factory. Union leaders must effectively defend the interests of workers to a certain extent because they must continue to retain support from the workers. Management "control" of trade unions does not preclude protest or negate a leader's capacity to mobilize workers. However, the mobilization must occur within boundaries that are acceptable to management. Consider, for example, one manager's description of the union leader who had received the gift of Rs. 20,000: "We like him. He creates *tamasha* [dramas] but then he makes it swing in our direction. We like that he creates this *tamasha.*" This *tamasha*, then, is a form of activity that we would classify as worker mobilization and resistance. Hence the game of politics involves an intricate balance of interests that must carefully define the timing of the mobilization of workers, the boundaries of these interests, and the nature of the resolution of conflicts between workers and *maliks*.

While the dependence of unions and leaders on management produces an appearance of consent to management authority, this consent is always complemented by coercion or the threat of coercion in cases where leaders do not obey the "rules" of patronage and acceptable labor-management conflict. Such union leaders are classified by management as "riotous" leaders, and they are constantly under the threat of disciplinary pressures such as charge sheeting (presentation of statements of charges), suspensions, and eventually the loss of employment. In such circumstances, the union leader has two options: he may attempt to undertake legal action or he may attempt to mobilize workers and call a strike. In the first case, action through the courts generally takes years to resolve a conflict and is therefore often not an immediate practical strategy. The second option, while more viable, is also inadequate since employers continue to use the factory lockout to deter strike activity. In the case of larger unions, a leader may use political pressure through political party affiliations to counter threats of victimization.[38]

Let us examine the nature of the consent of union leaders through the ideological contestations of one local leader of one of the smaller unions in the mill.[39] The leader had been working in the mill for almost fifty years and had been a union activist for almost thirty years. I was able to observe this leader engage in extended conversations in three contexts which were characterized by three different configurations of power.

Situation 1

In the first situation the union leader had come to the management building to speak to one of the company directors who was visiting the mill. The leader was asking the management representative for an increase in wages for a particular department in the factory because of recent increases in workload levels. The transcript of the ensuing dialogue was as follows:

> Leader: . . . We need money because we are working so much.
>
> Director: You are not working; I am the only one who works here. *I* am working.
>
> Leader: But you are the *malik*; it's not the same.
>
> Director: No, the company is the *malik*. The company owns all mills. I am just working for the company. The head supervisor

35. One of the biggest complaints of workers was that labor officers and management representatives were never available to take care of such bureaucratic tasks. My own observation confirmed the fact that workers were constantly being told to "come back later" when they tried to approach the managerial staff.

36. This multiplicity of unions has been a defining characteristic of trade union politics in India. For a lengthy discussion of this phenomenon, see Rakahari Chatterji, *Unions, Politics, and the State* (New Delhi: South Asian Publishers, 1980).

37. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, p. 5.

38. This consolidates the significance of the political nexus between unions, parties, and the state, and undermines the possibility for independent trade union activity. See Chatterji, *Unions, Politics, and the State*.

39. This particular union consisted of approximately 350 workers.

is not here. He is sick, but he will come back next week. When he comes back, you go to him and talk to him.

Leader: But *sahib*, we want to talk straight with you; you can do this.

Director: I cannot remember all the figures, the complaints. You go to the supervisor, and he will tell me what you want; then I will look at the case and make a fair decision.

Leader: [*Silence.*]

Director: This is a question of love [*yeh pyar ka cheez hai*]. I give you this money with love. What you get is because of my caring. There has been so much *golmaal* [trouble] here but I have not closed this factory down. For the past seven years it has been running.

Leader: No, of course, because of you the factory is running. We are very grateful. We don't want to do *golmaal* here.

The leader in this situation had adopted an appearance of supplication in which he was continually consenting to the authority of the management representative while attempting to insert his demand into the dialogue. However, what we see in this conversation is an ideological battle to define the nature of the power relationship between the manager and the worker-leader. Thus the manager begins by denying the asymmetrical relationship of power by arguing that since he is "just working" for the company, he is therefore just a worker and is in the same position as the leader. He moves to a reassertion of the chain of authority in the factory by telling the leader to approach the supervisor, and he then concludes by redefining the "worker-*malik*" relationship in terms of a patron-client relationship. The worker-leader must be *grateful* for the employment provided by the *maliks*. The language of the director constructs the relationship in terms of a form of paternalism rather than a "contractual" relationship; workers are not given wages in return for the sale of their labor power—they receive employment out of the "love" of the owner.

The union leader is set up to lose the battle over the definition of the meaning of the worker-owner relationship. The leader must reproduce his position of subordination through the subtleties of tone, language, and bodily gestures. The manager sits behind the desk while the leader stands near the door and speaks. The leader bends and *salaams* as he leaves, while the manager pointedly looks down at his paperwork on his desk.[40] Hence the appearance of servility is preserved and the leader appears to consent to the authority of the director.

Situation 2

In the second situation the leader walked in while I was conducting an interview with the personnel manager in the labor office. He had come to lodge a complaint for a worker who had to share a quarter in the labor lines with twenty-one other people. After five minutes of discussing this case, consider the following excerpt from the conversation:

Leader: Why are you sitting here listening to him [the personnel manager]? You want to know the main problem we face. It is the capitalists (*pujipati*). The capitalists are the cause of all the troubles.

Manager: How can you say that it is because of the capitalists? In Russia they are pulling down Lenin's statues everywhere.

Leader: Communism is getting stronger. It is moving forward. I was just reading a newspaper from Russia, so I know.

Manager: What newspaper are you reading? Why don't you read our newspapers?

Leader: Communism is growing. You can pull down Lenin's statues, but Lenin is alive. His words are alive. You cannot pull that down.

This debate continued for a while and began to take on a humorous and dramatic turn. At the end, the leader left saying that he would send for the worker whose complaint he had lodged. If we consider these two situations it would seem highly unlikely that they concerned the same worker-leader. On one level, this difference in positions can be explained by the fact that in the second situation the personnel manager occupies a lower position in the authority structure of the factory and is responsible for the resolution of daily conflicts and grievances of workers and leaders. Hence there is a wider political space for the expression of the leader's ideological resistance to management's authority. The incident reveals the manner in which the expression of class relations changes according to the context in question. If each of these situations were represented as typical of the leader's understanding they would result in very different conclusions since he displays a form of submission in the first and expresses a revolutionary ideological belief in the second instance. Let us now turn to a third situation in which the leader expresses his understanding of class relations.

Situation 3

This situation involved an interview I later conducted with the union leader. During this conversation his analysis of union organization and the potential for working-class resistance was far more skeptical then the previous situation would imply. He argued that union organization was becoming increasingly difficult since the owners could easily divide workers and unions, break legal agreements, and initiate changes in the workplace. When I asked him how the owners could do this, he indicated: "Through greed. They give bribes. They give favors. If a leader talks and acts properly, the *maliks* will give him favors, they will employ his people. If you don't talk properly, they won't give you work. If you are too strong and you don't behave the way they want, they tell you to get out of the mill. They charge sheet you." He felt that it had become increasingly difficult to try and change things.

At the end of the conversation he pointed out in response to the questions I was asking him, "I also had written some things before about such issues, but it doesn't do anything. The *maliks* don't like to hear what is written. They won't change. It's no use." This response highlights the point that even a private conversation between the field researcher and "subject" is shaped by a particular configuration of power. Hence, this "private" conversation cannot be assumed to represent the "real" views of the leader, which transcend the constraints of power. On the contrary, we could interpret the leader's reaction as a critique of the academic project I was engaging in..

40. The gesture of *salaam* in which the leader touches his hand to his forehead represents a sign of recognition of a figure of higher power and authority.

The three situations I have described represent three very different interpretations and engagements, ranging from supplication to "revolutionary consciousness" to pragmatic cynicism. We see, then, that the meaning of class becomes contingent on the context. Each of these situations taken in isolation would have led us to a very different conclusion regarding the nature of class relations in the mill. The situations taken together reveal the constant shifting between positions, discourses, and the understanding of class in the factory.[41]

If, as I have argued, union leaders must depend on and comply with management, what is the nature of the legitimacy of trade unions and their leaders in the factory? Worker support for union leaders in the mill is consolidated by the strategic role leaders play in addressing daily grievances and conflicts in the mill. Unions continue to serve as a crucial resource for workers who must deal with the otherwise absolute nature of management authority. Consider the following telling reaction of one supervisor who has worked in the mill for the past forty years:

> I don't like working in this industry. It is very tough. Standing in the factory for ten hours at my age. You know I am over sixty [years old]. I have two sons but I won't let them work in *chatkal kaam* [jute work]. Once we used to beat the workers; they would bleed in the mouth. We would kick them and still they would plead for work. I have seen this myself. Now we have to beg them to work and say nicely *kaam karo*. See how much things have changed. The workers have changed.

The organization of unions has thus provided a basic level of protection for workers. The approach of most workers to unions is based on utilitarian rather than formal ideological grounds. It is common for workers to become members of more than one union or to shift membership according to changes in the relative positions of power of the major leaders. This utilitarian approach is strengthened by the fact that union leaders often use their positions for personal gain. Thus leaders often charge workers for their services. For example, if a worker's living quarters were to become vacant, a worker would have to pay a leader to negotiate on his or her behalf. Such payments vary in amount, but they can be as high as Rs. 1,000 or 2,000, the equivalent of a month's salary of a permanent worker.

As I have argued earlier, workers must depend on the authority of union leaders since they are unable to approach management directly. This dependence is intensified by the system of discipline and regulation that operates in the mill. Consider, for example, one of the most basic manifestations of inequality in the factory, the question of literacy. Nonliterate workers are dependent on literate workers in the case of disciplinary procedures since factory rules require that workers submit a response to a charge sheet. If a written response is not submitted, the worker is threatened with suspension. Thus a worker must pay a literate person, usually a union leader, to frame this response. The point is not that the worker is "ignorant," but that literacy is translated into a resource, a form of capital, that perpetuates a certain system of power and authority and that perpetuates the political vulnerability of a certain section of the work force. The position of union leaders as the legitimate representatives of workers is simultaneously consolidated by this vulnerability.

Workers are in fact aware of the complex network of interests and patronage that link management and trade unions. This network permeates the work force and builds on and reproduces hierarchies between workers. I have already discussed the reproduction of ties of community and gender within the factory. These relationships form a crucial component of the material used to build networks of patronage between unions and sections of the work force. Trade unions, like most other formal organizations, do not exist at the abstract level of constitutions and ideologies above or distinct from cultural and social configurations of power and interests. Unions have thus built on relationships, identities, and hierarchies that exist within workers' communities. For example, the position of migrant jute workers within their villages are translated into the positions held by workers in the mill communities. Workers with land in the village form the majority of the permanent workers and the main base of support of unions. *Sirdars* and union leaders tend to occupy positions as community leaders and are also relatively privileged in terms of their rural social position. Such social hierarchies that exist in working-class communities are then transformed into inequalities and forms of dependency within the capitalist system of power in the factory.

The incorporation of gender inequalities by local unions provides a window for understanding the creation of networks of interests in the factory. Trade union activity is marked by the relative absence of women's participation, particularly in organizational and leadership activities.[42] One woman worker in the mill described the nature of women's participation in union meetings in the following way: "We just listen. The women never talk. The men talk. But we go and sit. We don't do anything for the union. After the meeting we just go home."

However, the gendered basis of the networks of interests between management, unions, and workers is not merely crafted around the question of the "participation" of women workers. On the contrary, I argue that the existence of such networks rests on the exclusion of women workers and the re-creation of gender hierarchies in the workplace and in factory politics. Let us turn to a concrete example in order to fully understand the constitution of political processes involved in the argument I am making.[43] Management wanted to increase the worker productivity of sack bundlers working in the sack-sewing department. This section was comprised of 150 women, each handling four hundred bags per day. Management wanted to increase the workload so that each woman worker would handle two thousand bags per day. Since production levels would be held at existing levels, such a change would mean that only 30 women would be required in the bundling section of the department. One of the women began organizing her coworkers in order to resist these

41. James Scott has effectively argued against theories of false consciousness in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990).

42. This is also true in the wider national arena in India. See Vamal Ranadive, *Women Workers of India* (Calcutta: National Book Agency, 1976).

43. This case was narrated by a manager and can be read "against the grain" in order to reveal management use of gender divisions in their strategies.

changes and took the case to the district commissioner. This organization was independent of the existing unions and was comprised solely of the women working in the department.[44] The district commissioner then called a meeting that included the women workers, management representatives, and trade union leaders. In light of an impasse in the negotiations, management indicated that they would close down the sack-sewing department for six months. The women signed an agreement to this effect in lieu of accepting the changes proposed by management.

The result of this strategy was twofold. First, since the entire department was closed, workers in other sections, such as sewing machine operators, were also affected by the decision.[45] The manager who gave an account of this case admitted to the explicit use of a "divide-and-rule" strategy in order to quell the resistance. The result was that male laborers from other sections began to pressure the women workers to withdraw their resistance. Secondly, the union leaders withdrew their initial support of the women bundlers and began adding to the pressure on the women. Thus while management was able to play on gender divisions within the work force, the unions consolidated this strategy by adhering to the interests of the male workers who have formed the base of union support. In the resolution of the conflict, while the women's resistance was dissolved and the higher production level was instituted, the interests of management, unions, and male workers in the department were safeguarded.

The relationship between community and trade union support is not manifested as directly as it is in the case of gender. Unions are based on a range of support that cuts across identities of region, religion, or caste. However, community ties also provide material for the creation of relationships of patronage between unions and workers. For example, unions may compete for the support of particular castes or communities that are powerful by attempting to gain benefits for members of the group in question. Workers from Bihar belonging to the *goala* caste represent the dominant caste in the mill, and both the CITU and INTUC unions have been attempting to increase their support among this caste. According to one mill manager, a small union consisting of workers from Andhra Pradesh and Orissa was formed in order to counter the resulting underrepresentation of the interests of these communities of workers. The manager indicated that "the union was formed on an ethnic basis because these are weaker groups and they were being browbeaten by the goala caste workers." In general, however, linkages between community and unions are represented through subtle investments in networks and interests rather than through a direct one-to-one correspondence of identity. I am arguing that unions in the mill do not usually have an "essential" community basis but that interests represented by unions are defined according to the interests of dominant communities. Thus the representation of "working-class" interests through trade unions is constituted by hierarchical relationships of gender and community. What we see then is that an analysis of trade unions cannot be divorced from an understanding of the differentiation of interests within the working classes.

The contradictions inherent in the nature of trade union organization raise once again the issue of resistance. We have seen that while unions provide an important resource to workers, they have simultaneously been transformed into independent symbols of authority. Unions and their leaders have created their own bases of power contingent on social inequalities of gender and community. I will conclude by examining the manner in which such issues are translated into a concrete political conflict in the factory.

The Politics of A Wildcat Strike

During the period of my fieldwork I was able to observe the political dynamics of a wildcat strike in the factory. The conflict began in the form of a specific workplace quarrel between two workers. A weaver was waiting for his machine to be fixed by a *mistri* (mechanic). The *mistri* did not arrive on time, and the weaver was angry at being unable to work; since this is a piece-rated occupation, the delay was causing a loss of wages for the weaver. When the *mistri* finally arrived, an argument started, the weaver was injured by the *mistri*'s hammer, and a fight broke out in which the *mistri* was also injured. At that time the general manager and personnel manager happened to be in the department and they took them to the dispensary. The general manager tried to resolve the conflict and made the two workers shake hands.

On the same day, the weaver accompanied by three other workers from his *goala* (buffalo herder caste group) went to the weaving department in the mill and confronted the assistant manager. The general secretary of the leading trade union who was also present at the scene was also angry that the quarrel had been patched up by management without first consulting him. At this point a large crowd had gathered and the general manager was also present and trying to defuse the situation. In the midst of the argument, one of the four workers pushed the assistant manager so that he fell against a machine. Management, in retaliation, gave orders that the four workers were not to be allowed inside the factory. Since two of the workers were temporary workers, their names were simply struck off the employment list. The other two workers were suspended from work.

In response, the general secretary of the union then led a deputation of about fifteen or twenty workers to the labor office and told the labor officer that if the management did not withdraw the charge sheets in twenty-four hours, the union would take further action. Meanwhile, the union leader filed a police report against the *mistri*. The management wanted the *mistri* to also file a report, but he refused since he was receiving threats in the labor lines. The *mistri* did not have access to adequate protection since his caste group was much smaller and since in such cases police protection is usually insignificant. According to one labor officer, the *mistri* was being hunted by the *goala* caste members and was therefore in hiding. Meanwhile the union was firm and speeches were given at a gate meeting. The first speech given by the union general secretary represented a direct attack on management for charge sheeting the workers. The leader argued that the management was persecuting workers who had worked in the mill for thirty

44. The bundling section is classified as "women's work" and therefore employs only women.

45. Management was able to do this legally since most of the workers employed in the department were casual workers and were not guaranteed work. Management took enough orders to employ 50 permanent workers in the department.

years. The leader said that the union did not want violence but that they would not accept injustice. He denied that there had been any assault on management during the conflict. On the following morning the leaders of the union walked into the weaving department and called for a wildcat strike. However, while the weavers struck work for one hour, the leaders were unable to mobilize workers from other departments. The strike therefore unraveled without any effective challenge to management.

Let us now attempt to disentangle the interests that lie beneath this seemingly straightforward linear narrative. On one level, the events appear to represent a clearly defined workplace conflict. According to some workers, the union leaders were angry because the management resolved the issue without adequately addressing the *mistri*'s negligence. Workers and leaders continually complain that their work is made difficult since machines are old and supervisors are lax in ensuring that repairs are carried out. While this represented a specific issue of contention, the incident also involved a conflict over the symbolic exercise of authority in the factory. Several workers and labor officers indicated that the union leader was angry because he was not consulted before the manager made the two workers shake hands. As I have discussed earlier, union leaders represent a central symbol of authority among workers, and they serve as intermediaries in negotiations and conflicts between managers and workers. The fact that the manager "made them shake hands" represented a direct symbolic attack on the leader's position of power in the factory.

The second political strand in the wildcat strike necessitates a shift from the conventional boundaries of workplace conflicts to the internal identities and interests within the jute workers' communities. The weaver who was involved in the conflict was from the *goala* caste, which, as I have indicated earlier, enjoys a high degree of political power in the mill. The two main unions, the CITU and INTUC, had thus been involved in a competition to win the support of workers from the *goala* caste. While the *goala* caste members used to be largely under the leadership of one union, a fraction of the caste had shifted allegiance to the union leader involved in the conflict.[46] It was this fraction that had become involved in the conflict. If the general secretary of the union were able to successfully defend the weaver and the three other workers he would potentially increase his support from the caste members. The *mistri*, however, was from the relatively weaker *lohar* (metal worker) caste. The incident points to the significance of caste allegiance in trade union mobilization within the factory. One labor officer indicated that the weaver involved in the initial quarrel was a powerful person in his community as he was a *khattal* (buffalo) owner and had a lucrative private business with the sale of buffalo milk. The general manager provided the following interpretation of this situation:

> One of the men involved in the conflict is a big *khattal* owner. He has his own milk business, and he is also a shop owner. He used to work only in the B shift, while all other male workers are rotated through three shifts. He would come in and work for about two hours and then go off and see to his business. Now we have put him on rotating shifts, which is affecting his business. So he has a grudge against the assistant manager. They do not like this discipline. They want to work in their own way and do what they want. We have to assert discipline.

On one level, this interpretation can be understood as representing the language of authority in the mill. Thus the management was attempting to explain the conflict solely in terms of the irresponsibility of the worker in question. However, on another level other workers confirmed the fact that the worker involved in the conflict was socially powerful within the workers' community.

Let us turn now to a third dimension of the conflict, the reassertion of authority and the subsequent union-management confrontation. One of the workers charge sheeted was the assistant secretary of the union in question. Given his prominent position, the union could not back down since this would significantly undermine its political position in the mill. In addition, however, some managers privately admitted that they were trying to use the incident to undermine the union. One high-level manager went as far as to clearly state that they wanted to "break" the general secretary of the union. Hence at this stage the conflict took the form of the traditional opposition between the union and management, in which the union leaders were placed in a vulnerable position.

The events described represent strands of authority and resistance that are woven around caste relationships, social hierarchies, and the interests of the union and management. In addition, the union's support of the wildcat strike was related to the important social position of the weavers in question. However, the representation of these interests of the weavers was embedded in the oppositional relationship between management and unions. Thus there was a linkage between the community-based form of union mobilization and the subsequent union-management confrontation.

The force of the interplay between these strands of conflict and interests are underlined when contextualized within the larger social milieu of the factory. While the strike was contained within a single department, the entire factory became the stage for a fierce ideological battle to define the meaning and history of the conflict. On one level this battle was carried out by management and the union. While management was engaged in the reconstruction of the conflict through notices posted in the factory, the union was holding gate meetings in which they denied allegations that they had assaulted the assistant manager. Several versions of the events and diverse rumors spread through the mill in this conflict over the definition of the "history" of the strike.[47] During the

46. The union involved in the strike was the CITU. However, it is important to note that both the CITU and INTUC engage in the form of politics I am describing.

47. I have reconstructed the dynamics through interviews with workers, labor officers, managers, and leaders of other unions. I did not interview either the general secretary of the union involved or the manager who was allegedly assaulted. Such events are highly volatile and the meaning is transmitted indirectly through networks in the mill. Furthermore, since the union leaders were unsuccessful in their action, their sense of honor would not permit them to speak about the incident. In fact, during the months following this incident I rarely saw the leaders in the mill.

brief course of the conflict this ideological contestation far surpassed the specific characteristics of the conflict. Consider the following engagement I witnessed in the midst of the events. A worker approached the general manager for an advance of Rs. 300 rupees in order to pay for medical bills for his mother. The manager, however, angrily refused to sign the necessary form despite the fact that a *sirdar* was also pleading the case on the worker's behalf.

> Manager: Why should I sign this? If I sign this for you, I will have to sign this for everyone who comes in here. So what is the point of coming in here. You might as well just go and take what you want. Don't you realize there is a reason for rules? There is such a thing as the law.
>
> *Sirdar:* ________ [the leader of the strike] was saying that there is no law here. This is a *jungli raj* [uncivilized state].
>
> Manager: That's right. Because of you people. You people are making this a *jungli raj*. We are trying to follow the law. You people are creating the trouble. You can tell ________ that.
>
> *Sirdar:* But _______ is saying that a *jungli raj* is being run here.

The *sirdar* was upset that the manager was refusing to sign the form for the worker's medical bills. He responded to the manager's exercise of power by drawing on the words of the leader of the wildcat strike. The position of the strike's leader thus became a symbol of a standard of justice and equality that workers were denied within the factory. Meanwhile, the manager responded by arguing that this standard had been disrupted by "you people," the workers. The conversation represents a struggle over the control of the parameters of justice and legality in the factory. The strike had thus been transformed into a symbol of protest against a *jungli raj*, an unfair system of management authority. The *sirdar* was presenting a challenge to the manager's authority by insinuating that this authority was uncivilized and unjust. The fact that a *sirdar*, an intermediary between workers and managers, would choose to distance himself from the manager indicates the polarization between workers and managers during the course of the strike. Thus at this stage in the political conflict the initial dispute between the weaver and mechanic had been overshadowed by the representation of the conflict as resistance against management. The incident reveals the manner in which worker resistance such as a strike may arise out of conflicts and social hierarchies between groups of workers. In this case the caste allegiance of the weaver shaped the union's participation and occurred at the expense of the *mistri*. However, once the conflict involves a union-management confrontation, it operates in a new field of power and acquires a different meaning for the participants and the workers in general.

This case in which a dispute between workers is transformed into a confrontation between unions and managers is an example of an important category of factory conflicts. For instance, a particular group or community of workers may bring a grievance against another worker to management. If management does not take action, the community may then mobilize in protest. For example, in one case a woman worker was sexually assaulted by another worker in the factory. The community leaders of the woman worker brought the grievance to management and demanded that the male worker in question be fired, since the assault represented an attack on the *izzat* (honor) of the woman and her community. Management under pressure from this community of workers fired the male worker. This worker's union then organized a wildcat strike. The strike was unsuccessful and the worker was not reinstated.[48] Thus we see the transformation of a gendered conflict between two workers into a union-management confrontation. It is important to note, however, that in such cases management is not simply an innocent bystander. During such conflicts management attempts to utilize its power to discredit the union leaders in question in order to undermine the union's position and present a warning against future resistance by workers or union leaders.

Conclusion

I have examined the manner in which differences and hierarchies between workers play a central role in the politics of the jute working class. I have specifically argued that our understanding of class in terms of both structure and the praxis of class politics must integrate issues of gender and community. I have used ethnographic research to analyze the way in which this process occurs through the construction of the labor market, the gendered and community-based division of labor, trade union practices, and instances of labor-management conflicts. While I do not claim to have transcended the "partial truths" of ethnographic or social science representation, my research aims to contribute to our understanding of the local level of factory politics in contemporary India. In this endeavor I have focused on both the structural constraints and spaces for workers' agency and resistance in the factory.

My analysis of this research points to the way in which "the working class" is constructed and contested by the politics of gender and community. The point has not been to present gender and community as natural antitheses to the category of class, nor to suggest that class can be reduced to gender or community. For example, the wildcat strike rests on a link between the workers' caste positions and union mobilization. However, the meaning of the strike is not limited to this caste relationship. Thus to the *sirdar* the strike represented a challenge to an unfair system of authority, that is, the capitalist system in the factory.

In conclusion, my argument suggests that it is critical that we continue to pay attention to issues of difference within the working classes. Such difference is not merely manifested by a pluralistic set of class identities but by a political process in which class interests are articulated through conflict, hierarchy, and exclusion. I have thus argued against the foreclosure of such difference through an assumption that the working class acts or must act as a unified subject. Such a project underscores the complexities and dynamism of the politics of class that unfold at the factory level in industrial India.*

48. The incident was narrated by labor officers in the mill. Note also that such cases have been historically documented by Chakrabarty in *Rethinking Working Class History*.

*I would like to thank Amrita Basu, Susanne Rudolph, David Laitin, Lloyd Rudolph, and William Sewell for their support of this research. I would also like to thank the MacArthur Foundation for funding the field work through the Council for Advanced Studies in Peace and International Cooperation at the University of Chicago.

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