

# **Culture, Structure and Working Class Politics**

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# Culture, Structure and Working Class Politics

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*This essay attempts to analyse certain forms of cultural politics as a means of demonstrating the varying layers of structural inequality that serve to constitute the working class. The author argues that criticisms of teleological, unitary conceptions of the working class do not necessitate a shift from but rather a revision of the ways in which we think of structural analysis. By examining the linkages between class, gender and community in the jute mills it is possible to move away from a focus on the ways in which cultural difference forecloses class politics to an understanding of the ways in which different forms of class-based political practices may contest and reproduce the intersecting structural hierarchies which constitute the working class.*

IN recent years, the field of Indian labour studies has engaged in a debate that has been defined by a focus on two paradoxical yet interconnected questions. On the one hand, historical evidence of cases of workers' collective action have clearly demonstrated the ways in which working class unity may be constructed around shared interests. On the other hand, the persistent significance of differences of caste, gender, region and religion in both historical and contemporary cases of Indian labour politics has pointed to a need for an interrogation of the presumed unitary nature of the working class. Such an approach has demonstrated the significance of taking seriously the politics of cultural difference in any understanding of the political behaviour of Indian workers. In this essay, I suggest that while analyses of the significance of culture have provided important insights which have decentered Eurocentric or unitary conceptions of the working class [Chakrabarty 1989; Ong 1988], they have often stopped short of rethinking the structural dimensions of the working classes. Culture, in this context, is implicitly transformed into a force that is external to the politics of class and ultimately becomes the basis for exceptionalist arguments which seek to explain the absence or weakness of class politics in India. The materiality of culture then becomes a unitary, bounded entity which displaces or supplants rather than reconceptualises the structural dimensions of class politics. The essay attempts to question the creation of such reified boundaries between the realms of 'culture' and 'structure' and argues for an approach that reconnects the focus on the materiality of cultural difference with the structural basis of class politics. I argue for a shift from a focus on 'difference' as a marker of the realm of a bounded cultural sphere to an analysis of 'difference' in terms of a set of layered structural inequalities which shape class politics in the contemporary industrial arena.

The essay draws on fieldwork which I conducted on the jute mill workers in

1990-92 in Calcutta and is constructed in two main sections. The first section presents a brief theoretical discussion of the question of conceptualising the materiality of class politics in ways which move beyond the culture/structure divide. The second section of the paper uses ethnographic research on the jute mill workers in order to demonstrate how this form of materiality unfolds through particular forms of class politics.<sup>1</sup> I present three cases of the political practices of the jute mill workers: (1) ritual politics as workers celebrate the Vishwakarma puja in the jute factory, (2) community-based organisation in the workers' residences and (3) critical discourses of working class women. Each of these three cases represent practices which are located within the realm of particular cultural identities – identities which signify forms of exclusion and social hierarchy between groups of workers in the mill. However, each case is also linked to a form of oppositional class politics which brings sections of the workforce into direct confrontation with management authority. I argue that the significance of such political practices does not lie in the reassertion that culture forecloses the emergence of a form of unified class politics but in an analysis of what these practices tell us about the intersecting gender and community-based structural inequalities which are constitutive of rather than external to the working class in the jute mills. The analysis suggests that certain forms of workers' oppositional class politics may either reproduce or contest structural hierarchies between some groups of workers. Such hierarchies are structural because they place certain groups of workers in positions of inequality both in relationship to other groups of workers as well as in relationship to management within the labour-capital relationship. When oppositional labour politics directed at management reproduce gender hierarchies (for instance by excluding women's participation) this recreates hierarchies between female and male workers as well as between female workers and male

managers in the factory. When women in the jute mills, for instance, are excluded from predominantly male unions, they lack the support of union resources in confrontations with male manager and are placed in a distinctive location of subordination within the labour-capital relationship. On the one hand, 'difference' in this context is not 'merely cultural' but represents a problem of structural differentiation between male and female workers in the industrial arena. On the other hand, the structural dimension of class in this context is therefore also not unitary but is produced through difference; male and female workers occupy different structural locations within the labour-capital relationship and therefore have a differentiated set of class interests. Thus, as the essay will argue, the juxtaposition between an essentialised cultural difference on the one hand and a homogeneous structural unity on the other is called into question.

## THEORETICAL NOTES ON CLASS/CULTURE DEBATE

The juxtaposition between class and culture is inextricably linked to the argument of 'Indian exceptionalism' and the corresponding assumption that contemporary politics in India has been shaped by the politics of cultural identities such as caste and religion rather than by the politics of class. Studies of organised labour that draw on this perspective have, for instance, often concentrated on explaining the 'exceptional' nature of contemporary labour politics in India, that is, the reasons for the inability of the Indian working class to produce a single unified national labour movement or labour party [Chatterji 1980; Rudolph and Rudolph 1987]. Such studies rest on the view that there is a universal form of labour organisation and behaviour, one that implicitly conforms to European models of the industrial unions, organised labour movements and class-based parties. Where this form of organisation is absent or weak, it becomes an exceptional phenomenon

that must be explained, whether in terms of structural reasons, issues of consent and false consciousness or as a collective action problem. Many studies have noted the absence of a unified national trade union movement and in particular, fragmentation of the union movement through their links to political parties. The disunity or limited scope of 'formal' labour organisations such as unions and political parties have often served as an unquestioned mark of the irrelevance of class in the schema of Indian politics [Rudolph and Rudolph 1987]. Such an approach rests on an assumption that equates class with specific forms of organisation and ignores other media for the expression of class politics such as women's networks, community organisations or other cultural modes of expression [Berger 1989; Ong 1988]. The implicit separation between class and the politics of gender and community that lies at the basis of such an approach results in a predetermined understanding of labour politics in India, one which assumes the primacy of the 'politics of region and religion' [Rudolph and Rudolph 1987] in contemporary India without interrogating the ways in which such forms of cultural politics often also signify or are interconnected with class politics.

At a theoretical level, this presumed separation between class and 'cultural identities' has taken the form of an assumption that there exist natural boundaries between capitalist and pre-capitalist traditions and behaviour, with pre-capitalist traditions encompassing religious, ethnic and caste communities. This assumption has resulted in several variations in the explanation of Indian labour politics. Early approaches within the framework of modernisation theory lead to the view that industrial workers in India may behave according to 'pre-capitalist traditions' but that these traditions will or should evolve into a secular, unified working class. For example, religious or caste divisions within the labour force are analysed as divisive elements that will dissolve with the development of capitalism; the Indian working class will then eventually work its way towards an idealised vision of the working class.<sup>2</sup> In another variant, some studies have assumed that industrial workers have been governed by pre-capitalist identities; the Indian worker is therefore 'different' and cannot be understood in terms of class identities.<sup>3</sup> These approaches, while often starkly different in their approaches and conclusions, rest on a shared conception of the working class. This conception is caught within a framework that either implicitly or explicitly measures the behaviour of the

Indian working classes against an idealised image of the working class. In this framework, the Indian working class is either similar or different from this ideal type of 'the working class'.<sup>4</sup>

Recent research in the field of labour studies has attempted to confront the co-existence and interplay between capitalist identities of class and pre-capitalist identities and to address issues of cultural difference within the working class [Chakrabarty 1989; Das Gupta 1994; Joshi 1985; Simeon 1995]. Dipesh Chakrabarty, in particular, has argued that this framework rests on the assumption, that "workers all over the world, irrespective of their specific cultural pasts, experience 'capitalist production' in the same way" (1989: 223). On the one hand, the ideal type purports to represent the universal nature of working class politics. On the other hand, studies that challenge or deviate from this type are characterised as 'exceptional' cases. Chakrabarty's interrogation of the subjectivity of 'the working class' has provided significant impetus towards a revision of the concept of class and the cultural assumptions inherent in universalistic categories such as labour or capital. However, as I will demonstrate, Chakrabarty's conception remains caught within an exceptionalist framework as his argument ultimately returns to the notion that it is culture which, in the last instance, forecloses the emergence of a modern, egalitarian form of class politics in the West Bengal jute mills. While Chakrabarty's argument begins by demonstrating the Eurocentric cultural assumptions present within Marx's concept of capital his attempt to rethink working class history ultimately focuses on an attempt to isolate 'culture' as a realm which forecloses class consciousness. It is the hierarchical rural culture of the jute workers (in contrast to the egalitarian culture of the west) which distinguishes the jute working class from the English working class. Chakrabarty argues that the difference at hand is between the "notion of a pre-capitalist 'community' - distinguished by hierarchical, inegalitarian, and illiberal relationships - and the notion of individualism that has been with us since the rise of the bourgeois order in Europe, entailing ideas of citizenship, equal rights, equality before the law" (Chakrabarty 1989: 219). I have elsewhere discussed at length some of the problems inherent in this reified opposition between 'east' and 'west' [Fernandes 1997: 15]. However, the point I would like to focus on in this essay is the ways in which, in Chakrabarty's conception, 'hierarchies' between workers (such as of caste and ethnicity) are depicted as cultural elements rather than as

relationships of power which are inextricably linked with the structural materiality of the category of class.<sup>5</sup> This sole emphasis on the materiality of culture, I want to suggest, in fact prevents Chakrabarty from developing a critical reconceptualisation of class structure despite his rich and complex history of the jute working class. In effect, while Chakrabarty wants to move us away from teleological, universal conceptions of the working class, he inadvertently retains a unitary conception of class structure. The class consciousness of the jute workers, in his view, is foreclosed by an externalised pre-capitalist cultural difference. Chakrabarty, in a later essay, qualified his argument and has characterised his question 'Why did the Indian working class fail to sustain a long-term sense of class consciousness' as a 'false question'.<sup>6</sup> In particular, he shifts instead to a focus on the question of temporality and the ways in which the 'pre-capitalist' identity both exists within and disrupts the 'temporal horizon of capital.' While his discussion of difference in terms of temporality aims at disrupting a teleological narrative of the history of capitalism, he once again leaves untouched an explicit interrogation of the question of class structure. It is this circumvention of the problem of structure which, I suggest, continues to implicitly reproduce an opposition between class structure and cultural difference in recent work. Such work which calls into question universalistic master narratives of capitalism articulated through a hegemonic masculine Eurocentric subject [Ong 1989; Prakash 1990; Scott 1988] has tended to discard rather than rethink the category of structure.<sup>7</sup> The problem with such a move, as my discussion of Chakrabarty's work has attempted to show, is that approaches which do not attempt to reconceptualise class structure may well end up with unitary essentialised conceptions of culture.

Drawing on research which I have conducted on contemporary labour politics in the West Bengal jute mills, I argue that a reconceptualisation of the meaning of 'structure' can circumvent the theoretical problems inherent in a presumed juxtaposition between class and culture. First, drawing on feminist research<sup>8</sup> on the linkages between gender, class and race/ethnicity in comparative contexts, structure can be thought of as 'intersectional' rather than unitary [Banerjee 1991; Collins 1990; Glenn 1992; Sacks 1990; Sangari 1993]. Identities such as caste, ethnicity or gender are not merely external cultural identities or ideologies but are constitutive of the structure of 'the working class'. Second, working class structure can be thought of as a fluid process of production

in 'time, space and movement' [Giddens 1981]. Structure then is neither static nor unitary in this conception. Consider for instance the ways in which this approach unfolds within the context of contemporary working class politics in the jute mills. As in the historical context, identities of community and gender have played a central role in processes of labour recruitment and the division of labour on the factory floor. For instance, workers in the postcolonial context use family and community ties in order to gain access to employment in the mill. Certain sections of the production process are classified as men's work or women's work while other tasks divided up according to community.<sup>9</sup> The construction of the labour market suggests that the structure of the working class is produced through the politics of gender and community. Meanwhile, management attempts to exercise authority on the factory floor through the control of time, space and movement of the workers also does not occur through neutral bureaucratic processes but is fundamentally linked to a politics of difference. For instance, the discipline of workers' bodies occurs through a set of gendered processes. Women workers for instance are disciplined not just by neutral forms of workplace discipline but by modalities of power which operate through the control over women's sexuality (where single women are constructed as a social and moral threat by both management and workers) and domestic labour (where work discipline involves the extraction of labour both in the factory and in the workers' residences).

These examples begin to point to the complex layering of the forces which structure the lives and labour of the jute working classes.<sup>10</sup> Given this multidimensional form of structure the analysis of working class politics then is transformed from a project of measuring activity against a predefined ideal vision of class unity to a question of the ways in which different forms of workers' political practices respond to this multilayered structure. For instance, rather than asking whether such differences prevent or permit workers to unify in oppositional political action. I want to ask how different forms of working class politics contest or reproduce these varying layers of structural hierarchy. In the next section, I therefore present three different forms of political practices: ritual practices manifested through the workers' celebration of the Vishwakarma puja, community activism and women workers' critical responses to management and union authority.

#### CULTURAL POLITICS AND STRUCTURE OF WORKING CLASS

The celebration of religious festivals, such as the Durga Puja, Vishwakarma Puja, Shivratri and the Id festival, represent significant public events which serve as a site for political negotiation between workers, unions and managers in the jute mills. Workers and unions organise such celebrations in their residences in the mill labour lines (bustees) or in the factory and invite management to attend and in many cases to inaugurate the festival. The dynamics of the organisation and celebration of such festivals provide a lens through which we can analyse the relationship between class and culture at the local level of factory politics. I will analyse the celebration of Vishwakarma puja, an event which as I will demonstrate can be viewed as the site for the production of a form of class conflict rather than a lingering element of pre-capitalist religious consciousness. Dipesh Chakrabarty interprets the jute workers' celebration of this puja as historical evidence of the peasant's conception of his tools, whereby the tools took on magical and godly qualities" (1989: 89) and as a maker of the 'pre-capitalist, inegalitarian' (1989: 69) culture of the jute workers. He does not, however, explore the possibility that such ritual practices may have served as a site of class opposition to the industrial discipline of the workplace or the culture of capitalism being produced within the jute mill.

Let us turn to an analysis of the celebration of this festival in more recent times in order to provide a contrasting interpretation. The Vishwa Karma Puja continues in contemporary times to represent a festival of significance for particular Hindu communities of the jute working class since it involves the worship of tools; the rituals of the festival are specifically oriented towards work and the meaning of labour. The festival, which is held within the factory compound, consists of the worship of the god Vishwakarma with offerings of flowers and prasad and celebration with music. Let us examine the political dynamics that constitute the organisation and performance of the festival. The politics of this ritual in the jute mill unfold within two planes of activity and meaning, or as David Laitin has put it, "the two faces of culture" constituted by "the cultural ordering of political priorities and the use of cultural identity as a political resource" (1986: 11). While on the one hand, the religious ritual and interests of unions and managers in

the factory, on the other hand, the ritual delineates a sphere of politics which is distinct from the 'formal' realm of industrial politics.

In the first case, the politicisation of the ritual occurs through the involvement and conflict between trade unions and management over the organisation of the terms and boundaries of the activity on the shop-floor. The performance of the ritual is centred around representations of the deity Vishwa Karma which workers construct in the factory. The construction of these images of the god causes a disruption of production as workers' labour time is taken away for this process. When the organisation of the festival was being planned during the course of my fieldwork, management indicated that their primary aim was to contain and centralise the process by authorising the construction of one large shrine which would only require four or five workers to build the puja and organise the activities. Furthermore, management stipulated that the Puja would be limited to the mechanical department of the factory.

However, the unions were insisting on the construction of several images of the god since the leaders of each union wished to create its own sphere of power and ritual authority. Hence, there was a symbolic recreation of the competition between unions through the construction of the shrines in the factory. Eventually, six separate shrines were constructed in the factory by separate groups of workers affiliated with each union. The representations of the deity were transformed into symbols of power of the mill trade unions. In this process, as the unions utilised the Puja as a resource to represent and consolidate their sphere of influence among their constituents, religious worship became the signifier of the representation of the interests of particular groups of Hindu workers. With this politicisation of the festival organisation and the corresponding conflict between unions and management, the worker's interest was consequently constructed through their religious identity. Hence, there was an erasure of the boundary which is conventionally assumed to separate the class and religious identity of the worker.

I have thus far examined the manner in which the organisation of the religious worship becomes politicised by the involvement of unions and management. However, the ritual practices that constitute the worship during the Vishwakarma puja also represent a sphere of political activity that is distinct from the politicisation of the festival. I am shifting here from the way in which such religious activities

become politicised by formal, secular organisations to the second plane of analysis, one that examines the political nature of the religious ritual itself.

On the day of the festival a large shrine was constructed next to the shopfloor. On either side of the construction, two amplifiers were blaring popular Hindi film songs, drowning out the regular sounds of the machines. Meanwhile, five smaller shrines were constructed in the mechanical department. In these sections, ritual practice prohibited workers from touching their tools and machines. Religion altered the landscape of the mill both in terms of spatial construction as well as in terms of structuring of time. Meanwhile, the discipline of time and space was continually subverted by other sections of the workforce during the course of the ritual. For example, workers from various departments are able to leave their machines at various points during the day in order to perform a brief worship of one of the deities in the mill. The puja represented an arena for a political battle over the control of labour through the structuring of time and space. One high-level manager indicated with a significant degree of annoyance, "I will stand in each department of the mill for half an hour tomorrow and make sure that they do not just leave their machines." This battle was not merely limited to a monetary question of preserving production levels but represented a conflict over the preservation of capitalist discipline in the mill.

Through this ritual, religious worship created a space of autonomous worker activity on the factory floor which was temporarily able to challenge the authority of management. Consider the following incident which occurred when I accompanied a labour officer to the department where the shrines were constructed. One worker said to the officer, "This festival is for us to enjoy. Why are the sahibs coming to see it?" A management representative no longer retained the symbolic authority or right to enter the ritual space in the factory; our visit represented an intrusion into this arena. Hence, the ritual resulted in a transformation of the sphere of work into an inviolable, sacred space of the workers. However, this delineation of a sacred space also represented the creation of political boundaries – boundaries that produce a class opposition between workers and management through the religious ritual practices of the puja. Dipesh Chakrabarty has interpreted historical instances of this ritual as evidence of the worker's "incomprehension of the running principles of the machinery" (1989: 89). He juxtaposes the 'religious outlook' of

the workers with the 'science' of modern technology. The point Chakrabarty wishes to make is that the "man-machine relationship inside a factory always involves culture and a techno-economic argument overlooks this" (1989: 89). However, he does not consider the possibility that this 'religious outlook' in fact forms an intrinsic element of the creation of class consciousness and identity. In my alternative reading, I am suggesting that the performance of the Vishwakarma puja in the factory through the workers' 'worship of machinery' produced a reversal of the 'alienation' of the workers from the means of production; the transformation of the mechanical department into a sacred space resulted in a temporary wresting of the control of the means of production from management. Such beliefs provided an alternative conception of social reality [Fields 1985; Taussig 1980] which temporarily contested the dominance of capitalist authority in the factory. This analysis compels us to reconsider such historical instances of the Vishwakarma puja and at the very least to question the assumption that the puja celebration represents a form of purely mystical worship, "whereby the tools often took on magical and godly qualities" [Chakrabarty 1989:89]. In the contemporary context, the dynamics of the Vishwakarma puja demonstrate the way in which such rituals weave together the workers' religious identity with an oppositional class consciousness.

The point which I want to emphasise here is that this form of ritual-based class politics temporarily subverts management attempts to structure time and space and movement on the factory floor. Such political practices then are not simply relevant as a manifestation of a particular form of cultural consciousness; on the contrary this form of cultural politics subverts management's discipline and surveillance over workers and in effect contests the process of the structuration of class in the workplace. The point is not of course to valorise this form of political practice as an idealised form of political activity. However, it is important to note in this context that such ritual practices in the jute mills are not inherently communalised; rather than presuming that a narrative of communalism always characterises such practices, we can begin to understand the ways in which such class-based practices have the potential to become communalised through organised political activities in the context of the contemporary Hindutva movement. While this cultural form of class politics may temporarily subvert certain dimensions of management authority it contains within it the potential

of reproducing a politics of class opposition which is linked to other forms of social exclusions, in this case in relation to other communities of workers in the jute mills. To take another example of this potential for exclusion, such cases of ritual practices also reproduce exclusionary masculine spaces as women workers are excluded from participation in the organisation and public celebrations. The convergence between class and community occurs within a masculine terrain which reproduces a form of gendered structural hierarchy. This form of oppositional politics contests certain structural aspects of capitalist authority such as the control of time and space on the factory floor while reproducing other forms of material inequality. Let us consider this contradictory effect further by turning to a second case of community-based politics located in the jute workers' residences.

During the course of my fieldwork, several male workers who had grown increasingly dissatisfied with the inability of either management or unions to improve the conditions of the labour lines, the workers' residences which are situated around the jute factory and owned by the millowner. The workers decided to create a forum, one that would replace the authority of both unions and managers. The composition of the organisation was particularly striking since it involved members across caste, religious and ethnic identities. Moreover although the members were not union leaders, the committee did not represent an anti-union organisation since several of the participants were also union members. The organisation evolved out of a form of public dissatisfaction over specific problems in the workers' communities. For example, one of the founders of the forum argued that several workers had become increasingly concerned about problems of alcoholism,

The alcohol shopowners just met with the union leaders and gave them money. So the leaders took the money and kept quiet. Slowly the problem of alcohol has been getting worse. Before there were only a few places selling it. Lately it has been increasing. People who didn't drink before started drinking. Young boys also started drinking. This talk came up in our Andhra Pradesh Club. We felt we must stop this. We must stop alcoholism. We must stop all vices. So we set up a meeting and called members of all the clubs. In this way the committee was set up.

The organisation evolved out of a public debate held within workers' community clubs which are located in the jute mill residences. As one worker argued,

This committee is completely separate. Management has nothing to do with it. The

unions also don't have anything to do with it. We want it to be separate. We don't want any political parties to come into it...Some of us are with political parties but we will not bring that into this work. The workers were attempting to construct an autonomous community organisation, one that would contest the attempt of management to regulate social life within the labour lines both in terms of management's direct control as well as through joint management-union activity. The organisation attempted to enforce this new community identity through the use of coercive tactics. As one of the committee members indicated,

First we stopped the alcohol. We called a meeting with all the alcohol shopowners and gave them a warning. We said we would beat up anyone who drinks. We have been doing that. If anyone is drunk we beat them up and tie them up. This way we got control of the alcohol. Then we did the same thing with gambling. First we gave a warning. Then we beat up anyone who was gambling. In this way we have stopped all the vices. Then we decided to clean up the lines. We called in all the shopkeepers and told them to put up garbage cans to throw waste in. So people won't throw garbage anywhere. The next thing we want to do is for the children in the labour lines. The children go and play in the railway colony. It is a shame for us that they have to go there and play. So we will talk with the Company [mill] about getting a playground for them...

Organisers of the forum were unambiguous about this use of coercion and independent policing of the labour lines. As another of the committee member emphasised,

We will beat up anyone who drinks. We have beaten up about seventy or eighty people. Even if it is a union leader or a president of a union it will be the same. Even if it is my brother or father...This alcohol is not made in government [legal] shops. It is sold in houses.

However, the significance of such methods of coercion cannot be understood merely in terms of a manifestation of violence and brute force. On the contrary, the success of such methods was based on the public, social humiliation of the targeted persons. The entire community would know or be informed that the particular person had been beaten for violating the social norms defined by the committee. The importance of the publicity of such methods was highlighted by other forms of social ostracism used by the committee. As one worker indicated, "For one person we shaved his head and beard, put a garland of shoes around him and paraded him through the whole colony."

The contours of this workers' community rested on the presumption of common interests of workers. Consider, for instance,

(the vision put forward by one of the workers involved in the organisation of the 'action committee':

We have to do this for our children. We have to educate them, to try and raise them up slowly. Our people will throw away all of their money on liquor and gambling and will not even leave enough money for dal (lentil) and roti (bread) for their children. We have to stop this. If our children are not in school they run around and get spoiled. The young boys spend their time in video parlors watching bad films. They waste themselves.

This emphasis of the committee's agenda embodied an attempt of the workers to invest in their future within the urban setting in Calcutta rather than relying on their anticipated return to the village. Hence, the image of improving the lives of children in the labour lines constituted a vision of the reproduction of the urban community of the workers—and an attempt to imagine a community that could become independent of the politics and authority of union-management relations yet did not have to retreat to the memory of their villages of origin.

Despite this vision of a common purpose and future, the workers continued to rely on a gendered notion of community, a conception which ultimately foreclosed the possibility of producing a form of community which would contest the domain of management power. On one level, the committee constructed by the workers continued to rest on the exclusion of women's participation: it had no women members and the organisers of the forum indicated that they did not intend to deal with issues specifically regarding women. The vision of the action committee did not contest prevailing notions that restrict working class women to specific domestic or socially acceptable spheres. Furthermore, the preoccupation of the committee with social order and the future of working class children rested on the significance of reproducing a particular model of the working class family, one which would uphold existing codes of the appropriate behaviour, activity and spaces for working class women.

Paradoxically, such conceptions which characterised the workers' community in fact converged with management discourses on the social disorder and disarray of the labour lines. Consider the following description of the labour lines by one mill manager,

The main problem is that we have only seven hundred quarters for about forty thousand workers. There are many 'jihupries' (illegal constructions/squalter settlements). There are about fifty illegal liquor shops. All kinds of vices such as,

blue films' prostitution, etc. were in prevalence. In the dock area there are many criminals.

The manager's description cast the jute workers' communities in a stereotypical image of a dangerous, violent and immoral space, one which was implicitly contrasted with the civilised morality of middle and upper class neighborhoods. In his conception, the problem was only one of numbers, a position which carries with it the language implicitly linking social and economic disruption to overpopulation—a connection that perhaps strikes a familiar chord with national discourses that have linked family planning with economic development. References to prostitution and pomography stem from management discourses on the social and moral disorder that arises when male workers migrate to the city, leaving their families behind in their village; hence there is an association between the problems and 'vices' of the labour lines and the disruption of the working class family. This has reinforced the construction of the urban arena as foreign, dangerous and male.

While, management would continually characterise the labour lines as violent and unsafe this conception was interwoven with a gendered discourse of morality. They would point to alcoholism, prostitution, and crime as forms of a social disease which violated middle class norms and their particular representation through Bengali bhadrak culture. Such conceptions were also specifically linked to views on the family and appropriate roles for women. For example, daughters and wives of managers would often make references to the supposed sexual promiscuity of women workers. They would indicate for example that women in the labour lines whose husbands had deserted them were living with other men and thus violating acceptable social codes regarding marriage. While management discourses on working class masculinity centred on the threat of violence and the protection of upper class women, discourses on working class women in the labour lines focused on the threat of unrestrained female sexuality.

This discursive construction of the labour lines in terms of moral disorder reverberates with parallels to discourses and representations produced by the community activism of the workers' action committee. The irony of this convergence of gendered discourses is underlined by the fact that while management was engaged in a construction of the labour lines in terms of moral disorder, one of the cornerstones of social order in the working class communities in fact lies in the reproduction of a patriarchal model of the working class family. For example, dominant ideologies

within the communities of workers do not permit single women to reside without the presence of family members, particularly male relatives, in the household. Such dominant ideologies also dictate that working class women must adopt socially acceptable roles in which they are responsible for performing domestic labour such as housework and childrearing and where they do not enter masculine spaces in the labour lines. Women are rarely seen in tea shops in the labour lines or near the factory and they do not participate in public activities such as religious festivals which include the participation of male workers, union leaders and in many instances even management representatives. Meanwhile, while trade unions also play a central role in shaping the political and cultural spheres of workers, women workers have also been marginalised from this activity. The point I am making here is not that women workers represent an essentially passive or subservient group, but that everyday social and institutional practices of workers produce exclusionary masculine spaces which foreclose possibilities for women's participation.

In this process, the management and workers' public spheres in effect overlapped in the production of such gendered discourses of social and community order. In effect, the conception of the workers' community which the action committee produced was unable to break from the gendered politics which have shaped management discourses and union practices. While the workers were able to contest relationships of power (based on caste, region or religion) by creating a cross-community organisation the action committee inadvertently reproduced gendered hierarchies. The committee, by failing to recognise the ways in which gender represents a structural force of power and hierarchy in the factory and workers' residences, in effect, produced a set of political practices which were unable to break from certain modes of capitalist power and discipline exercised by management in the mill. The limits of this form of political activity do not merely stem from the persistence of rural pre-capitalist cultural conceptions of justice or community (which as I have shown converge with 'modern' bourgeois moral codes regarding gender and sexuality) but from the persistence of gendered inequalities which structure 'the working class'.

I will turn then in the last part of the essay to a discussion of the implications of this role of gender in the structuration of the jute working class. The contemporary location of women workers in the jute mills has been significantly shaped by

historical processes which have contributed to the retrenchment and marginalisation of women in the workforce. Modernisation and rationalisation of the jute industry in the 1950s and 1960s resulted in a decline of women employed from approximately 20 per cent to 2 per cent of the workforce. Women workers who continue to work in the mill are primarily concentrated in the large casual workforce. Women whom I interviewed indicated that they worked out of economic compulsions and their primary concern was to be able to obtain even a few weeks of mill employment in order to meet daily subsistence requirements. In many instances, women were not able to maintain even a basic subsistence level. This was particularly the case in situations where women were sole financial supporters of their families. In the context of extreme levels of worker competition over mill employment, both managers and union leaders argued that employment for male workers should be given priority over female workers. In addition to such arguments, ideological assumptions that women workers are unable to operate machinery and the notion that women workers are burdensome employees due to state protective legislation served to constitute powerful ideological obstacles to the employment of women in the mills. The economic marginalisation of women workers was therefore such that the everyday practices of women workers in the mills were centred on a struggle for survival rather than on the participation in organised political opposition.

An understanding of this politics of survival of women workers cannot be fully grasped either by the analytical category of resistance or by the assumption that structural constraints simply inhibit women's collective action and produce a form of individualistic survival. Rather, the life histories of women workers whom I interviewed demonstrate that they interpreted their endurance through their 'micro' everyday activities as attempts to disrupt the reproduction of 'macro' structures of patriarchy and capitalism even as their particular social location induced them to assess the risks of overt protest. While working class women were excluded from trade union activity as well as from the types of 'cultural' or community politics which I have discussed above, women workers transformed the meaning of their productive and reproductive work from labour appropriated to reproduce structures of capitalism and patriarchy into the means through which they attempted to imagine a future for their children that could disrupt these structures.

The particular structural location of working class women provided the space for women workers to develop a distinctive form of critical consciousness through their interpretations of their everyday struggles. For instance, women would use their personal experiences and problems to provide a critical assessment of management practices or workplace hierarchies. Women workers in general argued that they did not have any sources of support. The response of one woman, "Who is there to help? I do everything alone?" was echoed by many of the women whom I interviewed in the mill. In particular, women workers indicated that they did not view trade unions or workers' community organisations in the mill as a potential source of support. Their responses revealed a consciousness of the systematic exclusion of women from the public sphere of social and political power. Representation of their personal experiences cannot be understood as a form of individualism but as a sharp critique of both union and management practices. One woman worker for example argued:

If you go to them [union leaders] they say come back later. Later. The labour officers also say the same thing. They say come back later. He [pointing to empty chair of the personnel manager] never has time... We beg and plead about our problems but no one will listen. But if three or four of these big men go into the office and make loud noises they will immediately say come and sit down. And they will give them help.

This analysis presents a clear consciousness of the gendered nexus between management, unions and a privileged section of the workforce. Another woman recounted an incident to demonstrate the absence of institutional support for women workers.

If someone is in trouble no one will help. I'll tell you one story about one woman I know. Last year one woman had an accident in the mill. She fell into a machine, her whole back was destroyed. She was in the hospital for three months. No one helped. The management did nothing, the unions did nothing. We went around and collected two rupees or three rupees from each person and helped her. No one else bothered. If there is something big that happens the union will do something. If someone assaults me or beats me in the mill. If there is some incident with me of course they will do something. If there is something big. Otherwise no one will help. If there is a problem or hardship we face there is no one.

Hence, women workers perceived the unions' definition of what qualifies as an 'incident' as implicitly exclusive of the concerns and interests relevant to their

lives and work. The consciousness of women workers of the exclusionary nexus between unions and management has reinforced the reluctance of women to participate in trade unions. One woman for example argued, "you have to give them money... Whatever it may be you have to give them something. Even if it is ten rupees I won't do that. I won't give money."

Such responses shed light upon the question of women's participation in union activity. Low levels of participation and membership of women in unions in comparative contexts [Cook, Lorwin and Daniels, 1992] have often been interpreted in terms of the 'apathy' and 'passivity' of working class women. I would argue that, on the contrary, women's rejection of union activity can be understood as a form of consciousness of the exclusionary, gendered practices that have often characterised the mainstream national trade unions.

My research on women working in the mill reveals that the scope for independent collective action has been severely restricted. The combined forces of competition, dependence on employment and the retrenchment of women from the workforce have reduced the possibility for such action. This is particularly evident in light of the fact that during the 1950s and 1960s women workers demonstrated militant opposition to their retrenchment from the mills. In the present context, the ability to gain employment is the most pressing issue for women workers, particularly in light of past retrenchment and present obstacles to employment. As one woman argued,

If three or four of us talk together and say we will go to the management and say something the others will feel they will lose their jobs. So we don't do anything. We are afraid to say anything to management... Each of us is so busy trying to see to ourselves. We have so many problems. We work for so many years but we are not permanent workers. I have to take care of my brothers. She has three children to take care of... We cannot do anything to make things better. Anyway, we have no money to do anything.

The point is not that women workers are passive victims or that they are essentially incapable of engaging in collective action. However, structural constraints and an absence of resources severely limit the possibilities for organisational activity. As Bourdieu has suggested, the absence of resistance by members of a subordinated group often denotes an ability of the individuals to recognise the immense structural constraints which they are faced with and to gain a "practical mastery of the social structure as a whole". [Bourdieu 1985:728]. It is this recognition of the

immense odds which they face which compels women to adopt a pragmatic view of their everyday lives and transforms collective protest into a sphere for the relatively privileged members of their community. Hence, women's lives in the jute mill were centred around the struggle to survive, a task which left less time and space for overt protest or organisation.

However, an exclusive focus on such structural constraints on collective action without an analysis of the ways in which women workers interpret their own acts does not fully capture the meaning of their everyday struggles. Women whom I interviewed stressed their concerns about their children's future and indicated that they hoped their labour would produce a better life for their children. In their perception of their productive and reproductive labour, these women understood their everyday activities as an attempt to interrupt the reproduction of structures of patriarchy and capitalism in the mill and in the labour lines. They emphasised their hopes that their children would become educated so that they would not have to work in the factory; they did not imagine a future in which their children would take over their jobs. A particularly stark example of this vision was represented by the case of one woman who expressed her desire to educate her daughters and to physically send one of her female babies away so she could escape both the factory and mill lines [Fernandes 1997b]. In this discursive construction of their daily actions, women whom I spoke with understood their practices as an attempt to ultimately disrupt 'macro' structures of power reproduced within the factory, community and family.

The meanings which women give to their everyday lives provide us with the analytical space to move beyond a classification which either constructs women workers as clear resisters to or passive victims of structural oppression. On the one hand, the struggle of women workers simply to survive on an everyday basis cannot be adequately conceptualised in terms of the category of resistance. Yet on the other hand, women workers interpreted their labour as a means to provide a better future for their children, one that would move beyond the structures which have circumscribed their lives. I have already suggested that this imagined future and their investment in their children prevents us from reducing their practices to an individualistic form of survival. More significantly, they did not perceive their labour as merely serving the needs of capitalism or patriarchy even while they are acutely aware of the implications and effects of such larger structures. In this

context, we cannot then assume that women workers in the mill are simply victims or that women's reproductive labour can be reduced to the reproduction of these structures [Kuhn and Wolpe 1978].

By taking seriously the ways in which women workers discursively construct their own social location, practices and experiences we are able to construct a third possibility, one that can inform recent research which has pointed both to the dangers of romanticising resistance [Abu-Lughod 1990] and the problems of presenting women as passive victims of structures of oppression [Mohanty 1991]. This can allow us to analyse the very real material effects of a multilayered structure of 'the working class' without foreclosing an understanding of the critical visions which women workers produce in order to momentarily interrupt the reproduction of these narratives – visions which are of fundamental importance in interrogating the regimes of power which operate in the mill, community and family.

#### CONCLUSION

This essay has attempted to analyse certain forms of cultural politics as a means of demonstrating the varying layers of structural inequality that serve to constitute the working class. In this context, I have engaged in an attempt at 'writing against culture' [Abu-Lughod 1991] as a means of moving away from conceptual approaches in which a narrow focus on the materiality of culture forecloses the possibility of revising our conceptions of what counts as 'structure'. In thinking of the structure of 'the working class' as multilayered and as produced in time, space and movement, my aim has been to argue that criticisms of teleological, unitary conceptions of the working class do not necessitate a shift from but rather a revision of the ways in which we think of structuralist analysis. For instance, by examining the linkages between class, gender and community in the jute mills we can move away from a focus on the ways in which cultural difference forecloses class politics to an understanding of the ways in which different forms of class-based political practices may contest and reproduce the intersecting structural hierarchies which constitute the working class. For instance, in the jute mills community-based politics have contested certain forms of management control over the workers' residences yet reproduced gendered inequalities that structure the working class. Rather than resting with the assertion that pre-capitalist cultural identities simply foreclose the emergence of class politics, the essay has instead argued that such cultural ties point

to the layered structural formation of the working class in the jute industrial arena. An interrogation of the distinction between the categories of culture and structure necessitates an understanding of difference which is constitutive of the structure and politics of the working class rather than as a predetermined obstacle to oppositional class politics.

### Notes

[This essay was first presented at the Social Science Research Council Conference on "The World of Indian Industrial Labour", Amsterdam, December 9-13, 1997.]

- 1 The essay draws on 18 months of fieldwork which included a detailed study of one jute mill in Calcutta based on daily visits to the factory for approximately 8 hours a day, interview conducted at other jute mills in West Bengal, interviews with state-level union representatives from the leading central trade unions and archival work conducted at the Indian Jute Mills Association. Due to limits of space, the essay is confined to a discussion of a few examples from this research. A full presentation of the empirical research and theoretical argument is contained in Fernandes, 1997a.
- 2 The contours of the debate over exceptionalism and universalism have also taken place in the context of studies of labour politics in the United States and Britain with the case of English working class formation serving as the ideal type for the behaviour of the working class and the United States serving as a marker of exceptionalism. For a critical review of conventional explanations of 'American exceptionalism' see Katznelson (1981).
- 3 Such studies of these two variants rest on images of the 'traditionalism' of the Indian worker. On one hand, the Indian worker is depicted as rural and illiterate and therefore different from the modern (western) industrial worker. See for example Rao, 1965. On the other hand, such studies focus on the way in which precapitalist ties serve as an obstacle to the class consciousness of the Indian worker. See for example Mamkootam (1982: 124).
- 4 This point has also been made by Chandavarkar (1994).
- 5 For instance, Chakrabarty (1989) depicts the problem of culture as a problem of the persistence of the 'primordialism' of cultural identities. See Fernandes, (1997) for a more extensive discussion of Chakrabarty's work.
- 6 Chakrabarty (1993: 1095).
- 7 Aihwa Ong, for instance, argues that the Malay women workers in her study see themselves as "politically informed Malay Muslims" rather than as a class in the Marxian sense (Ong 1988). However, her discussion and rejection of the category of class is based on an analysis of class as an identity. She does not, for instance, address the question of whether the location of women workers in the factory constitutes them as a class in a structural sense. In the process, her rich ethnography of the intersections between gender and the labour process does not lead to rethinking of the category of class and the ways in which the structural position of the Malay working class is constituted through a layered intersection of gender, ethnic and class relations.
- 8 The vast literature on the relationship between gender and labour in India as well as in

comparative context has significantly unsettled both conceptions of structure as well as the opposition between cultural and structuralist approaches. Research on the gendered division of labour and the relationship between production and reproduction has demonstrated the asymmetrical structural relationship between male and female workers. Such research has demonstrated that while gender inequalities are linked to hegemonic cultural norms they are also structurally-based identities that both shape and are produced by socio-economic processes. See for instance Acker (1988), Banerjee (1991), Mies (1986).

- 9 I discuss this at length in Fernandes (1997): chapter 4.
- 10 For a theoretical discussion of the multiple and interesting forms of structure which shape the categories of women and women's agency see Kumkum Sangari (1993).

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