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# BEYOND PUBLIC SPACES AND PRIVATE SPHERES: GENDER, FAMILY, AND WORKING-CLASS POLITICS IN INDIA

LEELA FERNANDES

Discourses on the family, appropriate roles of women, and the politics of sexuality remain central to the making of labor politics in the industrial arena in contemporary India. A study of everyday politics in the jute mills<sup>1</sup> in Calcutta provides a striking example of the ways in which such gendered ideologies and practices transform working-class politics into a masculine terrain, one which rests on the marginalization of women workers. For instance, the masculinization of space in the jute factory and in the workers' communities<sup>2</sup> results in the construction of single, working-class women as a social and sexual threat to the community; or, for example, family ties represent the primary means of gaining employment through a system of recruitment called the *khandani*, or family, system in which the son or male relative of a worker inherits his job when the worker retires or dies.<sup>3</sup> What forms of politics produce such hegemonic masculinized spaces at the local level in the jute factories? What mechanisms of exclusion and hierarchy constrain women workers who continue to work or attempt to gain work in such male-dominated industries? I will address these questions through an analysis of the ways in which the daily social practices of workers result in the production of an exclusionary realm of public activity.

The construction of the workers' public sphere in the jute mills represents a culturally specific and gendered political space that exists alongside the bourgeois public sphere and constitutes an arena where "members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate op-

positional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs."<sup>4</sup> The jute workers' public activity is shaped by the particular sociospatial continuum between workplace and residence in the jute factories in which there is no geographical separation between the work and home similar to the U.S. company towns and mill villages.<sup>5</sup> Management also qualifies this spatial continuum between work and home by attempting to incorporate the workers' residences within its sphere of authority. Workers therefore engage in a continual battle to transform their communities into what Sara Evans and Harry Boyte have called "free spaces,"<sup>6</sup> which can escape from and exist in opposition to management authority and the social codes of the "bourgeois public sphere."<sup>7</sup>

Although the jute workers' public sphere attempts to represent the general interests of the workers, it in fact produces gender hierarchies that result in the exclusion of women workers and their interests. In particular, this "subaltern counterpublic,"<sup>8</sup> to use Nancy Fraser's term, engages in the enforcement of particular models of the working-class family through the construction of single, working-class women as disruptive of social order in the workers' community. Paradoxically, in this process, the subaltern counterpublic in effect converges with management discourses within the bourgeois public sphere which portray the jute workers' communities as a site of moral decay and social disorder. This convergence between the gendered discourses of management and workers ultimately compromises the contested nature of the worker's counterpublic. In this article, I analyze the way in which public activities represented through community organizations, workers' everyday practices, and social discourses center around the reproduction of the "working-class family." Both unions and community organizations of the jute workers are complicit in reproducing a patriarchal form of the family, one that re-creates hierarchical relationships of gender.

Based on ethnographic research that I conducted at one factory in Calcutta during the period 1990 through 1992, my analysis focuses on observations of everyday social practices and community activities of the jute workers. Although I draw on the cultural and material specificities of the jute working-class communities in postcolonial India, such an analysis con-

tributes more generally to feminist research on women and work by furthering our understanding of the ways in which linkages between spheres such as work, community, and family manufacture gender hierarchies and constrain the lives of women workers. My point is not only to analyze purely discursive processes which produce the jute workers' public sphere but also to demonstrate the material and political consequences for women workers, specifically in terms of access to organizational support from working-class community groups and unions. To this end, I later turn to the life history of one woman worker in order to examine the particular effects of these processes. As the life history demonstrates, a single woman who attempts to speak with a union leader about workplace grievances may incite speculation, gossip, and rumors about her relations with the union leader in question. Thus, even access to the political resources of trade unions remains contingent on discourses of sexuality and the family. Through this life history, we see that as workers, union leaders, and managers participate in and produce a gendered public sphere, they enforce a construction of a patriarchal form of "the working-class family." Such an approach thus allows for an analysis of the family as a product of dynamic political processes rather than as a preconstituted static structural category which merely serves as a signifier of essentialized patriarchal cultural traditions that oppress Indian women.<sup>9</sup>

### **THE JUTE MILL "LABOR LINES"**

Let us begin then by traversing and imagining the physical and spatial terrain that shapes and is inscribed by the jute workers. The "labor lines," the workers residences situated across the street from the factory, represent an extension of the boundaries of the mill; the residences and the land on which they are built are owned by the proprietor of the factory.<sup>10</sup> In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, factories set up in India, faced with labor shortages, actively recruited rural migrant workers. Because employers were responsible for such active recruitment, they generally provided housing for the workers. Similar to company towns in the United States, working-class residences are thus strongly tied to and crafted around the workplace in industrial areas.

The jute workers' residences, which consist of rows of small houses constructed back to back with no windows, were built by the British industrialists when they first established the mill in the late nineteenth century. Since then, there has been no new construction or improvements of the quarters. Each house has a small veranda, one room which is four feet by six feet, and in a few cases a small room for cooking. According to conservative estimates, approximately 14,000 or 15,000 people are housed in this area which contains 700 quarters.

Workers and their families have attempted to negotiate this phenomenon of extreme overcrowding in a number of ways. Most of the existing houses have been divided into separate quarters, that is, each room (including the veranda area) is turned into a separate "house." In addition, the area includes a number of makeshift houses, called *katcha* (temporary) housing, constructed out of mud, clay, sacks, or any other available materials. Finally, a quarter may be shared by a large number of male workers who "sleep in shifts," that is, where the use of the room or house is rotated according to the worker's shift in the factory. Such inadequate living conditions have often presented obstacles to the ability of women to accompany their husbands or parents to the factory (women rarely migrate alone). The scarcity of space and the fact that a small room may be shared on average by eight people has deterred some male workers from bringing their families to the factory. Indeed, rural folklore<sup>11</sup> has historically tended to identify the jute mills with the journey of single men from the village to the factory. This masculinization of the factory and the urban arena in Calcutta continues to characterize representations of the jute mills. However, in practice, working-class women do reside in the labor lines. The factory employs approximately 180 women out of a total work force of 4,000 workers. In addition, some male workers have brought their wives and families, and some women residing in the labor lines were born there to parents who had worked in the mill. It was impossible to gain access to precise statistics, because such records are not kept by management. Any independent attempt on my part to conduct a formal survey (in contrast with the everyday conversations, interviews, and observations I conducted) would have raised suspicion among workers, because such records could be used as part of management surveillance.

Such suspicion would have been particularly appropriate because the workers' residences in fact do fall under the purview of management surveillance and control. This surveillance is comprised of a number of strategies and techniques of power. Management literally maps the residences; each row or "line" of quarters and each individual quarter is numbered and records of quarters are kept by management. Surveillance is then conducted by the "line *durwans*," watchmen employed by the factory specifically to watch over the residences. In addition to these official representatives of surveillance, management also relies on a number of informal sources of information. It is probably not a coincidence that the industrywide cartel of jute industrialists, the Indian Jute Mills Association, has a record of every labor and union meeting and rally, including the names of the organizer, speakers, and contents of the speeches, held since the early decades of the century until the present time. This spatial segmentation, supervision, and policing of the jute mill labor lines reverberates with parallels to the Foucauldian model of disciplinary strategies.<sup>12</sup>

However, the control of the labor lines does not correspond to the totalizing vision of Michel Foucault's notion of the panoptical model of discipline. This control is continually encroached on by the workers where, as Michel de Certeau has appropriately argued, "Beneath what one might call the 'monotheistic' privilege that panoptic apparatuses have won for themselves, a 'polytheism' of scattered practices survives, dominated but not erased."<sup>13</sup> For example, workers continually construct "unauthorized" quarters, or squatter settlements, called *jhupries*, which defy the ordered mapping of the labor lines. Managers periodically post notices in the factory condemning the "illegality" of these constructions, but they are unable to demolish these quarters as this would result in retaliation from the workers in the workplace.<sup>14</sup> Such conflict over the labor lines begins to point to the way in which workers attempt to resist management control over material space within the jute workers' communities.

The attempt of workers to create autonomous spaces for community life<sup>15</sup> outside the control of management is not limited to the reclaiming of material space in the labor lines. The everyday practical control of the workers' residences falls

under several layers of organization, including trade unions and various ethnic- and caste-based community organizations that represent primarily gendered areas of activity. Factory-level union offices are set up in the labor lines, and trade union meetings and rallies are held in public spaces in the labor lines. Male workers are members of specific "community clubs" that organize a variety of social and leisure activities, including music programs, dramas, or times when workers are able to watch a color television owned by a particular club or have access to a public space to play cards and socialize.

However, access to such public spaces clearly differs for female and male workers. Although male workers have access to such spaces after their shifts in the mill or on their days off, women must begin their shifts of domestic work. Everyday public life in the workers' communities is shaped by what Kathy Peiss has called the "sexual division of leisure,"<sup>16</sup> in her discussion of working-class community life in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century New York. Working-class women in the jute mills are excluded from participation in most forms of public activities of the community clubs; they are also excluded from participation in the public life of the street, a central arena of working-class social activity.<sup>17</sup> Although tea and liquor shops represented inaccessible spaces for women workers, they did, however, have to cope with the consequences of such public activity. Alcoholism was widespread among male workers, and women workers often complained that their husbands spent their salaries on alcohol consumption rather than on necessities such as food and clothing. Meanwhile, women workers have also been marginalized from trade union activities. Women workers whom I interviewed indicated that women do attend union meetings but they rarely speak. It is not that women workers represent an essentially passive or subservient group but, rather, that everyday social and institutional practices of workers produce exclusionary masculine spaces.

We begin to see that the boundaries of the workers' public sphere constitute an exclusionary terrain, contingent on the production of gender hierarchies and the marginalization of working-class women. As I argue in the following section, the construction of a subaltern counterpublic results in the production of a significant paradox. In the context of the sociospatial

continuum between workplace and residence, the effectiveness of the workers' counterpublic becomes contingent on the ability of workers to create forms of public life that can circumvent or contest the factory authority of management. However, although the distinctive subaltern nature of this space rests on an oppositional relationship to the sphere of management authority, workers in effect reproduce gendered discourses that coincide with management assumptions regarding women, the family, and sexuality. Hence, the gendered nature of the workers' public sphere ultimately circumscribes its potential autonomy, an autonomy that could have contested the reach of management authority.

### **THE MAKING OF A GENDERED SUBALTERN PUBLIC SPHERE**

The connection between workplace and residence in the Calcutta jute mills has created a political arena which allows for the continual transformation of community concerns and conflicts that occur within the labor lines into issues that are brought within the boundaries of the factory authority. On one level, the continuum between the politics of workplace and residence of the jute workers rests on factors related to the migratory nature of the work force. The majority of workers retain strong ties with their village of origin, and so the communities of the jute workers in the factory area are significantly shaped by the social relationships that exist within the village. In certain instances, conflicts that occur within a village of a particular group of workers may be translated into a conflict in the factory.

Because management acts as representative for the landlord (that is, the factory owner), community clashes as well as everyday conflicts among workers in the labor lines are brought to the labor office in the factory for resolution. This in turn reinforces management's ability to regulate the actions of workers. The labor office becomes a form of community "court" and the personnel manager and his labor officers must arbitrate conflicts. Such conflicts, ranging from personal problems between neighbors or between workers sharing a quarter to disputes over the occupancy of a particular residential quarter, provide

one of the biggest sources of workplace conflicts. This relationship between workplace and residence has encroached on the ability of workers to create forms of public activity and community organizations that are relatively independent of management authority. For instance, management and trade unions had developed a formal institutional mechanism through an organization called the Village Committee in order to resolve the conflicts arising from the continuum between factory and residence.

This institutionalized mode of conflict resolution has reinforced the marginalization of women workers. For instance, while women workers may bring grievances to the committee, the leadership of the committee, comprised of both management and union representatives, does not include any women. Moreover, the only attempt of the committee to increase the participation of women workers in this process came in the form of a proposal that the female labor officer in the factory should organize a meeting for women workers in order to educate them and train them to clean up the labor lines. According to one memorandum, the committee decided that a separate meeting for women should be held so that women living in the residences could be told how "to help maintain cleanliness *in their way* [emphasis added]." This provides a particularly stark example of the gendering of this organization in terms of both the consolidation of male authority within the public arena and the corresponding attempt to reproduce social norms which dictate that domestic labor represents the natural duty of women. The organization of this committee in effect reproduced hegemonic representations of both gender and community. Although, on the one hand, women workers were marginalized from any role in the committee, on the other hand, the organization reproduced the role of management authority in overseeing everyday neighborhood conflicts. The organization therefore facilitated the extension of management control over workers' community lives despite the participation of union leaders.

During the course of my fieldwork, workers began to organize a significant challenge to this reach of management authority. Several male workers who had grown increasingly dissatisfied with the operation of this committee decided to form

an alternative forum, one that would replace the authority of both unions and managers. The organization, the Action Committee, evolved out of a form of public dissatisfaction and debate over specific problems in the workers' communities, in particular, the growing presence of alcohol and alcoholism. The intention of the forum was to carve out the sphere of the "social" separate from the "political." 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 making of this proletarian public sphere provides an interesting parallel to Jurgen Habermas's conceptualization of the bourgeois public sphere. However, I would suggest that the construction of the workers' public sphere represents a battle both with the "public power" of unions and management and with the bourgeois public conception of critical discourse and social regulation, that is, with the bourgeois public sphere itself. We see in this process the attempt of workers to construct an oppositional public sphere, one that would contest the attempt of management to regulate social life within the labor lines both in terms of management's direct control as well as through joint management-union activity. Consider, for example, the use of coercive tactics within this subaltern public sphere. 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 labor 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. . . .

This reliance on force provides stark contrast to the form of social regulation associated with Habermas's notion of citizen participation and the rise of "civic" concerns. 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 is based on the public, social humiliation of the targeted persons. In this way, 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 contours of the workers' public sphere which I have thus far been describing have rested on the presumption of common interests of workers. As Craig Calhoun has argued, in the bourgeois public sphere: "The very idea of the public was based on the notion of a general interest sufficiently basic that discourse about it need not be distorted by particular interests."<sup>18</sup> This discourse of shared interests has also characterized the construction of the proletarian public sphere. Consider, for instance, the vision put forward by one of the workers involved in the organization 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* and *roti* 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.

Despite this vision of a common purpose, the making of this public sphere continues to rest on a gendered notion of the "public," a conception which I will argue ultimately foreclosed the possibility that workers could produce an "imagined community" which could contest the domain of management power. The public sphere constructed by the committee continued to rest on the exclusion of women's participation. As with management's model of the Village Committee, the Action Committee had no women members, and the organizers 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 (specifically boys) rested on the significance of reproducing a particular model of the working-class family, one that would uphold existing codes of the appropriate behavior, activity, and spaces for working-class women.

Paradoxically, such conceptions which characterize the workers' counterpublic sphere in fact converge with management discourses on the social disorder and disarray of the labor lines. Consider the following description of the labor lines by one mill manager:

The main problem is that we have only seven hundred quarters for about forty thousand workers. There are many *jhupries*. There are about fifty illegal liquor shops. All kinds of vices, blue films are shown, prostitution. In the dock area there are many criminals.

The manager's description casts the jute workers' communities in a stereotypical image of a dangerous, violent, and immoral space, one which is implicitly contrasted with the civilized morality of middle- and upper-class neighborhoods. In his conception, the problem is 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 pornography 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 labor lines and the disruption of the working-class family.

This view reinforced the construction of the urban arena as foreign, dangerous, and male. For example, one of management's stipulations when I started my research at the factory was that I would not go to the labor lines and that I would confine my movements to the factory compound because, they argued, the labor lines were "unsafe." With time, (and by taking advantage of the fact that managers could not afford to take time away from their factory surveillance in order to continually keep watch over me) I was able to circumvent this regulation; but, nevertheless, this reveals the masculinization of this space. This is further demonstrated by the fact that the only woman working as a welfare officer was told that she should not go to the labor lines, whereas male labor officers would often go to the lines, to attend, for example, cultural functions organized by workers.

Management would continually characterize the labor lines

as violent and unsafe, and 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 *bhadralok* culture.<sup>19</sup> 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 labor lines whose husbands had deserted them were living with other men and violating acceptable social codes regarding marriage. Such representations of workers' homes and communities as dangerous spaces rested on the distinction between the "endangered lady" and the "dangerous woman" which Mary Ryan has discussed in the context of early-twentieth-century cities in the United States.<sup>20</sup> Management discourses on the labor lines centered on the threat of violence and the protection of upper-class women from these spaces; however, discourses on working women in the labor lines focused on the threat of unrestrained female sexuality.

This discursive construction of the labor lines in terms of moral disorder converges with 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 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 male family members 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 labor such as housework and childrearing and where they do not enter masculine spaces in the labor lines.

In this process, the bourgeois and workers' public spheres in effect overlap in the production of such gendered discourses of social and community order. In effect, the conception of the workers' counterpublic which the Action Committee produced

was unable to break away from the gendered politics which shaped management discourses. This gendering of the workers' counterpublic was not limited to the exclusion of women's participation but also fundamentally centered around the production of a particular form of masculinity. As Kathy Peiss has noted in the context of working-class activity in the United States, the construction of workers' public culture is transformed into "a system of male privilege in which workers' self-determination, solidarity, and mutual assistance were understood as 'manliness'"<sup>21</sup> The use of coercive policing by male workers represented a reproduction of the notion that the future of their community rested on the adoption of aggressive strategies which could only be adopted by men. Subtle linkages between such coercive tactics and male strength allowed the committee to transform its vision of the working-class community into a masculinized construct, one that ultimately converged with the gendered practices and ideologies of management authority.

### **THE GENDERED EFFECTS OF THE SUBALTERN PUBLIC SPHERE**

If the workers' counterpublic represents an exclusionary masculine terrain, what then are the implications for women workers who work in the mill and reside in the labor lines? I will explore the effects of such exclusionary public activity through the life history of Rekha,<sup>22</sup> a woman worker in the mill. This life history demonstrates the ways in which management, unions, and workers' community norms converge in the production of gender hierarchies and provides a unique view of the political and material effects this has for women workers.

Rekha was employed as a skilled casual worker in the weaving department, a traditionally male occupation in the mill. Her father was a worker in the spinning department of the factory. Her parents had been landless laborers in Bihar and they had migrated to Calcutta in search of employment. She was married to a man in Bihar at the age of twelve or thirteen. Her parents then brought her and her husband to Calcutta. After two years Rekha's husband deserted her for another woman, leaving her with two children to support. It is at this point that

she managed to obtain a job in the mill. As she recalled:

When my first husband left me I went to him [the general manager] for a job. I had covered my head with a *sari* but he saw the *sindoor*<sup>23</sup> in my hair. He asked me: "Are you married?" When I said yes he slapped his hand on his forehead and then laughed. Then he asked me: "Why don't you send your husband?" I told him my husband left me and I touched his feet and I begged for a job.

The manager's reaction to Rekha's request is particularly telling because it highlights the patterns of patriarchal access to employment in the mill. His initial disbelief that a married woman would work stems from his subscription to the classic middle-class model of the family where the husband must seek employment and the wife must confine herself to the domestic space within the household. Meanwhile, she must play on his paternalism and represent herself as destitute in order to gain employment—a common method used by widowed or deserted women to gain work. In this representation, the woman must present herself as a victim of circumstances beyond her control which prevent her from occupying a socially acceptable role within the family. A woman seeking employment must in effect demonstrate that she has tried to conform to this ideal middle-class model of family life when in practice poor women in both rural and urban areas in India have always worked outside the household. Hence, from the very outset, Rekha was placed in a situation where she was compelled to consent to a patriarchal and class-based model of the family.

Once she had managed to obtain work, Rekha's personal situation began to improve as her employment provided her with some means of economic independence or, as she put it with the benefit of hindsight, "at least I could . . . put food in my mouth." However, after she began to work in the mill, Rekha's family and community members began to pressure her to remarry as it was unacceptable for her to live on her own. This enforcement of marriage was exerted through two means. First, members of her community began to put pressure on her parents who were also workers in the mill. The single status of this woman became a source of dishonor for her parents. In addition, methods of social ostracism and informal means of power such as gossip and rumor were exercised in the labor lines. The intensity of this social compulsion was such that

Rekha eventually agreed to marry an unemployed man residing in the community and subsequently undertook the economic burden of supporting him as well as his family. As she described her situation at length:

After my husband left I didn't want to get married again. I just wanted to work. So I came to the mill and I begged for the job. I told my parents that I want to get a job otherwise I will kill myself. So finally they said all right. But then later they made me get married. They said their honor depends on it. People were saying things. They were saying: "See this girl how she is—this is why her husband left her. . . ." So my parents forced me to marry. They said otherwise I will get no help from anyone. I will be left alone. So I got married. But I was better off not being married. At least I could work and put food in my mouth. My man is very poor. And I have to see to his sisters. I will have to get them married. I already paid 5,000 rupees for my man's brother's wedding. For the girls the dowry is very high. It will be 10,000 rupees or even 15,000 rupees even to marry a really poor man. I will have to see that all my brothers' sisters get married.

The social hegemony of the family was even able to outweigh the economic self-sufficiency of the woman worker in question. The economic burden of such social responsibilities reinforced the woman's dependence on wage labor in the factory. However, this labor did not provide Rekha with any means of economic independence, because her social role was still defined by the structure of the family.

While Rekha was bearing the economic burden of her husband's mother and sisters she indicated that she did not receive any assistance from them, either financially or in terms of help with household work. Her own mother would help by taking care of the children, but Rekha felt that she could not rely on her in-laws for similar support. The patriarchal construction of the joint family structure in India is such that a woman must enter her husband's household; as a newcomer she is in a position of subordination and only begins to occupy a position of clear authority in relationship to the daughter-in-law who eventually marries her son (if she bears one). As is often the case in internal dynamics within joint family households in India, Rekha was placed in a situation of subordination in relation to her mother-in-law. As she indicated:

My mother-in-law doesn't help. She only asks for money. She asks for money for dowry for her daughter but where can I get the money from now? I tell her I don't have it but she says I'm hiding it and not giving it to her.

In middle-class households new brides are often pressured into

providing additional amounts of dowry (either in terms of money or, increasingly, luxury consumption items such as televisions or washing machines); however, in this working-class context, Rekha was faced with a situation where her labor and earnings were being extracted within the household.

In the midst of this triple exploitation where she was performing wage work in the factory, domestic work in the household, as well as turning over her earnings to support her in-laws, Rekha's relationship with her husband tended to provide some sense of personal support. As she indicated:

When I come home from the mill I am so tired I just sit in a corner and start crying. Then he [her husband] tells me: "Look, you are working hard in the mill. You lie down and I will cook the dinner." But usually I will cook the dinner and my husband will help me by taking care of the children. When I cry my husband will help me. Actually I like my husband but he is a poor man. He tries to make a little money by selling eggs—he is also a barber, so sometimes he makes ten rupees a day. But how much can you make with that kind of work?

Throughout our conversation, which lasted several hours, Rekha repeated that she liked her husband but that he was "a poor man." Given my discussion of the enforcement of patriarchal models of the family it is perhaps ironic that her husband was her only source of support within her immediate household. However, rather than iron out such contradictions, I suggest that this can better serve as a reminder against false essentialisms, in this case in relation to the nature of Indian male workers. In the face of constructions of masculinity which I have analyzed earlier, Rekha's husband's willingness to take on some responsibility for household work points to the possibility that individuals may disrupt such hegemonic constructs through their everyday actions.

The history that I have been representing thus far should reveal the manner in which the working-class community in question exercised a public enforcement of the family as one of the central organizing structures of the community. This social hegemony of the family can be understood as the product of dynamic processes that are constituted through everyday practices in worker communities. In other words, I am arguing against the temptation to identify the power of such conceptions of the family as lingering, static traces of traditionalism in Indian society. The persistent significance of this form of the

family can be better understood as a product of gendered political processes rather than as a deviance from recent changes that are occurring in the family structure in the United States or in other Western societies.

Such political processes are not merely limited to the sphere of community but also include the practices and ideologies of trade unions, organizations which we classify as "modern," "formal" institutions. For instance, women workers tend to have access to trade union support if they have male relatives who have been members or activists in a particular trade union. Let us turn again to Rekha's self-representation, this time in relation to her work experience. Shortly after she began working in the mill, she began experiencing harassment by two of the shopfloor supervisors; the supervisors were threatening to fire her if she did not engage in sexual relations with them. As she indicated:

You know there are one or two *sahibs*<sup>24</sup> who ask me to go places with them. They say: "We'll go to this place and meet." But I refused to go so they stopped giving me work. For eight months I couldn't get work. If I would go to work they would say: "Why are you at this machine? Who told you to come to work?" I would just say, "*sahib*, the machine was empty so I'm working here." Then I would not be called to work.

Rekha was placed in a position in which her employment was contingent on sexual politics within the factory arena. She was a casual worker so the supervisors possessed the means to easily prevent her from obtaining work if she did not cooperate with them. As she described her experience at length:

I tried to tell [the management representative]. I said: "See, I am not getting work." He would always say: "Come back later." The labor officers would also say the same thing. . . . But I didn't tell them what the *sahibs* were asking me. I'm too ashamed to tell anyone. It will look bad on me. So I have not told anyone. They [the *sahibs* in question] would tell me to come to this room where the *durwans* stay in the mill. But I refused to go. They said if I went with them I would never have to worry about getting work. But even if I starve and I never have food in my stomach I will never go. A woman's *izzat* [honor] is in her hands. She can let it go but once she does she can never get it back. Some women might do it. But out of ten women, two, three, or five, maybe more, will not do it. But now I cannot get work properly. Right now I'm working because at this time there is need for me [it was the religious season when many workers were on leave; plus she is a skilled worker]. But soon again I will have to sit. Now they don't come near me. They don't say anything to me; they don't even look at me. No worker does this. The *sirdars*<sup>25</sup> don't do this. Only those two *sahibs*.

Rekha was unable to obtain any support from mill unions despite the fact that she was a member of one of the prominent unions in the factory. She indicated that when she approached any of the leaders of this union they would abruptly dismiss her and tell her to "come back later." She then went to another of the union leaders with her grievance. After she had visited his office on a few occasions he told her to stop coming to see him. The leader indicated that people in the community were beginning to gossip and speculate on his relations with her. The fact that a few visits of a woman worker to a union office should incite public attention and gossip indicates both the extent of the gendered boundaries of union activity in the mill as well as the gendered nature of public opinion. This further reveals the manner in which the "rational critical discourse" of the public arena centers around the politics of sexuality and the definition of criteria for the "appropriate" spaces for women. What we might conventionally classify as the "private" realm of the family is in fact sustained through public political processes that involve both the cultural hegemonic constructs of community and the institutional operation of trade unions.

Meanwhile, Rekha was able to keep her family at a subsistence level by performing domestic labor for some of the management representatives residing in the factory compound. As she indicated:

The other *sahibs* give me work in their houses. I clean their floors. I wash the dishes. I work in three or four houses. So when the mill is closed I can at least feed my children. They don't pay me money but they give me food and if they have extra food they will send it to me.

In this situation, she was performing a double shift of unpaid domestic labor, in the management quarters and in her household.

To some extent, Rekha's persistence in supporting her household did increase her status among other workers. Although her employment as a single woman had been frowned upon as socially deviant behavior, her new role as the sole supporter of her husband's family brought her new support from other workers. As she indicated:

Sometimes the other workers, the men, will say: "She is poor, she's just sitting there, why don't you give her some work?" They never trouble me. The men think I am good because I am taking care of my whole family. They think highly of me.

Male workers were willing to identify with her position, in terms of a shared class identity, as a "poor" person in need of employment; yet this shared identity implicitly rested on her new position within a patriarchal family where she was contributing to her husband's household. This collective class support was framed by gendered ideologies which may easily have been overlooked without placing the context of her work experience within her broader life experience in her community and family.

I have represented this life history in order to point to the ways in which women workers must negotiate the complex web of the family structure, gendered practices in employment, and the exclusionary practices of trade unions. The experience of this woman worker embodies the relationship between the system of authority in the factory and the institution of the family, the gendered ideologies of management policies regarding issues such as recruitment, and the exclusionary practices of trade unions. However, despite the power of these combined institutional and ideological forces, Rekha was able to persist in her work in the weaving department of the factory, a skilled occupation in which women are generally never employed. The importance of this encroachment on the fields of power that have shaped the position of women jute workers is underlined by the fact that the woman in question was one of four women working in this skilled occupation in the entire industry. During my visits to other factories, management and union leaders would refuse to believe that a woman was working in this occupation in the mill. They insisted that it was impossible, because the weaving department represented the toughest job in the factory and could only be performed by men. Given the fact that Rekha was able to obtain and retain employment in this department without consenting to the sexual exploitation by the management staff, I suggest that this act must be understood not merely as a form of survival but also as an act of resistance. I am aware of the dangers of overstating the case for resistance, but the significance of her ability to resist the managers' sexual harassment without the organizational resources of the unions or any support from her family or community should not be underestimated. Furthermore, despite the extreme structural constraints conditioning her life circumstances, Rekha also dis-

played a strong consciousness of the extent of her accomplishment which her labor represents. She argued:

The most important thing is to work. I want to work. I will do any kind of work. Anything I am asked to do, I will do. Any work. That is the only thing in life. If you work you can put food in your mouth. Marriage doesn't help. I became worse off after I got married. Before I was big and strong. Now I have become so thin since I got married. But I take care of my family. Even my mother-in-law. I take care of her. She is like my mother—I treat her like that. I will give food to everyone—my mother-in-law, her daughters, my husband—before putting food in my own mouth. See, for *Durga Puja*<sup>26</sup> we had less money to buy new clothes. I bought clothes for everyone but myself. My husband told me not to buy him anything, to buy something for myself. But I didn't do that. I bought him new pants. Because I thought if he had a job he would have done that for me. He would have bought me a *sari* and not bought anything for himself.

This interpretation of her labor can be understood not in terms of a misguided form of "consent" to the control of her labor but as a form of consciousness of the significance of her ability to economically support her family. Within a context of economic and social domination Rekha was able to transform her role into a source of empowerment, one that allows her to survive the gendered ideologies that have classified factory work as "men's work" and transformed "the working class" into a masculine construct. This resistance must no doubt be qualified by the harshness of the circumstances which she continues to face and perhaps highlights the ironic reversal of the Foucauldian approach to resistance in Lila Abu-Lughod's reminder that "where there is resistance there is power."<sup>27</sup>

These fragments of Rekha's life signify the processes through which unions and community practices re/produce consent to a patriarchal model of the working-class family. However, Rekha's ability to maintain her employment and interpret her survival as a sense of accomplishment provides a contradictory moment in the exclusionary gendered public sphere which I have analyzed. This momentary point of contestation underlines the constructed and political nature of the jute workers' counterpublic and prevents us from resigning women workers in this context to a role of passive victim of oppression.

If such possibility for contestation exists, let me end then by returning to the implications that Rekha's story has for the gendered representations of the workers' public sphere. If the Action Committee envisioned a future for the urban working-

class communities in the jute mills that rested on social order of the patriarchal family, what did this future signify to Rekha? In many ways her vision coincided with the one put forth by the leaders of the committee. She spoke at length about her children's future and about her desire to educate them, in particular her daughters (without mentioning her son once during the conversation). This hope was mixed with her own memories of loss.

You know I studied till class eight. I passed all my exams. I still keep my certificates. I thought I could work with papers like this [she points to files on the desk]. I wanted to study more. But when I got married I had to stop. My [first] husband didn't want me to study. And then when he used to come to meet me at the school, people used to talk about me. They used to say things about me—they used to say I was going with this man. But then I showed them the *sindoor* in my hair and they realized I was married. But still they didn't like it. So I stopped going. I felt bad to go.

Moving back from the past to the present, she went on to assert: "I want my girls to go to school. Then after that they can get married."

This decision to invest in her daughters provides a clear contrast to the masculinized image of the community organization. More significantly, although the male community leaders could envision the possibility of building a community within their residences, Rekha's image of hope rested on the possibility of escaping this community as well as the mill. As she said: "I want to send my three-year-old to the hostel [that is, put her in boarding]. So I can at least get her out of here. I will try and send her away." This desire presents a severe comment on the meaning that "community" has for working-class women and their daughters. The notion of a unified "subaltern counterpublic sphere" within the jute working classes falters on the gendered terrain of community as it compels a working-class woman to want to send her daughter away in order to preserve some hope for the future.

## CONCLUSION

I have examined the ways in which workers in the Calcutta jute mills engaged in the production of a gendered public sphere, one that simultaneously contests management authority and manufactures gendered hierarchies among workers. We

have seen that discourses and practices within this subaltern counterpublic converge with management's construction of the social and moral disorder within workers' communities; both workers and management reproduce a set of shared discourses that underline the significance of a patriarchal model of the working-class family. This process ultimately inhibits the ability of the workers' public sphere to effectively represent the interests of all workers and contest management authority. In effect, as we have seen through the life history of one woman worker, such gendered discourses exclude women workers from full participation and representation within this public sphere. An analysis of the exclusionary nature of this subaltern counterpublic sheds light upon the everyday practices and political processes through which industries, such as the jute textile industries, are transformed into masculinized spaces.

The article has also demonstrated the ways in which the "public sphere" must be understood as a gendered and culturally constructed category. In this context, the construct of the public sphere becomes a useful tool for analyzing both the exclusionary, masculinized spaces which characterize this sphere as well as the consequences for women workers. Through such a deconstruction of the boundaries of the subaltern counterpublic, we are able to confront and conceptualize the theoretical and material effects of discourses and practices which allow the "subaltern" to signify a gendered category.

#### NOTES

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1. The jute mills produce coarse textiles such as gunny sacks and carpet-backing material.
2. For the purpose of this article I use the term "community" as a broad social grouping that refers to ethnic, religious, caste, and linguistic identities.
3. I have analyzed this process in more detail in "Contesting Class: Gender, Community, and the Politics of Labor in a Calcutta Jute Mill," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 26 (October-December 1994): 29-43.
4. Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of

Actually Existing Democracy," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992).

5. See John Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980); Jacquelyn Hall et al., eds., *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Textile Mill World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987).

6. Sara Evans and Harry Boyte, *Free Spaces: The Sources of Democratic Change in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986).

7. Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992).

8. Fraser, 123.

9. See Chandra Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, ed. Chandra Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), for an extensive discussion of such problems inherent in the representation of "Third World" women.

10. Note that management quarters are built within the factory compound, thus intensifying the connection between workplace and residence. A detailed analysis of dynamics within the management quarters is not possible within the space of this article.

11. This theme is presented in songs of rural women whose husbands have migrated to Calcutta to work in the mills. See Nirmala Banerjee, "Modernization and Marginalization," *Social Scientist* 13 (October-November 1985): 48-71.

12. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

13. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 48.

14. I have addressed the nature of worker resistance and trade union activity more extensively in "Contesting Class."

15. See Evans and Boyte for a discussion of the significance of such free spaces for labor organization in the United States.

16. Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 5.

17. See Peiss; and Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India: Business Strategies and the Working Classes in Bombay, 1900-1940* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

18. Calhoun, 9.

19. *Bhadralok*, which literally represents the Bengali term for gentleman, describes the social and cultural status of members of the upper classes in West Bengal and denotes codes of "appropriate" behavior and "upbringing." Such norms have also come to define the behavior for members of the Bengali middle classes.

20. Mary Ryan, *Women in Public: Between Banners and Ballots, 1825-1880* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 73.

21. Peiss, 4.

22. The name is a pseudonym.

23. *Sindoor* is red coloring that Hindu women put on their foreheads as a sign that they are married.

24. This is a term used to refer to a superior; master.

25. These are workers who serve as line supervisors on the shopfloor.

26. *Durga Puja* is a Hindu festival for the worship of the goddess Durga. The festival represents a particularly significant public celebration in the state of West Bengal.

27. Lila Abu-Lughod, "The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power through Bedouin Women," *American Ethnologist* 17 (February 1990): 41-55.

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### Notes

<sup>11</sup> **Modernisation and Marginalisation**

Nirmala Banerjee

*Social Scientist*, Vol. 13, No. 10/11. (Oct. - Nov., 1985), pp. 48-71.

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<sup>27</sup> **The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power Through Bedouin Women**

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*American Ethnologist*, Vol. 17, No. 1. (Feb., 1990), pp. 41-55.

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