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Jan Breman

A Study
of Industrial Labour
in Post-Colonial India

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1. Constituting labour

In post-colonial India labour was given the connotation of work in industry. The labourer as a social figure became linked to the modern economy, a direction in which Indian society was to develop at a rapid rate. In view of the approaching end to the agrarian-rural mode of living, it hardly seemed necessary to defend the remarkable conflation of labour economics with industrial employment. The expectation of the transformation which was going to take place makes it understandable why authors of authoritative textbooks on the shape of the working class and the trade union movement, such as S.C. Patel (1965), R.R. Singh (1971) and S. Sen (1977), were able more or less to ignore the non-industrial way of life of the greater part of the workforce.

In 1940 the National Planning Committee, set up by the All India Congress Committee and led by Jawaharlal Nehru, laid down the policy that was to be put into execution after Independence. This august forum based its directives on deliberations held in working groups on a number of themes. One of these was the working group on 'Labour'. It had among its members R. Mukerjee, V.V. Giri, on behalf of industrial employers A.Sarabai, and as rapporteur N.M. Joshi, 'father of the Indian trade union movement'. G. Nanda was present by special invitation. It is interesting that this forum, charged with designing a planned economy, more or less ignored the Gandhian doctrine of small-scale village development in which agriculture was interwoven with crafts and trades.

The minutes of the meetings held by the working group on labour show that only those subjects were discussed that had to do with the regulation of industrial relations, e.g. working hours (48 hours per week, 9 hours per day), the health and safety of the workforce, social security, housing, etc. The regulations proposed in these respects were modelled on labour practices that were already operative in the industrialised part of the world. The reason why discussions focused so much on these features had to do, of course, with the circumstance that it was only in the industrial sector of the economy that a trade union movement had evolved which set itself the task of representing workers' interests. The labour legislation that was to be introduced allotted to the state considerable power regarding the definition of industrial procedures and the solving of disputes between employers and workers. This statist involvement led to the setting-up of a massive government machinery charged with administration and registration, inspection, arbitration and adjudication as well as other tasks, all exclusively concerned

with labour and employment in what was later going to be called the organised sector of the economy.

At the start of the post-colonial era India had less than ten million industrial workers of whom considerably less than half were subject to a labour regime that could be called factorised. In 1950, according to Ornati (1955:9), this applied to 2.75 million workers. If we adhere to the higher figure of 10 million, this category of industrial labourers formed less than six percent of the total workforce; in the non-agrarian sector of that workforce its extent was also of little significance with barely 17 percent (Pant 1965:12). Nevertheless, the literature described this small minority as the prototype of the labour force which was to determine the future of land and people.

[...] their importance does not lie in numbers. This small section of the total labour force is important because growth and expansion of the economy depends, to a large extent, upon its attitude towards industrialisation. It being the only section where labour organisation exists and can grow easily, it can influence the pace of change. It is this section which along with its problems will grow with the progress of industrialisation. (Pant 1965:12)

The far-reaching effects of the foreseen remodelling of society are illustrated by the fact that, since the beginning of the 20th century, hardly any change had occurred in the relative size of the labour force employed in the secondary economic sector. In 1901 and 1961, industry, mining and plantation agriculture employed 12.6 and 11.7 percent respectively of the working population (Pant 1965:10). The reason why labour was nevertheless only discussed in this manifestation was due not only to the fact that it would become dominant in the short term, as soon as the sectoral shift was to get under way, but also to the strategic significance that was attributed to work in industry. The post-colonial economy was designed according to plan and was meant to have a socialist orientation. Industrial employment was the model on which this not so far distant future was to be shaped, in which employers, workers and state would attune their separate interests to the common good. Pant referred to this agenda in the Preface to his book:

This book studies Indian labour problems and policies in the context of planned economic development and the objective of the establishment of a socialist society. (Ibid.:Preface)

Even when the industrial breakthrough failed to materialise, when the planning principle became far less significant in policy execution and the latitude allowed to social forces followed another orientation than socialist ordering, the term 'labour' nevertheless continued to hold the

connotation that it meanwhile had acquired: employment in the organised sector of the urban economy in general and factorised production in particular. The transformative scenario that was maintained was founded on the assumption that a social system would eventually emerge similar to the one that had already developed in the west. The economist K.N. Raj referred approvingly to a statement made by Zakir Hussain even before Independence to the effect that Asiatic and Indian capitalism would essentially differ little from the manner in which this mode of production had persevered in the West (in Papola et al 1993:211). This adherence to the assumption of parallel development meant that, in the last instance, there were no fundamental doubts regarding the switch to an urban-industrial society. The acceleration that occurred in the migration of labour from the countryside towards the large and middle-sized cities seemed to herald the approaching transformation. Between 1901 and 1961 the share of the urban population in the total rose from 4 to 18 percent. Completely ignored, however, was the fact that, in the intermediate regime that still prevailed, only a very small part of the working population was employed in modern factories. Very little consideration was given to the question of how the remainder, in actual fact the greater part of the urban masses, managed to earn a living. Also disregarded were the huge labour army which, although working for big industrial enterprises, did so in the rural hinterland, far removed from the urban milieu. This applied in particular to mineworkers and plantation coolies, a workforce which was indeed far larger than the labour incorporated in the factories in Mumbai and Calcutta. Exceptions deserve to be mentioned. For example, in his study of the working class (1945) Mukerjee did not restrict himself to labour in the textile and metal industries, but also discussed working conditions in mining and the plantation corporations. Chandra (1966) did the same, but neither author gave any attention to wage-labour in agriculture. In their analyses the countryside was the supplier of labourers who belonged to the peasantry until the moment of departure.

The preoccupation with industrial employment detracted attention not only from the great segment of the urban population that earned its living in some other way, but even more from the social relations of production in agriculture. Iyer was one of the few nationalist authors who drew attention to agricultural labour as a separate social formation. Already at the start of the century he commented on the miserable fate of the landless in the village economy (Iyer 1903, in: Chandra 1966:762). Post-colonial policy-makers only very slowly came to realise that agricultural labourers constituted the largest single section of the labour force in the country (Thorner 1962:173). Early in the 1950s nation-wide investigations showed that this rural under-class included roughly one-quarter of the agrarian population. The industrial proletariat, even at its maximum definition, was far smaller in size than the army of agricultural labourers. How was it, then, that this enormous rural workforce was left out of consideration for so long? Its systematic

neglect began in the colonial era and was linked to the stereotyped image of the rural order as a fairly homogeneous community, a massive volume of peasant producers at work in the fields mainly on their own account and at their own risk. The lack of differentiation accorded to land ownership and the emphasis on subsistence agriculture, both assumptions that gave a strongly-biased image of the late-colonial situation, obstructed any view of the presence of a very sizeable agrarian under-class in large parts of South Asia. Attention was drawn to it incidentally, but case studies such as that of Lorenzo (1943) were given little notice and were considered even less in the context of wage labour and its diverse modalities in Indian agriculture. Patel was one of the first to study the existence and growth of agricultural labour in South Asia. His account in essence endorsed the thesis of agrarian regression in the late-colonial era which had many adherents in nationalist circles. Under alien rule, the original village community formed by a collectivity of peasants and artisans, was said to have been broken-up in a process of economic differentiation into a minority of producers who had been able to maintain their independence (one-fifth), an impoverished class of small peasant-owners as well as tenants and sharecroppers (one-half), and a residual class (one-third) whose members had not been able to consolidate themselves even as dependent cultivators and who, having fallen into a state of complete landlessness, had no other choice but to work for others in order to ensure their own survival (Patel 1952). Kumar (1962) objected to this received wisdom in a study in which she established that landless labour formed a substantial social class in South India even in early colonial times, calculating that they represented 17 to 25 percent of the total agrarian population. In view of the significance of cottage industries and handicrafts in the countryside at the start of the 19th century, this could be equated with at least 10 to 15 percent of the entire working population. Her conclusion then led Kumar to study the social identity and mode of employment of agricultural labour in both the pre-colonial and the colonial past. She demonstrated that the great mass of landless people came from low castes and that their working status was given shape in servile labour arrangements based on bondage. Various village monographs written in the colonial era, for example those on South Gujarat by Mukhtyar (1930) and Shukla (1937), confirmed labour bondage as being the hall-mark of the relationship then existing between members of peasant castes among whom cultivable land was largely concentrated, and members of the landless castes subjugated to them in the rural economy.

Was it perhaps because of the state of captivity which marked the agrarian regime that the landless masses were not defined as labourers and brought under the same denominator as industrial workers? The latter proletariat had after all freed themselves from extra-economic coercion. Such reasoning, however, makes no allowance for the fact that fairly large-scale use was made of indebtedness in recruiting workers from the peasant landscape, not only for coalmines and tea

plantations but also for harbours and factories in large cities. Labour contractors and other intermediaries played an important role in mobilising labour in a situation of bondage. The classic thesis that industrial capitalism only comes about when the transition to free labour has occurred in a dual sense - detached from the ownership of means of production, and able to decide for themselves how and where to sell their labour power - has proved not to be applicable to the colonial situation (Breman 1985:59-77).

Recent years have seen an interesting discussion regarding whether bonded labour was 'traditional' by nature and had disintegrated in the course of time or, on the other hand, whether it should be seen as indicating the penetration of capitalism into the agrarian production sphere. I count myself, with all appropriate qualifications, as an advocate of the first interpretation along with many others (Breman 1974; see also Thorner 1962:63-64; 1980). The contrary view has been defended first by Mundle (1979) and subsequently by Prakash (1984). In doing so, the latter referred to the combination of the capitalist market effect and the colonial exercise of power in changing the subaltern *kamia* in South Bihar into a landworker in debt bondage. In extending the logic of this thesis to the present day, Patnaik has posited that the further development of capitalist forces in agriculture will cause the augmentation of semi-feudal forms of labour bondage.

[...] bondedness of labour is not a static phenomenon. While debt bondage has always existed, we may expect it to increase rather than decline, given the increasingly desperate economic situation faced by rural labour. (Patnaik 1985:14; 1987:8 in Ramachandran 1990:17)

Brass has adopted this opinion with even more aplomb. Disagreeing with studies by Harriss and Epstein of agrarian dynamics in South India, Brass, in his first article on the subject, criticises their refusal to see what he saw: the enormous increase of bonded labour, in Harriss' own research area by no less than 243 percent between 1955 and 1970 (Brass 1986:56). This remarkable assertion, in view of the lack of any empirical support, is indeed highly questionable. Brass has maintained that extreme position in later articles. In controversial fashion, he disputes any attempt to deprive the distinction between free and bonded labour of the doctrinal zeal with which he has endowed it (Brass 1990:7). My own opinion continues to be that earlier forms of bondage in agriculture have disappeared but that they have not always been replaced by free labour in the orthodox Marxist sense of the term. I have taken as example the recruitment and employment of an army of labour migrants in sugarcane-cutting in South Gujarat, which is run on an industrial basis.

[...] a capitalist mode of production on the other hand by no means precludes certain forms of absence from freedom, emanating for example from the necessity to enter into debt. It also explains why there are certain features in the plight of the cane-cutters which, although serving new purposes altogether, are essentially those of pre-capitalist labour relationships. (Breman 1978:1350)

That which I have termed neo-bondage has proved able to go hand-in-hand with capitalist labour practices (see Breman 1993, 1997). I am inclined to agree with Ramachandran who, at the end of his report on fieldwork in Tamilnadu, concludes that the complex reality cannot be reduced to a simple black and white contrast between free and tied labour. Certainly, a whole set of factors works towards the commoditisation of labour power, towards impersonalising relations between worker and employer, and towards establishing the worker's freedom to sell his or her labour power to an employer of his/her own choice. At the same time, there are many constraints to the freedom to manoeuvre.

The failure of industry to absorb the vast numbers of the agrarian unemployed as well as the interaction between the phenomenon of a surplus population and the pre-capitalist aspects of the village community cannot but have a profound significance for the socio-economic status of the manual worker in the village. (Ramachandran 1990:262)

This passage quite correctly links the social quality of agricultural labour to the stagnation in the transition to industrial employment. I shall return later in this paper to the problem of continuity and discontinuity of labour bondage, both in and away from agriculture and the village economy. Here, I suffice with observing that post-colonial literature sees the labour question one-sidedly in terms of industrialisation and urbanisation. The only linkage made with the rural economy is to the effect that a labour surplus had accumulated, estimated at from 25 to 35 percent of the total peasant population (Pant 1965:362), which would have to flow towards the economic growth poles. This accorded with recommendations made by nationalist authors such as Ranade even before the end of the 19th century (Chandra 1966:494). But did the rural masses, forced into mobility according to this conventional line of thought, meet the requirements set for a modern industrial proletariat?

2. A Deficient Workforce

The strong emphasis on the rural origins of the working class at sites of industrial employment dates back to the colonial era and is a recurring subject for attention in reports concerned with that period. It was coupled with the notion that the initial generations of factory hands refused to sever their ties with the hinterland. Characterisation of the industrial worker as a peasant *manqué* was a principal motif of the late-colonial *Report of the Royal Commission on Labour in India* (1931:26). According to the established view economic necessity had forced the migrants to leave their villages and that, while searching for work and income away from agriculture, they never relinquished the idea of returning home again. Rural people were said to show little interest in what the outside world had to offer and were only reluctantly prepared to leave their kindred and the village milieu.

Hunger, unemployment and boredom occasionally drove the *ryot* out of the village and into the city. Much more generally, the native village held him in spite of miserable living conditions. In his attachment to the village, he was influenced by several social institutions, among which caste, the joint family, early marriages, and the diversity of languages were the most important. (Ornati 1955:36)

The image of an unwilling army of migrants willy-nilly approaching the factory gates is elaborated further in the equally negative assessment of the lack of enthusiasm with which this influx of workers subjected themselves to the demands of the industrial regime. Their disappointing quality was indicated by a low and slovenly work pace (loitering was an ever-recurring complaint), the ease with which they changed jobs, and the high degree of absenteeism which was linked with their equally perfidious habit of returning to their village whenever they felt like it and of staying away indefinitely. In their heart they are still peasants, was the lament voiced by a long series of private and public commentators. Criticisms cumulated into the verdict that labour discipline was seriously defective. Experience gained over many years gave rise to the suspicion that this was by no means a transitory phenomenon and could not be regarded as a temporary handicap that would gradually be corrected as workers became accustomed to the regime.

This image, commonly held during the colonial era, acquired new impulse in social science literature which described the course of the modernisation process that had started in the early 1950s in such a way as to cause doubt regarding the capability of the mass of non-western peoples to internalise the type of behaviour that met the characteristics assumed by an industrial way of life. Like Clark Kerr et al., Feldman and Moore saw industrialism as implying a set of conditions

that needed to be met before the process of economic transition could be considered to be complete and successful. They considered that the worker who shows commitment needs little supervision and also has more self-discipline. His behaviour is then reasonably predictable and need not be enforced through external checks and sanctions. These authors also raised the more general question of how, as economic development progresses, the obstacles could be overcome that hamper the quantity and quality of labour supply (Clark Kerr 1955; Moore 1951; Moore & Feldman 1960). Myers was among those who discussed this question and the assumptions on which it was based more specifically with regard to the Indian situation (Myers 1958). Ornati went so far as to speak of a dislike for factory work. He showed agreement with the opinion that the industrial worker, in the proper sense of the term, is lacking in India. More than anywhere else, violations of industrial discipline, including damage to goods and machinery, protracted inertia and other forms of 'unsuitable behaviour', needed to be punished with fines. In Ornati's view, shows of defiance were caused by the worker's evident inability to adapt himself to the working conditions that are inherent to life in industry.

Occasionally, the worker leaves the factory not to return to the village but to rebel against being forced into what might be called the 'factory norms': time discipline, the limitation on leisure, the confines of the machines, the toil of learning, and the like. (Ornati 1955:47)

Their peasant background made it understandable why they preferred the more irregular and more risky existence as self-employed, which also required less self-discipline. The 'peanut entrepreneur' had to cope with far greater economic uncertainty but, in Ornati's view, his life was more attractive on social and psychological grounds.

In 1958, under auspices of the American Social Science Research Council, a conference was held in Chicago on how to motivate labour to perform non-customary tasks as a precondition for economic growth. Moore and Feldman were the editors of *Labor Commitment and Social Change* in which papers presented at the conference were bundled. 'Commitment involves both performance and acceptance of the behaviors appropriate to an industrial way of life', was their succinct definition of the topic in their Introduction (Moore & Feldman 1960:1). In his contribution Kerr makes a distinction between successive stages of involvement, culminating in the willingness to conform permanently, completely and unconditionally to the demands of the new mode of production (Kerr 1960:351-52). At the same conference Moore embroidered further on this subject by specifying, with regard to India, 'the web of rules' which needed to be fulfilled before one could speak of a stable and dedicated labour force:

[...] when workers no longer look on their industrial employment as temporary, when they understand and accept the requirement of working as part of a group in a factory or other industrial enterprise, and when they find in the industrial environment a more adequate fulfilment of personal satisfactions than they enjoyed in the village or rural society. (Myers 1958:36)

Even when measured only against the first of these criteria, according to the author, Indian factory workers were at best only partially committed. They were keen to have fixed employment, but had no scruples in deserting the job, unexpectedly and uncalled-for, in order to visit their home village. This was best illustrated by the high degree of absenteeism. Similarly to many others, Myers referred to the accurate and up-to-date body of statistics, published in the *Indian Labour Gazette* and the *Indian Labour Yearbook*, on the high percentage of workers who did not daily report for work.

In a sense, these Indian workers want to have their cake and eat it too: they are partially committed to factory jobs in that they regard them as more or less permanent which can be interrupted (but not lost) by periodic visits to the village. (Ibid.:45)

To defend themselves against such unpredictable desertion, the factories set up a reserve pool of labour on which they could draw whenever necessary to meet their strongly fluctuating requirements. Each factory maintained such a stock of casual workers. Continuing on Myers' line of thought, James argued that the emergence of these *badlis* demonstrated the common sense and leniency of the employers. Understanding that their workers found it difficult to adjust to an industrial existence, and drawing a lesson from long experience, they had purposely refrained from harnessing their permanent workforce too tightly (James 1960:100,104). But high absenteeism was not the only reason why Myers placed Indian factory workers so low on the ladder of commitment.

Commitment to industrial employment implies more than the presence of workers on the job, however. It involves also their acceptance of industrial discipline and the performance of tasks under supervision. (Myers 1958:53)

The self-discipline demonstrated by committed workers made them able to meet the industrial tempo which machinery forced on its operators. Feldman and Moore remarked that machine pacing and rhythm impart an increased rigidity to the structure of work activities. In addition, workers were unwilling to accept the managerial authority, in particular control

exercised over them by shop-floor supervisors. Their resistance to interface with machinery might be due to their rejection of the property relations on which the industrial mode of production are based. After all, factory workers operate machines that belong not to them but to others. It then has to be asked whether the workers are familiar with ownership notions and, more importantly, whether they behave accordingly (Feldman & Moore 1960:19-26). If not, should the covert or overt demand for redistributing the industrial means of production be seen as expressing a lack of engagement?

It is interesting to note that in discussions on these issues, narratives regarding lack of faulty commitment change effortlessly into complaints about lack of discipline. That which is initially explained as non-internalisation is in a way turned around and given the tenor of employers' failure to gain an adequate grip on the behaviour of their subordinates. Loitering, frequently leaving the machines without permission to get some fresh air or to smoke a cigarette, is the most innocent example of this behaviour which borders on sabotage. A more extreme variation of labour indiscipline is the physical violence used against members of the higher or lower factory management such as timekeepers (Myers 1958:48). In the same breath the author refers to strikes that degenerate into *gheraoing* the company offices. In such a case the warning seems to be forgotten that commitment to industrial labour and commitment to managerial practices should not be confused the one with the other. Rather than insufficient engagement, unrest and other actions can equally and perhaps more justifiably be described as symptomatic of the opposite (Moore & Feldman 1960:4). This brings me to conclude that adherents of the lack-of-commitment thesis usually restricted themselves to pointing out this lack in the activities of the working class. Kerr is quite explicit about this bias and adds that such a handicap does not apply to the managerial elite (Kerr 1960:358). His diagnosis contrasts squarely with the findings of research held in a West Bengal factory to the effect that supervisors charged with disciplining the workers did not themselves have the necessary discipline to fulfil their task properly (Chattopadhyay & Sengupta 1969:1209-16). More in general, I contend that what Myers and others describe as labour problems in India's industrialisation are primarily presented by them as problems caused by the labour force. This biased approach detracted from consideration being given to problems as experienced by a very large part of the industrialising population. The emphases placed by Myers in particular seem to me to be connected to the manner in which he carried out his research. In compiling the empirical data on which his analysis is based he restricted himself principally to discussions with management. In addition to 125 officials in 49 enterprises, he spoke to leaders of employers' organisations and trade unions, government officials, academics, and representatives of international agencies (including the ILO and American technical missions). Did Myers meet any workers? It seems very doubtful, unless they

took part in any of the 16 group discussions held with 'mill technicians, labor officers, union leaders and management groups' (Myers 1958:xvi).

3. Rejection of the Commitment Concept

Morris was one of the first to qualify the alleged shortcomings in industrial labour behaviour as misleading and premature. His historical study of labour and the growth of cotton mills in Mumbai, supplemented by a brief and less in-depth research into the development of the Tata Iron and Steel Company (TISCO) in Jamshedpur, brought him in many respects to conclusions that were diametrically opposed to the image that had been current even in the colonial era and which, in post-colonial years, was further endorsed in an expanding literature on the process of economic growth. Morris started by refuting the thesis that urban industry had ever suffered from lack of labour. In all phases of industrial expansion it had never been difficult to recruit workers for the textile factories, although the distance that needed to be covered increased over time. Simultaneously, however, a working class had evolved which closely identified with Mumbai's industrial sector and had renounced its roots in the rural milieu (Morris 1960, 1965). The author also rejected the notion that a rigid social ideology prescribed a bond with traditional institutions and with the village in particular. Then how did Morris explain the on-going mobility which continued to characterise a hefty part of the urban migrant army? To understand this floating behaviour, according to Morris, it was first necessary to distinguish between large-scale and small-scale industries and between enterprises that produce the whole year through or only seasonally. In other words, circulation between city and village was caused by the nature of the economic activity rather than by the ingrained habits of the workers (Morris 1960:175). And finally, Mumbai's cotton mills were able to obtain the workers that they wanted: employed on a temporary basis and able to be dismissed without notice, while productivity remained low due to lack of investment in training and management.

These practices made it possible to use very large amounts of minimally trained labor, precisely the sort that was easy and cheap to obtain in Bombay. But the work schedule also made it necessary to employ enough labor to permit workers to take breaks while the machines were running, to develop what in effect amounted to an informal shift system [...]. There is no question that employers could have initiated a tighter and more precise system of labor utilization and discipline had they so wished. But such an approach would have required more expensive supervision than could be obtained from the jobbers [...] (Morris 1965: 203)

An industrial working class was thus formed without the employers having to face any major problems. Morris did object, however, to the tendency to emphasise the psychological aspects of labour discipline, advocated among others by Kerr and Myers. Industrial work did indeed subjugate the workforce to fairly rigid rule-by-the-clock, but in his opinion there was no question of any acute break with the manner of employment to which landworkers were accustomed. Germain in this connection is his remark that the majority of factory workers had no contact with machines (Morris 1960:188). He also dismissed the suggestion that labour unrest could indicate lack of commitment. In his view, the willingness to strike meant just the opposite: it expressed progressive adaptation to the industrial way of life.

The sociologist Lambert who, in 1957, charted the origins and identity of the workforces of five factories in Pune, stated in the Introduction to his book that he had found no confirmation of the 'recruitment-commitment problem' (Lambert 1963:6). Some of the workers he interviewed (a stratified random sample of 856 chosen from a population of 4249) said that they would probably return to the countryside when their working life had finished. The researcher found this surprising in view of the fact that one-third of his respondents had been born in Pune and a non-specified percentage in other urban localities. The majority of the workers were certainly not migrants who had only recently left their villages. There was evidence of such large-scale commitment to factory employment that Lambert concluded that three-quarters of his respondents belonged to the committed category of workers, at least in the sense understood by Moore and Feldman (Lambert 1963:83-84). Lambert made it quite clear, however, that he found little advantage in using this modish concept. In another fashion he nevertheless showed his doubt regarding the transforming character of the industrial-urban system in which his respondents were embedded. The transition from tradition to modernism in Indian society had been very incomplete, in his view. Factory organisation showed features deriving from social institutions that originated in village life and in the caste hierarchy. Lambert referred here to the *jajmani* system which granted members of the local community the right to a job and a livelihood. The patron was not allowed to cancel the multifarious relationship one-sidedly, even when the client's performance left much to be desired. Transgression of this prescript could cause the patron to be boycotted by his caste. According to Lambert, employer-employee relations in the factory are based on the same principle. The worker regards his job as his property and assumes the existence of an accord which the employer is unable to terminate on grounds of unsatisfactory discipline and insufficient efficiency. As long as the worker approaches his boss as client, behaves towards his boss deferentially, and meets all sorts of obligations that have nothing to do with the level or quality of his working performance, continuation of his employment is a justifiable expectation and, in the last instance, self-evident. As far as patrons are concerned, their clients

might preferably show rather less commitment. In the early phase of the industrialisation process the employer could only escape a claim to social security by using labour contractors and jobbers who profited from a constant rotation of workers. When those practices disappeared, the factory job became a more permanent form of property. Employers reacted to this limitation of their powers to discipline, select or dismiss their workers, by making it more difficult to obtain fixed employment. They did so by forming a pool of reserve workers who were available when needed and who had far fewer rights than permanent employees (Lambert 1963:91-94). The author concluded by stating that the transformation towards a modern society, the conversion of *Gemeinschaft* into *Gesellschaft* in India, is still a matter for the distant future.

Far more nuanced was the picture that Sheth drew of labour and labour relations in a modern industrial enterprise in a medium-sized city in West India, which he gave the fictitious name of Rajnagar. The author is sociologist and the report of his fieldwork, carried out in 1956-58, was not published until much later (Sheth 1968). He found no confirmation for the hypothesis that he had taken as point of departure, namely, that Indian traditional institutions such as the village community, the caste system and the joint family, had obstructed progress towards industrialism based on machine technology. According to Sheth, that which Moore, Kerr and others had designated an industrial society was actually an ideal-typological construct for a great variety of social formations that had become reality without approximating that prototype. It was equally impossible to reduce the pre- (or non-)industrial society to one uniform model. Sheth followed this negation of any extreme black and white contrast by stating that the introduction of new technology did not necessarily preclude continuity of the traditional social system. In his view it was incorrect to posit, as Moore had done earlier, that the sluggish economic development was to be blamed on the tenaciousness of traditional social patterns which emphasised fixation rather than mobility (Moore 1951:124). The commitment concept actually represented further operationalisation of that line of thought, whose relevance for his own field of study Sheth found doubtful. In his opinion, there was no rupture between industrial relations and the wider social environment. Factory managements applied ascriptive and particularistic norms in their dealings with the workforce, not incidentally but purposefully. Did that not accord with the manner in which personnel policy was implemented by Japanese industry? Between the tradition-oriented social life of the worker and his work in the factory that was based on rationality, compatibility ruled rather than conflict.

In Oriental [pseudonym for the researched enterprise] one finds a coexistence of the two sets of values and neither seems to hinder the operation of the other. (Sheth 1968:203)

In its analysis, Sheth's study showed affinity with the tenor of the research reported on by Lambert. Both record that industrial employment does not cause a watershed in the worker's attitude and behaviour. Neither Lambert nor Sheth, however, have supported their argument by discussing the social life of the workers or the way in which they spend their income and leisure time outside the factory gates. In view of the conclusions that they draw, this would have been a logical sequel to their investigations. Sheth pointed out that his *modus operandi* differed from that of Lambert. The latter concentrated on presenting actual data obtained on the basis of a questionnaire and gave no attention, as did Sheth, to analysing inter-personal relations in the factory. Another difference between the two which has drawn my attention is that, even more than Lambert, Sheth failed to give the pool of casual labourers (in both cases about one-fifth of the total factory workforce) the strategic significance that that industrial reserve army deserve (Lambert 1963:94-104 Sheth 1968: 56-57).

Numerous authors, from various sides and for differing reasons, have pronounced categorically against the commitment thesis. Sharma did so on the basis of socio-psychological research in 1965-66 in which he studied the attitudes and behaviour of labourers employed by a car manufacturing plant in Mumbai. His study was inspired by ideas proclaimed by Ornati, Kerr, Moore et al. To test them out, he undertook 262 in-depth interviews to ascertain the level of commitment to each of the many aspects of work as well as non-work experience of his respondents. The profile compiled by Sharma shows that his respondents did not represent any cross-section of the surrounding population. The factory appeared to prefer educated workers over the non-educated, urban-born over the rural-born, and those with industrial experience over the ones having no experience or with a background in non-industrial occupations (Sharma 1974:14). With regard to absenteeism, the author noted that workers of rural origin had a better attendance record than their colleagues who had grown up in the city, and that trade union members were less likely to absent themselves than were non-members. His findings were contrary to the assertions made by adherents of the commitment thesis. In a more general sense, Sharma's study also failed to confirm the conventional image of the industrial worker as someone still rooted in the countryside and in agriculture who has difficulty in breaking those ties. There was apparently no evidence of alienation and anomie to which, according to the stereotype, the labourer would fall prey in his new environment, with lack of discipline as an important symptom. Sharma concluded that:

[...] traditional Indian culture appears to present no serious obstacles to the workers in either accepting factory employment or in becoming committed to industrial work.

Moreover, the commitment of workers seems to be influenced not by their traditional backgrounds but by work technology within the factory. (Ibid.:48)

The last sentence in this quotation is significant in that it draws attention, similarly to other authors, to the fact that the factory worker was not a uniform type but showed numerous variations that differed the one from the other according to the nature of the industry, the technology used and, last but not least, the demands regarding training and skills that were made on the workers at their moment of entry. The diversity in modes of employment between more and less technologically-advanced factories obviously had consequences for the social composition of the workforce and also helped to determine the worker's attitude towards his work and employer.

Finally, Holmström based his monograph on industrial workers on more anthropological methods of data collection. The fieldwork that he carried out in 1971 was localised in Bangalore and concentrated on workers in four factories, two in the public sector and two in the private economic sector. His research did not focus on industrial organisation and industrial relations within it, but was concerned primarily with the residential milieu in which workers retreated outside working hours. The author based his findings on case studies of 104 workers, selected from a far larger population and making allowance for obvious criteria such as educated-
uneducated, young and old, members of diverse castes etc. (Holmström 1976). His point of departure was that the significance and impact of urbanisation should not be confused with those of industrialisation and that, with regard to the latter, it was senseless to assume a simple and linear dichotomy between tradition (rural-folk society) and modernity (urban-industrial society). The principal questions that inspired his research were, firstly, the social identity of the factory workers and what distinguished them from the majority of city dwellers who had not found access to modern and large-scale industrial enterprises. Secondly, how members of this industrial vanguard thought about their own situation and, more in particular, about their work and career. Holmström rejected the commitment requirement for his research group as being essentially immaterial.

Many forms of organization are probably compatible with industrialization, or the failure to industrialize; and the forms actually found in industrial countries probably depend as much on historical circumstances as on the technical requirements of the industrial process. (Holmström 1976:144)

The author does not give an unequivocal answer to his own question of whether members of the industrial vanguard being shaped in India considered that they belonged to a labour aristocracy.

Rather than confirming or denying this, Holmström advocates that the question be broadened in the context of a more comprehensive analysis that would include other segments of the labouring landscape. The author himself put this idea into effect in a later work (Holmström 1984).

In an overview published in 1977, Munshi discussed the arguments that have been expressed over time by supporters and opponents of the commitment theory. His critical discussion is followed by a devastating judgement on the utility of the concept in all its aspects (Munshi 1977). The author refuses to adopt the counter argument which would have forced him to prove the industrial commitment of the Indian worker. To do so would demonstrate the relevance of the theory on which it was based and that, in his opinion, was out of the question. Scruples of a methodological, conceptual and empirical nature have already been discussed extensively. Munshi rejected the dualism demonstrated by advocates of the concept by elevating modernism and tradition into static and opposite poles. The assumption, whether explicit or not, was that industrialisation would follow the pattern that had originated in the West. Deviations from that model were said to be defects due to the inadequate cultural equipment of the latecomers to the once established development paradigm claimed to have universal meaning. Another prejudice, ideological in nature, was that in the literature under discussion, failure to realise the appropriate transition to 'the modern economy and society' was projected onto the specific inability of the working masses to meet the demands dictated by the logic of industrialism. In that line of thought, the transformation was also attributed to external forces, in particular to the strategic significance of a management style attuned to industrial relations in American industry (Munshi 1977:82). In his later publication, Holmström summarises this approach as follows.

Foreign writers, and some Indians, wanted to find the formula for successful industrialization, the ingredients missing from the traditional society which must be added to make India an industrial country: entrepreneurship, efficient management, changes in social values, 'achievement-orientation' or a committed labour force. The problem of supplying the missing ingredient or ingredients was believed to be common to non-industrial countries which lagged behind, at various points, on the great highway of development marked out by the west and Japan. (Holmström 1984:28)

One difference with the dualism doctrine as shaped in colonial times (Higgins 1955) was that the new variant at least acknowledged that non-western peoples did indeed have potency to develop according to the given example. However, this concession went accompanied by the warning that it would be a lengthy process because industrial mentality could not be expected to become internalised until much later than the first generations of industrial workers.

Ram was one of the first to attempt to rise above the discussion between adherents and critics of the commitment theory by drawing attention to ways in which the capitalist work process manifested itself in India. Its specific nature, she argued, was expressed in the interconnection between rural and industrial labour. In the coal and iron mines of West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa, for example, workers were not even given the opportunity to cut their ties to their village of origin. This also applied essentially to migrants who found more permanent employment but were solely able to support themselves in the new location, denied both accommodation and an income that would be sufficient to enable their family members to accompany or join them.

It allows employers to transfer the costs of reproducing and maintaining workers' families, and even of providing for the worker himself in times of illness and old age, on to the villages. (Ram 1983:182)

Significant in this connection is Ram's observation regarding the extremely unequal distribution of work among the sexes which characterises increased mobility. The Indian pattern of industrialisation and urbanisation has in fact largely been based on women's exclusion from industrial employment. Ram quite correctly posits that theoretical literature had so far given much too little attention to the very biased gender composition of India's industrial economy.

4. Factory Workers as Dominant Class in the Urban Economy

The growth of India's modern proletariat was, to a strong degree, an urban phenomenon. The new towns and cities that came up in various parts of the country, next to the already existing urban centres, became the locations of a great diversity of industrial enterprises. The economic policy adopted in post-Independence years was intended to bring about an industrial infrastructure with a far broader base than had been established, or even survived from pre-colonial times, under foreign rule. The jute and cotton mills had long been of vital significance to Calcutta, Mumbai and Ahmedabad. Here and elsewhere the manufacture of clothing and footwear was supplemented by production of a broad range of consumption goods, both for daily sustenance and for more durable use. Of much more recent origin was the emergence of a heavy industry sector (iron and steel) for the production of capital goods, e.g. machine and construction workshops, petro-chemical enterprises, cement factories, the manufacture of cars and other forms of transport, military equipment, shipbuilding, etc. By far the greater part of this industrial production was intended for the domestic market and was realised by what the 1969 *Report of*

the National Commission on Labour described as a new type of factory worker: strongly anchored in the urban milieu, originating in the petty bourgeoisie, equipped with some education and, finally, showing a noticeable degree of social mobility.

The social composition of labour is undergoing a change. Labour is not restricted to certain castes and communities. Apart from the fact that caste and occupation have always inter-acted and the relation between the two has been 'elastic' in our society, social mobility today accounts for the emergence of a mixed industrial work force. While in traditional industries this change is slow, one cannot escape noticing it in sophisticated employments such as engineering and metal trades; oil refining and distribution; chemicals and petro-chemicals; machine tools and machine building; and synthetics and in many white-collar occupations. The background of the intermediate and lower cadres in the latter industries is overwhelmingly urban: their level of education is higher. They come from middle or lower middle classes comprising small shopkeepers, petty urban landlords, lower echelons of public service and school teachers and professional groups. They have a pronounced polyglot character. (Report NCL 1969: 33-34)

This portrait will be detailed first in terms of recruitment and mode of employment. The social profile that characterises this group of workers, together with their lifestyle, is discussed in the next section.

Recruitment. The workforce which, according to the familiar cliché dating from colonial times, flowed straight from the villages to the factory gates, had little if any direct business with management. Workers were recruited by jobbers who were frequently also charged with control on the workfloor. In such cases, the functions of recruitment and supervision were concentrated in one and the same figure. This middleman was sometimes also responsible for housing and feeding the gang of workers taken on by him. The gap between demand and supply that had to be bridged physically, economically and socially was so crucial that the jobber is not without justification said to have been the midwife of the early phase of India's industrialisation process. One of the first changes to occur, starting around the turn of the twentieth century, was the transfer of recruitment from the hinterland to the factory itself. Increasing pressure on subsistence sources at the bottom of the rural economy in particular, the result of population growth and land alienation, caused an acceleration of the earlier flow of poor farmers and non-agrarian workers to the cities where industrial employment had gained new impulse during and after World War II. In line with these dynamics, the room for manoeuvre enjoyed by the jobber within the work hierarchy also disappeared. From being an intermediary between worker and management, leader

of a gang of workers whom he had himself brought together, he became a foreman charged with implementing orders issued from above.

The hiring of workers is becoming the responsibility of the employment office, and the 'labour officer' is beginning to take over the welfare and service activities of the *sirdar*. (Ornati 1955:40)

This diminution of the jobber's task went hand in hand with the introduction of new set of rules which obliged major industrial enterprises to professionalise their personnel policies. After several transitional decades, the changing management style ultimately caused jobbers to disappear from the factories, as Papola concisely states (1992:27).

Other authors also show that, over the years, more impersonal selection criteria have gradually gained in importance in taking-on new workers. But does this mean that individualised traits derived from *achievement*, such as experience, training, age, have taken the place of the *ascription*-based qualities of applicants? The tendency in this direction, as Papola seemed to argue on an earlier occasion, ensued from the economic logic of the labour market, giving rise to the assumption that the employer allowed himself to be guided primarily by the question of who was the most suitable candidate to fill a vacancy (Papola 1970:182). Papola thus dismissed the suggestion that subjective characteristics such as caste, religion, custom or tradition per se were of decisive significance in the search for work. Still, it was quite clear that personalised features continued to play a very large part. Recruitment through the mediation of members of the existent workforce helps to stabilise performance in the daily organisation of production and thereby serves the interests of the employer.

Recruitment through present employees continues to prevail. According to the evidence before us, employers prefer this method to improve the morale of workers. In some companies, labour-management agreements specify entitlement to a percentage of vacancies to close relatives of senior employees. In a few cases, both the employer and the union maintain rosters of people so eligible for employment. Recruitment through advertisement is restricted mainly to supervisory and white-collar employments and is being increasingly used to tap skilled labour. For occupations which do not require skills, an arrangement by which workers appear at the factory gate in the hope of getting employment still operates. (Report NCL 1969:70)

The large-scale use of relatives, neighbours and friends in order to gain the favour of those who have jobs to bestow indicates the enormous discrepancy that still exists between demand and

supply. The competition for access to regular employment in the factories was so great that applicants without any intercession and recommendation stood no chance at all (Holmström 1976:42-54; U.Ramaswamy 1983:18-19). Some authors have linked the strength of such particularist mechanisms to the carry-over of traditional notions that prescribed support to kinsmen and other kindred as an act of loyalty and solidarity. Sheth was one of those who drew a parallel between the practice of patronage found in a medium-sized industrial enterprise and very similar manifestations of favouritism encountered in the social fabric of the wider urban society of which the factory was part and parcel. The time has passed when particularism was equated with an 'earlier' or 'lower' stage in a unilinear process of transformation on a continuum that eventually resulted in a type of civilisation said to be universalistic and globalised. A number of studies now drew attention to the course followed by industrialisation in Japan along a particularist pattern in which the own social identity was not lost but preserved and given shape in an adapted system of industrial relations. In similar fashion, the structural and cultural continuity of traditional India could be demonstrated in the transition to a modern industrial existence.

Without adhering to the superseded stereotype that the change from an agrarian-rural to an industrial-urban society could be nothing other than a copy of the path already taken in the west, other authors considered that the tenacity with which aid in obtaining work was given to family, caste or religious kindred should not be taken automatically as reflecting the sustained impact of 'traditional' institutions. Such behaviour is rather common in situations of extreme scarcity and has to be understood as a more universal attempt to pressurise people more favourably placed to care for their kinsmen and mates and to do their best to help them in getting a job. In my opinion, it is against this background in particular that the meagre effect of 'modern' types of labour mediation have to be understood. An analysis of a large number of studies on industrial employment carried out in different parts of the country brought Papola to the following conclusion.

In over two-thirds of cases, the workers got information about the availability of jobs from friends, relatives and neighbours. Employment exchanges were the source of information to a very small extent, ranging from 1.5 per cent in Bombay to 10.6 per cent in Coimbatore, though 20 per cent of the workers in Ahmedabad and 25 per cent in Poona had registered with the exchanges. Newspaper advertisements provided information about their jobs to 1.5 per cent of workers in Bombay, 2.2 per cent in Poona and 10.6 per cent in Coimbatore. Jobs were secured on the basis of recommendation or introduction by friends, relatives and persons of the same region and caste, generally employees of the same factory, in 67 per cent of cases in Poona and in 61 per cent of cases in Ahmedabad,

Bombay and Coimbatore. Placement through employment exchanges accounted for 2 per cent of jobs in Poona and Ahmedabad. (Papola 1992:27)

These figures go a long way in explaining why many factory workers attribute their access to the coveted arena of employment, in more veiled terms, to 'coincidence' or 'good luck'. Such terminology quite incorrectly gives the impression of an unexpected windfall, a mere stroke of fortune. It is an euphemism for claims made on more fortunate fellows for help, an appeal for active intercession which usually is the rationale for their employment.

Mode of Employment In studies of industrial labour, researchers customarily and primarily direct their attention to workers in permanently employed by medium to large-sized enterprises. Data are usually compiled on the basis of survey-type investigations. All employees of one or more establishments, or a sample thereof, provide information that is then recorded by field investigators in questionnaires or interview reports. Labour was also the target of earlier studies, but not seldom personal contact with the workforce was lacking. As we have mentioned earlier, Myers (1963) did not meet the factory workers over whom he wrote; Singer, who published an essay entitled *The Indian Joint Family in Modern Industry*, based his findings on the family history of 'nineteen outstanding industrial leaders in Madras City' (1968:433). The next batch of researchers did actually descend to the level of the workers, but even then it rarely went any further than brief one-off encounters, as is customary in such inquiries. Only those studies of a more anthropological nature gave the researcher a chance to penetrate the work and life of industrial labourers more extensively and intensively. Uma Ramaswamy, for example, settled in an area populated by factory workers for the duration of her fieldwork (1983:14). To my knowledge, however, no researcher has ever actually worked in a factory and reported thereon. Participatory observation, in that literal sense, is anything but a popular method of study. Also lacking is any documentation that originates among industrial workers themselves. Diaries, biographies or evidence in the form of oral history compiled in order to record the workers' own experiences, are almost unknown.

Research among factory workers has only rarely been extended to their activities in the actual workplace. Managers are often distinctly suspicious of the motives of the research and of the researcher in the factory. Not only does there not seem to be any tangible benefit for the management but such alien busybodies might well have the intention of stirring-up trouble among the workers. Similar prejudices may be found even among researchers. One source reports that questions regarding trade unions were avoided 'because these excited the workers too much' (van Groenou 1976:175). Sheth is one of the few researchers who managed to move freely inside the factory walls and to ask whatever questions he liked. Thanks to a friendly contact Sheth was

given permission by the owner to observe the daily work cycle in the factory at close quarters, on the understanding `that I would stick to my academic business and would cause no trouble in the administration of the factory.' Such authorisation from high-up, however, can also cause the researcher to encounter antagonism and distrust among the workers. This was Sheth's experience when, in talks on the workfloor, he was made to understand that transgression of the fairly tight limitations would not be tolerated by the bosses.

`It is all very well. You are doing good work which may benefit us in the long run. But you don't know our employers' tactics! You will now write down your report and publish it. But I am sure that if your book contains anything against the interests of these masters, they will buy up all the copies of your book to prevent others from reading it. And they are so rich that they can buy any number of copies that you print. All your labour will then prove futile.' (Sheth 1968:8)

The majority of studies base their glimpses of factory labour on encounters with employees outside the factory. This also explains why descriptions and analyses of the actual work process are still comparatively rare. Information regarding the work hierarchy within the enterprise is also very scanty. The social mobility mentioned in the NCL 1969 Report as an attribute of factory work, assumes the possibility of progressing towards a higher-ranking job. The complexity of industrial organisation naturally varies with the nature of production and the technology used. The image presented by most studies, however, is one of little task differentiation. This impression agrees with Lambert's finding that, in the five factories that he investigated, 75 to 90 percent of all workers were recorded as unskilled or semi-skilled. Moreover, the majority were still doing the same work that they did on first entering the factory. The unskilled category in particular, varying from one-third to three-quarters of the workforce, was distinguished by almost complete lack of mobility (Lambert 1963:131). In view of this evidence, it is hardly surprising that roughly three out of every five workers questioned by the author did not expect any promotion and apparently considered their present position to be as high as they would ever get.

Clearly, the bulk of the workers are `fatalistic', at least so far as upward mobility in the factory is concerned. (Ibidem:185)

Careful perusal of these particulars brings us to suspect that the workers' assessment of the slight chances they have to improve their position above all shows an apt sense of reality. Factory work has the aura of skilled labour, but in practice that applies only to a very limited

degree. In many enterprises, roughly one-quarter of the workforce belongs to the supervisory cadre and to maintenance staff. While the former act as bosses on the workfloor, do not take part in the production process but are charged with ensuring that work proceeds satisfactorily, the maintenance staff carry out all kinds of tasks which make them indispensable but not important. As cleaners, guards, messengers or general dogsbodies they occupy the lowest ranks in the factory hierarchy. Between these two poles are the production workers, about three-quarters of the total workforce, who are split up into two sections: 'operators', who are assumed to be the skilled workers, and their subordinate 'helpers' who function as their less skilled stooges and substitutes.

The progressive mechanisation of production means that a higher percentage of workers than in the past now regularly or continuously handle machines and have to subject themselves to their regime. This does not automatically mean, however, that their performance becomes more skilled. Much of the work that has to be done is monotonous and makes no demands on a worker's competence as a craftsman. In that sense, access to factory labour may even result in loss of skills.

In view of the very limited prospects of occupational promotion within the industrial hierarchy, the question arises of whether factory employees try to realise their hopes of improving their position by changing their jobs. In contrast to the earlier stereotype of lack of commitment, the greater majority of Indian factory workers show themselves to be extremely entrenched. No-one less than Myers had already ascertained that industrial workers tended to cling to their workplace at all cost. True, their absenteeism was of a high level, but horizontal mobility was a rare phenomenon. In the USA, by contrast, such rotation occurs frequently (Myers 1958:47; see also James 1960:103).

Lambert in particular elaborated further on this pattern of fixation, which resulted from a noticeably low degree of both vertical and horizontal labour mobility. He drew the conclusion that:

[...] most of the workers were interested in acquiring 'permanent' property rights in a job and that this carries with it a notion of minimal quality of performance but not an internalized drive for continuously enhanced productivity [...]. Moreover, the general impression one gets in reading the literature on Indian factory laborers is that a factory job is a form of property to the worker and that he will seek to retain, but not improve it [...] the worker's status in the general society seems not to be increased by upward occupational mobility within the factory. (Lambert 1963:179)

While in the early literature on the course followed by the industrialisation process in India numerous and recurrent complaints can be found about the lack of commitment with which industrial management had to cope, in subsequent studies the problem defined was rather one of workers behaving as though they were clients which could not be dismissed by their patrons, i.e. their employers. According to this view, employees showed no inclination to perform adequately nor were they willing in course of time to try to seek another job. Such an attitude was just as reprehensible as that of the uncommitted worker who refused to accept discipline and who played truant for the slightest reason or none at all. Conversely, the shortcoming of the over-committed worker was that he was 'committed not only to industrial life but also to his particular occupation or his particular employer by training, by seniority rules, and by pension and welfare programs' (Kerr 1960:352). This opinion has been contested, however, in other empirical studies (Holmström 1976:139-40). Fieldwork in an industrial neighbourhood of Coimbatore brought Uma Ramaswamy to a more balanced viewpoint. She confirmed indeed that workers who have been given permanent employment will fight tooth and nail against the idea that the job could be taken away from them.

Most workers expect to retire in the factories they first joined unless better opportunities present themselves elsewhere, which is unusual. They increasingly look at their jobs not only as a right but also as property to be passed on to their children through *warisu* [a hereditary transaction]. All these find their reflection in the low turnover in the workforce. (U.Ramaswamy 1983:145)

The author states clearly, however, that this attitude should not be understood as referring to customary practice, neither is it caused by culturally-determined characteristics. It is behaviour that ensues from the attempt to achieve maximum security in a situation in which lack of permanent employment and consequent income is the rule rather than exception. 'A secure mill job is the most coveted employment,' she states briefly and to the point. Given the social condition of acute and continual scarcity, factory workers make every effort to secure their livelihood, and if possible also that of their children and close relatives. However, their claim on the preservation of whatever comfort they have gained is driven by a defensive attitude. In my view it is a question of anxiety and of fear of falling back to a position of uncertainty rather than an expression of indolence and a craving for property, a freerider's mentality which acknowledges no obligations. In similar fashion, Holmström dismisses the suggestion that factory workers see their job as a form of property (Holmström 1976:139-40). He considers that such a perception, insofar as it exists, is based on practices adopted by industrial management, combined with the need to let

others in the direct circle of kinsmen and companions to share to some degree at least in the privileges and advantages that have been achieved.

The behaviour of factory workers in permanent employment is to a large extent determined by the presence in most enterprises of a very substantial labour reserve. Lambert, as we have seen earlier, draws emphatic attention to temporary workers as representing a well-considered response by employers to 'the problem' of workers who think that they enjoy indisputable rights once they have a permanent job. It is interesting to see that quite a few researchers devote their attention particularly to this peripheral category, and pay little if any heed to the role of the floating section of the industrial proletariat. The rapporteurs at a UNESCO survey of factory employment in various Indian states stated without any explanation that 'the short-tenure factory workers and the non-factory workers had to be left out' (UNESCO 1960:7).

Temporary workers are employed on a daily basis, but this does not always mean that the factory management is free to send them away again when they report at the stipulated time. Their more or less continuous involvement in the flexibly-organised work process, long after the duration of a reasonable trial period, is often unavoidable or may even be essential. However, the lack of any institutional pressure sanctioned by means of a formal work contract, gives employers at least the freedom to minimalise conditions of employment. Against this background it is easier to understand why, in my own fieldwork in South Gujarat, I repeatedly encountered people who had worked for the same boss on a temporary basis for more than ten years, without ever giving up hope of eventually being rewarded with a permanent job in return for their 'loyalty'.

The size of the labour reserve varies according to the enterprise. In the five factories studied by Lambert, 10 to 20 percent of the workforce belonged to that category. Sheth reports that in the industrial establishment of his research almost one-fifth of all employees were temporary. In addition, there was a category of casual workers who were called upon and dismissed according to the need of the moment. Two sub-contractors were charged with hiring these outsiders. Each morning the manager reported how many extra workers would be needed for that particular day, and the two labour contractors took care of their admission at the factory gates. On average this amounted to 70 or 80 men, representing another 10 percent of the total labourforce. The contractors were paid piece rates. Neither they themselves nor the gangs working under them appeared in the factory's administration. These middlemen were paid a round sum, from which they first deducted their own generous earnings before shilling out to their teams. This reserve labour pool, kept floating and completely without any rights, was not only called upon for all kinds of odd jobs, such as the loading and unloading of goods, but also to take the place of any regular labourers who had not reported for work (Sheth 1968:56-57).

Holmström's study of industrial employment in Bangalore revolves around the idea that those admitted to factory employment had crossed the threshold to a secure existence. The contrast with the endangered life outside it became paramount.

Once inside the citadel, with a job to fall back on, improving one's qualifications and getting promotion becomes a gradual process, a matter of more or less, faster or slower progress, rather than simply of having a permanent job or not having one. (Holmström 1976:41)

In my opinion, this viewpoint shows too little consideration for the considerable and often lasting gap between permanent and temporary workers. Holmström seems to suggest that passing from the latter to the former category is in most cases nothing more than a matter of time and patience. 'Even educated Brahmans will take unskilled casual factory work in the hope of permanent jobs. Once inside the citadel, a man can look around for alternatives, if he wants' (ibid.:137) His suggestion of upward mobility as a rather common career pattern is not confirmed by several other studies. As a matter of fact temporary workers often remain stuck at the bottom of the work hierarchy. This reserve pool, although better off than the labour nomads beyond the factory gates, can make no claim on the secure conditions of employment enjoyed by permanent hands. They are usually if not always given the most lowly-valued and unskilled chores available. Even when their work is no different to that of tenured employees, they are paid far less (Lambert 1963:99-100). In the four factories in Pune on which he concentrated his work, Lambert noticed a tendency to lengthen the term of temporary employment.

[...] it does appear that the average time spent in non-permanent status is increasing in all the factories, and that the two older companies using the *badli* system have a non-permanent labor pool that is tending to become stabilized. (Ibidem:102)

I incline towards making that conclusion dependent on fluctuations in the industrialisation process over time. It seems reasonable to assume that during periods of rapid growth, when existing factories expand their production and new ones are opened, permanent employment becomes more quickly and easily available. Exactly the reverse holds in a period of industrial recession. It was probably no coincidence, therefore, that Uma Ramaswamy, who undertook her Coimbatore fieldwork in 1977-78 when the local textile industry had just gone through a decade of massive retrenchment due to mill closures and strongly reduced production, came across a residual category of workers who had been registered as temporary hands sometimes for over a dozen years. In addition to the fact that they were much cheaper, factory management expected

them to be far more tractable. The vulnerability of their position was described by a permanent worker.

There are about seventy temporary workers in our mill. They were made to give their signatures on blank sheets before being taken for work. They have to report for work ten minutes before the others and are sent out ten minutes after the shift is over. The idea is to prevent them from mixing with permanent workers. Management fear that association with permanent workers might cause discontent in them. If a temporary worker is found sitting at the back of my cycle, he would be immediately denied employment. The blank sheet with signature would be used to write out his resignation. (U. Ramaswamy 1983:21)

While making allowances for the interchange of good times with bad times and for major branch-specific variations, it must be said that the transition to an industrially-based society has been far more tardy and erratic than had been hoped for and predicted half-a-century ago. Labour productivity is still at a low level. Pro-business management publications attribute this to the militant attitude adopted by workers and by trade unions that tend to be aggressive in defending the entrenched interests of their members. Taken together with the numerous holidays and other days off, this means that, according to some sources at least, a quarter to almost half of all days per year are lost in doing nothing. As a result, factories are brought to a standstill far more frequently than in the industrialised part of the world, according to the Presidential Address given to the *Indian Society of Labour Economics* in 1983 (Papola et al 1993:294-325).

From an entirely different perspective, low productivity is blamed on the stubborn refusal by factory owners to invest sufficient capital. Rather than trying to increase turnover through technological improvements, the emphasis is on making the labour process more onerous. Women are frequently victimised by this strategy. Fearing a loss of income, they are prepared to do work that is customarily carried out by men, to allow themselves illegally be included in night shifts, and to work overtime without any extra payment (U. Ramaswamy 1983:23).

The skilled factory work associated with industrial employment has until today remained the domain of only a tiny portion of the total workforce within the sector. In recent times surplus labour, which has acquired enormous proportions in the countryside, has sought *en masse* for work away from the village and from agriculture. Those of the surging army of migrants who manage to reach the urban economy for shorter or longer periods, are able only to a very limited degree to penetrate to the enviable but strongly protected bastions of secure employment in the factories. As we have seen, even such access by no means always provides, whether immediately or in the future, the longed-for permanent job and related security of existence. Nevertheless, it is this more fortunate category, more influential than might be supposed from its size and status,

which has become of vital significance as a truly dominant class in the urban-industrial landscape. What are the principal social characteristics of this elite among the working population?

5. Social Profile and Lifestyle

In contrast to earlier notions that portrayed the factory labourer as a rural migrant who has only recently arrived in the city, the majority of studies show that many if not most workers are men and women who have lived in the city or its immediate environs for many years, if not since birth (cf. Lambert 1963:7; Sheth 1968:79-82; Holmström 1976:28; U. Ramaswamy 1983:12). A great many of the masses who have only recently settled in urban locations would be only too grateful to be considered for factory employment, but they lack the experience and contacts needed to compete for such work. The conditions that E.A. Ramaswamy found in the mid-1970s in his research in Coimbatore were by no means exceptional.

The textile industry in Coimbatore is near saturation from the employment point of view. Even with the creation of additional capacity, jobs are too few in relation to the number of aspirants, particularly considering the low skill requirement. (E.A.Ramaswamy 1977:175)

The same sources observe that the percentage of literates among industrial workers in large-scale enterprises is quite high. Although lower education, let alone a higher grade, is not really essential for unskilled work, practice shows that the ability to read and write is a minimum qualification for acceptance even as a temporary hand. In the course of time educational standards for acceptance have been further upgraded. Candidates who lack a secondary school certificate are no longer considered for selection nowadays (Holmström 1976:38; U.Ramaswamy 1983:20).

Conventional opinion holds that the first to report for work in the modern urban industries were the landless and land-poor farmers who had led a poverty-stricken and threatened existence in the countryside (e.g. Buchanan 1934:294; Ornati 1955:29). The social complement to their economic vulnerability was their membership of low or even the lowest castes. As urban industrial employment gained in respectability, higher castes also began to show interest, according to Myers (1958:39-40). Morris was one of the first to reject this viewpoint. He is dismissive of the idea, which can be traced back to Weber, that a significant part of the emerging

industrial proletariat stemmed from 'declassed and pariah castes' of rural origin. In his study of labour in Bombay's cotton mills, Morris defends the thesis that caste was not a relevant, let alone primary criterion in the recruitment of workers, or that members of untouchable castes were discriminated against (Morris 1965:200-1). More generally, his proposition is that the linkage between caste and occupations in modern industrial has never been proven.

It is interesting that this distinctive institution of caste has been almost entirely ignored in connection with Indian industrialization. No detailed study of the relation of caste to industrial work is available. In the vast array of official investigations into the conditions of industrial labor, virtually the sole reference to caste relates to caste dietary restrictions, which employers claimed prevented them from establishing factory canteens. The institution has been treated mainly by anthropologists, and almost entirely in its rural setting. Those who have studied caste have ignored industry, and those who have studied industry have ignored caste. (Morris in Moore & Feldman 1960:182-83)

Little of this disregard is a noticeable feature of later research. Indeed, in a wide variety of empirically based reports the relationship between caste and factory employment is put forward as a significant factor (e.g. Sheth 1968:73-75; Holmström 1976:32-34; U.Ramaswamy 1983:102-14). These studies point out fairly systematically that the workforce approximately reflects the caste composition of the urban population as a whole. That correspondence also applies to the high-low distribution, in the sense that middle and higher castes are over-represented in the higher echelons of industrial work hierarchy (Sharma 1970:13), while the bottom ranks are mainly occupied by members of lower castes. It should be noted that this correlation is by no means a linear one, but is affected strongly by differences in educational levels. But has the growing discrepancy between the limited supply of industrial work and the enormously increased demand not led to exclusion of the socially-deprived categories? That assumption is certainly not groundless. Harriss, amongst others, has provided information on such discriminatory practices (Harriss 1982:999). On the other hand, however, the policy of positive discrimination adopted with regard to public sector employment has prioritised employment of candidates belonging to scheduled castes/tribes. To some degree this has enabled a growing number of low-caste candidates to penetrate to higher-ranking jobs in the industrial hierarchy which were formerly inaccessible to them. At the same time it should be noted, however, that in capital-intensive, i.e. technologically advanced industries, particularly corporate and multi-national concerns, staff are recruited almost entirely on the basis of requirements that show a strong bias towards the higher social classes. Nevertheless, confirmation that the structuring principle of India's society is still

recognisable inside the factory gates does not mean that caste still retains the same ideological significance that it was ascribed in the past.

[...] caste is no longer plausible as a thorough-going religious ideology, justifying all social and economic relations as parts of a divinely established hierarchy. The main public ideology - not just the language of politics and unions, but much ordinary talk - tends to stress moral and social equality. The status inequalities that count depend on jobs, income, life style, manners and education. Where these things go with caste rank, this is usually because some castes had more access to education and good jobs in the past - a situation that will not last, because effective caste job-finding networks are not stable or confined to high castes. (Holmström 1976:80)

Our conclusion might well be the same one which, almost two and half decades ago Sharma reported as the main finding of his industrial research, namely, that factories gave preference to 'the educated workers over the non-educated, urban-born over the rural-born, and those with industrial experience over the ones having no experience or with a background in non-industrial occupations' (Sharma 1974:14). This does not complete the social profile, however. What is lacking, in the minimal sense, is the gender dimension. Early studies of industrial employment give the impression that women were rarely to be found in factories. Their suggested absence motivated Kalpana Ram to argue that 'the virtual exclusion of women from the Indian industrial working class has drawn little theoretical comment' (1983:182). She pronounced this judgement after considering the far higher participation of women, both in the early industrialisation period in western countries as in various Third World societies at the present time. Her opinion needs some qualification in view of the fact that, for example in Mumbai's cotton mills at the end of the 19th and the early 20th century, women made up one-fifth to one-quarter of the workforce (Morris 1965:65). Although that was far less than in western societies at the time of emergence of the textile industry, it was most certainly not negligible.

How are we then to explain the fact that steady growth of the industrial sector brought a fall rather than rise in the percentage of female factory workers? The primary cause reported was the introduction of factory legislation which restricted the use of the far cheaper labour of women and children in the first few decades of the 20th century. Morris, however finds this explanation rather spurious. More important in his opinion is the fact that women's reproductive role causes them to absent themselves more frequently, thus giving them the reputation of being a nuisance. However, that argument is not compatible with huge local variations apparent in the employment of women in the textile industry throughout the country. Morris considers the

marginalisation of the female sex to substantiate his thesis that there was no lack of male workers who, in the last instance, were preferred by the industry (Ibidem:69).

In the mid-20th century industrial work was perhaps more than ever before a male preserve. By then the public image of a factory worker is of a young man, of not more than 30-35 years old. Official reports such as that by the National Commission on Labour confirm the decreasing participation of women in the industrial work process.

This decline has been more marked in the textile and basic metal industries. In both cotton and jute textiles, the decline of women's employment is attributed mainly to technological changes rendering the jobs held by several women workers redundant. Fixation of minimum work load and standardisation of wages in the cotton textile industry necessitated retrenchment of women workers who were working mostly as reelers and winders where the work-load was found to be lower [...].Rationalisation and mechanization schemes in the jute industry eliminated some of the manual processes which at one time were the preserve of women workers. Certain occupations giving employment to women in the jute industry earlier were found to be hazardous and are therefore closed to women now by Rules framed under the Factories Act. (Report NCL 1969:380)

Similarly to many other publications, the NCL Report states that the eclipse of women from the factories was caused partly through the rationalisation of production and partly through the weaker sex being relieved of labour which, on second thoughts, was considered to be too strenuous. In the first case, their removal was attributed to the fact, apparently thought irrefutable, that women's performance not only lagged behind that of machines but also that of men. In the second case, women's exclusion was presented as the deplorable result of a well-intentioned measure, namely, protection of their welfare. Where the emphasis should be placed, however, is on the fact that the progressive mechanisation of industrial work has further strengthened the male dominance that became a more common feature of economic life.

In factories where machines are not only used but also made, women seem to disappear from view entirely. While Sharma at least reported that only males were employed in the car manufacturing plant researched by him (1974:7), Sheth does even take the trouble to explain that, and why, in the factory of his research the workforce apparently did not include even one woman. Also in factories where both sexes are employed, women are invariably far in the minority. Lambert reports that in 1956 in India as a whole women formed only 11.7 percent of the workforce in manufacturing industries, concentrated mostly in medium-sized to large enterprises (Lambert 1963:23). Women were present in only two of the five factories in Pune which were

the target of his research. The sample on which Lambert based his analyses consisted for 96.6 percent of males. Although this under-represented the average share of women in the enterprises in question, Lambert did not correct the imbalance in his data set. This also applies to Holmström's study in Bangalore of the workforce in four industrial enterprises. In the case study sample to which he narrowed-down his research, women's share amounted to only 5.6 percent, far lower than their 15 percent of the factory population in Karnataka state as a whole (Holmström 1976:19). The under-exposure of women workers in the industrial production landscape is thus not unconnected to a code of social conduct which makes them less easy to approach for members of the other sex. This is so not only for male researchers but also for male co-workers.

[...] the one woman 'draftsman' says the men in her office treat her as a sister, but she never goes among the men on the factory floor to discuss design problems, and so she cannot get promotion. Women keep to themselves in the canteen, play a minor part in most clubs and then only in the shadow of their husbands, and take little part in the union beyond attending general meetings and voting. (Ibidem:65)

It cannot be coincidental that, in her fieldwork in an industrial neighbourhood in Coimbatore, Uma Ramaswamy did not overlook the position and problems of female workers. The information that they formed 15 percent of the total workforce was accompanied by the observation that their participation, in absolute as well as relative terms, was going down (1983:22). In this case the cause of women's marginalisation is again part of a trend towards mechanisation through which they in particular become victimised. At the time of Ramaswamy's research, the output of one woman equalled that of five a few decades earlier. Women's employment is falling even though their productivity is higher than that of male workers. Why is it, then, that the sexual balance is becoming even further distorted? It boils down to the fact that in practice it is easier to let men take the place of women than *vice versa*. In addition to all manner of inhibitions connected to the employment of women, and regardless their willingness to work night shifts for example, there is the fact that they have to be paid while on maternity leave. Such protective measures have helped to reduce the differential wage level. This means that the customary reason for employing women, i.e. their attraction as cheap labour, has lost some of its value. Women who are superfluous to needs are dismissed or transferred to departments where they are given unskilled work and thus suffer reduced earnings. Investigations have repeatedly shown that women are invariably the lowest paid workers. Insofar as they have not been completely ousted from the industrial labour process, women seem principally or

exclusively to be assigned tasks by management which need no special knowledge or skill and may be quite monotonous, but nevertheless require precision and alertness.

When a certain job requires, in the employer's eyes, delicate handling, or when the work is time-consuming and tedious, women are called upon to do it. Thus, women are favoured in the electronics industry, for jobs which require tiny parts to be handled gently and carefully, and where fine wires have to be twisted and wound. In the textile industry, women have traditionally been employed as menders, spinners, winders, reelers, folders and cottonwaste pickers. In the pharmaceutical industry, women are generally employed as packers. (quoted in Holmström 1984:227)

These are all activities which leave women, far more than male workers, riveted to the bottom of the work hierarchy with no prospect of any promotion.

6. The Claim to Dignity

This is the last of the characteristics that make factory workers in regular employment a special category, i.e. the fact that they have amalgamated into trade unions to care for their own interests and to defend the rights that they have gained with so much difficulty. Government also played an important role in this respect. Labour legislation that was introduced after Independence consists largely of regulations intended for a fairly small upper layer of the working population. The fact that government concern was primarily if not exclusively directed towards what have been called assault troops in the process of industrialisation was not caused by any feelings of benevolence; it was rather a concession to the power that had been built-up by the industrial proletariat during the preceding decade.

Discussions in the National Planning Committee in 1940 on the labour problem were based on a report drawn up by a sub-group. At stake was the installation of an industrial machinery such as already existed in Europe in particular. This was coupled with the laying-down of extensive legislation regarding conditions of employment and their compliance. These included delimitation of the working week, prohibiting the use of child labour, provisions for health and security, the fixing of minimum wages and how this should be put into practice, equal pay for equal work by men and women, the right to a paid vacation, maternity benefits, housing, procedures for settling conflicts, and compulsory arbitration by government which necessitated the setting-up of a Conciliation Board and an Industrial Court. Following on to all this, the construction of a system of social insurance was also discussed.

A system of compulsory and contributory social insurance for industrial workers should be established directly under the control of the State to cover the risks of sickness and invalidity other than those covered by the Workmen's Compensation Act. Schemes for providing alternative employment to those involuntarily employed. Old Age Pensions and Survivors' Pensions, and also Social Insurance to cover risks of sickness and invalidity for all, should be established directly under the State. These schemes should be extended by stages, priority being given to particular classes of workers, with due regard to the relative urgency of their needs, facility of application, and to the ability of the community to provide for them. (*Minutes National Planning Committee, May 1940*)

The latter sentence was intended to act as a brake to any exaggerated expectations. During the deliberations, however, Ambalal Sarabhai, who acted as employers' representative in this assembly, raised the question of whether the entire packet of new measures and regulations was really intended to be introduced in the short term. The Chairman, Jawaharlal Nehru, explained that it represented a coordinated scheme of action which did not allow for any piecemeal selection. He showed rather more flexibility with regard to the date of introduction. The scenario that had been drawn up was intended to provide direction to the future development of the nation and it was self-evident, he reassured Sarabhai, that the plans could not be put into implementation before the take-over of power.

The need to pacify labour was due to the realisation by the nationalist politicians that the mobilisation of industrial workers which had started in the colonial era and had expressed itself in strikes and other forms of protest, might perhaps gain new impetus rather than decrease after the liberation from alien rule. Registered trade unions in India totalled 29 in 1928 and 3987 in 1951 (Ornati 1951:xi). In itself, this explosive growth showed that economic policy must inevitably make allowance for this institutionalised interest. Although the trade unions cared for the interests of only a very small minority, that minority formed the most vocal and most militant portion of the working population. It was hoped that, in exchange for special treatment, this vanguard of 'the dangerous classes' would abandon any more extreme demands and would devote their efforts, in a constructive and loyal manner, towards building the nation's economy. Farmers and workers were told more and more frequently that they had to make offers for the national interest. Entirely in line with that spirit, one member of the National Planning Committee suggested, during discussions of the labour problem, that there should be no room for industrial unrest in the Planned Economy. Nevertheless, the fear of radicalisation of the factory proletariat, whose numbers were bound to rise rapidly, was great. The workers' efforts, through strikes and other militant forms of agitation, to improve their working conditions has been dismissed by some of the literature as irresponsible and irrational. Kanappan, for example, entirely in agreement with

the current emphasis on discipline as a problem, stated that the rebellious attitude evidenced an anomist reaction to the industrial environment. In his opinion the government had every reason for concern.

As late as in the sixties, Indian authorities were concerned with violence or unruly and abusive behaviour in the coal mines. In the modern Rourkela steel plant, in an automobile plant in Bombay, and other places too numerous to mention here. (Kanappan 1970:315)

In the effort to combat the threatening danger of a shift in the balance of social power relations, the politicians used a number of strategies. Firstly, they made successful efforts to encourage the rise of trade unions that were linked to various political currents. Their mutual rivalry prevented the labour movement as a whole from forming a united front. Second, all efforts were made to prevent any direct confrontation between employers and employees. The priority given to harmony and reconciliation in industrial relations and the prescribing of arbitration meant that the state itself became a principal party in negotiations over wage demands or other matters. This tripartite consultation became a significant principle in labour policy. The final piece of strategy was the attempt, with the aid of extra benefits and facilities, to detach the industrial elite among the working population from its links with the far greater masses of workers. This enormous army of under-achievers was excluded from formal wage negotiations, and there was no institutionalised and organised promotion of their interests.

A Fair Wages Committee was given the task of finding out how much an industrial worker needed to provide for himself and his family.

[...] it should enable the male earner to provide for himself and his family [N.B.: fixed as man, wife and two children as a social unit] not merely the bare essentials of food, clothing and shelter, but a measure of frugal comfort, including education for the children, protection against ill health, requirements of essential social needs and a measure of insurance against the more inevitable misfortunes including old age. (Loknathan in Papola et al. 1993:51)

It is interesting to note that this exercise was undertaken in the third quarter of the 20th century, at the end of a period when women were expelled from the factories with the message that they should devote themselves to their reproductive tasks. Payment of a living wage, as described above, is still a far distant ideal. Employers' unions argued that even the 'measure of frugal comfort' signified a burden that was too heavy. For the time being they were only prepared to grant a fair wage if the other party would agree to increase production and to maintain industrial

peace. This was not an unattractive proposition in that even the fair wage level was far above the income with which the greater part of the working population had to survive. Until the beginning of the 1960s, the illusion was maintained that industrialisation was a tool in the transition towards a socialist society. In addition to the granting of a fair wage and bonus policy together with the acceptance of collective bargaining, industrial socialism ultimately also signified the introduction of workers' participation in management, passing over into profit-sharing (Mukherjee in Papola et al.1993:109). It is hardly necessary to record that this has never been achieved.

The highly developed class consciousness of the factory workers derives from their proven willingness to organise themselves. Membership of a trade union is evidence that they are prepared to take collective action and is a tangible expression of their feelings of solidarity. But is that interpretation plausible and justified? Doubt in that respect arises firstly from the realisation that by no means all workers in what is called the formal sector of the economy became members of a trade union. In 1961 that applied to only four million of the 12 million who belonged to that category of the working population (Das 1983:174). This vanguard is also suspected of attaching no significance to any improvement of the working conditions of the masses. They are said to be interested primarily in maintaining their own privileges and to be objective about any claims from below for assistance and solidarity. Seen from this viewpoint, such workers are more interested in maintaining the closed-shop nature of their regular factory jobs than in taking action to improve conditions for others by extending their solidarity outwards and thus also downwards.

Confirmation or negation of the thesis regarding egoism on the part of the working elite in looking after their own interests needs to be tested on the basis of empirical research that focuses on relations between industrial workers and the trade union. The best study in this respect is undoubtedly that undertaken by E.A. Ramaswamy. On the basis of fieldwork in Coimbatore, this author has charted local interactions between a selected trade union and its members employed in cotton mills. The picture arising from his study confirms that the millworkers keep a sharp eye on whether the union's cadre exert themselves in caring for the complaints and wishes of the workers, whether individual or collective. On the other hand, the workers show their realisation that their existence is far more comfortable than that of the great masses who have no-one to defend their interests. In the words of a senior union member:

There is a limit to what we can ask from the millowner. I get four times as much as my neighbour who toils in a field all day, and yet my job is easier and not very much more skilled than his. Unless conditions improve all around it is difficult to get us to ask for more. (E.A.Ramaswamy 1977:182-83)

Other than seems to be suggested by the title of Ramaswamy's book (*The Worker and His Union*), trade union members also include women. They are said to be fairly passive and to do no more than pay their contributions. Ramaswamy observes that women have little time in which to hang around. After finishing their shift, they have to hasten away in order to care for their household. If their job is endangered, however, or problems arise of another nature, they show themselves to be extremely militant. At the time of the research they had every reason to show militancy because women in particular threatened to be victimised by staff cuts. We have seen earlier that women are found in the lowest ranks of the labour hierarchy and often get no farther than casual work. Whatever their sex, such workers who are kept in the pool of reserve labour have greater need than regular workers for a union's help and protection. This is not only hindered by the employers (U.Ramaswamy 1983:21). Trade union leaders, whether or not pressurised by their members, show little zest for accepting such outsiders and even a distinctly negative reaction if efforts are undertaken in that direction. Can the unions be blamed for such negativism? Holmström is not convinced and points out that they have their hands full with maintaining what they have already achieved. Even that is difficult, let alone that they should have to defend the interests of a mass of workers who are still extremely vulnerable. Even more than for the *badlis*, who at least have been able to join the pool of reserve labour to await their turn for a job, that vulnerability affects the infinitely greater mass who have not yet found their way into the labour pool but on the contrary are kept far away from it.

Many unions are overwhelmingly defensive. They are there to protect jobs first, then the real value of wages against inflation, with safety and working conditions a poor third, rather than to win more than the members have already. They know their bargaining power is weak; noisy militant demands for more are a tactic to hold the line, something to be bargained away when vital interests are threatened. The union has a hard enough job protecting its own members without worrying about outsiders. (Holmström 1984:289; see also Das 1983:174)

Other authors are far more critical about the activities of trade unions. Their leaders in particular are said to be manipulative and corrupt, more interested in their own advantages than in caring for the interests of the rank-and-file. Workers react to such behaviour by making their faith in the leaders dependent on the results they achieve. If these are disappointing they have no hesitation in defecting to a rival union. The choice is not a question of ideology but the more pragmatic matter of who offers the most for the lowest price. According to such authors, trade union bosses operate as brokers, similar to the earlier labour jobbers, who use their mandate to enter into deals with employers, politicians and rival unions. This is a critical view which makes

it understandable why most enterprises are organised only to a fairly low degree. To keep one's distance from a trade union, however, could also be seen as demonstrating loyalty to management or, to put it more bluntly, as fear of becoming known as a possible troublemaker. The setting-up of unions in which workers were brought together, and the battle which had to be fought in order to break through employers' fierce resistance to collective action, is perhaps the principal reason why the present generation of factory workers continues to trust in organisations that were set up to defend their interests. A contributory factor is that, in the residential areas more than in the workplace itself, the memory still lives on of champions in the fight for a better life who often had to pay a high price for their ideals and dedication. These were not the great names in trade union history but rather local level leaders, some of whom came from the ranks. Sheth, who concluded that the union had only marginal significance for the workforce in the factory researched by him, nevertheless qualified that conclusion as follows:

[...] workers realized that though the union achieved precious little for them, they could achieve even less in the absence of a union. Individual workers could make a comparison in retrospect between 'union days' and 'unionless days' and found that though the union got them hardly anywhere in relation to the demands it made on the management, it was necessary for systematic dealing with the management. (Sheth 1968:159-60)

I tend to regard this as adequate representation of an opinion commonly held in the milieu of protected and organised labour. It is difficult to see it as the easy-going and also short-sighted aristocratic mentality of *après nous le déluge*. The attitude taken by the industrial vanguard seems rather to be caused by the fear that the cake, i.e. the comfort of a relatively secure existence, is too small to be divided amongst all comers.

It is also my view that the trade union movement did in fact play an emancipatory role in India. Perlin is quite correct in pointing out that little if any improvement has been brought about in the deplorable forms of factory labour. In a great many enterprises, working conditions are injurious not only to health but also to human dignity (Perlin 1979:457). The light-hearted opinion held by compilers of the *NCL* report to the effect that industrial workers had become accustomed to such hardships and more or less ignored them (1969:35), does not appreciate that the working proletariat suffers from the stench, dirt and noise that accompany the production process and unmistakably feel besmirched by them.

All this does not alter the fact, however, that factory workers in regular employment have made great progress, particularly in their own self-esteem. That has been due not least to the protection offered by membership of a trade union. Conversely, that self-esteem encourages them

to organise themselves, even when this is likely to arouse displeasure among their bosses. A principal conclusion reached by the National Commission on Labour was that 'the industrial worker of today has acquired a dignity not known to his predecessor'. Employers in talking to the NCL used a different jargon which showed irritation regarding '[...] a greater measure of defiance towards his superiors'. Also according to the same source, the greater degree of assertiveness was based on greater awareness: 'a worker today is more politically conscious than before, more articulate of the existing order and more sensitive to his conditions and hardships' (*NCL Report 1969:35*). There can be little doubt that the dignity gained was both cause and consequence of the social conflict fought by the labour movement on a broad front. Its cadre members became the prototypes whose charismatic behaviour induced the less active and less aware factory workers to take action, even if only temporarily. The research carried out in Coimbatore by both E.A. and Uma Ramaswamy illustrates this in lively and forceful fashion.

The Ramaswamys describe in detail - with sketches of individuals and their life histories and thoughts - a world of the union activists [...] held together by an ideology of working-class solidarity cutting across barriers of caste and employment. By their personal example, they carry along the mass of ordinary workers who are moderately apathetic about wider issues, but still loyal enough to strike, demonstrate and perhaps vote when asked by those they respect. The union provides a service when needed; in return it sometimes asks for sacrifice and enthusiasm. (Holmström 1984:294-95)

Wage increases is undoubtedly the most urgent demand made by the trade union movement since its inception. However, its programme of action immediately became far broader and far outdistanced this primary target. Through the very nature of their existence, the organisations in which factory workers were united protested against the strict hierarchical system, not only in industry but in society as a whole. That hierarchy instructed that labour must resign itself to its own subordination. The ideology of the trade unions, however great their mutual diversity, could do nothing other than nurture the thought of social equality. Corruption of that ideal was linked to everyday party-political practices and also resulted from contradictory opinions that prevailed among the working population. After all, a great proportion of the workers originated in a milieu that was by no means averse to distinctions according to rank and class, to ethnicity, faith or colour. It is thus all the more significant that 'the main public ideology - not just the language of politics and unions, but much ordinary talk - tends to stress moral and social equality' (Holmström 1976:80). Increased self-esteem essentially also meant the denial of dependency and inequality. This met with considerable oppression, however, since employers attach great significance to recognition of their traditional authority. They quite rightly see

industrial agitation as undermining their claim to respectful obedience. This feudal-like attitude is illustrated by the following appeal with which, at the start of the 1950s, one employer called his striking workers to order.

Your illegal and indisciplinary ways distress me. I am tired and will be compelled to take action[...]. My advice to you *as your elder and wellwisher* is work wholeheartedly and maintain discipline [...].if you do not follow my humble advice you will compel the company to dismiss all those who act illegally as we have waited patiently for long [...] (in Ornati 1955:15).

To return to the citadel of which Holmström spoke, alluding to the fact that, in the labour landscape, industrial workers in the organised sector of the economy formed a privileged and protected enclave. In his view, that was also the perception held by the workers themselves.

They tend to see factory work as a citadel of security and relative prosperity, which it is: it offers regular work and promotion and predictable rewards, as against the chaos and terrifying dangers of life outside. For everyone inside the citadel, there is a regiment outside trying to scale the walls. (Holmström 1976:137)

This model shows a number of the factors described above as typical of factory workers in regular employment. It is not only in terms of employment that they stand out. They form an aristocracy with a befitting social profile and a reasonably comfortable lifestyle. Not least, they have a dignity that derives from their status as organised and legally-protected employees. In particularising all these characteristics, however, it also becomes clear that they form an *ideal type* as understood by Weber: a compilation of features which, separately and together, are over-exposed and provide an image in which the work and lives of only a small minority of factory workers are recognisable. To put it in another way, it is almost impossible to define the average factory worker. The differences among them, between and even within industries, are too great. Just as progressive variations predominate within the citadel, there is no question of a clear and rigid rupture with the working world outside it. The economy does not allow itself to be split into two sectors, a formal and an informal, and that also applies to conditions of employment. Holmström has abandoned his earlier stance and has replaced his former dichotomy by drawing-up a more differentiated chart of the labour landscape, one that is very uneven.

My image of the citadel was too simple. The organized/unorganized boundary is not a wall but a steep slope. Indian society is like a mountain, with the very rich at the top, lush Alpine pastures where skilled workers in the biggest modern industries graze, a gradual slope down through smaller firms where pay and conditions are worse and the legal security of employment means less, a steep slope around the area where the Factories Act ceases to apply (where my wall stood), a plateau where custom and the market give poorly paid unorganized sector workers some minimal security, then a long slope down through casual migrant labour and petty services to destitution. There are well-defined paths up and down these slopes, which are easiest for certain kinds of people. (Holmström 1984:319)

In abandoning the idea that the economy follows a dualist pattern, Holmström reaches the further conclusion that the world of labour also cannot be divided into two sections of organised and unorganised sector workers respectively. There is no clear dividing line between them. I am in agreement with that observation, but find the lesson that he draws from it, however hesitantly, to be more problematic, namely: that there is only one working class with common interests and a common fate. If that which Ram and many others have remarked is indeed true, i.e. that 'any one descriptive generalisation of the characteristics of the Indian working class simply no longer seems to suffice' (Ram 1983:184), it is perhaps more suitable to draw attention to the plurality of this very diverse and heterogeneous social collectivity: working classes. That option forms the point of departure for the following analysis of industrial employment, not within but outside the organised sector of the economy. My particular attention will be directed towards the working environment and also to the identity of the mass of workers who depend upon it for their existence.

7. Industrial Work in the Informal Sector of the Economy

Rural-urban migration, which started long before Independence, has accelerated during the last half-century. Only a small minority of that army of migrants has found work in the formal sector of the economy, however. The greater part of the urban population, both long-established and newcomers, are excluded from such employment. How, then, has this gradually increasing mass of people managed to earn a living? The answer is with work of very diverse character which provides very little stability taken over the year, even if continuous and full-time. The typification of informal sector employment is largely determined by the image evoked by Hart on launching the concept (1971). Hart's description stressed the colourful cavalcade of trades that may be

encountered in the streets of Third World cities, including those of India: hawkers, rag-and-bone men, shoecleaners, repairmen, tailors, market traders, bearers and porters, drink sellers, barbers, refuse collectors, beggars, whores and pimps, pickpockets and other small-time crooks. In the 1970s and 1980s in particular, registration of this field of work expanded enormously (Breman 1998). A noticeable factor is that publications on the subject did not originate among conventional researchers into labour, who were interested mainly in formal sector employment. The contents of important specialist journals, such as *The Indian Journal of Industrial Relations* and *The Indian Journal of Labour Economics*, show that that interest, for the time being, did not change. The neglect was due both to lack of knowledge regarding the state of affairs in lower levels of the urban economy and to lack of affinity with the sort of research that would be necessary to increase that knowledge. The informal sector included a complex range of activities regarding which no statistics were available and to which the customary measuring and counting techniques were inapplicable. The landscape of informal sector employment has been charted mostly by anthropologists and then on the basis of qualitative rather than quantitative research.

The rapidly increasing interest that is presently being shown in this prominent branch of economic activity does not change the fact, however, that its existence has been acknowledged in various earlier publications. As long ago as 1955, Ornati divided industrial employment in India into two segments: 'organised' versus 'unorganised'. His distinction was based on the enforcement or non-enforcement of a packet of employment conditions laid down in the Factories Act. The greater majority of industrial workers proved not to be covered by those regulations.

A very large group of workers finds employment in the myriad small manufacturing enterprises which produce a large variety of products for local consumption. Much of the production of shoes and leather products is conducted in factories which, because of their size, are not covered by the Factories Act. In addition, many workers are employed in small cereal-milling establishments, printing firms, bangle factories, and by mica processors. Working conditions in this sector vary considerably from region to region and from enterprise to enterprise. Little is known about the precise number of people employed or about the conditions under which they work. (Ornati 1955:64-65)

At the end of the 1960s the same classification was used in an official publication, although with a different meaning attached to the concept of 'unorganised': 'those who have not been able to organise in pursuit of a common objective' (*Report of the National Commission on Labour* 1969:417). The same source refers to a separate category of unprotected labour, found

particularly in larger cities. The only information given is that: 'very little is known about it and much less has been done to ameliorate its conditions of work' (Ibidem:434).

These descriptions include recognisable elements that have been given considerable attention in literature on the informal sector. In addition to the great diversity and irregularity of employment, the smallness of the work unit is noticeable: often no more than a single household or even one individual. Hart, in his pioneering essay, posited that the difference between the organised and unorganised sectors of urban employment coincided with wage labour versus self-employment. Many authors since have been inclined to see the informal sector as a collection of micro-entrepreneurs, people who work chiefly for their own account and at their own risk. Another noticeable factor is the predominance of activities in the tertiary sector of the economy, sometimes carried out in the open air. Apart from the heterogeneous mass working in the service sector, however, industrial work also forms an essential part of the informal sector economy. This refers to a type of industry that is mostly, if not always, carried out in closed spaces: in small workshops or, in the case of home workers, in premises that are also used for domestic purposes. Powerlooms, leather-working ateliers and diamond-cutting workshops are all prominent examples of small-scale industry in India, responsible for a very large share of total turnover in their particular branch.

What are the most obvious characteristics of these small-scale industries in the urban milieu? Firstly, the lack of complexity involved in the production process. The amount of invested capital is limited and does not allow the use of advanced technology. The work is far less divided into a system of interdependent tasks than in the formal economic sector. In other words, the organisation of the business is much flatter in character. Low capital intensity also restricts horizontal growth. The enterprises are fairly small, employing no more than a dozen or so workers, usually managed by one man. Wages are low, based not on total hours worked but on the amount produced. Piecework rather than an hourly rate is thus the measure for the sum that workers receive periodically, usually weekly, from their employer. The workplace is a modest shop or shed. Although the workers go there daily, they derive no rights from their regular employment. The employer is free to terminate or interrupt the employment at any given moment. The latter may be due to seasonal fluctuations that occur each year, or to an abrupt breakdown in power supplies, problems with the supply of raw materials or with sales of the product. Even when the industrial cycle is not characterised by such freakish behaviour, the employer retains the right to sack his workers on-the-spot, whether or not they are replaced by others.

This state of affairs shows that the workers are not protected by legal regulations. Such rules do exist but, not least due to the legislator's lack of will to exercise reasonably effective control over their fulfilment, are circumvented by employers as a matter of course and with great

ease (Breman 1996:177-221). The workers are penalised, not only by their employment conditions: wage level, payment method, working hours, vacations, social provisions, etc., but also by the lack of any directives to guarantee their safety and to prevent their health being affected during and through the production process.

The unprotected nature of labour is closely linked to the inability of this major part of the workforce to reduce its vulnerability by forming a communal front. Trade unions are rarely found in the landscape of informal sector labour. In fact, this defencelessness, together with their own non-compliance with various government measures, is an important reason why employers keep their enterprises out of the formal sector of the economy.

Industrial enterprises such as those described above employ masses of workers who, in numbers at least, far exceed the total workforce in the formal sector of the economy. Home-workers form a third category of industrial workers and represent the least visible but most vulnerable part of the entire labour force. The lack of adequate and reliable quantitative research means that their numbers can only be estimated. One problem in this connection is that home-work is rarely a full-time activity but is one that occupies more than one household member in varying degrees of frequency and intensity. As a result, far more women and children are involved in this work process. Under this putting-out system, an obstinately surviving form of work whose history dates back to pre-capitalist times, raw materials are brought to the home of the producer and finished products are returned to the supplier or his agent. Production requires only simple tools, if any at all. Lace and brocade, tricot, carpets and *bidis*, for example, are mostly manufactured in this way; home-workers also assemble parts into final products, ranging from toys to furniture and clothing.

The degree of education required for industrial work in the informal sector of the economy varies considerably, but in general, access to a trade is not tied to formal education. While applicants for factory work in the formal sector are expected to have at least a diploma from an Industrial Training Institute, a long-term training course that follows completion of elementary and secondary school, informal sector workers learn on-the-job. Sometimes they follow an apprenticeship lasting a few months, but more usually they learn by helping an experienced worker. During this training phase the newcomer is paid little if any wage; if he does get anything, he is expected to give part of it to his instructor. If skill is required, as in the case of diamond-cutting, the employer only takes on apprentices who are prepared to pay for their training or who will commit themselves to work long-term for him after its completion. Informal sector workers are not known for any high degree of skill. According to some authors, newcomers to the urban milieu do not need technical knowledge so much as dexterity.

... although the vast majority of the urban labour force is unskilled, urban employment may require certain patterns of coordination and motor responses which differ from traditional agriculture and thus influence the possibilities of commitment [...]. There may be need for more rhythm and monotonous repetition, coordination, careful timing, and higher levels of spatial, verbal or logical conception. (Kanappan 1970:321)

Discipline, it seems, is a virtue that informal sector workers also need to learn. This point of view shows complete ignorance of demands made on workers in the rural economy, regardless of whether they own a small plot of land or are landless. In addition, however, it under-estimates the division of work pertaining in industrial production in the informal sector and the technical skill that is needed.

Wage labour is not only the principle on which capitalist enterprises in the formal sector are organised, but it is also the predominant mode in the informal sector. On further analysis, what is usually called 'self-employment' proves to equate with payment agreements that only ostensibly tally with that which is understood as 'work on own account'. Sub-contracting, and payment with a round sum for other production tasks, e.g. job work, seem to me to be indirect wage agreements in the sense that they are mediated. It is then incorrect to include such transactions under micro-entrepreneurship in that the reasonable degree of independence and freedom to act, normally associated with that concept, are lacking.

Contracting and sub-contracting of industrial production in the informal sector are coupled with the activities of middlemen. Such people form the link between providers of capital in the form of raw materials or semi-products, sometimes also tools, and workers whose labour adds value to them. Labour brokers are found in all shapes and forms. Within their field of operations they fill a particular niche which allows them some latitude. They are responsible for ensuring that the work is done and for regulating payment after its completion.

Large establishments give out contracts of jobs or of particular operations, e.g. loading and unloading, to contractors on a lump-sum payment. The contractor engages his own workers. The contractor can be an individual or an establishment or even a senior worker like a maistry or a mukadam or a sirdar. (*Report NCL 1969:418*)

Sometimes the entire production process is divided into a number of components. What seems to be a factory in the formal sector, i.e. a large workplace filled with machinery and with a few hundred workers, proves on further inspection to be an enterprise organised on a completely informal basis. This can be exemplified by the dyeing-and-printing mills in Surat

(Breman 1996:158). Work teams are led by sub-contractors who also act as labour jobbers and supervisors. The factory owner has nothing to do with recruitment of the workforce and accepts no responsibility for conditions of employment. Labour jobbers have thus not disappeared from the industrial economy; on the contrary, they are still emphatically present in the informal sector where they fill a key position.

What is the social identity of industrial workers in the informal sector? The stereotype image holds that they are migrants who have only recently left the countryside and who came to the city in the search for a better existence. This is true to a certain extent. Many home-workers and workers in small businesses originated from outside the city. Their outsider status is in fact an important reason why employers prefer them. A high percentage of newcomers are males amongst whom the younger age categories are strongly over-represented. The lack of adequate and affordable housing forces even married men to leave their families in the village. The bachelor life characteristic of many migrants causes them to congregate in groups in accommodation that serves primarily for sleeping in. The enormous leap forwards made by the informal sector economy has given urban streets a strongly masculine appearance. At the same time, however, the informal sector is certainly not the exclusive domain of migrants. Research has shown repeatedly that the mass of workers in the lower levels of the economy include many who were born and grew up in the city. As in the formal sector, the work that they do has frequently been handed down by the preceding generation.<

From which castes do informal sector workers come? The diversity is great and there is no basis for the assumption that members of higher castes avoid such work as much as possible. Nevertheless, social origins frequently determine the type of work that is carried out. The informal sector is not homogeneous but can be broken down into various branches. Without doubt, access to work in those branches is connected to caste membership. That applies also to better-skilled and better-paid tasks, including industrial work. In recruitment for such work the middle and lower castes seem to be strongly represented. Workers for the most humble and miserable forms of informal sector work, people who roam the streets and open-air workplaces, are mostly recruited from the lowest ranks of the caste hierarchy.

Notwithstanding the unequal sex ratio of the urban population, women's participation in the work process in the informal sector is far greater than in the formal sector. Child labour is also commonly found. The nuclear family is a normal household unit, but the income needed by the family can only be obtained if use is made of the labour power of as many family members as possible, both adults and children. The number of non-working members per household is lower than in the formal sector. The participation of women and children in industrial work, however, does not signify that the balance of power in their households is more equally distributed. The

fact that the man is no longer the sole or principal breadwinner seems to have little effect on his dominance. Skilled tasks, insofar as these occur, are carried out by the man. The time and effort involved in the help given by his wife and children may be no less than his own, but are remunerated at a far lower level. The wage earned by all family members is often paid to the man, who also decides how the money is to be used. As head of the household his role with regard to other family members may be compared to the labour jobber's behaviour towards his workgang.

The notion soon appeared that industry and industrial work are intrinsically linked to urban locations; even now it seems to have lost little of its persuasiveness. If the transition from an agrarian to an industrial society was to be realised, a large part of the population had no alternative but to leave their villages and to settle in the cities. More than a century ago, in 1881, Ranade wrote:

There is a superfluity of agricultural labour in the agricultural labour market and unless that is removed from it and employed elsewhere, no remedial measure to improve the wretched condition of the agriculturalist will be productive of permanent good results. The development of agriculture and mechanical industry must be simultaneous. (cited in Chandra 1966:494)

Spatial movement on a large scale was a necessary precondition to this scenario of changing work practices. Pant estimated surplus peasant labour to represent one-quarter to one-third of the total; from that he deduced that roughly 33 million workers would have to leave the countryside, together with their families (Pant 1965:362). After Independence, scepticism regarding the will of the people to do this voluntarily caused policy advisers to suggest the setting-up of Migration Boards whose task was to be to encourage migration away from agriculture and the village (Papola et al.1993:45). Only later was it realised that the sluggish growth in production and the continued or even increasing lack of employment could not be solved unilaterally by an urban industrialisation process.

The facile identification of countryside with agriculture needs to be corrected, even historically. Since its origins, plantation production has been characterised by an industrial work regime, as also has mining. The same or similar rules were applied to plantation coolies and mineworkers as to urban factory workers. It requires little imagination to recognise the industrial organisation of these large-scale and labour-intensive enterprises as being the rural variant of the formal sector economy. During the last half-century modern industrial enterprises have been set up here and there in the countryside which are strongly capital-intensive by nature. For example, a major chemical concern chose to site its new works in a rural location along the Mumbai-Surat

railway line. A small town has sprung up around the factory in which high-ranking staff and skilled specialists have settled. However, two-thirds of almost 4000 workers employed by the factory in 1969 had to commute daily to their work from surrounding small towns and villages (Kapadia & Pillai 1972). Employment conditions in this large enterprise do not deviate from those described for the urban formal sector. That in no way applies to craftsmen working in the villages. Attempts to maintain this traditional form of production, or to reactivate it in according to Gandhian precepts, have almost always resulted in total failure. Traditional cottage industries could not compete with the capitalist mode of employment that had gradually gained ground, neither could they cope with the competition of mass-produced goods.

The break-through in agrarian production which started in the 1960s was coupled with diversification of the rural economy, a tendency which it also helped to strengthen. The slowly decreasing significance of agriculture as the only or at least principal source of livelihood was contrasted with the increase in employment in other economic sectors. This applied particularly to transport, building and the service sector, but also to the rise of new industrial employment opportunities in the countryside based on capital and entrepreneurship derived from agriculture (see e.g. Rutten 1994).

The government's industrialisation policy encourages the establishment of both large and small industries away from principal cities. This has led to the creation of industrial estates, mostly on the edges of secondary or tertiary urban nuclei, whose workers come partly from surrounding villages. The labour regime in such enterprises is similar to that of average informal sector practices in the urban milieu (Streefkerk 1985). The category of rural industries also includes enterprises that process agrarian produce. Some of these originated in the colonial or even pre-colonial era, e.g. cotton gins, jute presses, sugar mills and tanneries. However, the more recent expansion of these agro-industries into large-scale and technologically modern enterprises, for example for the production of sugar, paper and conserves, has not changed the informal nature of relations between employers and employees (Breman 1994:133-287).

Finally, I would draw attention to a few forms of rural industry that have been given little notice but which provide work to very many people throughout the country, namely, quarries and brickworks. Production is almost always small-scale in nature. During the last dozen years or so, however, its significance has grown considerably due to the enormous increase in public works and perhaps even more in the volume of private buildings, both urban and rural. A noticeable element regarding this industry is its season-linked character. The labour force consists mostly of migrant workers brought in from elsewhere, often over long distances, by labour-jobbers who also act as gang-leaders. The assumption that the import of alien labour is a necessary consequence of inadequate numbers of local workers is misconceived. In their turn, land-poor and landless peasants migrate from that same region during the agricultural off-season in order

to seek a livelihood far from home. They go to work as roadworkers, builders and cane-cutters, but also as brickmakers and quarrymen. Not migration but circulation forms the predominant pattern of employment in work that is temporary and carried out in the open air. Labour nomadism is by no means a new phenomenon, but its magnitude and the distances that have to be covered have strongly increased over time. Pant considered its presence as an expression of economic need, a symptom of social dislocation which would be brought to an end by the development process (Pant 1965:33-34). My own opinion is that this migration of temporary duration is very closely linked to the accelerated progress of the capitalist mode of production in the countryside (Breman 1985).

One factor that must not be forgotten in all this is that the situation of workers who remain behind in the villages is even worse. Wages paid to the landless who continue to depend on agriculture for their existence have fallen even further behind in the course of time. The people concerned are usually the most vulnerable: women, the aged, and all those whose health and fitness is affected in some way.

8. Structuring the Industrial Labour Market

I have earlier rejected the division of the industrial labour system into two segments, i.e. a formal and an informal sector, as being incorrect. The image of the citadel is nevertheless an attractive one because it illustrates the reality of a comfortable life enjoyed by a comparatively small minority but denied the far bigger majority. One glance over the high wall is sufficient to strengthen our understanding of privilege within a limited arena. Holmström found this view among industrial workers in the formal sector.

They tend to see factory work as a citadel of security and relative prosperity, which it is: it offers regular work and promotion and predictable rewards, as against the chaos and terrifying dangers of life outside. For everyone inside the citadel, there is a regiment outside trying to scale the walls. (Holmström 1976:136)

The dualistic model is thus made even more convincing by emphasising the extremes of working life and contrasting them with one another. Instead, I am inclined first to draw attention to the great diversity in modes of employment. Regularity characterises the lives of factory workers in regular employment. They are paid reasonably well, are adequately skilled, are protected by labour legislation, and have organised themselves so that their interests may be collectively served. Their modest welfare and security makes them credit-worthy; in other words,

they are able to incur debts without any immediate and far-reaching loss of independence. In their own eyes and in those of others, the manner in which they live and work provides these industrial workers with prestige and respect. The dignity that they thus achieve means that they can evade some activities of a dirty nature, and can also permit themselves to reject work even though this may mean a temporary loss of income. On the other hand, it also explains the desperate pursuit of the few positions that become vacant inside the citadel. At the start of 1995 the Kerala State Public Service Commission received 200,000 applications for 16 jobs as low-ranking government clerk (Venkata Ratnam 1996:361). My own research has shown that, to be considered for work as unskilled labourer by the large Atul concern, applicants are prepared after a long period of education, to pay an amount equal to twice or thrice (HOW MANY TIMES IS ENKELE?) the annual wage that they would receive after being accepted. The willingness to invest in protected work has to be understood from the fact that work requiring equal skill or degree of training, is paid two or three times more in the formal sector than in the informal.

This wage difference does not adequately express the distance involved, however. Other conditions of employment in the lower ranks of the economy also amount to a partial if not total reversal of labour relations in the formal sector. The workers are not in regular employment and can be dismissed arbitrarily. The production process is fairly irregular: its rhythm is subjected to severe and unexpected fluctuations, with the consequence that the size of the workforce varies while working times are less standardised. Exorbitantly long hours are interspersed with days of inactivity. This lack of stability gives rise to a circulation of labour among the numerous small enterprises belonging to a particular industrial branch. The unremitting flexibility shown by the workers is due to the manner in which production is organised and does not imply any lack of commitment such as that of which employees were accused by factory owners in the past. The state of flux that affects the larger part of the labour market is further emphasised by the custom of using workers from elsewhere. The greater vulnerability of these alien workers is a reason for employers to prefer them. Migration turns into circulation when the employment is of limited duration. A marked example of this is provided by the seasonal workers who leave their villages, often accompanied by wives and children, to escape the off-season in the agrarian cycle by working as cane-cutters or brickmakers. Occupational multiplicity is their only means of survival. The income earned by their labour power is so low that such households cannot permit themselves to exempt any members from work even for a short time, let alone a longer period. Even more than in the case of migrants, these circulants are subject to extreme vulnerability which prevents them from defending themselves in any crisis that they inevitably encounter: disease and death, old age, and the suffering of any sort of defect which prevents them to a greater or lesser degree from doing a full day's work.

It would be misleading, however, to examine only the contrasts occurring between the extremes of the labour system. The enormous diversity, not only between the formal and informal sectors but also within them, should above all be stressed. The distance between skilled workers regularly employed by a multinational enterprise and temporary factory workers who nevertheless belong to the citadel, is just as great as that to diamond cutters whom I consider as belonging to the top of the informal sector. The latter are equally elevated above brickworkers who work as agricultural labourers for part of the year. A unidimensional hierarchical stratification does not exist in all respects. The annual income of experienced diamond cutters is higher than that of temporary factory workers in the formal sector. The confusing heterogeneity, however, applies above all to the broad social middle class. From top to bottom of the labour system it is expressed in a composite set of arrangements that guarantee maximal security and accumulated dependency respectively.

The dignity inherent to work in the formal sector changes into the ever-increasing lack of it in the lower economic ranks. At the bottom of the informal sector may be found a mass of people who may be qualified as coolies. Government has deleted this term from its word usage owing to the denigration it is said to imply (*Report NCL 1969:31,n.2*). Nevertheless, for this sort of nomadic labour, circulating among varying locations and occupations and fobbed-off with wages that are close to or even below subsistence level, continued use of this officially-banned concept is justified in every way. In addition to intense poverty, coolie life is characterised by heavy work accompanied by sweat and physical exhaustion. The odium of untouchability is intensified by stench, noise and filth that cause work to become a hell. Such workers are rapidly worn-out in the production process and, as their productivity decreases, are discarded as waste.

Finally, the lack of choice available to the workers also contributes to the inferiority of life in the informal sector. Incomes are both low and uncertain, with the result that the autonomy of these industrial workers is narrowly confined. Not only do they lack any savings with which to meet all sorts of expected and unexpected expenditure, but they have little creditworthiness. Neither the granter nor the receiver of financial aid can be certain whether and when repayment would be possible. The labour power of the borrower is the only available collateral for any loan. Work in dependency, expressed in a debt relationship, is a common phenomenon in the informal sector milieu. Employers incline to present such an arrangement as an advance on wages that is to be repaid with the labour of the borrower. Such advance payment, however, is intended to appropriate that labour, whether immediately or later. Neither party sees the transaction as a loan that will be terminated on repayment.

Debt bondage is anything but a new phenomenon. In the past it was the customary manner by which landless low-caste workers were bound to landowning households belonging

to higher castes. This master-serf relationship in the agricultural economy was a common occurrence in quite different parts of the South Asian continent. My own fieldwork in South Gujarat has brought me to typify such bondage, known there as *halipratha*, as a pre-capitalist system of tied labour (Breman 1974). Its characteristics were, firstly, that the contract was life-long. Vassalage usually continued from father to son and was sometimes maintained for generations. Secondly, the landowner appropriated more than just the labour power of his servant (and his family members). He demanded a broad range of activities, both economic and non-economic by nature, that demonstrated the subjugation of his *hali*. As client, the latter had to do everything required of him by his patron. Such serfdom stressed the social inequality between the parties. Thirdly, his containment in the master's household forced immobility on the servant. The only way in which he could escape his subjugation was to flee. The exercise of extra-economic pressure was inherent to the effectiveness of the *hali* system. Moreover, if a serf were to abscond, the master could count on help from local government officials in tracing him and bringing him back.

It is important to keep in mind the social context in which this master-serf relationship occurred, namely, a rural community of strongly closed character whose agrarian economy was based primarily on subsistence production. A comprehensive process of change led to the erosion and ultimate disappearance of the *hali* system as the institutionalised bondage relationship between members of the dominant landowning castes on the one hand and those of the tribal landless castes on the other. That disintegration occurred over a considerable period of time and lasted until roughly the middle of the present century (Breman 1974:68). I found numerous traces of the earlier system during my own fieldwork in the early 1960s. That work started, however, with the question of which labour relations had taken its place. That a definite change had occurred had been shown by the findings of many other researchers. In a work published in 1968 under the title *The Emergence of Capitalist Agriculture in India*, Thorner concluded that:

[...] the various forms of bondage and unfree labour services which were formerly rampant in many parts of India, have now virtually disappeared, except in States still notorious for this, as parts of Bihar and adjacent areas. (Thorner 1980:246, and 236)

In the reporting on my initial fieldwork I stated that, although the *hali* system indeed no longer existed, in the transition to agrarian capitalism the bondage of farm labourers had certainly not been changed into a free labour system. They continued to be indebted to the landowners and were therefore unable to hire-out their labour power to other employers, whether in or out of agriculture. Although sometimes with reluctance in view of the risks involved, landowners continued to wield the payment of an advance as a means by which to immobilise their permanent

workers. Nevertheless, it is my opinion that their relationship has undergone fundamental change. For a start, the percentage of day labourers among agricultural workers has risen strongly. In addition, present-day workers differ essentially from the *halis* of pre-capitalist times. Their state of indebtedness does not alter the fact that the exercise of power by landowners has been checked. The term of servitude is shorter and restricted to the work sphere, while the use of extra-economic coercion with which to ensure compliance with the agreement entered into is contrary both to the law and to the virtual inability of landowners to enforce their authority. The servant is no longer confined to his employer's household. The housing of landless people in their own districts has reduced their dependency, while the greater opportunities of finding work away from agriculture and the village has stimulated their mobility. In this respect my opinion differs fundamentally from that of Brass, according to whom landworkers who have incurred debts are exposed to the same unfree regime that existed in the past. The argument that, irrespective of which shade of meaning is applied, very significant changes have been brought about in the social relations of production, is rejected forcefully by that author. This forms a focal point of his *ad hominem*-tinted sallies against me (Brass 1997).

The reduced frequency and intensity of extra-economic coercion in particular has caused me, similarly to several other authors (e.g. Rudra 1978, Omvedt 1981), to doubt whether the term 'bonded labour' is applicable to present-day landworkers. I have shown that the indebtedness of labour is caused by lack of work in combination with under-payment, and that it is not the result of total subordination of the landless to the rule of the landowner (Breman 1985:311-12). Rudra adds that it is not the length of the commitment that determines whether there is evidence of feudal or capitalist relations of production, but rather the nature of the work demanded. In the first case this would include a wide range of indefinable obligations, while in the latter case both type and content would be more specified (Rudra 1978:966). I have summarised the difference between past and present as follows.

[...] the present situation differs from the earlier one in that the present-day worker who enters into debt repays it with labour power without subjecting himself in any other respect and unconditionally to the will of the 'master'. In comparison with the servitude of former times, the present arrangement is more restricted in nature. The employer is primarily interested in attaching labour, no less but also not much more than that. Although traces of servitude are certainly present in cases of long-term employment, the lack of freedom that formerly existed in my fieldwork villages has lost its social legitimacy. (Breman 1996:163)

The opinion that I voiced in 1985 to the effect that indebtedness should not be equated with bondage arose from the emphasis that I wished to place on the transformation that had occurred in the agricultural economy. Without wishing to detract from the significance of that change process, I have pointed out in both earlier and later publications that '[...] a capitalist mode of production [...] by no means precludes certain forms of absence of freedom, emanating for example from the necessity to enter into debt' (Bremans 1978:1350; see also 1988:21).

Indebtedness continues to be a crucial aspect of the capitalist work regime which I have ultimately defined as new or neo-bondage. It is a mode of employment that is not restricted to the still shrinking category of landworkers. Similar arrangements also characterise a great diversity of industrial labour in the informal sector of both the rural and urban economies. Men, women and children recruited for cane-cutting or brickmaking receive through the labour jobber a sum of money which binds this army of migrants to the place of employment for the season's duration, a period ranging from six to eight months. Payment of an advance is intended to force them into spatial mobility, although in such a way that they are prevented from withdrawing prematurely from their agreement. To ensure immobilisation of the floating workforce for the duration of the production process, payment of the wage was deferred until the season ended. The more skilled and also better paid urban workers, such as powerloom operators and diamond-cutters, could also obtain 'loans' from their employer, in exchange for which they lost all disposition over their own labour power.

The new bondage regime differed from the traditional one in terms of the short duration of the agreement (often for no longer than one season), its more specific character (labour and nothing more) and finally, its easier termination (even without repayment of the debt). The far greater risk of breach of contract discourages employers from being imprudent and generous in granting an advance on wages. It is difficult to recoup losses made in this way and it is useless to appeal to the authorities for help in punishing the transgressors. Present-day bosses lack the natural superiority which, in the past, made it unthinkable that a contract should be broken. In many cases the social identity of the employer is the same as that of the employee. The labour jobber originates from the same milieu as the members of the gang that he recruits for work in the canefields or brickworks, while the owner of a diamond-cutting workshop belongs to the same caste as the cutters who work for him. Finally, I might refer obliquely to the fact that the new regime of bondage through debt applies not only to workers but that it also extends to employers in the informal sector. Labour jobbers are indebted to those who give them their assignment, just as owners of powerloom workshops and diamond-cutting workshops are dependent on traders. This shows that not only labour relations but the entire organisation of industrial production in the informal sector is strongly mercantile-capitalist by nature. The difference is that, contrary to

their workers, bosses are not obliged to hire-out their labour power in order to redeem their debts.

I have repeatedly stressed that labour bondage then and now has a number of characteristics in common and that, if for that reason alone, the difference between the two can only be understood in the ideal-typical sense. It is also undeniable that employers in agriculture and industry make use of pre-capitalist mechanisms of subordination, whether or not in transmuted form, in order to keep wage costs down in a production process that answers to the demands of capitalist management. Ramachandran, who verifies this, first remarks that the difference between bonded and free labour cannot be reduced to a simple black-and-white contrast. Social reality is far more complicated and thus demands a more qualified interpretation. This brings him to the following conclusion, which is supported by the results of my own research.

The unfreedom of workers who were neither bonded nor completely free to choose their employers took different forms, their freedom to choose employers was circumscribed in different ways and in different degrees. The most common manifestation of this kind of unfreedom was what has been called the right of first call of employers over workers. (Ramachandran 1990:252)

The indebtedness that prevents workers from being able to do as they please robs them of the dignity inherent to freedom. In addition to defending the proposition, with more obstinacy than plausibility, that unfree labour arrangements in agriculture are increasing rather than decreasing, Brass also opines that workers in a debt-dependency relationship have lost their proletarian status. Under the de-proletarianisation process that he considers to be in progress, he understands 'replacing free workers with unfree equivalents or by converting the former into the latter' (Brass 1997:348). This suggests that present-day debt-bonded workers would formerly, as genuine proletarians, have had freedom of choice over use of their labour power. Such reasoning implies that a process of capitalist transformation is in progress in the Indian countryside in which free labour is disappearing to make place for a regime of unfreedom. In fact the trend is rather the reverse.

In a number of publications I have drawn attention to growing assertiveness in the landless milieu as a characteristic of proletarian conscientisation. Undoubtedly, labourers who work each day for the same landowner are still frequently bonded through debt. Among the younger generation, however, the submissive attitude with which this was accompanied in the past has made way for far greater independence. Are we to deduce from this change that the former *halis* were inclined to resign themselves to their subjugation or perhaps had even internalised their state of dependency? The lack of any contemporary material that is reasonably trustworthy and

detailed makes it difficult to form any opinion retrospectively on this question. Nevertheless, there are sufficient signs that there was no lack of resistance to the claim to superiority with which landowners customarily stressed their dominance. In the context of a more or less closed rural economy, however, such resistance could easily be nipped in the bud. That this is now far more difficult to accomplish follows from the ever-growing significance of other sectors than agriculture. The increase in sources of livelihood together with greater scope caused by the coming of modern transport and the consequent ease with which it is possible to leave the village for a shorter or longer period, means that the landless are now less obliged to act in compliance with directives laid down by the landowners. The traditional power of the latter was founded on the application of preventive and repressive sanctions for which there is no legal basis in the new political order. Pressurised by changes in living conditions, the supremacy of farmer-landowners has come to an end and the landless have freed themselves from the stigma of inferiority. One way in which this is expressed is their resistance to any form of unfree labour that is accompanied by a debt relationship. Brass casts doubt on this growing resistance from below and also points out that it has little effectiveness. Referring to my own writings on the subject, Brass writes: 'the "from above" power of the economic relationship invariably overrides any manifestation of "from-below" resistance' (Brass 1997:347). However, I do not regard the success of resistance as an effective measure with which to determine the degree of proletarian conscientisation. Neither am I inclined to make the existence of that mentality dependent upon collective action that develops into class conflict. The situation that has developed is, in my opinion, clarified in the following.

The need to accept a cash advance on wages entails the obligation to subject oneself to the orders of an employer for the direct future. Back payment has a similar binding effect. The loss of independence that adheres to such a labour contract explains why it is only entered into through lack of a better alternative. That so many nevertheless have recourse to this last resort of employment indicates the enormous pressure on resources of livelihood in the bottom echelons of the economy. Even that disenfranchisement is subjected to restrictions of durability, range and intensity. The work agreement is not entered into and continued for an indefinite time, as was the case with the *hali* of former times. The neo-bondage is further strongly economic in nature and restricts the imposition of the employer's will and his claims of superiority *per se*. The behaviour of wage hunters and gatherers not only expresses their longing for material improvement, but also manifests their basic unwillingness to seek security in bondage. There is a type of social consciousness that might be expected from the proletarian class. (Breman 1996:237)

This applies not only to agricultural labourers in the villages of South Gujarat but also to industrial labourers who move in the informal sector of the economy. This footloose proletariat adopts various ways by which to resist employers' endeavours to appropriate their labour power through indebtedness. Labourers do not hesitate to leave without notice if the employer or the work itself is found too oppressive, and certainly do so if the opportunity arises to do the same or other work for a higher wage. Creditors lack the power to prolong the contract until the debt has been repaid. They are no longer able to call on the authorities for help, and employers' attempts to exclude 'defaulters' from further employment usually fail due to their mutual rivalry. In brief, the loss of bonded labour's social legitimacy means that he who pays an advance is no longer assured that the promised labour power will be provided. The chance that compliance with the contract will be enforced does not necessarily increase as the social gap between the two parties widens. The labour-jobber, who belongs to the same milieu as the worker, is more effective than the employer in this respect. Even more effective than the labour-jobber is the head of household who does not shrink from using strong-arm tactics in forcing his wife and children to co-operate.

The practice of escape and subordination shows great diversity. Earlier, I have attributed occupational multiplicity to the lack of permanent employment in any particular branch of industry. Frequent changes of job and workplace, however, can also indicate a strategy by which to avoid confinement to a single source of livelihood. For example, when the man migrates alone this may be due to his wish to protect his family members from the dependency and lack of respectability inherent to life in the informal sector far away from home. Similarly, I am not inclined to see labour circulation exclusively as indicating fluctuations in the supply of work. The refusal to continue a contract indefinitely is also founded on protest against a merciless work regime. I have also suggested that self-employment is primarily a conscious attempt to avoid normal entrepreneurial labour risks. The self-exploitation that results from this mode of payment, however, gives an advantage to the most skilled and most hardened of industrial workers, providing them with a degree of autonomy far exceeding that of workers in regular waged-employment.

There is little documented evidence of practical resistance in the form of collective action, although this is a common occurrence. The study of industrial agitation is unjustly restricted mostly to the formal economic sector. Strikes are usually of short duration and restricted in range. Their spontaneity and local character indicate a lack of organisational experience. The fragmentation of the workforce, dispersed over numerous small firms, also inhibits the mobilisation of greater support.

Given the vulnerability of industrial employment in the informal sector and the dependency mechanisms inherent to it, it is not surprising that resistance is mostly of an individual nature. I

consider this to include the broad range of inertia, apparent lack of understanding, deviation, withdrawal, sabotage, obstruction, etc. It is a type of behaviour that gives nomadic labour the reputation of being unpredictable, impulsive, and liable to abandon work without reason. Such complaints are put forward by employers in censuring the lack of commitment and discipline on the part of wage hunters and gatherers. Seen from another angle, this escapist attitude arises from an attempt to obtain or maintain a fragile dignity. There is a degree of solidarity, but its boundaries are not based on any realisation that they all belong to an undivided working class.

Employers make use of primordial ties with which to exercise control over labour for shorter or longer time periods. Conversely, such parochial attachments are equally important for the mass of workers to optimize its resistance and manoeuvrability. Although this is not necessarily expressed in a generalized horizontal solidarity, i.e. manifest in class organization and action, nomadic workers nevertheless show signs of social consciousness which is essentially proletarian in nature. In my opinion, their mental make-up and lifestyle are indicative of the capitalist basis of the economy, in both its urban and rural manifestations. (Breman 1996:21)

More research into the multiple identities of workers in the informal and formal sectors of the economy is urgently necessary. The facile conclusion that all social formations that deviate from unadulterated class alliance are guilty of false consciousness, does not evidence much understanding for the complicated conditions that determine the changing and fragile existence of wage labour in India at the end of the 20th century. The social movements that increasingly manifest themselves at the foot of society give voice, both within and outside the work sphere, to endeavours to achieve emancipation and, more particularly, to deny inequality as being a principle of social organisation.

I have rejected the proposition that economic activity and accompanying labour relations separate into two sectors. The theory of economic dualism can again be split into two variants. The first emphasises that both segments are more or less independent of one another and that each has its own propensities and patterns. The second suggests an hierarchical stratification whereby the informal sector is subordinate to, and exploited by, the formal sector. The protection enjoyed by the well-organised higher circuit, not least including the workers employed therein, is at the expense of the far greater mass of producers and consumers in the lower circuit. Their subordination and deprivation continues and is a direct consequence of the preferential treatment enjoyed by a comparatively small but powerful upper layer. Das has written a critical article on theoreticians who defend this dualistic model.

The basic argument of such rightist attacks on the industrial workers organised in trade unions is that they are a small minority of the total population who are being paid disproportionately high wages because of the strong bargaining position they have entrenched themselves in owing to the 'monopoly of labour' which they have established in league with 'monopoly capital', and hence they are the prime villains in the process of exploitation from which other sections of the population, notably peasants, suffer. (Das 1983:171; see also Holmström 1984: 17-18 and Papola et al.1993:271-72)

The attraction of dichotomous constructions is that their characteristics may always be recognised in social reality. The wage earned from industrial work in the formal sector can be increased by searching for extra opportunities outside it. It not infrequently happens that the worker who has a job on-the-side can provide work for a shorter or longer period for casual workers in the informal economic sector. In my opinion, such practices illustrate the interconnectedness between the formal and the informal sector rather than the exploitation of the latter by the former. This opinion is supported by analyses of the multiform use of labour in working-class households. These show, namely, that members of such living-cum-working units are active in both sectors (Holmström 1976:56,77; 1984:261; U.Ramaswamy 1983:30-35). In my interpretative framework, therefore, prime place is given not to the division of the sectors but to their mutual inter-penetration. Heterogeneity is characteristic of the economic order, and this applies to both sides of the demarcation line that is drawn fairly arbitrarily between the formal and informal sectors. In terms of labour this signifies a complex and strongly fragmented landscape in which an extensive plain of informal work is interrupted by smaller and larger hills of formal employment. The continuing mobility of the workforce, the enormous crush on the routes between plain and hills and *vice versa*, further add to the confusing image offered by this terrain. The industrial labour market evinces great differentiation but, taken as a whole, is in a state of flux.

The protection given to the organised segment of industrial labour dates from a period when the state attempted to accelerate the growth process through systematic planning. Even then, political priority was given to capital accumulation. The safeguarding and promotion of this factor of production demanded that industrial peace be ensured. At that time, the motivation for regulating conditions of employment with the aid of legislation was not so much the existing power of organised labour as the anticipated increase therein in the near future. The stagnation which soon occurred in expansion of the formal economic sector brought re-evaluation of the need to extend the protection of labour, as a concomitant aspect of that stagnation, to an ever greater part of the working population. However, the scenario that provided for the transition of workers from informal sector workshops to modern factories where they would increase their

skills and become accustomed to industrial life, was never implemented. The expansion of formal sector employment was not able to keep pace with the growth of the working population.

What is the relative significance of the two sectors and what shifts between them have occurred over the years? Reliable statistics are lacking and estimates vary for the different branches of economic activity. In 1961, according to Joshi & Joshi, half of Bombay's working population belonged to the informal sector. For industrial workers, however, the percentage was far lower, namely about 30 percent. Of the great majority of industrial workers who were covered by labour legislation, three-fifths were employed in the hundreds of textile mills in the city (Joshi & Joshi 1976:49-50). Ten years later, according to the same authors, industrial activity with a formal sector character had increased but had not been able to prevent a considerable upwards leap of the relative share of similar activity in the informal sector (Ibid.:57-66).

In my opinion these estimates of the magnitude of employment in the formal sector for the years in question are rather exaggerated. Nevertheless, the trend can only be explained in one way: a gradually decreasing percentage of industrial workers lead a formal sector existence. There is ample evidence to justify the conclusion that these dynamics were not restricted to Bombay but also appeared elsewhere in the land. Holmström considers that less than half the total stock of industrial workers are employed in the formal sector (Holmström 1984:149). I calculate the percentage at present to be no more than 10 to 15 per hundred. The remainder may be divided roughly into two sections: (i) those who, as unprotected but regular workers though always under the threat of on-the-spot dismissal, are consigned for indefinite periods to small-scale workplaces (approx. 60 per hundred); and (ii) those who earn their living as casual workers in the open air or at home, or as nomadic labour in seasonal industries (approx. 25-30 per hundred). To this I would add that such a sub-division is also perceivable in other industrial branches within the informal sector, e.g. trade, transport and services, but that these segments are of different relative strength. Fairly constant in almost all important branches of industry, however, is the minuteness of formal sector employment. It seems self-evident that future research into industrial labour relations should concentrate on the dominant middle category.

The history of the industrialisation process suggests an evolution that ultimately finds completion as the greater majority of the working population comes to work in the factories. This is the classic model of economic development devised by the societies of the west. The capitalist route followed in India during the second half of the 20th century has clearly not been in accordance with that model, however. The importance of agriculture has certainly gradually declined, but the labour expelled from primary production in the countryside has not been steadily taken up by urban factories. The path towards industrial capitalism took a different course. We have concluded above that expansion of the formal sector has lagged behind that of the informal sector. It is hardly exaggerated, however, to speak of a process of informalisation. While the so-

called 'normal' transition to industrialism assumes the transfer of work at home, i.e. the *Verlag* system, firstly to workshops and then to concentration in large-scale factories, the trend seems to have been the reverse in a number of branches of industry in India. The abrupt interruption in Bombay's formal sector growth during the last quarter-century was caused by suspension of industrial textile production. Powerlooms were removed from factories and installed in small workplaces elsewhere, often in other cities. In these new locations the machines are served by informal sector labour (Bremner 1996). Patel has investigated the consequences of the closure of cotton mills in Ahmedabad, the town that was formerly known as the Manchester of India. Dismissed workers now have to depend on the informal sector for their livelihood. A great many of them still manufacture cotton, but now in casual employment by small firms and for half the wage that they earned in the mills. They have also lost the social provisions and legal protection that lent respectability to their former lives (Patel 1988). Regression in the industrial work regime can go even further. In a few places in South India *beedi* were usually rolled in small factories. Their closure and the farming-out of production to home-workers occurred in one case after a strike, and in a second case shortly after the introduction of legal measures intended to improve working conditions in this small-scale industry (Avachat 1978; Mohandas 1980). De-regulation of industrial labour relations is not only a strong trend in private sector business activity but also occurs in employment in the public sector. In the steel cities that have sprung up in India, access to guaranteed and protected work is denied to increasing numbers of the population.

[...] as time went on, the steel plants employed considerable and increasing quantities of labour from outside the organised sector. Having built a reserve by creating a labour duality in these locations, they went on to exploit it [...]. Up to 20 per cent of the labour force at any time consisted of contract labour (and a far greater proportion at times of major capacity expansion). This labour was not given any of the facilities enjoyed by the permanent core. Nor was it unionised. Furthermore, the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes were heavily represented in it. (Crook 1993:349-50)

Will the concentration of capital and labour in ever larger-scale forms of industry eventually make way for dispersion over ever smaller units? That seems extremely improbable in view of the fact that modern industrial production demands both high-grade technology and a labour specialisation that cannot easily be divided and dispersed over an infinite number of micro-locations. A combination of various forms of industrial production, ranging from factory to home-work whether or not united under one boss, seems more feasible (Singh 1990). Profound attention should be given to study of the political economy of this integration.

Against the background of the globalisation of the economy, it is important to keep the international context in mind when studying industrial work and labour in India. Prominent international institutions show very considerable interest in the course taken by the industrial transformation process in India. The World Bank has shown itself to be an outspoken advocate of the dismantling of labour legislation and social provisions that are inherent to employment in the informal sector. Its reports make it known that India, by choosing liberalisation, is at last taking the right path but that, in the deregulation of industrial labour relations, a great deal must still be done. These are no gratuitous signs. After all, the programmes of structural adaptation provide the Bank with the opportunity to force India to take the desired course. Contractualisation, mobilisation, casualisation, are all modes of employment that fit into the suggested policy of flexibilisation. I attach to this the conclusion that there is little reason for optimism regarding a speedy improvement to the lives of the richly variegated and rapidly growing mass of industrial workers.

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