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Lords of labour: Working and shirking in Bhilai

Jonathan P. Parry

At the ethnographic level this paper discusses work and work-groups in the company town of Bhilai (Madhya Pradesh). Though its central focus is on those who have permanent jobs with the Bhilai Steel Plant, a large-scale public sector enterprise, brief comparison is made with current attitudes to peasant agriculture, with contract labour in the plant and with workers in the private sector. At an analytical level, it offers a critique of E.P. Thompson's thesis that modern machine production requires and promotes a new concept of time and a new kind of work discipline, arguing that this thesis not only romanticises task-oriented peasant agriculture but also effaces the extremely variable nature of industrial production. It further suggests that—at least here—public sector employment serves in significant measure as a 'melting-pot' which creates important solidarities between work-mates that transcend the barriers of caste, religion and regional ethnicity, whereas recruitment procedures and the composition of work-groups in the private sector have tended to reproduce such 'primordial' loyalties. The tentative hypothesis is that the dominance of the public sector is not unrelated to Bhilai's history of relative communal harmony, which is potentially threatened by current economic and policy trends.

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I

Preamble

According to the argument of one of E.P. Thompson's best-known essays (1991[1967]), modern machine production requires and promotes a new concept of time and a new kind of work discipline. In the pre-industrial world, work is task-oriented and governed by the rhythms of nature. The working day expands or contracts according to the task in hand, and bouts of intense labour alternate with long periods of idleness. But this 'more humanly comprehensible' world in which 'social intercourse and labour are intermingled' gives way to the (by implication inhumane) world of modern industry, which is governed by abstract clock-time, which imposes a new kind of work discipline, and which effects a new kind of differentiation between 'work' and 'life'. The main catalyst behind this revolutionary transformation is large-scale machine production which requires an elaborate synchronisation of tasks (and demands that the plant be kept in constant operation in order to repay the capital invested in it).

Akin to Thompson's contrast is the even broader opposition between production for use and production for exchange, which Sahlin (1972: chs 2 and 3) in turn associates with a radical difference in the intensities with which labour is utilised, and Terray (1975) with an equally sharp difference in the 'rate of exploitation'. In contrast to the old economy of use value in which labour tends to be under-utilised, the modern economy is one in which labour is used and exploited with a new intensity in the quest for unlimited exchange value.

Consistent with the second half of both dichotomies is a whole library portraying the 'human actuality' of modern factory production. Despite himself, Burawoy (1988) is co-opted through the game of 'making out' into cooperating with management in the production of greater surplus value by the pressure to fulfil or exceed his target quota ('to make out'). Success in the game is a mark of a man's worth amongst his peers, becomes an obsession, is the main topic of conversation on the shopfloor and is a sharp spur to frenetic productive endeavour. In a plant near Paris, Linhart (1985) solders the chassis of Citroen 2CVs—one every four or five minutes:

...as soon as a car enters a man's territory, he...gets to work. A few knocks, a few sparks, then the soldering's done and the car is already on its way.... And the worker starts again. Sometimes, if he has been working fast, he has a few seconds' respite...either he takes advantage

of it to breathe for a moment, or else he intensifies his effort and 'goes up the line' so that he can gain a little time. . . . After an hour or two he has amassed the incredible capital of two or three minutes in hand, that he'll use up smoking a cigarette, looking on like some comfortable man of means as his car moves past already soldered, keeping his hands in his pockets while the others are working. Short-live[d] happiness: the next car's already there. . . and the race begins again. . . . If, on the other hand, the worker's too slow, he 'slips back' And (now) the slow gliding of the cars. . . looks as relentless as a rushing torrent which you can't manage to dam up: eighteen inches, three feet, thirty seconds certainly behind time. . . the next one. . . coming forward with its mindless regularity and inert mass. . . sometimes it's as ghastly as drowning. . . (ibid.: 118–19).

Though several historians have sought to qualify Thompson's picture of a sharp break between the two types of productive regime,¹ much anthropological writing has appropriated Thompson uncritically. An exemplary instance is Ong's (1987) much-cited study of spirit possession amongst Malaysian factory women. Her story begins with the easy-going rhythms of 'traditional' kampong life where a young woman's work was supervised—if at all—by her female kin; where work was task-oriented and 'slow stretches of dull routine were lightened by songs and jokes. . .' (ibid.: 111). But this pastoral idyll is shattered by factory discipline, by the reduction of work to 'time-motion manipulations', and by the constant surveillance of male supervisors. What this dislocating experience provokes is a series of minor acts of resistance, of which seizure by ghosts is the most dramatic. And what these represent is a kind of ritual of rebellion 'against a loss of autonomy/humanity in work' (ibid.: 7), and 'a mode of unconscious retaliation' against male authority in human relations' (ibid.: 207).

I shall attempt to show that little in any of the foregoing rings true to my data. If I am to believe my informants, the old world of peasant production is far less benign than Thompson and Ong suggest; while much factory work cannot really be represented as the all-day everyday grind so vividly captured by the authors I've cited. Indeed, a good deal of

¹ By, for example, questioning the extent to which all peasant worlds really conform to his characterisation of them (e.g., Smith 1986); and by emphasising the obstacles which capital encountered in its attempt to impose a new kind of work discipline (e.g., Gutman 1988; Roberts 1992), the political and ideological—rather than purely economic—considerations that motivated it (Cooper 1992), and the uneven way in which the transition took place in different kinds of industries (Whipp 1987).

it is better described as consisting in long fallow periods of comparative idleness punctuated by bouts of intense activity—in the very terms which Thompson used to characterise task-oriented pre-industrial production. Nor do I see any clear evidence of a sharpening division between ‘work’ and ‘life’. Significant numbers of industrial workers in certain niches of the labour market appear to be no less leisured than Sahlins’s proverbially leisured hunter-gatherers (1972: ch. 1), and it is not obvious that the shift from production for use to production for exchange has been accompanied by any marked intensification of labour.

My ethnographic focus is on a notoriously leisured segment of the Indian labour force, workers in a large-scale public sector enterprise. But in drawing attention to the staccato character of their productive activities it is not my intention to swell the chorus which calls for their privatisation. A second theme of my paper has to do with the contrast between the way in which labour is recruited and deployed in public and private sector factories, and between their institutional subcultures—my hypothesis being that while in the private sector these commonly reinforce the ‘primordial’ loyalties and ‘pre-capitalist mentalities’ that Chakrabarty (1989) has seen as such an important barrier to class formation in the history of India’s industrialisation, in the public sector they de-legitimise caste and provide a partial prophylactic against the forces of communalism and ethnic regionalism. It is true that—so far from being ‘primordial’—these latter forces might plausibly be seen as (at least partly) the *products* of the modern state and industrial development, as Nandy and his collaborators have argued (1997). What is striking, however, is that although the world with which I deal would seem to have a particularly explosive mix of the ingredients they identify as productive of communal violence, such violence has been notably absent. If state-sponsored industry might in some measure be held responsible for creating inter-ethnic tensions, I want to suggest that it must also be given much of the credit for containing them.

II

The setting

Until the mid-1950s, Bhilai was a small village in Durg district, in the Chhattisgarh region of Madhya Pradesh. That village now gives its name to a large ‘company town’, the site of one of the largest steel plants in Asia. The Bhilai Steel Plant (BSP)—a public sector undertaking built with Soviet cooperation and technology—began production in 1959. It was deliberately located in what was then regarded as a remote and ‘backward’

rural area, profits being secondary to employment in the planning priorities of the time. Even in its present post-liberalisation form, BSP—along with its subsidiary mines and quarries—has nearly 55,000 workers on its direct payroll,² and provides employment for a further 12,000 contract workers each day.³ Even before its slim-down it was in fact in profit, and it is widely regarded as the most successful steel plant in the Indian public sector. It runs at its 4 million ton capacity; produces cheaper steel, and has a record of considerably more harmonious industrial relations than the other state-run steel plants,⁴ and than the vast majority of private sector factories which now surround it, and for which it served as a magnet. Initially these were small-scale ancillary industries directly dependent on BSP. Some prospered and grew into fairly large-scale enterprises, while industrialists from elsewhere were offered incentives to locate in the new industrial estate which now houses around 200 factories. None of any significance is owned by indigenous Chhattisgarhis. Aside from this development, the 40 km belt between the district headquarters in Durg to the west and Raipur to the east is today a more or less continuous ribbon development of factories and housing colonies.

² By comparison, the regular BSP workforce on 1 April 1987 was 63,400 (*Desbandhu*, 12/8/89). Roughly three-fifths of the total manpower is employed in the plant itself and less than one-eighth in the mines.

³ Of these, roughly three-quarters are employed in the plant and the township, and one-quarter in the mines. Within this contract labour force, there is an important distinction between unionised labour covered by the Central Provident Fund and non-unionised 'temporary' workers. Of the 8,000 or so contract workers in the plant and township, nearly 2,500 belong to the first category and enjoy considerable security of employment, being guaranteed a job with another BSP contractor on the expiry of their present employer's contract with the plant. They also receive relatively decent wages which are pegged to the All-India Consumer Price Index (currently Rs 85.04 per day for an unskilled worker, an amount which is *actually* paid). In addition they get guaranteed holidays, as well as various allowances and bonuses (a hutment and cycle allowance, for example, and a 3 per cent bonus on their total wages at the end of each contract). The worker (but no other members of his or her family) are entitled to free medical treatment; to full pay during convalescence after an industrial accident (though no sick pay); and on termination to a pay-out from the Provident Fund to which the worker and contractor each contribute. 'Temporary' contract labour is not entitled to any of these benefits, and their wages are considerably lower. The minimum legal wage in Madhya Pradesh is currently Rs 56.46 per day for an unskilled worker, Rs 61.60 for a semi-skilled worker, and Rs 64.84 for a skilled worker. Though BSP provides for such wages in all contracts it issues, the amount which the contractor actually pays is (with the exception of highly skilled workers) almost invariably less. For unskilled labour it would typically be between Rs 27–35 per day.

⁴ While this picture of comparative harmony applies to the plant itself, it does not apply to BSP's Dalli–Rajhera iron ore mines, which have experienced considerable industrial strife.

The BSP workforce is the local 'aristocracy of labour'. The job is secure, the wages are high, the bonuses and fringe benefits excellent: company quarters at subsidised rates; easy credit for house-building and consumer expenditure, free healthcare for the family and schools for the children; free first class travel to Cochin, Calcutta or wherever in every other year for all the family including aged parents and dependent siblings. Moreover, some managers and workers are widely reputed to make a considerable 'income on top' from innumerable scams and rackets associated with plant property, purchasing requirements and subcontracting arrangements. Significant numbers of workers certainly make a not insignificant supplementary income from their moonlighting activities to which some devote as much time as they do to their jobs in the plant: to a shop, a taxi or a buffalo herd, perhaps; or to property dealing, a business installing TV satellite dishes or providing computer training. In terms of consumption patterns, lifestyle and aspirations, a visible minority of workers merge seamlessly into the middle class—mainly those who come from outside the region and have more than one member of the household employed.

The plant itself covers an area of nearly 17 sq.km. To make way for it, for the spacious BSP township, for the mines and their townships, and for the private sector industrial estate, land from ninety-six villages was compulsorily purchased by Government. Some disappeared altogether beneath blast furnaces or the company town. The latter is laid out into sectors along broad tree-lined avenues with different qualities of housing for different grades of employee—rows of small cement cottages, large barrack-like blocks of flats, generously proportioned bungalows in their own grounds. But each sector has a mix of housing, so that managers and men use the same public space and many of the same facilities; and there is no question of religiously or ethnically exclusive enclaves. Other villages on the township periphery lost some or all of their agricultural land, but the residential site was left intact. Most of the villagers remained and many eventually took jobs in the plant. Large numbers of outsiders moved in, and gradually most of these settlements were swallowed up by urban sprawl. My fieldwork focused on three of these ex-village-cum-labour colonies.

As we have seen, a major objective of the Bhilai project was to create employment; and those who had provided the land were acknowledged to have a moral claim to jobs. This crystallised into a specific undertaking to employ one member from each household whose fields had been compulsorily purchased, to whom the State Government now issued certificates of entitlement. Initially, however, the majority of recruits to the BSP

workforce were outsiders—partly because very few locals had industrial experience or skills, and partly because most were reluctant to accept the jobs on offer. For this two reasons are given. The first is that their consumption needs were limited and they saw no reason to work more than was required to meet them. Those who still had some land preferred to farm it, while many of those who had BSP compensation money preferred to eat and drink and let tomorrow take care of itself. The second is that they believed that to put such a massive plant into production, thousands of human sacrifices (*balis*) would be necessary. New recruits were being set to work and then surreptitiously thrown into the foundations to make them bear the weight of such massive buildings, or into the furnaces to make them function. And there was a sense in which their fears were justified. During those early days, especially during the construction phase, working for BSP was very dangerous and the number of workers killed in industrial accidents was very large. A mortality rate which was dismal enough in reality assumed truly epic proportions on the village rumour mill—feeding the conviction that there was more to these accidents than the Public Relations Department put out.

During the second half of the 1960s, however, reluctance gave way to eagerness. The immediate danger had passed—as with the bridges and forts built by rajas, *balis* were only required at the time of foundation. The locals saw the outsiders returning safely from their shifts, saw the size of their pay-packets, and learned new wants. Then there were several years of chronic drought, and those who had lived off the land were forced to consider alternatives. An active market in land requisition certificates now developed; there was a remarkable spate of ‘adoptions’ as widows and elderly childless couples acquired notional ‘sons’ in search of employment, and shrewd operators bought up minute parcels of land which was about to be requisitioned for the rail link to the mines, or rapidly partitioned the holding they already had, so that another son would be provided for.

Today the competition is cut-throat. High caste aspirants acquire Scheduled Tribe, or even Scheduled Caste, certificates to try to get in on the reserved quota; everybody is searching for some ‘source’ who has influence in the employment exchange to advance their papers in the queue of applicants, and ‘brother-nephew-ism’ (*bhai-bhatijavad*) is assumed to be rampant in the selection process. But it is also assumed to be less effective than blunt bribery channelled through a *dalal*, or middleman. Though I have no means of knowing how often any of this money ever reaches anybody who could actually influence recruitment—a good

deal less often, I strongly suspect, than is popularly supposed—every third or fourth house in the neighbourhoods I studied has a story about how they paid this or that man a substantial sum to fix up their son in BSP. And of course the almost invariable sequel is that there was no job and that the money was never returned. ‘Before we used to say, “who’ll go there to die?” But now they won’t even let you in if you give Rs 40,000 in *dan* (charity).’

A reluctant local peasantry and a demand that it could hardly supply anyway, workers flooded in from all over India. So urgent was their need that BSP and the big contractors had trucks waiting at Durg Railway Station to transport them straight to the site. Many did not speak Hindi; few could follow the Chhattisgarh dialect. Some camped in the now abandoned houses of villages which were about to disappear or on the building sites on which they were working; others made temporary shelters out of woven mats in nearby villages which were soon to be slums through which epidemic disease spread rapidly. But as they represent it today, these outsiders brought ‘civilisation’ to Chhattisgarh where until their arrival people went naked (the women did not wear blouses), did not know what proper food was (being content with *basi* [‘stale’ rice]), and could not speak intelligibly.

Many of these early pioneers are now retired in Bhilai. Though the Malayalis complain about its weather, they complain even more about the cost of living in Kerala—as the Biharis complain about the routine violence of Bihar. But what really keeps them in Bhilai is that their children have been raised there, are illiterate in Tamil or Bengali and have no chance of white-collar employment in their ‘home’ state, do not feel comfortable in their parents’ rustic villages and know nothing about agriculture. Bhilai is consequently an extremely cosmopolitan place, a ‘mini-India’, they say, in which people from all over live in amity. In fact, Hindu/Muslim tensions remain low key⁵ and Bhilai has suffered none of the communal violence that has blighted so many other industrial centres. In its entire history I know of only one low-key incident of rioting (in the mid-1960s) which appears to have had a communal element. The dark cloud on the horizon, however, is the gathering resentment of the local people towards those who have come from outside.

The principal sources of this resentment are jobs, land and women. Management (which is overwhelmingly non-Chhattisgarhi) is alleged to discriminate against Chhattisgarhis. And indeed many managers do

⁵ The proportions are one significant factor. There are in fact more Christians than Muslims. There is also a small, but visible, Sikh presence.

regard local *men* as workshy. Chhattisgarhi women, by contrast, have a Stakhanovite reputation, but are generally only taken on as temporary contract labour to do the most laborious and menial tasks—though this is less a matter of ethnic than gender discrimination. None is more bitter than those whose land was expropriated. It is their region; it is on their fields that the coke-oven batteries now stand, and they think that their sons should be preferred for employment. But the outsiders of course say that their children too have grown up and belong in Bhilai. And anyway it was their blood and sweat which built the damn plant in the first place while the locals were cowering in their *jhonpris* (mud-huts) for fear of *balis* and bulldozers. On both sides feelings run strong. But these are principally about jobs in the public sector. Most of those in the private sector entail too much work for too little money to get too agitated about.

With regard to land, the situation is complex. The compensation money paid to the dispossessed is now felt to have been stingy,⁶ and it is certainly true that land was requisitioned in separate tranches over several years making it difficult for the villagers to reinvest rationally. Moreover BSP requisitioned much more land than it actually needed. The surplus was eventually made over to a Special Area Development Authority (SADA) which proceeded to sell much of it off to non-Chhattisgarhi speculators. Vast profits were made—but not of course by the villagers. The present employment situation is salt in the wound. Even if it has to be partitioned, land can be passed on from one generation to the next. But the BSP job which was offered in lieu went to one brother only; and now that he is close to retirement he is all too aware that it is not inheritable. Meanwhile what remain of the fields on the periphery of the urban area are being greedily gobbled up by new housing colonies from which unscrupulous property dealers from outside have grown fat. And then there is the fact that SADA was also given control of the old residential sites (*abadi*) of the villages swallowed by the town and has granted titles to many outsiders living as tenants in huts that the villagers had constructed for them. No longer a source of rental income, these ‘foreigners’ are increasingly blamed for ruining the village and corrupting its youth. And indeed, alcoholism is a positive blight, violence a constant threat, and *satta* (a numbers racket) a real epidemic.

Not only that, but rates of marital breakdown are extremely high, and there are considerable numbers of unions between Chhattisgarhi women and men from outside—especially with ‘Biharis’ (a term—more or less

⁶ The justice of this complaint is, however, another matter—though not one which is strictly relevant here. I defer consideration of it to a subsequent publication.

of abuse—which includes people from eastern UP). Though the locals are comparatively tolerant in such matters, it does not escape their notice that for them ‘Bihari’ women are *hors de combat* and that there is sometimes something distinctly predatory about such liaisons. I think, for example, of a neighbourhood shopkeeper, and a money-lender—‘Biharis’ both—who are widely supposed to have taken village girls in settlement of debts. Resentment sometimes spills into violence, and fights break out between rival groups of local and outsider youths over love affairs that cross the divide.

I should avoid implying, however, that the ‘sons-of-the-soil’—far less the outsiders—form a solidary homogeneous block. Many of the old caste barriers have indeed largely dissolved, and Chhattisgarhi men of the so-called ‘Hindu’ castes (the women are often more conservative) will now accept food and water at each other’s houses. While the first, or ‘primary’, marriage is almost invariably caste endogamous, the chances are that it will end, leaving both partners free to contract a ‘secondary’ union to which caste is largely irrelevant—provided only that the new spouse belongs to one of the ‘Hindu’ castes.⁷ With only some slight simplification, what that means is more or less every caste in the old village hierarchy except for Satnamis—who are by far the largest and most vocal of the traditionally untouchable castes of the region and who with regard to food, marriage, residential space and much everyday social intercourse, remain isolated from the rest of the neighbourhood. Apart from that between locals and outsiders, then, the really significant social cleavage in these ex-villages is that between two substantialised and antagonistic caste blocks—‘Hindus’ and Satnamis.⁸

I should also avoid implying that the generally suppressed tension between Chhattisgarhis and others is something more than it is. Bhilai is not Bombay or Assam, and suppressed tension is a significant step back from a Hobbesian state of ‘Warre’. In large measure, I want to suggest, the lid is provided by public sector employment.

III

In the happy world of the fields

As far as work is concerned, and despite its discontents, my Chhattisgarhi informants do not generally compare the new industrial ‘civilisation’

⁷ Cf. Dumont’s (1964) classic discussion of the distinction between primary and secondary marriage.

⁸ For a more detailed discussion of this theme, see Parry (forthcoming).

unfavourably with the old world of task-oriented peasant agriculture. Before I knew better, I went to some pains to prod them into telling me how oppressive a life ruled by the clock and the factory siren is, and into indulging their nostalgia for the happy world of the fields. My enquiries were met with incomprehension or amused incredulity. 'Highest is agriculture, business is middling, lowest is employment',⁹ they would quote, only to ruefully reflect on how today the relative valuation contained in that old adage has been reversed.

The fact is that agricultural work is now regarded with deep distaste—especially by the young. Though many local households in the neighbourhoods I studied still own some land in the surrounding countryside, even *unemployed* youngsters resolutely refuse to so much as supervise the work of day-labourers in the fields, let alone work in them themselves. They are *suvidhabhogi* ('privileged', literally 'enjoyers of amenities'), their fathers complain, and unwilling to toil up to their knees in mud in all weathers, or to spend broken nights guarding the crops. For their part the young see agriculture as emblematic of the rustic world of their 'thumb-impression' (*angutha-chhap*) elders. 'How with my education will I work on the land?', they rhetorically ask. It is not that old village ways are found totally wanting. Many do indeed evoke an image of rural life as one of mutual concern and freedom from crime. But in almost the same breath that life is also disparaged for its backwardness, bigotry, illiteracy and lack of 'civilisation'—and it is with these that agriculture is associated.

Certainly most young men prefer cash in hand from casual labour on a construction site to grains in the household's storage bins. The returns are more immediate, more predictable and more individualised. For the fruits of an uncertain harvest one has to wait, but contract labour provides the wherewithal for *sharab* (liquor) and *satta* this evening. And if there is no family land, and one is forced to work for daily wages, then contract labour pays better. Unsupervised by senior kin, it also holds out the promise of flirtation, romance and even sexual adventure—a significant proportion of illicit love affairs and secondary unions being initiated between members of mixed gangs of contract workers in such apparently unpromising settings as the BSP slag-dump. But above all, many agricultural tasks are regarded as harder and more unpleasant than those required in most forms of contract labour; and for the majority of my informants—whose conditions of existence are considerably less harsh

⁹ *Uttam kheti, madhyam vyavsay, nich naukari.*

than those described by Breman (1996) and for whom no work that day is much less likely to mean going hungry—there is also perhaps some sense that cultivation imposes greater compulsion. When the weather conditions are right, it is *now* that the fields need ploughing or the seed to be sown. But if one's body aches, one may well decide that one's presence on the building site can wait till next week. At the risk of labouring the point, task-orientation imposes its own time-discipline which may be at least as coercive as that of the contractor.

Though fathers deplore their sons' lack of stoicism, foot-dragging and even outright refusal to go to the fields, their own attitude to working the land is generally ambivalent. In the one of the ex-villages I studied which still has fields of its own, the real preoccupation is with rocketing real estate values rather than paddy production. But many long-serving BSP workers of local origin invest the Rs 4 lakh or so that they receive on retirement in land further out which they farm with hired labour. Land ownership is still a source of prestige and an asset reckoned in marriage. Such investments also have the important advantage not only of growing in value, but also of lacking liquidity. They are therefore relatively immune to being whittled away by the importunate demands of kin—most likely, of unemployed sons with hare-brained schemes for making a fortune or with problems involving the police.

But while land is certainly valued, the endless complaint is that today there is no profit in cultivation. So insistently is this repeated that it took me some to realise that crop yields are in fact very much higher than they were in pre-BSP days—by a factor of perhaps four or five times. In any event, the complaint is on my calculations considerably exaggerated, and is anyway premised on non-family labour doing most of the work. What is certainly the case, however, is that agricultural production in much of this region is marked by its insecurity, that within living memory Chhattisgarh has in several years experienced famine conditions, and that quite a high proportion of the least privileged segments of the Chhattisgarhi industrial labour force who now live in these Bhilai neighbourhoods were driven out of their villages of origin by dearth, drought and hunger. Their lack of nostalgia for the lost world of peasant production should not occasion surprise.

But there is possibly also an ideological element to it. In each of 'my' three ex-villages, in pre-BSP days well over half of the land was controlled by the *malguzar* (a landlord-cum-revenue official), to whom most other village households were beholden, whose autocratic ways are legendary, and in whose fields they were required to work. Cultivation is therefore

associated with subordination—especially perhaps by the Satnamis who suffered most from these exactions, and whose young men are today (or so their fathers complain) particularly averse to the fields. Meanwhile, competition from industry has driven up agricultural wages, while the fortunes of the old *daus*—the erstwhile landed elite of the village—have generally declined. While in the past a *dau*'s womenfolk would not have toiled in the fields, now they are forced to do so. So while there are some who disdain agricultural labour for its association with past servitude, there are others who resent it as the signifier of their fall from grace.

But whether fathers or sons, *daus* or Satnamis, all agree that for back-breaking toil, ploughing and levelling the fields, and transplanting the paddy in the monsoon rain, is hard to beat. It is true that new labour arrangements—in the form of work-teams hired on a contract basis to perform a specific task, so much per acre—have intensified the effort required, introduced a new element of self-exploitation and a new equation between time and money. Consistent with Thompson, it's a variant on industrial piece-work rates that keeps the workers at it from dawn to dusk. But what is less consistent with Thompson is that, even in its traditional forms, agricultural production is certainly not understood as a more humane and desirable way of making a living than work in a factory—whether public or private. In some BSP departments some working conditions seem extremely exacting; but when I asked workers how they managed to tolerate them, I was several times told that as the son of a farmer they had no problem.

Whether industrial workers in Bhilai feel alienated from factory work is a difficult question. Even within the regular BSP workforce I am struck by the variation—between workers in different departments, between workers with different tasks within the same department, and above all between relatively recent recruits and the older men who joined in the pioneer days. Some take an obvious pride in their jobs, enthusiastically describing improvements they had themselves initiated—a better door-opening mechanism for the coke-oven batteries, a new fitting which allows the rollers in the Rail Mill to be changed in half the time. Others, it is obvious, lack any commitment, regard work as nothing but drudgery and are interested only in doing as little of it as possible. But the one generalisation which does seem safe is that, while industrial workers are conventionally supposed to be alienated from the factory, factory work has most conspicuously alienated these neophyte proletarians from agriculture—in which they are increasingly deskilled and of which they are increasingly disdainful.

IV

In dark satanic mills

My experience of the BSP shopfloor has mainly been in the Coke Oven Department, supplemented by short periods in the older of the two Steel Melting Shops (SMS 1) and the Plate Mill. The Coke Ovens and SMS 1 rate as 'hard' shops where 'real men' work. Though conditions today are considerably less harsh than they were in the past, and though the bonuses are better here than elsewhere, new recruits go to great lengths to avoid being posted to either shop.

Across the rail tracks, a monumental fountain—'The Fountain of Love'—marks the start of Coke Oven territory. Just behind it stretches a massive rectangular phalanx of batteries—maybe 800 m long, 20 m broad and 15 m high. Their function is to convert coal into coke for the blast furnaces. Located to one side are two modern batteries with a larger capacity, but this phalanx consists of the eight older ones, four blocks of two laid end-to-end. Each battery has sixty-five vertically arranged ovens separated from each other by a heating chamber. Eighteen tons of coal are charged into each oven from a charging car which runs along the top of the battery, and eighteen or so hours later 12 tons of coke are pushed out of the oven by a kind of giant ramrod attached to the pusher car on one side of the battery ('pusher side') into a quenching car positioned on the other side ('coke side').

From the batteries seeps a dense, acrid fog of fumes and smoke, flames whooshing high into the air at unpredictable intervals from vents on the top of the ovens. To the right of the road that runs beside them is a tangle of massive overhead pipes mounted on concrete pillars, snaking in and out of each other in all directions and angrily spitting steam and boiling liquids. A fenced-off patch of hard rust-coloured ground below bears, like a bitter reproach, a now faded sign saying 'Site for Garden'. Behind it are the administrative buildings and then the by-products plants; and further on still are the coal handling yards with their 17 km of conveyor belt running through galleries of corrugated iron constructed on stilts above the ground. Obscured from view, on 'coke side' where the quenching car waits to drive the red-hot coke into a tower where it is doused with phenol water, are the Coke Sorting Plants and the galleries through which the coke is conveyed to the blast furnaces. Between the cooling towers and the steaming grey phenol-water soak-pits—into which one could disappear without trace save for one's plastic identity card and wrist-watch—are Public Relations Department hoardings bearing the injunction to 'Have a Nice Day'.

Even when you are on the ground, the Coke Oven Department might present itself as a plausible model for a latter-day industrial version of Signorelli's frescoes of hell. But when you are on top of the batteries you could really believe that you have arrived in the master's imagination. Even at mid-day, visibility seems to demand landing lights; the ambient air temperature reaches 50 degrees Celsius, and the surface of the deck is so hot that on the first occasion I went up there with the rod group, I had to spend the shift hopping from foot to foot because layers from the thick rubber soles on my shoes were left sizzling on the deck behind me. Here, and on the platform down below that runs beside the ovens, men move around like ambulant mummies, so thoroughly swathed against the heat that even their mothers might not recognise them. The older workers chew tobacco compulsively to take the taste of the dust from their mouths, and it is widely held that those who work on the batteries must drink liquor to clean the gas from their guts. But though the Coke Ovens are more insalubrious, they are less immediately dangerous than SMS 1 where huge ladles of molten steel, 'thimbles' of red-hot slag and just-cast ingots are shifted around by crane or train in a space which is much more confined.

Some tasks which are done in such shops are extraordinarily taxing. Take Dukalu,¹⁰ a mason in SMS 1, who works in incredible temperatures in the cramped area right behind the furnaces preparing the brick-lined channels (or 'launders') through which the molten metal is tapped. Or in the Coke Ovens, take Itvari and Ram Bhagat's rod group. They mainly work on the oven-tops where they clear obstructions and adjust the bricks which regulate the intake of air at the bottom of the heating chambers. This they do with long metal rods which they insert through the vertical flues on the oven deck. So intense is the heat that I found it difficult to even look into the heating chamber to see the brick and the burner, let alone stand over the flue long enough to adjust it some thirty feet below with a rod that's red hot within seconds. But other work-teams from their Refractory Group have even tougher tasks: the spray groups who work in front of the open doors plugging gaps and cracks in the brickwork with a mortar and acid slurry which they direct at the walls through a compressed-air spray; or the hot repair group, who patch the brickwork inside the oven doors while they are charged, building a partition wall with a heat-resistant lining a few feet in to separate off the burning coal from the area of wall on which they will work—the mason laying the bricks with his body half in and half out of the oven.

¹⁰ I employ pseudonyms throughout.

What is striking about such work-teams, however, is that the distribution of work within them is often conspicuously unequal—the charge-man notionally in charge often being the most obvious, if not the only, passenger. More striking still is that although such jobs are extremely demanding, the amount of the working day spent on them is not. On the first occasion I accompanied the rod group, we were through in an hour and half; on the second in just over two. For the rest of the shift we sat about chatting, drinking tea and going for a stroll.

And even in the hard shops, not all jobs are that hard. Much of the work requires neither much skill nor such physical stamina. Jagdish, a Maharashtrian Mahar from one of the neighbourhoods I studied, is the ‘helper’ to a technician whose job is to change the nozzle valves on the giant ladles that pour the molten steel into the ingot moulds in SMS 1. I joined him there one day at the beginning of the second shift at 2.00 in the afternoon. By 2.30 he was ready to start work. By 3.00 the first task was done and we spent the next hour and half chatting, drinking tea in the canteen and reading the newspaper. At 4.30 there was another job to be done. That took twenty minutes, and by then he was ready to leave. Though the second shift ends at 10.00 p.m., Jagdish boasts that in the four years he has been in the shop he is yet to stay beyond 5.00. Or take Ganesh, a Satnami from the same neighbourhood who is a welder working in a team which services the evaporation cooling system on the SMS 1 furnace doors. The job he was assigned during the shift I spent with him took nearly three hours. But for the previous two days he had nothing to do at all. Or, more extreme, take Prakash—another welder and another neighbour, who works in the Bloom and Billet Mill where his job is to cut free the blockage when one of the red-hot slabs of steel gets jammed on the rollers, which he does from behind an asbestos screen with an oxyacetylene torch. When the mill shuts down for maintenance, he works consistently at repairing the guides which direct the blooms. But otherwise the hours are unpredictable—maybe one in a week; maybe one in a month. In his spare time in the plant, Jagdish normally reads a romance and plays *satta*. Ganesh strolls about and smokes *ganja*, while Prakash plays *pasa* (a dice game) or reads. What really concerns the officers is that they can find their workers when they are needed, and those who sleep or play cards in their locker-room are much less likely to attract their displeasure than those who wander off on their own. But managerial surveillance is only minimally constraining, and by contrast with Bhilai’s larger private sector factories, there is no clandestine network of informers and stool-pigeons.

In many Operations jobs—the teeming crane drivers in SMS 1, the pushing car operators in the Coke Ovens, the list would be endless—the worker is expected to remain at or near his post for four hours at a stretch, though he is unlikely to be working throughout that time. The unwritten convention is that he can then go home. But even those without such semi-official licence can generally get away in good time if they keep on the right side of their superiors, and can square or evade Security at the gates. Certainly, it is not unusual to find somebody who went on the first shift at 6.00 in the morning and is back by 9.00. When, an hour after his shift had started, I went to find Madanlal in the SMS 1 stripping yard where the steel ingots are removed from the moulds, he and one of the other five crane operators on duty had already left for some ‘important work’ (which turned out to be fixing his motor-bike). But even so the three that remained were not overstretched, and I sat and chatted with them for 75 minutes before the first waggon arrived. The maximum number that might come in a shift would be ten or twelve, which they reckon they could clear in roughly three hours. Their delivery, however, is sporadic, so the shift consists of short periods of intense activity interspersed with longish intervals of leisure. As this example suggests, manning levels are sufficiently generous to allow groups of workers to organise their own informal duty rosters, and one worker might sometimes substitute for a mate in a different shift. If all else fails, you can always take casual leave or get a friend to deposit your token. Here, at any rate, the constraints of industrial time-discipline are not really oppressive.

The Coke Oven batteries are manned by various teams—the Heating Group who monitor and regulate the temperatures in the heating chambers, and clean and maintain the gas lines; the Refractory Group who repair the brickwork; Mechanical and Electrical Maintenance, and Operations who charge and push the ovens. For each pair of batteries there are around fifty Operations workers in each of three shifts. On any one shift, maybe seven would be on their weekly holiday and on average six or seven more might be eligible for leave. What remains is a notional complement of 36–37, while conventional wisdom is that 30–31 workers are required to run the shift efficiently. In other words, a 15–20 per cent surplus is built into the manning levels required, so that from the point of view of productive efficiency it really does not matter if these extra hands report for duty or not. But even if more than that absent themselves—as regularly happens on the night shift and at festival

times—production continues more or less normally. Extra hands might be borrowed from other batteries, a shortage in one category of operative is filled by upgrading a worker from a lower one, and various routine cleaning tasks will remain undone. On the larger canvas of the plant as a whole, it is therefore not surprising that there is no simple correlation between peaks in the graph for absenteeism and troughs in the graph for production.

The Heating Group is subdivided into various sections, of which the group which cleans and maintains the Hydraulic Main pipe that runs along the oven-tops has the nastiest job. They begin at 6.00 in the morning but on most days most of the unit will have left the plant by 9.00, when the General Shift members of the Heating Group are just starting their day. With the latter I once spent a week on batteries A and B.¹¹ A typical day might begin with Tamrakar, the unusually dynamic chargeman on battery B, inspecting the burners in the heating chambers through the vertical flues at the top. By eye he could instantly tell which were giving off less heat than they should, and which pipes and valves in the basement would therefore need cleaning. Tamrakar, Senior Gas Man Motilal and the team of six workers under them would then go down to the cellars below the ovens to start work. The atmosphere down there is suffocating, but the group would work steadily for an hour and a half. We would then go out for some air before congregating at 11.00 for tea in the 'Gas Man room'—a dark and dirty cellar with a few lockers which the General Shift heating men from the two batteries use as a common-room-cum-dormitory. After tea it would be time for lunch and a nap; another short cleaning job (taking maybe 30 minutes), tea-time again and it would be time to pack up. Next day the same, only this time contract labour is on hand and does the morning cleaning job with BSP workers standing over them issuing instructions.

But all this needs to be put in perspective. That week the group would be coming into the plant on their day off to do an extra job necessitated by the temporary closure of the main gas line for repairs.¹² And just sometimes there are real emergencies to cope with. At 7.30 a.m. on

¹¹ Fictionalised labels.

¹² One conspicuous exception to the relatively relaxed work regimes I describe are the very long hours put in by BSP officers at Senior Manager level with direct responsibility for key production processes. The one in charge of the Heating Group would regularly do a twelve hour day in the plant, come in on his day off, and spend nights there if some problem had arisen. In the course of a single evening at home he might receive ten to fifteen phone calls up-dating him on the state of the batteries.

11 December 1995, there was complete failure of the electricity board's power supply to the plant. The BSP has its own generating capacity which is supposed to provide emergency cover which can keep essential operations ticking over, but the sudden load-shedding placed an intolerable strain on the system which also failed. For some time there was not an amp of electricity throughout the plant. In the Coke Ovens the immediate consequences were catastrophic. Without a functioning extractor system, there was a massive build-up of combustible gases in the batteries. By 8.00 a.m. when the Senior Manager in charge of the Heating Group reached the plant, the place was ablaze, flames pouring out of the oven doors and lapping all over the tops. At ground level you could hardly see five paces ahead, while the batteries were 'just like a scene from *Towering Inferno*'. The one area which was not on fire were the basements and walkways under the batteries where the Heating Group does much of its work; and while the rest of the plant stood helplessly by for a week, the gas men worked like Trojans rigging up ways of preventing dangerous concentrations of gas, and restoring each battery in turn. Not all could be relied on, but the Senior Manager picked his best and had them working round the clock in relays, some hardly going home throughout the week. The moral of the tale, of course, is that some types of industrial work might also be described as consisting of long, fallow periods of idleness interspersed with bouts of intense activity.

But there's also another. During that week of chaos, work ground to a virtual halt in much of the rest of the plant. Without coke for the blast furnaces there is no pig iron; without pig iron, no steel to be made or rolled. An electricity sub-station was flooded by heavy monsoon rain in July '94, putting three blast furnaces out of action. The Steel Melting Shops cut production because they were short of pig iron; the Coke Ovens because they were not getting enough blast furnace gas and because anyway they could not store so much output when blast furnace demand was so low. On the first occasion that I visited one of the Coal Handling Plants, there were 400 waggons waiting to be unloaded—about four shifts' work. But on the previous day there had been not a single waggon to process. Moreover, productive intensity is by no means constant throughout the year. In the last quarter up to April, shop managements desperately struggle to fulfil their targets. But in the next three months much machinery is shut down for maintenance and workers in Operations may have relatively little to do. In short, as in peasant agriculture, production has seasonal highs and lows; and a good deal of what might seem to be shirking is simply a

consequence of an idleness enforced by breakdowns, failures in supply and essential maintenance.

A good deal, but not everything. Barring major, but exceptional, convulsions like the *'Towering Inferno'* incident and despite frequent hiccups on one battery or other (a spillage of coal from the overhead bunker blocking the path of the charging car; the 'mis-pushing' of coke when the quenching car is not in place which melts its track and brings down the trolley-wire), production continues in most parts of the shop, and the daily output of the major shops is in fact quite constant. In the Coke Ovens, for example, the range of variation in the number of ovens pushed per day in January 1998 was between 348–401; while in November 1997—which was typical—the blast furnaces produced between 11,000 and 13,000 tons of hot metal a day. Plainly, not every sleeping worker sleeps only while production is temporarily suspended.

Shirking is a social fact, explicitly acknowledged (and sometimes exaggerated) by workers themselves. *'BSP men bhagne ka "culture" hai'* ('BSP has a "bunking off" culture'); 'Biharis', Chhattisgarhis or whoever are *kamchor* (shirkers, literally 'work-thieves') who 'think of the plant as their father's factory that they can come and go as they like'. The problem, as one worker explained as we sat over a third cup of tea in the canteen, is the lack of incentives. 'Good worker, no prize; bad worker, no punishment', as he pithily put it in English, going on in Hindi to contrast the private sector where 'a worker works only after folding his hands' (in supplication) and for at least seven hours a shift. 'But here, if an officer orders him to do some job,' (he lifts one buttock off the bench and contorts his face in a pantomime of desperation), 'he says that he must go to the latrine. When the chargeman tells him to be quick, he will ask, "What, will you stop my piss and shit?"'

What the old-timers of peasant origin say, of course, is that these youngsters *can't* work because they were not raised on the pure milk and ghee that they had enjoyed; or *won't* work because their fathers have had to pay so much to get them a job that they regard it as their property. Largely absent from workers' accounts is any hint that *kamchori* (shirking) is seen—in the manner of Scott (1985)—as a weapon of the weak against managerial oppression. So far as I could discern, there was no disapproval of 'rate-busters' as class collaborators; little sense that avoiding work was a way of denying or mitigating the claims of a superordinate class, and only rarely is it pleaded that avoiding work is justifiable because the claims which are made on the worker are themselves unjust. Though

there are certainly exceptions,¹³ for the most part it is not I think plausible to see skiving as a 'Svejk-ian' form of class resistance.

A more compelling consideration is the relatively high level of manning which allows labour to be used with relatively low intensity. Indeed, I sometimes had the impression that if the full complement were to report for duty, they might actually impair productive efficiency. One afternoon spent 'coke side' with the hot repair group (a spray group was working alongside), I counted sixteen of us (including three officers and two chargemen) on the 2m wide platform which was strewn with equipment and fragments of brick. Laden with red-hot coke, the quenching car shunted up and down within a few feet; and as the door-extractor car advanced menacingly towards us we would scamper for cover at the end of the battery. The masons worked rapidly in relays, but the only contribution which half the group made, apart from increasing the risk of a fatal fall, was to go on some desultory errand for another tool, or to echo an instruction which had already been given.

Not surprisingly, many bright young recruits develop a sense of futility and alienation, frustrated that their talents and training (often in a trade which is totally irrelevant to the job they are actually assigned in the plant) are squandered. The feeling that there is not enough to do turns into a feeling that it is not worth doing anyway. When the Heating Group now tell the tale of their heroic hour at the time of the '*Towering Inferno*', their eyes light up as they recall the sense of togetherness and their 'relish' (*maja*) in 'real' work. What is also relevant here is the way in which recruitment happens. A young man will register at the employment exchange for a Plant Attendant's post as soon as he has passed his tenth class exams. But the queue of applicants is so long that in 1994 BSP were still only interviewing those who had registered in 1983. In the interim, many will

¹³ One such exception was a well-articulated campaign of go-slows and surreptitious sabotage on the first of the two modern batteries which came to a head when the second was commissioned. Even before this there had been some discontent amongst its young, well-educated and highly solidary workforce because workers in junior grades were regularly required to perform tasks which properly belonged to more senior ones, to which they consequently felt entitled. Management effectively bought them off with a promise of fast-track promotion, but when the newest battery was commissioned their (previously light) workloads increased, and new senior operators were parachuted in over their heads. Simmering discontent turned into concerted, but covert, resistance. But significantly this received no sympathy from the workers on the older batteries who resented their former privileges, while the support of the union—which was caught between them—was highly equivocal.

have spent their days loafing about, drinking, gambling and getting into fights. Others will have continued their education, and may well have an MA or a BSc by the time they are called for interview. The first category are often demoralised, sometimes even semi-criminalised, and without any habit of labour; while the second aspire to work with computers in a comfortable office and disdain the 'nut-bolt' work to which they are actually assigned as fit only for some *unparh gvar* (illiterate yokel).

And then again, there is the fact that slacking is possible because managerial power to prevent it is quite circumscribed. It must be emphasised, however, that both the possibility and propensity for it is rather unevenly distributed. In Battery Operations, for example, a dereliction of duty is immediately obvious in a way that it is not amongst General Shift workers doing routine maintenance tasks. But just as striking as this variation between work-groups is that within them; and I was often surprised by the absence of effective informal sanctions against their most manifestly indolent members (a product perhaps of the fact that in many routine non-Operations jobs, work which is shirked is likely to remain undone rather than falling to somebody else's lot).

The notified absenteeism rates seem high,¹⁴ though the relationship that these bear to reality is unclear. On the one hand the way in which the figures are calculated exaggerates its extent,¹⁵ but on the other takes no account of the number of workers—often with exemplary attendance records—who lodge their tokens at the beginning of the shift and then turn round and go home. The pattern they show is largely predictable: highest in the hardest shops, during the summer months and the week after pay-day; on the night shift; at festival times and during harvest. Also predictable is that Chhattisgarhis are more likely to be sporadically absent throughout the year, whereas the attendance of outsiders tends to be more regular until they go back to Bihar or wherever and fail to reappear for some weeks after their leave has expired. As for its causes, boredom and frustration are certainly one. The money-lending businesses of some workers are said to be another—the debtors (characteristically

¹⁴ Alarm bells ring when the figure exceeds 15 per cent. In the Coke Ovens they remained between 14 and 15 per cent during November and December 1997.

¹⁵ The rate is reckoned from the combined figures for unsanctioned and sanctioned leave (excluding the weekly holiday). One managerial justification for this is that much sanctioned leave is only sanctioned *ex post facto* when the employee shows up with some more or less implausible excuse for his absence over the past few days. But since some grandmothers do undoubtedly die and some workers are genuinely ill, the proportion of skivers must undoubtedly be smaller than the statistics suggest.

Chhattisgarhis and Telugus with a drink problem) staying away from the plant in order to avoid their creditors (stereotypically 'Biharis'). More certain is that alcohol is a major cause—some workers in the neighbourhoods I studied regularly going on long binges and not reporting for duty for weeks on end.

But again the incidence of absenteeism is very uneven—some workers being absent with true dedication and some who are rarely absent at all. Three hundred and thirty-six workers in the Coke Oven Department (11.1 per cent of its workforce) were officially notified as absent for 50 days or more during 1997, and of these 217 (7.2 per cent) were absent for more than 100 days. Of the 105 workers in the Heating Group who were reported absent in the eleven month period between April 1991 and February 1992, 75 were away for 10 days or less. Again, out of 96 (notoriously susceptible) Operations workers on batteries A and B for whom I have information, 13 had no absences at all during 1997, 37 had less than 10 days, 21 had between 11 and 50 days, 13 had between 50 and 100, and 12 had more than 100.¹⁶

It is only in the case of this last category (a hundred or more days in the year) that BSP's disciplinary procedures are likely to grind into action. The process is extremely protracted, many officers judging that it is more trouble than it is worth. And if a worker comes from a well-known criminal family, and his brother is legendary for having walked down a crowded street with the severed head of a supposed police informer held aloft, one may well conclude that inertia is the best policy. Nor is it obvious what other sanctions a middle-ranking officer has to buttress his authority. The present promotion system makes a worker's advancement quasi-automatic; and overtime was abolished in 1987.¹⁷ A workforce which enjoys considerable security of employment, officers who have rather limited power, work conditions that are often unpleasant—the real issue perhaps is *not* why absenteeism rates are high, time-keeping lax

¹⁶ These figures should be read in the context of the fact that, in addition to his weekly day-off, a worker is entitled to 51 days of paid leave in the year (though 20 of these are on half-pay). In theory, he is therefore required to work only 262 days, and must work at least 240 to be entitled to the full-quota of holiday. In practice many exchange some of their leave for cash.

¹⁷ This was partly because it was seen as a significant cause of slacking (encouraging deliberate torpidity during regular hours in order to have work to do on double or triple time); of absenteeism (with overtime a worker could earn more in fifteen days work in the month than by coming regularly for his shifts); and of considerable ill-will (accusations of favouritism directed at the officers, of *chamchagiri* [sycophancy] directed at workers, and of cornering the benefits for themselves directed at union leaders).

and the workers less industrious than they might be. Given that most of them could almost certainly get away with less, the puzzle is rather why so many of them attend pretty regularly and work as hard as is necessary to run the plant at its rated capacity.

The most obvious answer is pecuniary. A day's absence is a day's pay foregone; and bonuses are forfeited at an escalating rate below 23 days attendance per month. Given BSP wage levels compared to those of the private sector, an average of 20 days (involving the sacrifice of one-fifth to one-quarter of possible gross earnings) might seem quite sustainable—until one realises that for many workers this represents a much more significant proportion of net pay since they have taken substantial loans from the plant which are repaid in fixed monthly instalments.

But monetary considerations are not the only ones. Worker compliance is 'bought' by management acquiescence in their informal duty rosters and by the system of 'see-offs'. Who should do which jobs, and for how long, is governed by union agreements. But when manning is short the shift-manager must ask the oventopman to put in an extra couple of hours, or to drive the charging car when that job is properly done by somebody in a superior grade.¹⁸ Though the worker might in theory refuse, he is in practice unlikely to do so. Though getting past the gates is his own concern, the tacit *quid pro quo* is a blind eye to him leaving the plant whenever he is not actually needed; while the explicit (though unofficial) deal is that when he is asked to work beyond customary norms he is given a 'see-off'—a day's compensatory leave when he will be marked present when in fact he is not. Crudely, then, the workers work in exchange for their liberty to leave (or perhaps never appear) when their labour is not really required.

A third answer lies in the camaraderie of the work-group and the fast friendships which develop within it. Take Tarlok, a Plant Attendant in the Plate Mill, who had improved the shining hour between registering at the employment exchange and getting a BSP job by doing a BLLB. At first, he explained, his life in the plant felt utterly useless (*bahut bekar lagta tha*), and it seemed 'absurd' (*atpata*) that after finishing a degree he should be doing a job of this kind. He felt trapped, thought it would be better to be unemployed, and spent this working day wondering if his friends had been to find him at home and if they would meet that evening. But now his closest friends are his colleagues in the plant, where he is 'set' and where 'time passes well' (*ab achcha time pass hota hai*), so that a day away seems 'worthless' (*faltu*).

¹⁸ In the latter case, he will be paid an extra allowance (c. Rs 12 per shift).

Enemies, as one worker put it, are a luxury one cannot afford in the plant. Many jobs in the 'hard' shops are dangerous and even when they are not the production of steel demands close collaboration (cf. Kornblum 1974). The pitside worker in SMS 1 is daily at the mercy of the teeming crane driver who shifts 270 ton ladles of molten steel across the shopfloor; the finishing stand operator in the Plate Mill counts on his colleagues on the roughing and vertical stands to send down the plates at the right intervals and temperature if he is to manage his job properly. In Operations, even fairly senior managers will quite often lend a hand when it's needed. The coke from oven 23 must be pushed at 3.35, the pushing car operator needs a break and the officer in charge might take over while he goes for tea. But things tend to be different in the General Shift, where the majority of workers are doing unskilled routine tasks which do not have the same immediacy, and where relations between officers and workers tend to be more distant and hierarchical.

It is, of course, not only work which requires cooperation but also escaping it. At the principal gates to the plant there are regular checks on departing workers at certain times of the day. Unless one leaves immediately after lodging one's token, it is difficult to get out during the night shift without proper authorisation. The second shift (2.00–10.00 p.m.) is easiest, while on the first (6.00 a.m.–2.00 p.m.) there is checking after 10 a.m. Most shift-workers have a partner (*joridar*). On the first shift, the standard division of labour between, say, oventopmen partners is that one works the first three hours (allowing him to get away before the checking starts), the other does the remaining five and next day they swop. Here, admittedly, we find echoes of Thompson's rule of the clock—though what it really rules are arrangements for leaving the job rather than performing it. It is with your *joridar* that you cooperate over *when* you work; but it is with others that you must cooperate *while* working—which again involves personal negotiation within a framework laid down by the customary practices of the work-group. Amongst the oventopmen, there is a division of labour between the 'hatchman' and the 'valveman'. The latter has lighter duties and it has to be decided who will act in which role for how many ovens this shift.

Between work-groups with different functions enforced collaboration can, of course, create tensions. Operations workers, who are under pressure to maintain a strict schedule of charging and pushing the ovens, complain about the lethargy with which maintenance workers respond to their urgent calls for repairs to the pusher car (while the latter complain that there would not be so many breakdowns if the operators were less

careless). Operations also moan about the Refractory Group getting in the way and disrupting their schedules; and about the Heating Group, whose relatively relaxed workloads they resent, producing unworkable schedules in the first place (to which the Heating Group's response is that Operations workers are just brawn and no brain, and that they are always trying to get them to amend the schedules so that it will appear that they have done their job on time and that the blame for poor quality coke must lie elsewhere).

In the 'hard' shops, each shift is manned by workers belonging to a single brigade. For the eight older batteries there are three brigades of Operations workers, each with a strength of just over 200 men. Membership of a brigade never changes, so the same set of men are always on duty together and come to know each other well over long periods of time. A real loyalty develops, and also some rivalry with other brigades (who are berated for their slackness in going off duty leaving this or that job half done). And then within the brigade there are those who all work on the same battery, who share a room where they eat, sleep and drink tea together, and into which other workers are admitted only on sufferance. It is, of course, these smaller work-groups which develop the most intense solidarity.

For present purposes the important thing about such work groups is their social heterogeneity. Take the Heating Group once more. In the group as a whole, and—with one exception—in each of the smaller work-teams into which it is subdivided, the number of Chhattisgarhis and outsiders is roughly equal.¹⁹ Most teams include both Satnamis and men of 'Hindu' caste; and a few include the odd Muslim, Sikh or Christian. Some of their members are also strikingly different in their styles of life. Amongst the General Shift workers on batteries A and B, for example, was a Halbah Gond whose pastimes in the plant included hunting rats for roasting; and a BSP cricket umpire from Karnataka who would engage me in erudite conversation about the English County Championship.

I do not want to claim that such social disparities are always smoothly negotiated. They plainly are not. But in the 'Gas Man room' all eat

¹⁹ The exception is the Hydraulic Main Group, which is very largely made up of Chhattisgarhis. Of the non-Chhattisgarhis, the majority are in supervisory grades. One explanation for this is that most other tasks performed by the Heating Group demand standards of literacy and numeracy which the older Chhattisgarhi workers do not have. Another is that locals with land in the vicinity of the plant welcome a regime which allows them to leave it after a couple of hours in the morning. In other sections of the Coke Oven workforce, the proportion of Chhattisgarhis to outsiders is less even than in the Heating Group. But work-teams are still almost invariably mixed in terms of both caste and regional ethnicity.

together, vegetables brought from home being shovelled onto other people's plates—by Satnamis as well, though there were occasions in the plant when I sensed a degree of assertiveness about such generosity. 'At least here you cannot refuse' is the unspoken challenge. But it is one which nobody accepts. In the higher grades there are certainly tensions over a promotion policy which allows Scheduled Caste workers to leapfrog others more senior. But caste is less troubling than regional ethnicity²⁰—a certain tenseness over which is expressed in the form of ritualised joking in which insults which outside the plant might lead to real offence are banteringly traded.²¹ In private, however, some individuals are prone to rumble on about how the Chhattisgarhis will cover up for each other, but never for us; about how these interlopers from outside are always catching hold of some union leader to extricate them from the really tough jobs. In the Heating Group these feelings came to the surface in the recent election of two union representatives. Tamrakar, the chageman from battery B, ran on a 'Chhattisgarhis must stick together' platform. It is perhaps significant, however, that the strategy misfired. All the outsiders were driven into the camp of a Punjabi candidate, who was elected along with a man who comes from a nearby part of Madhya Pradesh which is outside the Chhattisgarh region, and who presented himself as an ideal compromise candidate who was both insider and outsider.

But there is another, and I believe more important, side to this picture which is the strong sense of solidarity that grows up between those who work together on a day-to-day basis and have ample time in the plant for socialising. This sense of 'togetherness' (*apanapan*) is reinforced by a rather robust institutional subculture which has roots in the Nehruvian vision of modernity for which BSP was always intended to serve as a beacon, and in which the divisions of caste, region and religion were to be transcended for the greater good of the nation. It is true that there are some workers who say that they prefer to keep work and home quite separate; and it is also true that there is a conspicuous absence of any attempt to domesticate plant space. Nobody even puts a calendar picture in the 'Gas Man / room', and nobody brings a pillow from home so that they can sleep more comfortably. But despite what this seems to suggest, the friendships which many workers form in the plant often acquire

²⁰ For a more detailed discussion of caste on the BSP shopfloor, see Parry (forthcoming).

²¹ 'Why is Chhattisgarh called Chhattisgarh?' asks the Bihari. 'Because every woman here has 36 houses' (i.e., husbands). 'You Biharis do not go home for two years,' the Chhattisgarhi responds, 'but still you distribute sweets for the child your wife just delivered in the village'.

considerable significance outside it and 'work' and 'life' are by no means compartmentalised. Entire work-groups are almost invariably invited, and at least some of their members will invariably come, to life-cycle rituals in the household; and the group as a whole can be expected to rally round in times of trouble. When Ramesh suffered kidney failure shortly after retirement and badly needed a blood transfusion, it was his former colleagues from the Rail Mill who scurried about in search of a donor of his extremely rare group.

The Heating Group, like many others, has its own Welfare Committee to which everybody makes a small monthly contribution that provides a float for a member in difficulties. Apart from contributing to that, Senior Gas Man Motilal from battery B is the organiser of a rotating credit society with thirty-two Heating Group members, and belongs to two other similar societies with overlapping memberships. He has an annual picnic in the BSP park for all the families; and more boisterous picnics are held when anybody from the group is promoted. Motilal is also an enthusiastic member of a 'tour group' which consists of ten work-mates who go off together by motor-bike or Maruti van for short breaks—four Chhattisgarhis (including one Satnami), and six outsiders from four different states. On a recent trip to a game park they were accompanied by their Senior Manager. Then there are his two Heating Group 'dining clubs' which meet once a month. One—at which meat and liquor are consumed—gathers in each member's house in turn; the other is vegetarian and teetotal, and meets in a hotel. But both include 'Hindus' and Satnamis, Chhattisgarhis and outsiders. Though Motilal lives in a neighbourhood which is rather out of the way for his colleagues, hardly a week goes by when one or other of them would not call. And he is not by any means exceptional.

A glaring gap in my account has been the army of contract labourers who work on daily wages in the plant, where—by comparison with regular BSP labour—they are conspicuous for the sustained intensity with which they work. Most are unskilled; and many of the most tedious, gruelling and unpleasant tasks which used to be performed by BSP workers are now done by contract labour who over the past five years have been the victims of the vast majority of fatal accidents in the plant. What is striking, however, is that as they represent it, working for BSP is—by comparison with most other jobs they can get—*aram ka kam* (light work). Their contact with regular BSP workers is extremely limited and the social composition of their work-groups very different. While inside the

plant all BSP workers are men,²² a high proportion of unskilled contract workers are women. But whether male or female, the vast majority are Chhattisgarhis, while the contractors are overwhelmingly outsiders.

V

In the private sector—A concluding hypothesis

What I hope this discussion has demonstrated is that, as far as those who have permanent jobs in a public sector industry are concerned, large-scale machine production does not necessarily impose a new and more exacting work discipline, or require new attitudes to time. But it would be rash to assume that things must be radically different in the private sector, however much that contrast is stressed in local discourse—on the industrial estate ‘not even a moment to straighten one’s back’ and ‘while there is work there is a hand on your back, and when there is none there’s a kick up your bum’.²³ It would be just as rash, though, to attribute to that sector a homogeneity which it does not have. My observations here relate to the larger-scale ‘organised’ sector factories.

Take the one I know best, an engineering company with around 500 employees. Though management strives to impose a regime of incessant productive activity, and though it has done what it can to curtail malin-gering (workers cannot leave before the end of their shift and the canteen has been relocated outside the factory gates to prevent them sloping off for tea without passing the security guards), its success is unspectacular and for many the working day is still punctuated by long fallow periods. As Chandavarkar (1994: 337) suggests, management’s problem has less to do with the work culture of an Indian proletariat still habituated to the rhythms of peasant agriculture than it has to do with the fact that a great deal of industrial production inevitably proceeds in a staccato fashion and continuous workflows are difficult to sustain. In all shops the intensity of labour visibly depends on the state of the order books. But even when they are full, work in the foundry shop alternates between bursts of frenetic activity and extended lulls. In the machine shop, by contrast, the continuous vigilance of the operator is indeed required *when* there is work in hand, though he can often leave his lathe to run itself while he briefly chats with a neighbour before the next adjustment is required. But

²² There are a few female officers.

²³ *Jab tak kam hai pith men hath hai, kam nehin hai to gand men lat hai.*

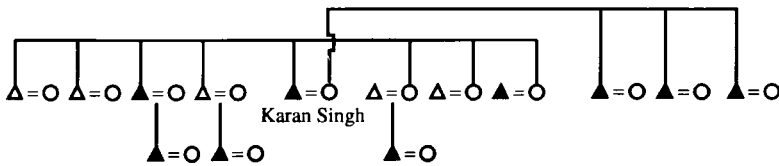
in the fettling shop work really is a ceaseless grind, and there is scarcely a moment 'to straighten one's back'.

At one extreme would be work by the furnaces in one of the re-rolling mills where those who do the toughest jobs might put in a maximum of two hours' (extremely hard) labour per shift in bursts of 30 minutes each. At the other is assembly-line production run on Taylorist principles; and it was on the line in a cigarette-making company that I encountered a factory regime which most perfectly exemplified the picture of a working day governed by the remorselessly repetitive demands of the machine. Two and a half hours 'overtime' (sometimes four) is routinely required, and on six days a week the operator is rooted to his position for two stretches of five hours repeating the same movements every few seconds. In short, different types of industrial process are associated with different intensities of labour and impose work disciplines of different degrees of rigour. Not only does Thompson's stark contrast between work in the fields and the factory romanticise the former but it also ignores the very variable nature of the latter.

I was sitting one day in the house of Gajraj Singh, an employee in the engineering firm just mentioned, while he was working at his sewing machine. It was his day off, and he makes a supplementary income as a tailor. But before he joined the company he had done it full time, and was telling me that his income from it was nearly as good as it is in the factory. Why, then, did he not continue with tailoring? To make a reasonable living at it, he explained, requires long hours of consistent application, and as soon as you think you are through for the day some importunate customer shows up demanding the suit for his son's wedding. By contrast a job in the factory is 'restful'. They give you a task; you do it and then take a break. You work for four hours and wander for four. Eight hours belong to the factory, but after that your time is your own and nobody comes to harass you at home. The discipline of the clock has also its advantages.

But if the contrast in the intensity of labour between public and *certain kinds* of private sector factories is less marked than I might have supposed from the way in which people talk, the difference in the way in which labour is organised is more striking than I had expected. The private sector shopfloor is less of a melting-pot. As I have documented in more detail elsewhere (Parry, forthcoming), 'primordial' identities have a discernibly higher profile in the private sector. This difference is partly a matter of institutional culture. The engineering company on the industrial estate was not set up to engineer a nation, but simply to

Figure 1
Jat Sikh Machine Shop Operators from Amritsar



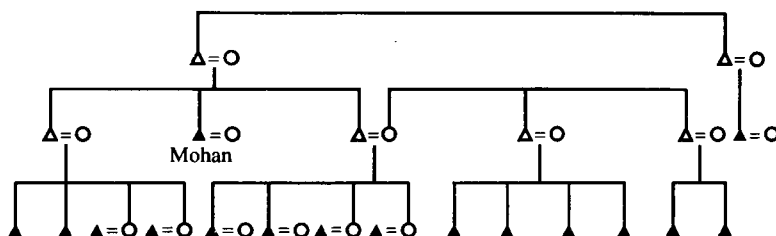
▲ Operators/Workers

make a profit. Moreover, in factories like it, the temporary contract workers are largely Chhattisgarhis, the permanently employed workers are largely outsiders, and the two categories of employee tend to belong to rival unions.

Even more significant is that in the private sector groups of kinsmen and co-villagers working side by side are a conspicuous feature of shop-floor organisation. This is principally an unintended consequence of the management's determination to circumvent the employment legislation. Workers taken on through contractors can be laid off at will by the company, and are not entitled to many of the benefits and bonuses which its permanent workforce receive. A contractor (often previously a skilled worker in the same factory) will be given charge of, say, a bank of five lathes and is (or at least was until very recently) at liberty to employ his relatives to run them.²⁴ As a result, most of the operators on one side of the shopfloor might be Jat Sikhs from Amritsar, on the other side Bhumihar Brahmans from Bihar. The Sikh example is Karan Singh's kinship group, shown in Figure 1. But in addition to his eight kinsmen, there are seven other employees in the factory who come from his village and who were recruited through him. Or take Mohan—a Mahar from Gondiya district in Maharashtra, originally a trusted *chaukidar* at his boss's wholesale company and now a security man at his more recently established cigarette factory. Figure 2 shows how he is related to fifteen of its machine operators. What it does not show is that he has also placed eleven other men from his own village and seven from neighbouring

²⁴ The policy of the owners has changed significantly over the past few years as the result of a period of prolonged industrial strife which made them realise the power of a large contractor at the head of a solidary block of kinsmen and co-villagers. Recruitment has now been taken out of the contractor's hands, and there has been an attempt to break up such blocks by scattering their members between different work-groups. But this has yet to make much noticeable impact on the texture of social relations within the factory.

Mahar Cigarette Company Workers



▲ Operators/Workers

villages in the factory. Nor does it show how these people tend to stick together within the factory and to live in close proximity to each other outside it. The contrast with BSP is, I hope, plain.

The situation is paradoxical. The BSP jobs are a major bone of contention between Chhattisgarhis and outsiders precisely because they are so privileged. On the one hand, then, BSP employment is a major cause of antagonism. But I have also tried to show that it creates strong social bonds which counteract that antagonism (in a way that private sector employment does not). Given the hegemony which BSP exercises over the industrialised area which surrounds it, what happens within its labour force has a significant influence outside it—and it seems plausible to suggest that this influence has something to do with Bhilai's history of relatively harmonious inter-community relations.

What is certainly striking is that this harmony has been achieved in the face of precisely those forces which Nandy and his collaborators (1997) have identified as most productive of communal violence: an industrialised terrain in which 'modern values are conspicuous and dominant', with an uprooted and—in significant measure—'semi-modernised' population with middle-class aspirations and an 'urban-industrial vision of life'. Of all places, Bhilai is associated with the Nehruvian vision of modernity with its model of the melting-pot, to the imposition of which—we are told—'much of the recent violence in South Asia can be traced. . .' In place of that model, Nandy et al. look back with nostalgia to the older, and more tolerant, world of the Indian 'salad bowl' in which 'the ingredients retain their distinctiveness, but each ingredient transcends its individuality through the presence of others' (1997: vi). Seen from Bhilai, however, it does not seem obvious that the melting-pot model was doomed to disaster. Nor is it clear how the 'salad bowl' model

might have provided a realistic (or particularly attractive) alternative for contemporary India. Identities in it are *collective* and generally *hierarchised*; and when resources are scarce, competition for them is likely to take place between ascriptively defined groups. In the melting-pot model, by contrast, roles are—in theory at least—allocated to *individuals* on the principle of their formal *equality* of status; and competition for them is between individuals rather than collective identities.

For Bhilai, the dangers, as I see them, lie less in the BSP melting-pot than in trends which threaten its influence. The plant is under increasing pressure to replace regular workers with contract labour. Since the latter are very largely 'sons-of-the-soil', while those who employ them are almost exclusively outsiders, the likely effect is to nurture existing sentiments of ethnic regionalism. I have also suggested that much private sector employment reproduces the 'primordial' loyalties that set different segments of the working class off from each other. What all this seems to imply is that any significant weakening of public sector employment may have serious consequences for inter-community relations.

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