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Chapter I



The Condition of the Working Class in Contemporary India

This work begins with ‘labour’, with the question of labour, as also with the ‘framework’ to analyze the condition of labour in contemporary India. *The Condition of the Working Class in England* by Engels (1845) focused on worker’s wages and their living conditions, which offered necessary empirical ground for the subsequent writing of *Capital* by Marx. The framework of analyzing the ‘condition of the working class in India’ could be a prelude to the possible writing of *Capital* in the contemporary. It is a prelude towards making sense of a triadic and split contemporary, marked by the overdetermination and contradiction among capitalism, development and neo-liberal globalization.

This chapter intervenes in the question of labour in four ways. First, it lays down a window to *look* at labour; a close look at labour encompasses diverse labouring practices, including gender and caste imbrications, and the equally varied ways in which wealth resulting from labouring practices is appropriated, distributed and received. This decentered and disaggregated perspective to labour gives way to a new meaning of the economy. The new meaning builds on a particular Marxian approach that has developed in the last three decades. More specifically, known as the class-focused theory (not class specific or class centric), this approach seeks to produce an alternative economic cartography in terms of ‘class defined as *processes* of performance, appropriation, distribution and receipt of *surplus labour*’ and the epistemology of *overdetermination*, which argues that class processes are in a mutually constitutive relation with non-class processes.¹ Second, class focused rendition of the economy produces in turn

1 Resnick and Wolff (1987, 2002); Gibson–Graham (1996, 2006); Chakrabarti and Cullenberg (2003); Ruccio (2011); and Chakrabarti, Dhar and Cullenberg (2012).

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the possibility of a number of coexisting social formations and labour relations, with capitalism being *one* (not the only) form. This entails that capitalism is a part and not the whole of an otherwise disaggregated, decentered and complex class focused whole, called the economy; as a result labouring processes are also polymorphous (not just multiple); the same labouring individual may move from one kind of class process to another, and occupy multiple class positions at the same time. Because, the capitalist class process, capitalism and the economy are conceptually distinct, any attempt to reduce the economy to either capitalism or the capitalist class process is moot. The concept of ‘economy’ and the concept of ‘capitalism’ cannot be reduced to one other (we shall show in Chapter 4 how neo-liberalism reduces the social to the economic and the economic to capitalism). Hence, labouring processes need to be conceptualized beyond the paradigmatic frame ‘labour in a capitalist class process.’ Third, the class focused cartography of the economy inaugurates a different language of labour that takes us beyond the understanding of the ‘working class’ as a homogenous group of people with a shared experience of alienation–exploitation and who can act. The problematization of a given working class *identity* propels us into the somewhat crazy Lacanian suggestion: *imagine there is no Working Class*.² What we have instead, because of the dissemination inaugurated by the class-focused analysis, is an extremely heterogeneous space of diverse socio-economic organizations with their equally heterogeneous labouring practices. This puts the identitarian-ism of the working class *under erasure*. It also puts to question extant trade union imaginations and practices in India; trade unions need to live up first to existing disaggregation of labouring practices (spanning from labour tied to capitalist class process to labour tied to non-capitalist class process; spanning from labour in formal sector to labour in informal sector;

2 In our understanding of the ‘working class’ we remain sensitive to the Lacanian leash, to Lacan’s (in)famous ethico-political binder he placed upon us all in his *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*: ‘Imagine There is No Poland’. What would the Poles (who would now no more be Poles) do if there were no Poland? What would the Poles do, how would they form a collective, if they were stripped of the transcendental refuge: Poland. Or perhaps to put the Lacanian leash in our context: *Imagine there is no Woman* (Woman with a capital ‘W’) *Imagine there is no Working Class* (Working Class with a capital ‘W’ and a capital ‘C’). How would we think class politics once we are stripped of the transcendental refuge: Working Class? As part of this rethinking, it is now accepted that class is no more a pre-given subject, a noun-in-action. But then even if class is not a pre-given subject, who would act politically, the concept of class albeit as process, the language of exploitation, does have political potential and potency.

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spanning from paid labour to unpaid labour; spanning from public sector labour to home-based labour; spanning from produce-driven to service-driven to care-driven labour) as also to changes in the structure of the economy, as focus shifts from 'labour-power' to 'human capital' (see Chapter 4). Finally, we will use our class-focused economy to exemplify and interpret economic practices and relationships that traditionally have not been the strength of economists and Marxian theory in particular. For this purpose, we will take up two subject positions that are central issues, albeit purloined or demoted, of the Indian economy and its transition: self-employment and household labour.

Building on these four areas, this chapter highlights in turn the distinctness of the class-focused approach; we show how it contributes to interpreting and explaining practices, relationships and events, and what it brings to the theorization of the economy as also the social. If we agree that the capital-labour relation is central to capitalism and to the contemporary process of transition, then an engagement with the category of labour (without rushing to the concept of working class) is imperative. This chapter will form the background that will push us to inquire into areas and in ways, which have hitherto been demoted in explaining India's economic transition.

It is also worth pointing out that our deployment of the concept and category 'class' is sharply different from extant non-Marxian and conventional or classical Marxian definitions of class. It differs in at least two respects. First, the conventional renditions of class exclude or demote the element of *surplus labour* from their definition of class, and instead view class in terms of *property* or *power* or *income*, etc. In contrast, Resnick and Wolff (1987) insist on the *entry point* of surplus labour around which class is understood. They argue that the understanding of class-as-surplus-labour brings its own uniqueness to social analysis, practice and policy that cannot be reduced to power, property or income-centric understandings. Second, almost all other theories of class understand class as a *noun*, that is, as persons as also a homogenous group of persons or social actors; however class as noun is logically inconsistent and unsustainable (see Hindess, 1987, 1988; Chakrabarti and Cullenberg, 2003: Chapter 1 and 3; Chakrabarti, Dhar and Cullenberg, 2012: Chapter 2). In delineating the Indian 'modes of production' debate, subaltern studies debate and the Indian economic transition from planning to liberalization, Chakrabarti and Cullenberg (2003) have highlighted the problem of the understanding of 'class-as-a-noun', and that too defined in terms of power and/or property; they have shown how this reductionism then undermines the conceptualization and description of transition. Critiques of class as noun,

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class as a *given being* provide the ground to move towards an understanding of class as an *adjective* (to processes) or a *verb* (i.e., class as process of producing surplus labour or simply class process), class as *becoming* or *doing*.

The concept of class as process pertaining to surplus labour and the class focused economic cartography problematizes the received notion of economy, capitalism, labour, worker and working class. In the process, it offers fresh ground for rethinking the imagination of trade unionism. To exemplify the scope of our class focused analysis and the kind of new horizon it opens up for rethinking trade unionism, we take up the case of ‘self-employment’ and disinter that category to reveal the diverse existence of labouring practices it telescopes. It highlights the difficulty of organizing diverse existences and types of workers, and the kind of challenge that trade unions must fathom and confront in the contemporary. This chapter is, thus, focused on a unique discursive space of contemplating economy and labour, and how it can be made to question, unsettle and displace received imaginations of trade unionism, Marxian and non-Marxian alike. In so far as transforming the language of trade unionism is concerned, we shall show how and why the class focused discursive horizon of labour has something new to offer. Moreover, our intervention also enables an imaginative space to rethink labour related politics and interventions beyond the given contours of trade unionism; our framework provides room for class struggle in the household to appear. We unpack the presence of class in ‘household’ production to show its effect, in conjunction with gender. The philosophy of conventional trade unionism is moot in such cases and other kinds of imaginations of politics are necessitated. This is not to undermine the social/political role of trade unionism (which anyway has to be rethought in neoliberal times), but simply argue that our approach takes us much beyond the usual contour of imagining labour and political intervention with respect to it.

Overdetermination and class

... a thousand threads one treadle throws,
Where fly the shuttles hither and thither,
Unseen the threads are knit together,
And an *infinite* combination grows.

Sigmund Freud, 1965: 317

Two aspects combine to define this kind of Marxian theory. The first refers to a non-essentialist epistemology, *overdetermination* and the second

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to the contingent and partial *entry point* of class process in a field of ‘infinite combinations’ (Resnick and Wolff, 1987: Chapter 1 and 2; Chakrabarti and Cullenberg, 2003: Chapter 1). Overdetermination rules out privileging, centrality and mono-causal origin in explanation. Overdetermination suggests that each process, including class process, constitutes and is constituted by other processes (say, property, gender, caste); unlike the deterministic structure of causality (in which cause and effect is separated and hierarchized), every process here is a cause as also an effect. A different conceptual apparatus takes shape to capture this phenomenon. The key term is *constitution* which means ‘bringing into existence’. The verb *effect* captures the aspect of ‘to constitute’, as such; by virtue of being both cause and effect, processes mutually constitute one another, that is, they are brought into existence by one another; no process can exist independent of the rest and hence be outside (mutual) constitution. There is another way to capture this quality. Take any process that is being constituted by other processes. Overdetermination says that the constituting processes provide the *conditions of existence* of the constituted process. It follows that each process is ‘constituted’, literally brought into existence, by the *combined effects* of other processes, some unknown; what is true for this process is true for all the other processes; ‘unseen the threads are knit together’; no process can occur alone; resulting from properties of mutual constitution and conditions of existence, it is evident that a process always occurs together with and in relation to a group of processes.

Clusters of processes help shape any individual, collective, institution, activity, practice, relationship or event in society. Relationships (say, a relationship of friendship or love), practices (say, organizing a trade union in a factory), activities (say, cooking food at home) or events (say, a social movement) are to be seen as sites of combined effects from mutually constitutive processes. No social relationship, practice, activity or event can thus be reduced to one singular or a few process; all are result of constellation of processes imparting their effects in combination with one another. Overdetermination, thus, encapsulates a critique of both determinism and reductionism.

Overdetermination also encapsulates contradiction. Different processes are bringing their distinguishing qualities that are unique and hence in their respective effects contradictory to one another, bear upon the constitution of a particular process. In this sense, the process of overdetermination is also subjected to contradictory forces that are pulling and pushing the specified process in different directions. Because every process is a site of overdetermined and contradictory effects of ‘a thousand threads’, each process is in a state of

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flux, prone to contingency, its movement uncertain and uneven. Let us take the example of policy.

'Policy' frameworks, as changing a specific process or two to obtain certain objectives, often tends to be ineffective or even go awry. This is because of overdetermined and contradictory effects; the effects of other constituting processes (known and unknown), some considered and others not well considered, undercut, often in unanticipated and unknown ways, the outcome of the policy which may turn out to be very different from ones that were expected or predicted. In the field of economics, failure of the efforts to exploit Phillips relation or the miscarriage of Lewis's transition story, inability to control exchange rate or inflation rate, etc., are some of such examples of policies getting affected by the constellation of overdetermined and contradictory processes, some unknown including in Keynes's sense of exogenous uncertainty that cannot be probabilistically calculated and predicted. Conversely, policy successes too may arise from not just the factors that are known and predicted, but also unforeseen and unknown processes that may impart effects favourable to the outcome policy makers' desire (in this work we shall explore from this perspective most of the policies, their movements and their successes/failures concerning post-liberalization India's economic history).

Given that reality is a cluster of infinite overdetermined and contradictory processes, there can be no grand theory, or explanation or understanding of reality. One can only have a contingent and partial theory, generated through choice of one of the processes or a composite of processes named as entry point. One can only have an *entry point* perspective. Consequently, there can be no absolute truth; one can only have 'partial truth' or a 'partial perspective', specific to the chosen entry point. When certain (determinist) schools of Marxism make absolute truth claims, they are to be seen as taking the chosen entry point process as the essence/origin/core to which other explanations or understandings are in the last instance reduced. At the level of explanation or ontological understanding in such theories, overdetermination is arrested. These are then contrary to our interpretation of Marxian theory.

Resnick and Wolff (1987) take class as the *chosen* entry point; we take class as the *touchy* entry point, because class is that which is foreclosed in the capitalist hegemonic, class is that which capitalist hegemony is most touchy about (Chakrabarti, Dhar and Cullenberg, 2012). However, class is considered not as a noun, but as an adjective to 'process'; for us class is 'class process'. Moreover, class is not to be reduced to property, power or income; class is to

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be understood as the process of performance, appropriation, distribution and receipt of surplus labour (and not just surplus value).

Class focused Marxian theory (from now on simply Marxist theory) marks its sharp difference from other theories by virtue of its unique chosen entry point of class process (focus of analysis) and epistemology of overdetermination (its understanding of relationship of class and non-class processes). It works and intervenes in a space where the changes in non-class processes effect and transform class processes and vice versa. It seeks to explore the (ever changing) overdetermined class focused reality consisting of the mutually constitutive class and non-class processes (including power, property and income), and make sense of its transition. Putting it alternatively, its objective is to locate and analyze the diverse manners in which the class process is constituted by, and in turn constitutes other economic, political, cultural and natural processes.

Processes comprising social reality are, for discursive convenience, clubbed as economic (production, distribution and consumption of goods and services), political (design and regulation of power and authority), cultural (production and dissemination of meanings), and natural (the transformation [biological, chemical, etc.] of the physical properties of matter) processes. The relation between economy and society needs to be clarified here. Since class process is clearly an economic process, one can think of Marxian theory as forwarding an economic theory. Is an economic theory, an explanation or understanding of society and as such a theory of society? The answer is 'yes' as long as one remembers that it refers to a *partial* theory of society. Since 'society is the totality of all designable processes' (Resnick and Wolff, 1987: 4–5), any knowledge built on a chosen entry point process will specify those, but not all, processes of society that connect with the entry point. Thus, an economic entry point will work to explicate possible connections between the economic entry point process and other processes, economic as well as non-economic. It is also never possible to designate in an absolute sense the outcome of any analysis of individuals, institutions, relationships, events or policies. Unknown effects of known processes and unanticipated effects from unknown processes would be bringing their contradictory influences to bear upon the overdetermined reality, and hence making it *contingent*. Thus, no (economic) theory can claim to explain all the possible dimensions of society, and thus, captures society in all its dimensions; nor can it claim to predict results with finality or foretell the future. Marxian theory is foundationally non-teleological in its assessment of society. This is also the difference between Marxian theory (with its emphasis

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on overdetermination, contradiction and entry point), and most neo-liberal philosophies that *reduce* the social to the economic; Chapter 4 is an explication of this difference.

Labour, economy and wealth

To arrive at an understanding of the concept of ‘class’, we begin with the ‘labour process’ in which labourers use their ‘labour power’ to transform elements of nature into final goods and services. Following Marx, our focus is on the ‘labour time’ expended in the labour process. The total labour time of direct producers are divided into ‘necessary labour’ and ‘surplus labour’. Necessary labour comprises of the performance or ‘doing’ that pays off (in money or in kind) for the socially determined basket of goods and services needed to sustain the worker. *Performance* of labour *beyond* necessary labour is surplus labour. For analytical convenience, those who perform necessary and *surplus labour* are ‘direct producers’ or workers. As the unpaid portion, the surplus product equivalent to surplus labour when exchanged for money acquires the form of ‘surplus value’. Surplus labour remains in the form of surplus product if they are directly consumed as use values without being exchanged for money, as is the case of a household. Both surplus value and surplus produce as manifested ‘surpluses’ are thus forms of surplus labour. Whether as surplus produce or surplus value, surplus labour is *appropriated* by some entity, and *distributed* by the same. The distributed portion of surplus accrues to the rest of society in various kinds of divisible amounts. This conception of surplus that connects the labouring process to the existence and flow of wealth in society is central to Marxian theory.

The interconnected processes of *performance*, *appropriation*, *distribution* and *receipt* of surplus labour are defined as class. The worth of surplus labour in money (as surplus value) or kind (as surplus produce) is the discretionary wealth of society available to be appropriated, distributed and received after having first deducted the payments of the direct producers (in the form of money wages or in kind) which, by definition, is the necessary labour equivalent, and then, the payments on account of the purchase of the means of production (comprising of machines, buildings, raw materials, etc.). Unlike other theories, class focused Marxian theory is premised on surplus labour, its entry point.

Resnick and Wolff divided class process into fundamental and subsumed class process for analytical convenience; fundamental class process (FCP) comprises of performance and appropriation of surplus labour while subsumed

class process (SCP) that of distribution and receipt of surplus labour. Marx deploys FCP to differentiate among various economic forms in society:

The essential difference between the various economic forms of society, between, for instance, a society based on slave labour, and one based on wage-labour, lies only in the mode in which this surplus labour is in each case extracted from the actual producer, the labourer (Marx, 1954–1967, Vol. 1: 217).

There are three basic possibilities. The process of appropriation can be *exploitative*, if the direct producers of surplus are excluded from the process of appropriation. The process of appropriation is *non-exploitative*, if the direct producers are not excluded from the process of appropriation; instead, in some commonly decided manner, they participate in the process of appropriation. Finally, the process of appropriation is *self-appropriating*, if both the performance and appropriation of surplus labour is done by one and the same individual. Class process thus signifies class relations of production. Depending upon the various class forms or FCP, different adjectives, such as, ‘independent’ and ‘communist’ are placed before the respective class processes.

Taking off from Marx (1954) and Resnick and Wolff (1987), Chaudhury and Chakrabarti (2000) re-formulated the organization of surplus in terms of fundamentally dissimilar manners in which performance and appropriation of surplus labour (FCP) can possibly take place. This differentiation will be consequently used to conceptualize the economy and relate it to, as also distinguish it from, the capitalist class process.

Appropriation of surplus labour			
Performance of Surplus Labour	Direct Labour (A)	Non-labour (B)	Collective Labour (C)
	AA	AB	AC
	CA	CB	CC

In the above matrix, direct labour (A) is labour that is performed individually in the production of goods or services. Non-labour (B) is self-evident. Collective labour (C) refers to the collective of labourers, who via certain division of labour, produce goods or services. In any combination, the first alphabet indicates the performance of surplus labour, and the second stands for the appropriation of surplus labour.

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AA and CC designate independent class process and communist class process respectively, AC and CA represent two forms of communitic class process, and the rest AB and CB map out into different kinds of exploitative class processes to be further classified as capitalist class process, feudal class process and slave class process. Let us define the class processes.

In the *capitalist* class process, surplus labour generated by direct producers qua productive labourers is appropriated by productive capitalists through a unique combination of values comprising of labour power, means of production and surplus value. This commodity form could be market driven or state sponsored, and the appropriators could be private entities or connected to the state. Depending upon the relation of commodity and appropriators to the state or to private entities, capitalist class process could be state or private (Resnick and Wolff, 2002).

Slave class process is defined as the appropriation of surplus labour of slaves by their non-performing masters where the slave-master relation is based on the condition that one set of human beings (master) retain possession of the labour power of another set of human beings (slaves) in perpetuity (Weiner, 2003). Accordingly, there is no market for slave labour power that would allow for its buying and selling, or its free entry and exit from the clutches of the master. What exists instead is the market for slaves, i.e., the buying and selling of humans. The slave has little, if any, freedom in the life process (for example, marrying, having children, etc.)

Feudal class process refers to another exploitative arrangement where the serf produces the surplus labour, which is appropriated by non-performing lords. Here, the relation between serf and lord, while not similar to slave-as-property (the serf has more freedom in the life process than the slave but less than the workers under capitalist condition), is still defined in terms of certain personalized forms of attachment or ties grounded on loyalty, fealty, kinship and so on.

In the *communist class process*, CC, both performance and appropriation of surplus labour take collective and shared forms. It epitomizes non-exploitative forms of appropriation since the direct producers are not excluded from the process of appropriation; rather they have share in the participation of that process. Resnick and Wolff (1988) have talked about two kinds of communist class processes:

Type I, where 'all adult individuals in society participate collectively in that class process as appropriators of surplus labour, but only some individuals (a small number) perform surplus labour' (1988: 21), and

Type II, where 'only those particular individuals who perform surplus labour collectively appropriate it' (1988: 21).