

Book Review

Manjusha Nair (2016) *Undervalued Dissent: Informal Workers' Politics in India*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
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Manjusha Nair's *Undervalued Dissent: Informal Workers' Politics in India* analyses the sweeping economic transformation within India over the past three decades, and its impact on the Indian workforce in terms of how labour politics has been reshaped after the introduction of neo-liberal reforms in the Indian economy. The author has executed this analysis by providing a thorough comparative historical and ethnographic analysis of two labour movements – one belonging to the era of economic nationalism and the other after the introduction of reforms. While informal workers are generally considered “outside” the boundaries of the “regular” workforce, the author's ethnography of these workers can be extended to labour politics in general. Let us see how the author has accomplished this.

Based on extensive fieldwork in Chhattisgarh, a state in central India rich in mineral resources, this book examines two different informal workers' movements – one involving the informal contractual workers of the Dalli-Rajhara mines (the captive iron-ore mines of the Bhilai Steel Plant) and the other involving contractual workers of the ACC cement factory in Jamul. This comparison has been formulated to explore the incremental but steadily vanishing democratic spaces in India. In this endeavour, the author compares the success of the mining workers' movement that started in 1977 to the non-success of the industrial workers movement that started in 1989 and continues today. She then attempts to answer the comparative puzzle as to why there have been differential experiences, despite the similar grievances and mobilisation and organisational strategies – that is, why did the local workers in Dalli-Rajhara succeed but not the workers in Bhilai?

The author argues that the mining workers succeeded by using the space and culture of democratic dissent, represented as workers' ability to organise contention through the channels of trade union activism, political party formation and social movements, to constantly exert pressure on the state by challenging its many arteries. This is in complete contrast to the industrial workers' movement, which did not succeed due to the fact that they contested within the context of the widely altered labour regime following neo-liberal reforms, where these spaces of democratic dissent were pre-empted. Based on Atul Kohli's work, Nair presents the difference between these two regimes as a transformation of the Indian state “from a reluctant pro-capitalist state with a socialist ideology to an enthusiastic pro-capitalist state with a neoliberal ideology” (p. 9). This pro-big-corporate stance adopted by the Indian state, suggested by Nair as “market fundamentalism”, was accompanied by a cultural shift in India pre-empting any kind of democratic mobilisation of rights, such as the right to unionise and the right to strike. These changes, Nair argues, have steadily led to the systematic shutting of democratic spaces of dissent in Indian labour politics.

The empirical engagement used in this study further supplements the theoretical claims on how neo-liberalism has systematically weakened the ability of workers to employ democratic forms of contestation. The primary empirical material is in the form of stories about participation in movements, which the author has painstakingly collected through eighteen months of fieldwork in two ethnographic research sites. This work uses a comparative historical and ethnographic analysis based on the extended case study method, which allowed the author to capture informal labour politics across a wider spectrum of spaces including indignity, rurality, displacement and mass exodus, which have all moulded the vulnerability of informal labour. The methodology also allowed the author to observe repertoires, strategies and subjectivities of workers that combined and shifted between “citizenship and community, militant activism, and electoral politics, trade unionism and social movement organisation, religion and secularism, rurality and urbanism, and instrumentalism and emotionalism” (p. 178).

With this approach, the book is organised into eight chapters, including introductory and concluding chapters. In the first chapter the author explains the central problem of newly formed states in India – to achieve economic growth and retain the support of the citizen-population, which was required to maintain political power – and how the state attempted to solve this puzzle in the context of state–labour relations. The latter section of this chapter illustrates a noticeable pro-business tilt in Indian political economy from the 1980s and the transformation in this regime after the introduction of the neo-liberal reforms. Nair points to neo-liberalism as a “cultural shift”, where entrepreneurship and profit-making, uncoupled from nation-building, became legitimised in the Indian public domain. In Chapter Two, Nair argues that the boundaries between workers and citizens, and between formality and informality, extends beyond the workplace and has steadily shaped the contours of life and livelihood, which must not be viewed as anomalies. Chapter Three analyses the mine workers’ success in the mining towns. Nair shows that the miners were able to effectively challenge the different conduits of the state simultaneously. She argues that the varied exercises were possible and successful not because of the existence of the state that granted rights, or a labour regime that permitted dissent, but because of the presence of a democratic space of contention that the workers capitalised on to the fullest extent. Chapter Four examines the phenomenon of the emergence and growth of Chhattisgarh’s development trajectory. The author presents evidence for the fact that the state government, led by the right-wing political party, the BJP, garnered political legitimacy despite human costs such as displacement of people from their livelihoods, unprecedented migration of the rural poor and suicides of farmers – all through a curious mix of providing material services and communalising the countryside. In Chapter Five, the author enquires what it was like for a Chhattisgarhiya informal worker to live and work in the postcolonial steel city, by situating it in Bhilai Steel city, the second research site of this book. This chapter provides a wider lens through which to understand the institutional and everyday divides between locals and “outsiders”, who comprise the working middle class of the Bhilai Steel Plant, while also including the roles and dynamics around the business class who are also major landowners. Chapter Six explores why the Bhilai movement failed to make the industrial management accept its demands, quite unlike the movements in the mining towns, despite the fact that the Bhilai workers drew on the same repertoire as the miners. The concluding chapter summarises the findings and implications of the book by putting forward cross-national and global comparisons. The major finding of the book is that the biggest change in labour politics following the transformation in state, economy and society is in the ability of workers to successfully use democratic means of doing politics.

Towards the close of the book, Nair provokes questions pertaining to the future of labour politics in India. She argues that contemporary India’s labour organisations lack the strength to

collectively mobilise the fragmented working-class resistance to declining employment conditions, and to put pressure on the state for effective changes in “flexible” labour laws. Labour rights appear to hold feeble moral legitimacy in India. However, these claims might actually be rather despondent, focusing narrowly on older forms of activism, which need not necessarily emerge as the best or most appropriate forms of labour response, especially given the case of the highly fragmented and differentially vulnerable informal category of workers that characterises the Indian labour scene. It is in this context that recent studies, especially those of labour geographers, analyse how the spatial practices of labour shape the economic geography of capitalism. These studies do not always look at the universally accepted global models but more at local scales of organisation and their effectiveness, while confronting actors organised at global or extra-local scales. Most of these attempts give priority to the “everyday forms of resistance” in terms of labour politics. Such efforts may not be of the same nature as the more familiar varieties of labour resistance, as argued for in this book, but such attempts must not be ignored as they convey a treasure of resistance strategies that may not immediately match the conventional forms of labour resistance.

Overall, this book is an invaluable read to those who are interested in issues of informality and the increasing precariousness of the Indian workforce. As the precarious informal segment of the Indian workforce is growing, questions of life, work, dignity, decency and worker unity are at peril, and this book, with its deep comparative engagement with two informal labour movements, provides extensive insights into these concerns. These issues emerge as highly pertinent when read against the growing neo-liberal regime in India, rendering this volume a significant contribution to informal labour politics, state–labour relations and the changing scene of state–labour policies in India.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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