

## Book Review

**Jonathan Parry (in collaboration with Ajay T.G.) (2020)<sup>1</sup> *Classes of Labour: Work and Life in a Central Indian Steel Town*. Oxon and New York: Routledge. ISBN 9781138095595 (hardback) 9780367510329 (paperback) 9780203712467 (e-book). 732 pages. £112 (hardback); £29.59 (paperback); £29.59 (e-book).**

*Reviewed by*  
**Suravee Nayak, Centre for Development Studies, India**

*Classes of Labour* by Jonathan Parry is based on thirty-four months of ethnography in one of Nehru's projects of modernity – the Bhilai Steel Plant (BSP) and its township in central India. This meticulously written monograph of 732 pages covers sixty years of work and social life of industrial labour in Bhilai, between 1955 and 2014, and focuses on the workforces of a public-sector steel plant, a variety of private-sector factories and informal-sector labour.

The book under review explores class differentiation in the manual labour force by analysing both shop floors and neighbourhoods in Bhilai. Parry argues that the working class in Bhilai is divided into two distinct classes of labour – *naukari* (regular BSP workers as labour elites) and *kam* (contract, temporary and informal-sector workers as the labour class). The labour elites sometimes share a relationship of exploitation against the labour class. The author further argues that the shop floor of the Bhilai Steel Plant, its township and middle-class housing colonies are the “melting pots” of old hierarchies or primordial relations of caste in India. Parry shows us that “class now trumps caste as the dominant axis of inequality” which shapes the contemporary social classes of labour (p. 4). He identifies the weakening not only of the *hierarchy of castes, division of labour and interdependence*, but also *separation* between upper and lower castes of the Hindu religion that characterised the “traditional” caste relations in India.

The class divide between labour elites and the labour class is analysed and observed not only on the basis of wages, lifestyles and life chances, “but also in kinship and marriage practices, the premium placed on ties with one's village of origin, the significance of caste in daily life and the texture of relations between neighbours, and even in the propensity to suicide” (p. 4). The book is organised into thirteen chapters, including the introduction and conclusion, across four parts – *Context, Work, Life and Concluding*.

The first part of the book (Chapters 1 to 4) sets out the key arguments and provides us with the conceptual basis on which the arguments are framed. It also gives the reader a sense of the wider political economy and the historical processes behind the making of Bhilai township. The author asserts that Bhilai is not among the examples representing a “tragedy of development” but rather a symbol of national integration and modernity. As an industrial monoculture, BSP has a heterogeneous and culturally diverse workforce dominated by migrant workers from different parts

---

<sup>1</sup> Social Science Press in New Delhi published the South Asia Edition in 2019. The next year, Routledge published an international edition. Details for the Social Science Press edition are: ISBN 9789383166343. 732 pages. ₹1850 hardcover.

of the country, setting it apart from other steel plants in India. Migration as a process is viewed as integral to the building of Bhilai's company culture and to the self-transformation process for the migrants. Besides, through the implementation of affirmative action, BSP also became the destination for historically marginalised Dalits, Adivasis and Backward Classes communities (placed at the lowest rank of the caste system).

Following Max Weber's (1968) concept of class – and with a thorough discussion of the limitations of Marx's concept of class, the author focuses on the life chances that shape the similarities and dissimilarities in working and living conditions of a particular class and between two classes of labour. Moreover, Parry conceives of the two classes of labour – *naukri* and *kam* – quite differently from the understandings of Henry Bernstein (2006, 2007) and Jens Lerche (2010, 2013). His careful analysis of life chances and mobility between the two classes enables the author to confirm the citadel rather than the mountain metaphor. With the use of Anthony Giddens' (1975) discussion of class structuration rather than social stratification analysis, he finds those who have *naukri* (regular BSP workers) are the most privileged class, at the top of labour hierarchy and inside a citadel. By emphasising the sharp breaks between the top and bottom of the labour hierarchy, he claims the rest of the workers fall outside the citadel and are thus excluded from the privileges of job security, middle-class lifestyles and upward mobility as possessed by the regular BSP workers – the labour elites. Through the account of Bhilai, he shows that the sharp distinction is not between the organised and unorganised workers in India but between a fraction of organised-sector workers (regular BSP workers) and the rest (contract and temporary workers, and informal-sector labour).

The second part of the book (Chapters 5 to 8) traces the factors critical to shaping class positions by examining the shop floors of BSP, of various private factories and of informal-sector workplaces – particularly the construction sector in Bhilai. The author does so by locating the “class situation through understanding its market situation (including the source and size of the purse, degree of job security and chances of upward occupational mobility), its work situation (the working relationships of its members), and its status situation (its position in the hierarchy of prestige)” (p. 163).

Parry found that BSP workers are among the highest paid in the country with quasi-automatic promotions and middle-class lifestyles. The labour elites also make additional income from what Parry calls moonlighting businesses. Despite several changes in the shop floors of BSP as well as recruitment practices, suspension of the trade union and stricter labour regimes over the years, Parry contends that the privileges of *naukri* holders remain intact. On the other hand, an increasing number of contract workers in BSP are bonded to contractors with wages in arrears and have insecure jobs. Regular BSP workers supervise the contract workers; there are no common and often opposing interests, which is also reflected in their labour union politics. The labour elites interact and socialise with different castes from the same class rather than with contract workers of the same caste.

The author identifies different gradations within the labour hierarchy and “fuzziness” around the boundaries of class structuration; however, he reaffirms the citadel model by indicating the sharp distinctions between *naukri* and *kam*. Except for regular workers in big factories, who arguably have more in common with labour elites, the rest of the contract and temporary labourers fall into the precariousness of *kam* in common with the lowest rungs of informal-sector labour with unstable employment and income, and no opportunities of upward mobility. Taking the case of informal labour in the construction sector dominated by local Chhattisgarhi women, the majority of whom are Dalits, Parry shows us the intersections of gender and class relations through their

labour and sexual exploitation. Working-class women are treated as unrespectable and are associated with pollution, placed differently from women in labour-elite households engaged in domestic labour, but Parry underlines that it is the labour class in general which is being stigmatised by the labour elites. He also observes the challenges for the younger generation of the *naukri* holders in reproducing and sustaining the privileges of the labour aristocracy who under such circumstances engage in moonlighting businesses. However, access to *naukri* is more likely to be achieved by children of labour elites than children of the labour class.

The third part of the book (Chapters 9 to 12) maps the differences in the social life of the two classes of labour. Interestingly, the book discusses critical differences in the spatiality of their residential spaces, childhood experiences, marital practices and even different tendencies towards suicide between the two classes of labour. BSP workers live in a different social space of township or a middle-class housing colony whereas the labour class live in *basti* (ex-villages cum labour colonies) and are separated by poor housing, living standards and consumption patterns. The *bastis* are residentially segregated between Dalits and upper-caste Hindus, a phenomenon which is absent among the labour elites in the township.

The children of the two classes of labour have different experiences of childhood. Children of labour elites focus on education and qualifications for securing *naukri*, and children of the labour class do not participate in educational competitiveness and end up in the labour class. Similarly, the marital practices are quite distinct between the two classes of labour. The rates of divorce, remarriage and inter-caste unions (only in case of remarriages) are increasingly found among the labour class. On the other hand, labour elites race for the stability of marriage, “respectable marriage” norms and new ideas of conjugality.

The author successfully captures two distinct patterns of suicides committed across the two classes of labour for a different set of reasons. Members of the labour elite take their own lives because of tighter regimes at work, the inability of their sons to reproduce into the labour aristocracy, failure to maintain the living standards of a labour elite and marital issues. The labour class tends to commit suicide because of love affairs and inter-caste remarriages.

In the concluding Chapter 13, the author reflects upon the intersections of class and other social structures, in particular caste, gender and ethnicity. In most contexts, Parry argues that class structuration defines and shapes the work and social life of the two classes of labour over and above other social structures. The author also extends the analysis of the *naukri/kam* divide to other industrial settings both inside and outside of India, where the working class is divided by class.

The depth of analysis limits the extent to which a reader can dispute the arguments laid down in this book. However, one remains unsure of how to make sense of the concept of *kam* in understanding the labour class, although the author frequently recognises the complexities and gradations within *kam*. The analysis would have been more convincing and fruitful if more discussion could have been dedicated to the intermediary group which he identifies as the “buffer zone” (p. 70) in parallel with the *naukri/kam* divide. One leaves wanting to know more about the buffer zone, especially when sons of the labour elites often fall into this category due to their failure to reproduce themselves to *naukri*. Besides, the lifestyle and life chances of the labour contractor may be quite different from that of a construction worker. Then the question arises of class consciousness and solidarity among different members of *kam*, and the possibilities of dominance and exploitation between them. One look forwards to seeking answers to that.

The author identifies the BSP shop floor and township as the “melting pot” of old hierarchies. However, there is also evidence of ruptures in the class structuration, though the author has

carefully stitched together the intersecting class, caste, gender and ethnic relations. One wonders if workers' subjectivities are shaped by the overlapping caste, class and gender structures rather than being encompassed by class structuration. This applies particularly to the multi-layered experiences of work and social lives of Dalit labour elites or Dalit labour-class women. The author himself recognises that Dalit BSP workers identify themselves with their caste, while Dalit-Adivasi BSP workers recruited through reservation are seen by upper-caste BSP workers as those who lack merit. Primary marriages remain caste endogamous (even within labour elites), and Dalit women from the labour class are "regarded as sexually available to powerful men" (p. 621). However, Parry does not follow up more closely on that. In the presence of tensions between migrants and locals, the question also hovers around how we understand this rich analysis of migration in contrast with other contexts of "conjugated oppression" narrating the co-constitution of class relations with that of caste, gender and ethnicity which amplifies migrant workers' marginalisation, domination and discrimination by locals (Lerche and Shah, 2018).

This book holds wide appeal and is a must-read for labour scholars across disciplines. The fine-grained ethnography of Bhilai has enabled Parry to make relevant contributions to different cross-cutting themes of industrialisation, development and change, labour hierarchy and fragmentation, migration and class inequality in India and beyond. Its implications on complex queries of labour agency, collective action and labour mobilisation are enormous and of great importance.

## References

- Bernstein, H. (2006) Is There an Agrarian Question in the 21st Century? *Canadian Journal of Development Studies*, 27(4): 449–460.
- Bernstein, H. (2007) Capital and Labour from Centre to Margins. Paper prepared for the "Living on the Margins" conference, Stellenbosch, 27–28 March 2007.
- Giddens, A. (1975) *The Class Structure of the Advanced Societies*. New York: Harper Torchbooks.
- Lerche, J. (2010) From "Rural Labour" to "Classes of Labour": Class Fragmentation, Caste and Class Struggle at the Bottom of the Indian Labour Hierarchy. In *The Comparative Political Economy of Development*, edited by B. Harriss-White and J. Heyer. London: Routledge.
- Lerche, J. (2013) The Agrarian Question in Neoliberal India: Agrarian Transition Bypassed? *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 13(3): 382–404.
- Lerche, J. and A. Shah (2018) Conjugated Oppression within Contemporary Capitalism: Class, Caste, Tribe and Agrarian Change in India. *The Journal Of Peasant Studies*, 45(5–6): 927–949.
- Weber, M. (1968 [1904–05]) *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. London: Unwin University Books.
- Weber, M. (1978) *Weber: Selections in Translation*, edited by W.G. Runciman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

SURAVEE NAYAK is a doctoral researcher at the Centre for Development Studies, India. She is in the writing stage of her PhD, titled "Dispossession, Labour Process and Production of Space: A Study of Coal Mines in Talcher, Odisha", which concerns the labour process in the coal mines of India, specifically in the context of land dispossession. Her research interests include the political economy of coal mining and dispossession, labour process and labour agency in the Global South. [Email: [suraveenayak@gmail.com](mailto:suraveenayak@gmail.com)]