

Debate

Response to Jan Breman's Review Essay on *Classes of Labour: Work and Life in a Central Indian Steel Town*

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I am grateful to Jan Breman for his generous comments on, and critical engagement with, *Classes of Labour*, and to the editors of this journal for the opportunity to reply.¹ Breman's focus is on just one of the book's central arguments. My response will for the most part follow suit, though to explain why I do not find his strictures on it convincing I need to briefly refer to some other strands in my analysis that his commentary has largely passed over and that are indispensable background to the key proposition with which he takes issue.

In the opening sentence of his Abstract Breman declares that from the beginning of his career he rejected the idea that the landscape of labour can be seen in dichotomous terms, divided between a formal and an informal sector workforce. Perhaps he forgets? Originally published in 1976, the first chapter of his 1994 essay collection is a repudiation of his own earlier attempts "to divide the local labour market into two divisions" and a plea for a more nuanced picture of the labour hierarchy as composed of multiple gradations (Breman, 1994: 18).

Two aspects of Breman's recantation particularly struck me when I attempted to review his position in the book (Chapter 2, Section 3). First, in the light of the empirical evidence alluded to in that 1976 essay itself and in the one that is reprinted next in the 1994 collection, the need to recant at all did not seem pressing. What much of that evidence in fact pointed to was a deep division between the labour elite (mainly regular workers in sizeable enterprises in the organised sector) and the rest of the workforce (primarily the three other major fractions of labour that Breman identified: the petit-bourgeoisie, the sub-proletariat and the paupers – a list that was seemingly provisional and expandable). Among other things, the labour elite was more like a salariat than a proletariat, was clearly distinguished from others in its material conditions, consumption patterns, aspirations and values, and by its consciousness of having different interests. Mobility into this stratum was very limited and joint households that included workers from across this divide seldom remained joint for long. The second aspect that struck me was that two other doyens of Indian labour studies had followed much the same trajectory at much the same time. Consider the shift between Holmström (1976) and Holmström (1984), and between Harriss (1982) and Harriss (1986). What was initially portrayed was a clear break in the hierarchy of labour between, on the one hand, those who occupy a "citadel" of relative privilege with secure and well-

¹ Editor's note: Jan Breman's review essay, appearing in GLJ Volume 12 Issue 2, is based on the following publication: Jonathan Parry (in collaboration with Ajay T.G.) (2019) *Classes of Labour: Work and Life in a Central Indian Steel Town*, New Delhi: Social Science Press, ISBN 9789383166343, 732 pages, ₹1850 hardcover. The following year, Routledge published an international paperback edition: ISBN 9780367510329, 732 pages, £29.59. The Book Review section of this issue's GLJ also includes a general book review of that publication, written by Suravee Nayak.

remunerated employment in the formal-organised² sector and, on the other hand, those outside it who are desperately trying but overwhelmingly failing to get in. The revisionist picture that superseded that binary portrayal was of a ladder-like structure with several rungs, or – to invoke Holmström’s image – a mountainside with multiple unevenly-spaced contours.

“One of the objects of class theory”, wrote Frank Parkin (1979: 3), “has been to identify the principal line of social cleavage within a given system – the structural ‘fault’ running through society to which most serious disturbances on the political landscape are thought to be ultimately traceable”. That political dimension is essential; and the “line of social cleavage” may not be singular. The presumption, however, is that the number of fundamental fault lines is small and that they divide the bulk of the population into a few distinct blocks. The idea of a “class society” is, in other words, premised on its division into a limited number of distinct groups defined by their unequal economic positions. Rather than sharp breaks, stratification theory by contrast describes the social order in terms of multiple ranks on a continuum, multiple criteria of ranking, and discrepancies between a person’s rank on different scales of evaluation. Breman, Holmström and Harriss had started, it seemed to me, with what was essentially a class perspective on the divisions within the Indian manual workforce and had, without ever quite acknowledging the paradigm shift, replaced this with a social stratification conceptualisation of it as parcelled into multiple grades. One of the principal propositions of the Bhilai book is that “there is still much to be said for the citadel, and that a class analysis of the landscape of labour in Bhilai is more revealing (if perhaps less exhaustive) than an analysis in terms of a multiplicity of strata” (p. 56). Whatever its other divisions, the Bhilai workforce is deeply divided by one structural rift of pre-eminent consequence that separates it into two principal *classes* of labour. It is mainly to this claim that Breman objects – though more perhaps on a priori grounds than on the basis of any detailed consideration of the evidence presented.

In my mind, it is above all a question of salience – of the economic, political, social and ideological significance of the fault line. There are, of course, many gradations as the book clearly shows. The issue, however, is how much these matter in determining the way in which people live, think and interact. The critical distinction, the really deep rift in Bhilai, I wanted to say, is between those who have regular and secure employment and those who do not, which in the Indian context is generally congruent with those in relatively remunerative jobs and those whose jobs pay only a pittance. For 2004–2005 it was authoritatively estimated that more than one-fifth of the total population of the country was living below the poverty line (meaning that they were unable to meet their own minimal nutritional needs), and that another half teetered on the brink of that condition or were in danger of being precipitated into it by some life cycle or domestic crisis (Sengupta, Kannan and Ravendran, 2008). “Millions of households”, as Krishna (2011: 157) bleakly observed, “are only one illness away from chronic poverty”; for a large majority of the population destitution has been an ever-present threat. Susceptibility to it is unquestionably one of the most important markers of difference in Indian society. Secure employment is a prophylactic against it and an asset of incalculable value. A regular post is at least as important a determinant of life chances as the ownership of land and at least as important a marker of class inequalities.

In the main, secure jobs exist only in the formal-organised sector, which includes both public and private sector enterprises. These are subject to labour laws that govern minimum wages, hours and conditions of work, safety provisions, union recognition and employment security. Those with

² In the Indian context, “formal” and “organised” are both used, more or less synonymously and as alternatives to each other.

regular posts in the sector have, in theory at least, enjoyed considerable protection against arbitrary dismissal. Historically such jobs, especially government jobs, have been a byword for security – so much so that in many instances they became a kind of quasi-property right, in effect heritable and sometimes even saleable, mortgageable or the source of rental income. The rub, of course, is that precisely in order to circumvent these employment laws most of the workforce in *privately owned* organised-sector industry has always consisted of untenured irregular labour that is hired through contractors and easily discharged, while the proportion of insecure contract workers in the public sector has grown exponentially since economic liberalisation began in the early 1990s. In practice, and in Bhilai at any rate, the employment law has only ever seriously impinged on a small proportion of private sector units – the largest, most modern and most profitable. In these it would be only the small proportion of regular company workers who could expect any protection from the law, and that less robust than the protection afforded to public sector workers. Of the 7 per cent of the total workforce that was estimated to be employed by the organised sector in the late 1990s, around 5 per cent were government employees and 2 per cent worked for the private sector (Glinskaya and Lokshin, 2007). Given that among the latter only a fraction would ever have been covered by the law, job security has in effect been overwhelmingly an attribute of government employment.

A key finding of *Classes of Labour* was that these distinctions are closely mirrored by local categories, and these categories mark the divisions within the workforce that most matter in social and ideological terms. Organised-sector workers in regular posts that are effectively protected by the law and from which they cannot be easily ousted “have” *naukri* (a “service” job that is spoken of as a possession). *Sarkari naukri* (a government job) is described as *pakki naukri*, the “perfect” form of it; by comparison a regular company post in one of the few elite private sector factories just mentioned is qualified as merely *kacchi* (“imperfect”) *naukri*. Not only secure, *naukri* for the most part reliably attracts a decent living wage and sundry allowances that are generally paid monthly. It certifies respectability, marriageability, solvency and creditworthiness. Opposed to those who have it are those who “do” *kam*, which otherwise means “work” in general but in contrast to *naukri* pre-eminently signifies an untenured labouring job that paradigmatically attracts a daily wage. The category *naukri* thus sets apart those who have regular government jobs, plus a small cohort of company workers in elite private sector factories. Distinguished from them are those who do *kam*, who include contract labour in state enterprises, the large majority of all workers in private factories (barring only the few deemed to have *naukri*) and all who work with their hands in the informal unorganised sector. The labour elite with *naukri* routinely refer to those with *kam* by the English label “labour class”, which – contrary to Breman’s implication – is not a construct cobbled together by the anthropologist but a standard emic category. It would be simply absurd to suggest that they themselves belong in it, as neither side sees that they are remotely the same kind of people. The *naukri/kam* distinction marks, I claim, a profound structural rift that divides the manual workforce in Bhilai into two distinct classes of labour. What Breman’s critique fails to recognise, I contend, is that there is a crucial qualitative difference between this severe break in the hierarchy of labour and what by comparison are mere hairline fractures that mark distinctions between other kinds of worker. Even if Breman wishes to impose his own, the class analysis has been largely done for us. It jumps out of the categories that my informants themselves deploy to represent their world.

The evidence provided in the book for the significance of this fundamental divide is, I claim, copious and compelling. The two main “classes of labour” are shown to be social classes in Max Weber’s sense: they are associated with distinctively different lifestyles, the life chances of their

children are radically differentiated, and (an aspect Breman passes over lightly) mobility between them (especially upward mobility) is extremely limited. Both in the same lifetime and in successive generations, mobility between different occupational niches *within* these classes is, by contrast, common. This is not, however, a matter of “infinite porousness” (that’s Breman’s hyperbole), nor is the familiar picture of the “closed shop character” of employment at the bottom of the labour hierarchy that restricts sideways mobility (Breman, 1996: 257), of “people at the very bottom (living) in little closed boxes, competing fiercely with other people in other closed boxes” (Holmström, 1984: 282), any more true to my ethnography. The situation as I summarised it is rather that:

Though there are some occupational niches that are not easily penetrated, and that are almost monopolies of a particular caste or community, many more of the labouring poor move readily and frequently between contract work in the Plant, casual labour on construction sites outside it, loading and unloading jobs, and self-employment as rickshaw-*walas*, vegetable sellers, street vendors, waste-pickers and the like. It is only exceptionally that one of their number gets a BSP [Bhilai Steel Plant] job. Long gone are the days when it was relatively easy to start out as a construction worker digging the foundations for the Plate Mill and wind up as a regular BSP operative maintaining its rollers. In sum, those who do ‘work’ of this kind conform to Weber’s definition of a social class as a set of positions between which mobility ‘is a readily possible and typically observable occurrence’ – a class distinct from those with *naukri* (*Classes of Labour*, p. 69).

Crucially, of course, that class is distinguished by the pitiful size of the purse and by its unreliability (not only on account of the irregularity of the demand for the labour it performs but also on account of the irregularity with which that labour is actually paid). Associated with that are very different orientations to time – the imperative to live in the present on the part of the “labour class”, a preoccupation with planning for the future on the part of the labour elite. The differences in their material circumstances also go with very different consumption standards, and with different values and attitudes. To an extent that remains exceptional in the study of Indian labour, I boast, *Classes of Labour* makes a serious attempt to combine an ethnography of workplace and living space, of life on and off the shop floor. What it claims to show is how the two classes have become increasingly identified with divergent kinds of childhood experience, with different household structures, different kinds of conjugal relations, different expectations about intimacy and attitudes to divorce, and with different propensities to suicide – this last an argument of which Breman is sceptical, though he does not consider the empirical evidence I offer in support of it or adduce any of his own.

The political dimension to which Parkin (1979) alerted us is crucial, though unaccountably Breman’s critique pays it little heed. What the book shows is how the two classes of labour have separate, divergent and sometimes opposing interests, how they have rarely acted in concert, and how there have been times when they have been at serious loggerheads and even in violent conflict – as, most conspicuously, during a series of bloody skirmishes revolving around the allocation of jobs between a radical union that was championing the cause of contract workers in Bhilai Steel Plant’s (BSP) iron ore mines and the “recognised” union that represented regular company miners with *naukri*. In terms of labour politics, it seems unquestionable that the really significant split runs along the fault line between *naukri* and *kam*, and that it would be deeply misleading to claim that that is just one of multiple cleavages of comparable significance.

Not only do the two classes of labour have different and sometimes conflicting interests, I argue in the book, but there may also be a relationship of exploitation between them. A regular

BSP worker receives wages at a level and has access to soft credit sufficient to significantly add to his ancestral landholding, to invest in urban real estate, or to put out money at an often usurious rate of interest – perhaps all three if he is shrewd enough. In addition, his work regime in the Plant is sufficiently relaxed, so he has ample time for some moonlighting enterprise in which he employs “labour class” helpers; and – since the cost is so derisory and he can easily afford it, and since the educational treadmill for children of the labour aristocracy makes considerable demands on their parents – his wife may press for domestic help. That is, he is often an employer of farm labour or of workers in his freelance business, a rentier with a row of slum hutments let out to “labour class” families, the moneylender to whom they are indebted or the householder for whom their womenfolk wash dishes and clothes. The more essential argument, however, is that the low intensity of the labour required of the regular BSP workforce and the generosity of the pay package they receive are only sustainable under current economic and political constraints while there is a large army of contract labour that is paid a pittance and that performs so much of the hard physical labour that is required to run the Plant. It is not therefore surprising that, as Sengupta (1985: 14) long since noted in the context of a discussion of labour in public sector steel plants, the prevalence of non-unionised contract workers is greatest where the unions of the regular workforce are strongest; and that Tulpule (1977) – himself a union leader who had been drafted in as General Manager of the Durgapur Steel Plant to sort out its chaotic labour relations – should have discovered that it was the company workers’ union that consistently blocked his repeated attempts to abolish contract labour.

Breman is right to point out that this kind of exploitative appropriation of labour value also occurs between workers at other levels of the labour hierarchy – between jobbers or gang-masters and the teams they recruit, for example, or between husbands and the wives and children they require to work under them in many labouring jobs. It obviously cannot therefore be claimed that exploitation is clinching evidence of a dichotomous labour system. But what I think can be safely asserted is that the exploitation to which I have drawn attention is powerful testimony to the deep separation and radical inequality between the two classes of labour on which my analysis was focused.

Though Breman does not take me up on it, more speculatively I suggested that this kind of separation has profound implications for the Indian polity as a whole and for the character of Indian democracy. The proposition, as I summarised it, was that:

In Western countries, miners and steelworkers have historically represented the militant vanguard of the working class. Their position in the industrial system made them a real political threat, and that position of strength was used to claim social citizenship rights – in the form of some modicum of welfare provision and social security – on behalf of the working class as a whole. In India, the aristocracy of public sector labour has seldom had to fight for relatively decent schools for their children or reasonably well-equipped and functioning hospitals. In Bhilai, these were offered to them on a plate as part of the Nehruvian development package. The consequence is that the large majority of workers have been left in the cold with only limited access to often miserably deficient state government provision. For them, many basic rights of citizenship do not exist in meaningful form because those who might have had the leverage to claim them on behalf of all citizens had no incentive to do so. Citizenship and social class, as Marshall (1992 [1950]) pointed out, are conflicting principles. But while Marshall’s main interest was in the way in which the equal claims of citizenship mitigate the inequalities of class, we should not lose sight of the opposite process. Class undermines the equal claims of citizens. A state that is supposedly the ultimate guarantor of the rights of the citizen has through its policies and legislation paradoxically created a class division within the working

population that has in significant measure made citizenship rights for the many an unachievable goal (*Classes of Labour*, pp. 58–59).

What is perhaps a more demonstrable effect of the divide I have been insisting on is the experience of labour during the weeks following the declaration of India's first national COVID-19 lockdown on 24 March 2020. All public transport was immediately cancelled with little apparent thought for the huge number of migrant workers who were marooned far from their distant villages and without any means of subsistence. Factories and businesses were closed, very often without paying arrears that were due to their workers and leaving them entirely without earnings for four or five months. Shops were shut, supplies immobilised and the Public Distribution System buckled under the pressure, resulting in widespread hunger and destitution. The majority of urban migrants hung on desperately where they were, though what caught the attention of the international press were the long columns of laid-off workers trudging hundreds of weary miles along asphalt highways and excrement-strewn rail tracks in a desperate bid to reach home. But who were these victims? Clear from the diary entries for Bhilai that my friend and collaborator Ajay (2020) recorded during those weeks, and from everything I have read in the press about the situation elsewhere, the answer is depressingly predictable. They were "labour class" families. As soon as lockdown started such people ceased to be able to get goods "on tick" from any *kirana dukhan* (general provision store) in the neighbourhood. Those with *naukari* continued, by contrast, to receive their wages without interruption by bank transfer and continued to be able to acquire necessities on credit. In mixed neighbourhoods, like the one in which he himself lives, Ajay describes how, for fear of being importuned for loans by their "labour class" neighbours, these labour elite households hunkered down under lockdown into homes they had turned into prisons; and how – though the government had announced a three-month rent holiday for tenants – one BSP neighbour with around forty tenants had announced that he had no intention of foregoing a single rupee. As elsewhere, the pandemic has exacerbated inequalities that were present already, which is to say that not only has it glaringly exposed the dualism that Breman disputes but also deepened it.

In an important paper on the origins of social insurance and the making of the "formal sector" in India, the historian Ravi Ahuja (2019) has, *avant la lettre*, lined himself up with Breman's critique of my argument (on the basis of an earlier recension of one part of it [Parry, 2009]). Like Breman, he rejects the significance I attach to the break between *naukari* and *kam*, and advocates an analysis in terms of multiple grades and shifting boundaries. His discussion revolves around the history of the Employees' State Insurance Act of 1948 (ESI), which was a key piece of legislation in the consolidation of the formal sector. It was, however, only one of several important legal and administrative interventions that covered different segments of the workforce. The Employees' Provident Fund Act of 1952, for example, applied to only about half the number of workers protected by ESI. "...[It] thus appears to be evident that legislation did not result in a formal/informal bifurcation of the workforce, but in an unstable, contested and to some extent malleable structure of graded (in)formality" (p. 243). Instead of one major structural fault, we should think of a more complex hierarchy with multiple grades.

On the view from the archives, that might seem reasonable enough but to carry conviction we surely need data to show that such legal discriminations have real social relevance in the world beyond. For much of the time much Indian law is completely ignored, and it seems unrealistic to assume that all or even many of these different pieces of legislation attract the emotional investment that would be necessary to divide the workforce into distinct groups with a significant stake in their separateness. Where is Ahuja's evidence of that commitment? The distinctions central

to my analysis, on the other hand, plainly stir serious passions, as is amply demonstrated by detailed ethnography in the paper on which he relies – ethnography that documents bitter union conflicts between the two opposed classes of labour.

Ahuja (2019) levels two other charges: that my analysis is static and ahistorical, and that I over-reach myself by extending my picture “to India’s world of labour as a whole”. The first I simply reject as I reckon to have consistently stressed in my writings on Bhilai how employment in the Plant provided an avenue for upward social mobility in the early days, how the workforce subsequently became a closed and privileged self-reproducing stratum, and how with economic liberalisation and downsizing its reproduction has come under threat. The categories are by no means static and the dynamism in my account is duly recognised in Breman’s commentary. Regarding the second, I acknowledge some equivocation in previous publications (not the confident conviction that Ahuja conjures) about the crucial issue of generality. In *Classes of Labour*, however, I attempted to develop a different position from the one that he imputes to me on the basis of earlier work. This is not an argument to which Breman refers, though in relation to the issue that divides us I see it as crucial. The view now advanced is not that the labour dualism I describe for Bhilai is a general and invariant characteristic of the Indian workforce but rather that it is a perhaps extreme variant in a set of permutations that are generated by a common structuring process that operates through a limited number of variables. A focus on this process and these variables allows us to compare cases across space and time, and within and beyond India; and they provide us with a handle on why it is that the labour elite sometimes emerges as a distinct social class with distinct interests (as it does in Bhilai), while in other cases it identifies “downwards” with fractions of labour that are in a weaker bargaining position than itself and might even act as torch-bearers for a more united labour movement.

More concretely, the argument was derived from Giddens’ (1975) notion of “structuration” and centrally revolves around the issue of class closure. To be *socially* significant, classes marked out by their unequal economic positions must develop a sense of their separate identities. Structuration refers to the set of mechanisms by which that sense is established and class boundaries are created. Pre-eminent among these are several parameters: the extent to which there is mobility between different classes (the less of it, the more closure); the extent to which their members are brought together or set apart at work, in the neighbourhood or by associational life; the extent to which the bonds of kinship, marriage and friendship cross class boundaries; and the extent to which their members share lifestyles, consumption preferences, tastes, values, political sympathies and so forth. The more tightly classes are structured on these parameters, the more likely they are to emerge as identifiable groups. The degree of structuration, in other words, seems to provide us with a helpful comparative tool for analysing class closure and for explaining the extent to which a group sees itself as distinctively separate from others. A case in point would be the extent to which a labour elite considers itself cut off from other kinds of workers. Structuration, in short, might provide us with some purchase on the issue of labour dualism, which is not a matter of yes or no but of more or less. It is a continuous process that is never complete and class boundaries are never finally crystallised. When they approach that state, however, the labour elite emerges as a distinct class cut off from other segments of the manual workforce. When structuration is weak, on the other hand, the barriers are low and the fault line between them may not appear that much more significant than other breaks on the labour hierarchy, which will look more ladder-like than dichotomous.

Labour dualism is thus an emergent potential, more fully realised in the case of Bhilai than in many others, though I would claim that there is a powerful strain towards it that runs right through

the Indian landscape of labour and that derives in large measure from divisions within the workforce that were in large measure created by the Nehruvian state. In the final chapter of the book, I made a tentative and preliminary start on exploring this variability with a series of brief comparisons with other Indian cases and with studies from other parts of the world. One comparative instance that I regret having failed to include is Breman's excellent 2004 study of *The Making and Unmaking of an Industrial Working Class*, which documents the post-liberalisation fate of millworkers in the Gujarati city of Ahmadabad. Breman invokes their situation in his critique of my book as an important reason for rejecting my analysis. As a result of mill closures and mass redundancies, these formal sector workers, for whom "labour aristocracy" was never an appropriate label, have been reduced to informality, making "Parry's argument that regular employees of large-scale industries *outside the public sector* managed to find and retain a safe haven in the citadel implausible" (Breman, 2021: 143, emphasis added).

The fact that these workers were employed in *private* industry seems to me crucial. From Breman's ethnography it is not, moreover, easy to discover what proportion of them had had *company* jobs in mills in which the law ever actually counted – had, that is, jobs that my own informants would classify as *kacchi naukri*. But the contrast with public sector employment is, I am sure, real. As I documented in detail, the state-run Bhilai Steel Plant shed more than half its regular manpower – more than 30 000 jobs – over twenty-five years, but it did so almost entirely through "natural wastage" (retirement, voluntary retirement schemes and death) and without forced redundancies. When it comes to lay-offs, terminations and redundancies, the state operates under constraints that are quite different from those that affect private employers. The picture that Breman paints of the world of these millhands, moreover, suggests that class structuration among them was a good deal weaker than it is among steelworkers in Bhilai. By contrast with the latter, these Ahmadabad millworkers were never residentially aggregated but almost always lived in the same neighbourhoods, even in the same households, as workers of other kinds, and those neighbourhoods were much more likely to be segregated by caste, religion and regional origins. That also applied to the mills themselves, where the division of tasks more or less followed the caste hierarchy. Different departments required different skills that were associated with different castes, and thus became caste enclaves, and these skills were represented by different craft unions which were therefore also caste-based (Breman, 2004: Chapter 4). A labour elite that was never so elite was thus fragmented in a way that is quite different from Bhilai. As Breman represents it, the divergence between his account and mine has a simple explanation: mine is wrong. As I would self-servingly prefer to see it, the two situations are different and the job is to understand just what it is that makes for that difference.

The public/private sector contrast is plainly one crucial part of the picture, and I return to it with one final set of somewhat speculative comments. As Breman observes, I wound up my Bhilai fieldwork in 2014. That was the year in which Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won at the polls and formed a BJP-led government, though *Classes of Labour* did not follow the subsequent story. But even if – as Breman objects – it had been true that up to that point the citadel had remained largely intact, that is nothing like what has been reported since for the rest of the country. Beleaguered and hollowed out, what is left is a shell and, as Breman (2021: 147) writes in his review essay, the public sector "has shrunk ... to little more than the personnel of the state".

That Modi's government would dearly like to dismantle the citadel, destroy the influence of organised-sector unions and greatly reduce the security of the workforce does not seem in doubt. But while its broad intentions may be transparent enough, its capacity to carry them out is perhaps

less clear and is in all probability patchy. A priori, public sector employees – especially in key industries like coal, steel and the railways – would seem to be in a better position to defend their jobs than most workers in the private sector; and though there is much sound and fury about privatisation, the actual extent of it seems to have so far lagged some way behind the rhetoric. Or take the story of public sector pay. Though liberalisation began to bite from early in the 1990s, the pay of government employees has seemed in the subsequent period to stand up surprisingly well. As I reported in the book (p. 208), Class 3 and 4 employees have on average been paid three times as much as those with comparable jobs in the private sector; their advantages increased between 2004–2005 and 2011–2012, while between 2007–2008 and 2011–2012 the pay and allowances of central government employees more than doubled. After the next (Seventh) Pay Commission then recommended another hike, tens of millions of public sector workers staged a one-day strike in 2016 in support of a pay rise. Further, the reduction in the size of the public sector workforce may not perhaps be as draconian as all the furore about it would suggest. In a 2014 paper, Nagaraj cited official figures which showed a 10 per cent contraction since 1997. Despite a moratorium on recruitment, National Sample Survey (NSS) estimates were at the same time suggesting a boom in the 2000s. That increase, he points out, could be partly a product of rapid economic growth and greater citizen demand for enhanced public services, though in all probability it was fuelled by a large increase in temporary employment. It is consequently not obvious what has happened to the numbers with secure and regular government jobs. What does seem a reasonable inference, however, is that it is pre-eminently formal sector workers employed by privately owned concerns who have been reduced to informality. Relatively speaking, those with *sarkari naukri* have come off quite lightly, and in terms of wages have even done reasonably well (though it is true that when they resign or retire they are liable to be replaced by cheap contract labour).

Assuming this public/private difference is real, why is it there? One likely reason, I speculate, is that what large corporate capital – which has bankrolled both this BJP government and its predecessors – has most cared about is the price of labour in its own factories and the degree to which it is amenable to managerial control. That is what government is most pressingly required to deliver and the task of informalising the public sector workforce is seen as less urgent. The other side of the coin is that it is also more difficult, that such labour is less malleable and the government's hand is less strong. At least potentially, groups like railwaymen, miners and steelworkers have considerable industrial muscle. Government employees are an immensely important vote bank and some sections of them can exert considerable surreptitious influence on electoral outcomes and on the local balance of power, and – perhaps above all – the promise of *sarkari naukri* is a key to electoral success and the retention of power. In November 2020, on Karin Kapadia's account (2020), Tejasvi Yadav (son of Lalu Prasad Yadav, the jailed ex-Chief Minister) made an unexpectedly strong showing in the Bihar State Assembly elections by refusing to fight on the BJP's chosen ground of caste and religion and basing his party campaign instead around jobs and education. "The fact that the BJP was forced to better Yadav's pledge of one million government jobs for the state's youth ... signifies", Kapadia (2020: 195) suggests with some touching optimism, "the growing appeal of a Centre–Left political and economic discourse". What it really suggests, I'd say, is the continued allure of *sarkari naukri* and its significance as an instrument of political patronage and control. And the reason for that allure is that for the majority of the "common people" of India, who are "only one illness away" from absolute impoverishment, it represents their best chance of a comfortable, secure and untroubled subsistence. That in turn is at bottom why the distinction between those who have *naukri* and those who do not is socially so salient, why that distinction dominates the landscape of labour, and why I suspect that my old

friend Jan Breman may not be entirely right to insist that we represent the most fundamental fault line that divides the Indian workforce as just another rung on the ladder.

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