

Social Gains of Union Activism

Abstract

Studies of workers' politics have replaced the prototypical working class consciousness and identities with what are considered to be empirically more grounded categories such as legal-institutional citizenship, neighborhood networks and community ties. Based on interpretation of ethnographic evidence collected from Dalli and Bhilai in central India in the summers of 2003 and 2004 and 2007, and the spring of 2006, I show how having the collective identity of *mazdoor* (workers) created agency among ethnic-contract workers, who then sustained a movement that outlived the quest for citizenship. I distinguish between the legal-institutional space and social space as two quests of (labor) movement participants. Dalli workers' movement began in the Dalli-Rajhara mining township, as an insurgent movement demanding legal rights for the native manual miners in 1977. The movement spread to the industrial town of Bhilai, who militantly organized native contract workers since the 1990s. Through union participation, workers created a social space of visibility and belonging, which co-existed, gained from, and/or overpowered the quest for the legal-institutional gains of citizenship.

“Just as sociologists are not likely to make sense of action without focusing attention on structure and order, it is unlikely we can interpret social action if we fail to also emphasize ontology, social being, and identity.”

Margaret Somers¹

Introduction

Doing dissertation fieldwork in central India, I was puzzled by the fact that my interviewees, participants in two insurgent labor movements, strictly knew and cared about whether their movements succeeded or failed in getting their demands fulfilled, but earnestly talked about how

¹ Somers M. R. 1994. “The Narrative Constitution of Identity: A Relational and Network Approach.” *Theory and Society*. Vol. 23, No.5, pp.605-649: 615-616.

their movement was part of a bigger struggle against capital and the “pro-bourgeois” Indian state. Workers in the Dalli-Rajhara mining township,² who orchestrated a militant movement demanding legal rights for the manual miners, considered their movement as a “success;” their final demand for regularization of workers was fulfilled in 1996, and many workers were retired and having lives of high status in their villages. However, instead of retreating, the Dalli workers talked about how they needed to expand to fight globalization, and mobilize more followers. Workers in the industrial town of Bhilai,³ who militantly organized contract workers, knew that their movement was a “failure;” most workers were thrown out of jobs and their court cases were pending for more than fifteen years. However, instead of being haunted by their perpetual failure, the Bhilai workers talked about “rejuvenating” their movement, expanding their repertoires like national mourning days and martyr days, and making associations with similar movements. Both groups of workers wanted to expand their horizons, beyond the lifespan of their demands, or themselves, finding new causes and trajectories.

Studies of workers’ politics have replaced the prototypical working class consciousness and identities with what are considered as more empirically grounded categories such as legal-institutional citizenship,⁴ neighborhood networks and community ties.⁵ With the object to counter the “master narratives of class formation”⁶ or to refuse the “‘materialism’ and the

² These workers will be referred to as the Dalli workers henceforth.

³ These workers will be referred to as the Bhilai workers henceforth.

⁴ Citizenship is not necessarily grounded, as has been shown by Benedict Anderson. See Anderson, B. 1983. *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*: Verso.

⁵ Gould, R. V. 1995. *Insurgent identities: Class, community, and protest in Paris from 1848 to the Commune*: University of Chicago Press; Chakrabarty, D. 1989. *Rethinking working-class history: Bengal, 1890-1940*: Princeton University Press; Somers, M. R. 1992. "Narrativity, narrative identity, and social action: rethinking English working-class formation." *Social Science History*: 591-630; Perry, E. J. 1999. "From Paris to the Paris of the East and Back: Workers as Citizens in Modern Shanghai." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 41:348-373; Katznelson I. and A. Zolberg. 1986. *Working-Class Formation: Nineteenth Century Patterns in Western Europe and the United States*. Princeton University Press; Chandavarkar, R. 1998. *Imperial Power and Popular Politics: Class, Resistance and the State in India, C. 1850-1950*: Cambridge University Press; Gooptu, N. 2001. *The Politics of the Urban Poor in Early Twentieth-Century India*: Cambridge University Press; Nair, J. 1998. *Miners and mill hands: work, culture, and politics in Princely Mysore*: Sage.

⁶ Gould *ibid*: 4.

conclusions that arise from it”,⁷ scholars point out that “class” is often only peripheral to workers’ movements, either a scholastic view of those that study them, or simply a rhetorical tool to enhance mobilization. Instead, many argue, what “workers” really do is appeal for inclusion through citizenship.⁸ For instance, concerning workers during the Cultural Revolution in China, Elizabeth Perry argues that “despite their rhetorical embrace of ‘class struggle,’ theirs was a bid for political inclusion (or ‘citizenship’) rather than a battle against an already moribund bourgeoisie.”⁹ Roger Gould argues that “the ‘communal revolution’ that took place in Paris between March and May of 1871 was, I intend to show, much more a revolt of city dwellers against the French state than of workers against capitalism.”¹⁰ Margaret Somers argues that “They [the working people] claimed these rights [to particular *political* and *legal* relationships] as citizens and focused on a particular understanding of ‘the people’ and their membership in the political community, and a particular conception of the legal relationship between the people and the law”.¹¹

Central to the above arguments is the distinction between “feigned” and “real” identities, accomplished by showing the distinction between rhetoric, and what the workers demands and motivations actually were. This distinction, I argue, is not very useful in understanding workers’ politics and movements. Firstly, it ignores the possibility that, a worker, who joined a union for ensuring her bonus hike, might actually feel and acts like a member of the working class in the process of union participation. Scholars, have pointed out that identities are “emergent”¹² and are formative through the process of participation in a movement.¹³ To give a compelling example, Craig Calhoun,¹⁴ discussing about the Tiananmen protests in China, points to how the identities of the students at the Tiananmen Square changed within six weeks of activism: “Their consciousness expanded beyond particularistic interests to include national concerns and

⁷ Chakrabarty *ibid*: 5.

⁸ Gould *ibid*; Somers *ibid*; Perry *ibid*.

⁹ Perry *ibid*.

¹⁰ Gould *ibid*:4

¹¹ Somers *ibid*.

¹² Brubaker R. and F. Cooper. 2000. “Beyond “Identity.”” *Theory and Society*. Volume 19: number 1: 1-47.

¹³ Poletta, F.1998. “‘It was like a fever....’ Narrative and Identity in Social Protest.” *Social Problems* 45: 137-159; Calhoun, C. 1994. *Neither Gods nor Emperors: Students and the Struggle for Democracy in China*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press.

¹⁴ Calhoun *ibid*.

universal ideals. As these themes evolved, it became possible for those in the movement, participants and observers alike, to identify emotionally with a general category—the Chinese people—instead of focusing on their distinctions from the rest of the population.”¹⁵ Secondly, it ignores the possibilities of the rhetoric of the working class itself in forming and sustaining the movement. Scholars have shown that collective identity is an essential emotional component that keeps the participants in a movement together.¹⁶ Many recent empirical analyses of working class formation have evaluated how the politics,¹⁷ discourse,¹⁸ and cultures¹⁹ surrounding class have sustained workers’ movements.

Movements have been designated as success or failure, depending on the institutional outcomes such as ability to influence policy, getting demands met by the state and other power holders.²⁰ Labor movements have been assessed historically as those bargaining for institutional gains, or demanding the assurance of social contract, be it for better wages and working conditions, or for better status within the nation-state, or for an increased role in governance.²¹ Many scholars point out how the workers’ expectations of the social contract have negotiated

¹⁵ Calhoun Ibid: 265

¹⁶ Mouffe, C. 1995. “Post-Marxism: Democracy and Identity.” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*. Volume 13: 259-265; Cooper, F. 1994. “Conflict and Connection: Rethinking Colonial African History.” *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 99, No.5. Dec: 1516-1545; Goodwin, J., J. M. Jasper, and F. Polletta, eds., *Passionate Politics: Emotions in Social Movements*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹⁷ Kalb, D. 1997. *Expanding Class: Power and Everyday Politics in Industrial Communities, the Netherlands, 1850--1950*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

¹⁸ Steinberg, M. W. 1996. "" The Labour of the Country Is the Wealth of the Country:" Class Identity, Consciousness, and the Role of Discourse in the Making of the English Working Class." *International Labor and Working Class History*: 1-25.

¹⁹ Fantasia, R. 1988. *Cultures of solidarity: Consciousness, Action, and Contemporary American Workers*: University of California Press.

²⁰ Banaszak, L.A. 1996. *Why Movements Succeed or Fail: Opportunity, Culture, and the Struggle for Woman Suffrage*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; Tilly, C. 1999. “From interactions to outcomes in social movements,” in Marco Giugni, Doug McAdam, and Charles Tilly (eds.) *How Social Movements Matter*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press: 253–70; Piven, F.F. and R. A. Cloward. 1977. *Poor People’s Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail*. New York: Pantheon.

²¹ See Nair, M. 2009. “Mixed Repertoire of an Indian Labor Movement, 1990-2006.” *Journal of Historical Sociology*, Volume 22, Issue 2, June, pages 180-206, for a discussion of the institutionalized treatment of labor movements.

their interactions with the state after neo-liberalization.²² Such scholarship, while brilliantly depicting the new tactics used by laborers to maneuver the vulnerability posed by withdrawal of the state and de-regulation of labor, however, does not address how labor movements sustain in the face of the persistent failure of the state to protect the social contract.

Why were the Dalli and Bhilai workers actively pursuing their movement in their combined history of more than thirty years, despite the success or failure of achieving the outcomes? I argue that by being part of the labor movement, the workers actively created a social space of visibility and belonging, which co-existed, gained from, and/or overpowered, and outlived the quest for a legal-institutional space created by workers' demands being met. I distinguish between the legal-institutional space and social space as two quests of (labor) movement participants. The legal-institutional space is that Weberian domain where the workers negotiate for the maintenance of the social contract from the state, ask for citizen rights, bargain for better wages and working conditions, and all that essential for day to day survival that can be given by state. The social space is that Durkheimian domain where the workers establish their ontological presence, experience a sense of belonging, and/or create an alternative familial space in the absence of the protective state to deal with everyday life. The quest for a social space, a constituent component of any movement, is not free-floating, but is situated in political, social and temporal contexts. In this particular case that I study, this quest is specific to being “productive beings”- “workers” in the context of post-colonial Indian nation building.²³

Foreshadowing some of the findings, through union participation, the Dalli and Bhilai workers carved out a recognizable and useful social space for the ethnically Chhattisgarhiya workers within the frame work of the state. They used this new social space to challenge, and counter-act against the hesitance of the state to grant them full citizenship The Dalli workers, within the state-centered political economy, strong community ties, and bounded spatial

²² Lee, C. K., 2007: *Against the Law: Labor Protests in China's Rustbelt and Sunbelt*. University of California Press; Seidman, G., 2007: *Beyond the Boycott: Labor Rights, Human Rights, and Transnational Activism*. Russell Sage Foundation Publications; Agarwala, R., 2008: Reshaping the social contract: emerging relations between the state and informal labor in India. *Theory and Society*, 37, 375-408.

²³ Post-colonial here implies decolonization, formation of new nation states, forms of economic development dominated by the growth of indigenous capital, and the persistence of the effects of colonization in the decolonized society, Hall, S., 1996: “When was ‘the post-colonial’? Thinking at the Limit.” *The Post-colonial Question: Common Skies Divided Horizons*: 248.

framework, aggressively created a visible social space overpowering the state, unions, contractors and mine management. The Bhilai workers, within the private capital-centered (with state having less of an ownership role) political economy and loose urban networks, created a fraternal social space sheltering them from the state, private capitalists, unions and contractors.

The findings suggest the need to re-visit the debates surrounding working class identities, citizenship and community. The workers did want the legal-institutional gains of citizenship; but what the workers wanted more was social inclusion, ontological security, and a sense of state being just. The Dalli and Bhilai workers fought for honor and justice: “We had to get *izzat* (honor). We are workers of the steel plant. So we should be behaved at properly.” This they realized, when the state consistently failed to deliver it, through their union: “With CMM there was contentment, even if we did not get any demand fulfilled, we got contentment.”²⁴ Being Chhattisgarhiya, and sharing the same language and culture, and even the same caste, must have helped building cohesive networks in Dalli and Bhilai. However, my interviewees thought of themselves first and foremost as workers. They fiercely refuted the suggestion that they were Chhattisgarhiya, and acting for the Chhattisgarhiya. They pointed out that there were many non-Chhattisgarhiya in the movement, as well as people of all castes and community. They pointed out that while they might have used the “Chhattisgarhiya first” argument sometimes as a tactic, they were even against the formation of the new state of Chhattisgarh in 2000.

This article is based on interpretation of ethnographic evidence collected from Dalli and Bhilai in the summers of 2003 and 2004 and 2007, and the spring of 2006. I engaged in participant observations, conducted in-depth interviews of 45 participants along with casual conversations to numerous others. Most of the evidence in this article is from oral histories of the movement by the participants. Since oral histories reflect on the present in which the ethnographic subjects are talking as well the past that is construed from the point of view of the present,²⁵ particular attention was paid not only to “what” the interviewees were saying, but also

²⁴ Interviewed on June 6, 2006.

²⁵ Joshi, C., 2003. *Lost worlds: Indian Labour and its Forgotten Histories*. Orient Longman; Portelli, Alessandro. “The Death of Luigi Trastulli: Memory and the event”. In id., *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and other stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History*, 1-26. Albany: State University of New York Press 1991.

“why” they said so.²⁶ Unlike the presumption that oral history is a continuous narrative, I encountered multiple layers of disruptions: the switch from the “propaganda mode” to the “personal mode,”²⁷ purposeful adherence to “seriality”²⁸ to disruption by what was perceived as “useless” stories, shift from “official” tape recorded time to the time for “criticism” The epistemology of these stories is itself a question of productive enquiry; here I have just tried to put together an account meaningful for the purposes of this article.²⁹

State, capital and contract work in Chhattisgarh:

“In fact, less is known about the unskilled workers, in the first decades of the 19th century, since they had no unions, they rarely had leaders who articulated their grievances, and few parliamentary committees investigated them except as a sanitary or housing problem...These shade into the “casualties”, or casual laborers; and the totally unemployed immigrants to the city, who might be reduced, like young William Lovett when he first came to London, to “a penny loaf a day and a drink from the most convenient pump for several weeks in succession.””
*E.P.Thompson*³⁰

The history of industrialization in India following the Second World War, unlike the industrial revolution that Thompson describes, was closely tied to nation-building and enclosed within the rhetoric of “national liberation.”³¹ However, the case of the native contract workers in

²⁶ Sarkar, M., 2006: Difference in memory. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 48, 139-168.

²⁷ A similar distinction was pointed out by Nina Eliasoph in how Americans talk about politics publicly and privately. Eliasoph, N., 1998: *Avoiding politics: How Americans Produce Apathy in Everyday life*. Cambridge University Press.

²⁸ My interviewees seemed to be aware of two notions of time, one of the official time, and the other, not so relevant personal time. They were particular about what fitted this official time and what did not.

²⁹ I thank John Krinsky here for pointing out that I should have a theory of ethnography.

³⁰ Thompson E.P.1966. *The Making of the English Working Class*. New York: Vintage: 264.

³¹ Thompson makes this comparison as well, in trying to show how the ideology of the industrial revolution was that of the masters alone, and hence was much more oppressive to the laboring class. Ibid: 445.

Chhattisgarh state in central India shows that the Indian state enacted its role as facilitator of capitalist interests and Indian indigenous capitalists acted in their own class interests,³² exemplifying what Immanuel Wallerstein pointed to as the crisis of the anti-systemic movements like national liberation struggles.³³ The Indian trade unions, many of them fiercely militant during the national liberation struggles, opted for participation in nation-building,³⁴ blunting their capacities for resistance to what they considered the “pro-bourgeois” Indian state.^{35,36} The labor insurgencies in central India that this article discusses were structured by the perceived betrayal of the state and the other trade unions that subjugated workers interests to capital. They are, additionally, an instance of workers being empowered to engage in effective, less violent politics.³⁷

³² Vivek Chibber argued that the Indian bourgeoisie weakened and demobilized the labor movement with the help of the post-colonial Indian state, which in turn helped them easily sabotage Indian planning efforts. Thus the Indian bourgeoisie, according to him, realized its class interests. See Chibber, V. 2003. *Locked in Place: State-Building and Late Industrialization in India*: Princeton University Press.

³³ Wallerstein argued that anti-systemic movements like national liberation movements that result in independent nation-states are themselves framed by the capitalist world economy. Hence they are forced to choose between the contradicting objectives of greater internal equality with rapid economic growth. Not only their economic institutions, but the political and cultural institutions are also shaped by the same. See Wallerstein, I. 1979. *The Capitalist World Economy*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984; *The Politics of the Capitalist World Economy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987; “World-Systems Analysis”. In Anthony Giddens and Jonathan Turner Edited *Social Theory Today*: 309-324. Stanford, Stanford University Press.

³⁴ My investigation of the Communist Party and AITUC documents of the 1950s shows that the Indian left leadership during that period was torn between supporting a “state capitalist” Congress Party regime, which enlisted the supported of Soviet Union. There were many leaders who suggested that forming unions might help mobilizing a working class, who could then fight for state socialism. Also see Chibber, V. 2005. *From Class Compromise to Class Accommodation: Labor's Incorporation into the Indian Political Economy. Social Movements in India: Poverty, Power, and Politics*, 32.

³⁵ Nation-building, in the Indian context, was possible through achieving industrial progress.

³⁶ The changed role of labor unions in the newly formed post World War II nation-states has been examined by scholars. Cooper, F. 1996. *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa*: Cambridge University Press; Seidman, G. W. 1994. *Manufacturing Militance: Workers' Movements in Brazil and South Africa, 1970-1985*: University of California Press; Ahmad, A. 1994. *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*: Verso Books.

³⁷ Don Kalb argues that class based politics created “effective politics”, creating disappearance of violence, increased use of “industrial muscle” and the strike weapon, and the general

The Indian state, after attaining political independence in 1947, started a program of economic modernization to speed up the process of catching up with the developed nations. The first Indian Prime Minister and the architect of Indian planning Jawaharlal Nehru stated, “During the past two centuries [of colonial domination], we became static and fell away from the current of human progress.”³⁸ The leaders decided to have a production-oriented economy, with a “commodity-centered approach,”³⁹ where more good were preferred to less. However, the leaders also felt that a simple copy of the socialist or capitalist pattern of the successful nations might not work for India. As president of the annual session of the party in power, the Indian National Congress, in 1955 pointed out: “The fact also remains that they [Western countries] had a march of more than a hundred years over India, and had other advantages and had followed other methods, which India cannot hope to have or copy. Neither a communist nor a capitalist pattern can, therefore, offer us any solution.”⁴⁰ The state opted for a “Welfare state and a socialist economy,”⁴¹ through a “planned approach,”⁴² which was an instrument of politics used by Nehru to pacify the rural masses and take them through industrial transformation.⁴³ In the mixed economy model that consequently followed, an emphasis was placed on self-reliant growth with state investment in the public sector engaged in capital goods, supporting a private sector using those capital goods for production of consumer goods.

shortening of labor conflicts. See Kalb, D. 1997. *Expanding class: power and everyday politics in industrial communities, The Netherlands, 1850-1950*: Duke University Press: 59; also see Thompson *ibid*: 424. This politics was possible because the workers were using what Charles Tilly would refer to as social movement repertoires. See Tilly, C. 1995. "Contentious Repertoires in Great Britain, 1758-1834." *Repertoires and Cycles of Collective Action*: 15–42.

³⁸ Zaidi A.M. and S. Zaidi. 1981. *The Encyclopaedia of the Indian National Congress*. Vol.15:1955-1957 *Socialistic Pattern of Society*: S. Chand Co. Ltd.: 155.

³⁹ Chakravarty, S. 1987. *Development planning: The Indian Experience*. Oxford University Press: 8; for the discourses surrounding planning, see Chatterjee P. 1986. *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* University of Minnesota Press: 138; Seth, S. 1995. *Marxist Theory and Nationalist Politics: The Case of Colonial India*: Sage Publications; Chattopdhyay R.1985 “The Idea of Planning in India, 1930-1951.” PhD Dissertation, Australian National University, Canberra.

⁴⁰ Zaidi and Zaidi, *ibid*: 181.

⁴¹ Zaidi and Zaidi, *Ibid*: 157.

⁴² Zaidi and Zaidi, *Ibid*: 158.

⁴³ Chakravarty, *ibid*.

The state invested heavily in steel to build the nation's strength.⁴⁴ The enthusiasm of the age was similar to the period of the Great Leap Forward in China where a new nation was imagined through industrial strength, specifically in iron and steel. For instance, posters published by the Tianjin People's Fine Arts Publishing House collective work, 1958, called for "Take steel as the key link, for a leap forward in all fields."⁴⁵ In a similar vein of enthusiasm, Nehru said "We have to introduce certain dynamism in every sector of our economic and national life in order to achieve this goal of mass production and mass purchasing power."⁴⁶ The second five year plan started three steel projects, Durgapur, Rourkela and Bhilai under the auspices of a state-owned company, Hindustan Steel Limited, which later became the Steel Authority of India Limited (SAIL). Bhilai in central India was chosen because it was adjacent to the Bombay-Howrah railway line that cut across the nation, and because of the proximity of raw materials like iron-ore, limestone and dolomite, necessary in the production of steel. By 1959, Bhilai Steel Plant acquired 7170.6 hectares of land displacing 94 villages and 5703 households.⁴⁷

The Bhilai steel plant project was completed in 1960 as huge industrial complex with three coke oven batteries, three blast furnaces, and six open hearth furnaces, rolling mills and ancillary shops and extending its capillaries to the captive iron-ore, dolomite, manganese, coal and limestone mines.⁴⁸ Since its launching, Bhilai has become the center of industrial undertakings extending to nearby regions of Rajnandgaon and Raipur. These include 120 small industrial units that depend on Bhilai Steel Plant for byproducts, and big enterprises like the Associated Cement Company, the Simplex Engineering and Foundry works, and the Beekay

⁴⁴ New Age, the mouth piece of the Communist Party of India supported the state endeavors for industrialization through a one-page advertisement that ran as follows: "Steel for the nation's strength-For basic and heavy industries, for machines to make machines which will manufacture articles of everyday use, more and more steel is necessary-and steel plants being set up at Bhilai, Rourkela and Durgapur will ensure the supply. Millions of tons of coal and millions of watts of electricity will provide the sinews of industry:" February 9, 1958.

⁴⁵ Source: the Chairman Smiles Exhibition, International Institute of Social History, <http://www.iisg.nl/exhibitions/chairman/>, accessed on February 15, 2005.

⁴⁶ Zaidi and Zaidi, *ibid*: 158

⁴⁷ Srinivasan, N.R. 1984.*The History of Bhilai*. Steel Authority of India Limited. Also see, Srinivasan, N.R. 1988. *Ripples-A Study of the Socio-Economic Impact of Bhilai Steel Plant*. Steel Authority of India Limited, Srinivasan N.R. 1990.*The Corporate Story of SAIL*. New Delhi: SAIL. Moorthy K.K.1987.*The Road Begins at Bhilai*. Madras: Technology Books.

⁴⁸ Report 1960-61, Ministry of Steel, Mines and Fuel, Department of Iron and Steel.

Engineering Corporation, that were owned by indigenous capitalists. Bhilai started producing steel; it made profits and started exporting to many countries as well.

While the state deployed skilled citizen-workers to produce for the nation in its steel plant and mines, the unskilled local population was deployed as non-recognizable contract workers in the manually operated section of the mines and in the privately-owned industries in Bhilai. The workforce in the steel plant and the mines were mostly from the educated parts of India. This regular workforce was represented by the trade unions, the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) affiliated with the Communist Party of India, and the Indian Trade Union Congress (INTUC), affiliated with the Congress Party. In the steel plant, INTUC was the only union allowed. In other places, they acted as “company unions,” using negotiation with the management as the main tactic for securing the interests of the workers. Despite these regulations on union activism, labor unrest used to happen in Bhilai, as is evident from the annual reports of the steel plant that tried to portray them as mere “personnel” issues.⁴⁹

The Dalli-Rajhara iron-ore mines that went into production in 1960, employed two types of workers, regular and contract, and the latter mainly were recruited to work manually in digging and transporting earth laden with iron-ore. The contract workers were employed in manual mine work of razing and transportation. Recruited through the *tekedars* or contractors, they came chiefly from the neighboring villages and districts, pushed by droughts, a persistent feature in the history of Chhattisgarh. They came as seasonal laborers, lived in temporary sheds in so-called labor camps and returned to do farming when it rained, thus exemplifying Solinger’s notion of the “floating population”.⁵⁰ In Bhilai, contract labor is the predominant form of employing labor, where the contractor acts as the mediator between the industrial management and the workers. Under the contract labor system, the industrial management passes the legal responsibilities to the workers; while the contractors maintain their herds of workers through long-established means of control.⁵¹ Some estimates of contract workers in the Bhilai industrial

⁴⁹ Steel Authority of India Limited Annual Reports 1955-2005, Ministry of Steel Annual Reports 1959-60 to 2005.

⁵⁰ Solinger, D. J. 1999. *Contesting citizenship in urban China*: University of California Press.

⁵¹ See for instance the ‘jobber’ in colonial India in Chakrabarty *ibid.* and Chandavarkar *ibid.* Also see Simeon, D. 1995. *The Politics of Labor under Late-colonialism: Workers Unions and the State in Chotanagpur*. New Delhi: Manohar Publishers; Sen, S. 1999. *Women and Labour in Late Colonial India: The Bengal Jute Industry*, Cambridge University Press.

region are as high as 94%,⁵² and their numbers are increasing since economic liberalization after the 1990s.⁵³

The Dalli workers' movement started when the contract workers, around 12,000 in number, initiated an insurgent strike. They were predominantly natives of the Chhattisgarh region, and they were already members of two national trade unions, the AITUC and INTUC. Though there were complaints about differential treatment meted out to the manual workers early on, the sudden spark that led to the split of these contract workers from their trade unions was a bonus hike issue: while the management raised the festival bonus of the regular workers to three hundred and eight Indian rupees, the same for the contract workers was raised to just seventy rupees. The raise was done after negotiations with the two trade unions. The decision enraged the contract workers from both unions, and they took to the road in protest. With militant trade unionism, the CMM forced the mine management to confer benefits upon them, including regularized wages and working conditions. The union through its militant activism, instilled fear, but also gained support in the township. Through terror and sustained union activism, they controlled the mining township, and forced the mine management to give them benefits like other laborers. Their final demand of regularization of manual laborers was fulfilled in 1996.

CMM emerged in Bhilai in 1990 by organizing around five thousand contract workers in the industrial area,⁵⁴ the time when the new liberalization policies were formally launched. It started as a "tool down" in the ACC cement factory and evolved into a full blown movement of contract workers, with protest marches, hunger strikes, public meetings and road blockages. The entire contract workforce with their families joined the movement. The following six months, the industrial area was filled with slogans of "living wages" and "take back the workers" and "workers' demands are just". In retaliation, the CMM leader, Niyogi, was assassinated allegedly by the industrialists, and most of the workers were expelled from their jobs. The workers squatted on the railway line, and the police shot sixteen activists. The routine government inquiry

⁵² Editorial, *Economic and Political Weekly*, October 5, 1991, 2273-4.

⁵³ Jha, P., D. Mitra, and M. Nair, 1999: *Economic Reforms and the Poor: A Study from Madhya Pradesh, India. Focus on Global South, Bangkok*. Also see Beverley Silver on casualization of labor as a characteristic feature of globalization, Silver, B. J. 2003. *Forces of Labor: Workers' Movements and Globalization since 1870*: Cambridge University Press.

⁵⁴ See Nair. M. *ibid*.

that followed established that contract labor existed in Bhilai. The cases of all the workers were referred to the court, reducing CMM to a routine client in the court. The union lost the case against the industrialists for the Niyogi murder, and the cases of the expelled workers are still dragging from lower to the upper courts. Some workers have returned to their villages, some work full time in the CMM, some have found alternative employment and some have simply not survived. With the nation-wide casualization of labor, the Bhilai labor is finding its reinstatement almost impossible. CMM has obtained favorable court decisions since 1995, but the industrialists have been reluctant to obey them. Instead, with the ability to employ reputed lawyers, the industrialists obtained repetitive “stays” of the court orders and appealed to higher courts. The desperation this created for the CMM workers was manifold. Many of them were without jobs for a long time by then and finally returned to their village agricultural work for survival. Most in the leadership were blacklisted by the industrialists, and had to suffer penury. For instance, a female activist, who is an expelled worker, still lives on domestic labor in regular cement factory employees’ houses and seasonal cattle-rearing (her caste job).

Meanwhile, Chhattisgarh was carved out as a new federal state in 2000. The new regional identity also meant closer surveillance of the CMM by the state. In the words of the workers, “Earlier, the state capital was 24 hours away [by train]. Now it is just 30 minutes away.” The state, now run by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), vigorously attempts to foster economic growth and lure tourists and investors.⁵⁵ The state is countered by radical left groups in the borders, the naxalites,⁵⁶ which have resisted the Tata and ESSAR steel projects, whose goals the CMM supports, though not the violent tactics. Though the BJP is known for its Hindu nationalist agenda, in many villages that I visited, being a BJP person meant a not so overtly religious, but a proud every day identity.⁵⁷ This also meant that the BJP was able to capture the support of many CMM followers, especially during elections.

Dalli workers’ triumphant union:

⁵⁵ See the official website of the Chhattisgarh state government, <http://chhattisgarh.nic.in>.

⁵⁶ These groups are termed “naxalites”, relating them to the 1967 peasant uprising in Naxalbari village in West Bengal.

⁵⁷ For instance, it was customary for young men in Bhilai and surrounding villages to wear a “tie and dye” cotton shawl, imitating the BJP leader Atal Bihari Vajpeyee. While I was in the field, this shawl had become an important marker of a new Chhattisgarhi identity in Bhilai.

“Chhattisgarh belongs to the Chhattisgarhiya; not to some one’s father”

*CMM slogan*⁵⁸

The Dalli workers’ accounts had a salient sense of agency: their stories told how, they, the “simple” Chhattisgarhiya people from the countryside, had by the end of the 1990s, challenged and overpowered the state, contractors and other trade unions. They, who were pushed to mine work due to famines in the countryside, were outraged by the “betrayal” of the mine management, contractors and “*rakhel*” (concubine) trade unions, started an insurgent strike, and formed an insurgent union. With the new sense of collective empowerment as unionized “*mazdoor*” (workers), they directly challenged the state and mine management for conferring them the legal status of regular workers of the mines. They did not stop at that; with their “laboring hands” they literally built their own hospital, union office, and schools. With their union fees, they maintained a “24 hour food service”, bought trucks and cars, published newsletters and published pamphlets. They mobilized masses from the countryside, organized enormous martyr day celebrations, visited the national capital Delhi that was 24 hours away by train, ran and won local elections, and was still a visible presence in the local village and township governance. The Dalli workers, understandably, still shimmered in this past glory; each narration of their movement created so much enthusiasm that it gathered a crowd of eager and applauding listeners to the site of the interview.

While interviewing, my first question was always how their movement began. The workers recounted a story of collective awakening, distinctively marked by the collective pronoun “We”. In 1977, the AITUC and INTUC unions negotiated with the management for a festival bonus, and agreed at three hundred and eight rupees for the regular workers and seventy rupees for the contract workers.⁵⁹ Hearing the agreement, some contract workers “who knew the

⁵⁸ The Hindi version of it is “Chhattisgarh Chhattisgarhiyon Ka; Na Kisi Ka Baap Ka”; alluding to the use and throw of Chhattisgarhiya riches by others as if it was their family inheritance.

⁵⁹ This was immediately after the “emergency” period, which had the support of AITUC and INTUC. “Emergency” refers to the state of emergency declared in India, by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi between 1975 and 1977. She, accused of malpractices in elections, used the period to crush her opposition, seriously suspending civil liberties and election. She enlisted the support of some of the national trade unions for increase in production and prevention of industrial sabotage. The emergency was called off in March 1977.

law” got agitated, tore the agreement papers and left the union offices. In the words of one of the participants in the protest:

“We, the red color union people [AITUC], got into the road shouting, and met the tricolor union people [INTUC] who also were shouting against their leaders. We all gathered in one place. We said: The unions are doing injustice on us. Our problems and your problems are the same. So let us go to the BSP [mine management] and demand that we also need to get three hundred and eight rupees. Thus we assembled in a field, leaving our work and started a strike. Our union leaders came and advised us not to stop work, lest we will be thrown out of the mines. We didn’t listen to them. Our strike continued. For twenty one-days, we were sitting in that field striking”.⁶⁰

The workers, through the repetitive emphasis on “we,” retrieved their agency, which was obscured in the outsider accounts of how the movement began. Such accounts narrated how Niyogi, a trade union leader organized the oppressed mine workers. For instance, Neera Chandoke claimed that “Until the arrival of Sankar Guha Niyogi on the scene, the people of Chhattisgarh region, most of whom were *Dalit*⁶¹ and *Adivasis*,⁶² were employed in mines and industrial units as casual labour and worked for a pittance under hazardous and oppressive conditions”,⁶³ despite the fact that not many of the workers were in fact Dalits or Adivasis.⁶⁴ The mine officials, rival union leaders and contractors repeated the story of Niyogi appearing to save or manipulate the simple Chhattisgarhiya. One mine official went as far as saying that “they [the

⁶⁰ Interviewed on March 30, 2006. Identities of the interviewees are withheld to ensure anonymity.

⁶¹ Dalit is used by many lower caste groups in South Asia to self-identify.

⁶² Adivasis, which means original inhabitants, is used in India to refer to the tribal people. Many tribes in India use the term to self-identify, transcending the definitions of the state. See Hardiman, D. 1987. *The Coming of the Devi, Adivasi Assertion in Western India*. Oxford University Press.

⁶³ Chandoke, N. 2003. Case study of Chhattisgarh mukti morcha, *Does Civil Society Matter: Governance in Contemporary India*. Edited by Rajesh Tandon and Ranjita Mohanty: 129-240.

⁶⁴ Only a few of my interviewees were tribal people. The mining township was located in a tribal development block, but the workers came from far away regions. Many belonged to cultivating castes, and even the tribal people interviewed were cultivating peasants. All interviewees agreed that there were workers from all communities, and so did the contractors that recruited them. The tribal origin of the mine workers, hence, seems to be a myth.

workers] cannot dissect; only we can.” The Dalli workers’ accounts clearly differed, and reinstated themselves at the center of the movement, thus reclaiming their movement. They said that they “invited” Niyogi, a migrant from eastern India, who was just released from prison where he was incarcerated for radical political activity, to lead the movement, since they needed an English educated person to negotiate with the mine management: “We went and told Niyogi: brother, our organization has grown a lot. We have around ten to twelve thousand mazdoor, but no leader. The red and tricolor flag people have left us. He said: if mazdoor is ready for the fight I am coming. Thus our union began.”⁶⁵ There was no victory for the union initially; its re-negotiation for the festival bonus resulted in a rupee less than that was decided in the original settlement. But the workers still rejoiced in remembering how the new settlement resulted in big celebration in the mining township, because it nullified the decision made by their previous unions: “The AITUC-INTUC leaders had told us that when the original festival bonus decision changed, an elephant would grow five legs. We had a huge demonstration with an elephant with five legs, since we broke their decision.”⁶⁶

Being unionized transformed the “miners” into “workers”, both by experientially distinguishing their work from the peasants’ work, and by improving their social status above that of the peasantry. Before they made their union, the miners did not differentiate mine work from farm work albeit it being more dangerous work; instead of going to their fields, they were going to the *pahari* (hills). Accounts narrate the hardships endured by everyday mine work. “We used to wear sandals to work and there were no helmets as well”⁶⁷, reminisced a retired worker. The workers used to leave early for work, and they would survive the whole day on porridge made from rice of the previous day. They had to walk two miles up the hill, carrying their tools: hammers and hoes. They used to work from seven in the morning till five in the evening, and were paid according to their work,⁶⁸ which was as low as 3 rupees (.06 dollar). The contractors that recruited the workers used to move around in surveillance. There was no shade, no rest center and so on, in the beginning. Sometimes boulders would fall from above and cause accidents. They still remember the emotional toll of their work: since they left home before their

⁶⁵ Interviewed on March 24, 2006.

⁶⁶ Interviewed on June 26, 2004.

⁶⁷ Interviewed on April 28, 2006.

⁶⁸ Workers were paid according to piece-rate, or the amount of work accomplished, and not an hourly rate.

children woke up, and reached home after they went to sleep, they hardly were part of their children growing up.

The workers contrasted that time with the time after the union started, which was a time of prosperity: “After we started the movement, everyone had a cycle. Everyone had radio. Didn’t we get more money? We got bonuses, arrears every three months; so people used to go to the mines listening to radio, listening to songs and news. The women folk started wearing silver jewelry. Now they even wearing gold ornaments.” Once the union was made and bargains won, mine-work became prestigious and “going to work was now a celebration”.⁶⁹ Though many have returned to the villages after retirement, their status there has changed as they are still identified as the worker from the mining township. Most have made brick and concrete houses, and run machine-operated farms with irrigation facilities. Thus, they have succeeded from humble beginnings, when they did not even think that “we would ever touch a cycle, let alone ride it.”⁷⁰

The Dalli workers often used the phrase “We eat from our labor, not from others’ kindness”, where the phrase distinctly distinguished the proud “we” from those with presumably no sense of agency in production and hence the entitlement to the rewards from it. Here, the allusion was to farming, which the miners considered as not that useful. Most miners came from the villages as far as in Rajnandgaon to escape from drought. Landlessness and drought are parts of everyday life in rural Chhattisgarh, and migration was a survival strategy for more than a million of its population.⁷¹ My interviewees were mostly owners of small family holdings that lacked irrigation.⁷² Memories of the village must have meant life of penury, debt and dependence.⁷³ The workers maintained ties to their villages; many had gone back to their villages

⁶⁹ Interviewed on March 30, 2006.

⁷⁰ Interviewed on March 27, 2008

⁷¹ Joshi Y.G. and D.K.Verma. 2004. *In Search of Livelihood: Labour Migration from Chattisgarh*: Manak Pub.

⁷² See Jha P. (Editor).2002. *Land Reforms in India: Issues of Equity in Rural Madhya Pradesh*: Sage Publications.

⁷³ An account of rural social relations in India tempered by the presence of money lenders can be found in Hardiman, D. 1997. *Feeding the Baniya: peasants and usurers in western India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press. Currently, Chhattisgarh is state with one of the highest number of farmer suicides, and usury is cited as an important reason. Also see Nagaraj K. 2008. “Farmers’ suicides in India: Magnitude, Trends and Spatial Patterns.” Madras Institute of Development Studies. http://www.macrosan.org/anl/mar08/anl030308Farmers_Suicides.htm

after retirement especially with the next generation not finding jobs in the township.⁷⁴ However, this new tie was different; they were much better off than their counter parts in the villages, and the ties were negotiated by their own union.

The Dalli workers attempted to create a viable neighborhood of workers, who were otherwise relegated to dwellings made of temporary shacks, called “labor camps”.⁷⁵ Through their collection of worker contributions, the workers built a concrete building for their union, bought their own cars and jeeps, and also built their own hospital for the mine workers and villagers surrounding the mines who had little access to health facilities offered by the state. Their logic was that “Mazdoor built the roads and bridges; why can’t the mazdoor have their own hospitals?” Participant accounts were keen to emphasize that the hospital was made with “their” money and “their” hands: “The hospital was made with our blood and sweat”, “it was made with our two rupee contribution”, and “we used our hands to make the hospital”. A half insane mine-worker who was my companion in the field in 2004, never forgot to point at the car that was parked in the garage of the union office and say: “It is our car, we bought it for Niyogi.”

Women workers gained from union participation in many more ways than their male counter parts. They became women of “duty” with incomes improving their status in the household; they also held leadership positions within the movement that improved their standing in the mines and in the workers’ neighborhoods. They recalled how they ran to the union office when they were called, leaving the children, and their kitchen fires with boiling rice behind. The household chores were then left for their husbands or the consenting neighbors to be fulfilled. They laughed at memories of how they terrorized the mine management, forcing them to submission to their demands:

“All men and women had *lathis* (bamboo clubs) in our hands. We used to bring bamboo from the forests and make fat lathis. One of us will shout the question: “If our demand is

⁷⁴ This case of reverse migration is not entirely true; there were some instances of my interviewees purchasing land and settling in villages than their own, motivated more by economic than social gains.

⁷⁵ The industrial labor camps started initially in the 1950s to temporarily house the laborers engaged in the construction of the mines. They have stayed on to become almost permanent mud housing clusters, where the local miners lived. Many miners, later, refused to shift to the official “quarters” of mine employees, which for them was “unclean” since it had toilets within the apartment. Workers preferred the open fields to “stinking” toilets.

not fulfilled, on whose head will the lathi fall”? The answer will be in a high pitch chorus: “in the head of the management”. Along with that, all lathis will hit the road at the same time. Everyone has been taught to say the management’s head. Then how will the management refuse our demands?”⁷⁶

They used to beat up liquor shop owners that were “eating away the workers’ hard earned money,” empty liquor barrels and threaten suicide in front of the liquor shops. The opponents recollected women activists’ militancy: “Chhattisgarhiya women do not care about their husbands; they are more violent than men.”⁷⁷ Remnants of this militancy still prevail; my women interviewees had immense anger at mine closures, de-mechanization, and unemployment of the youth, which had become almost irredeemable in the mining township in the neo-liberal era.

Political protest repertoires of the Dalli workers included many public performances,⁷⁸ the prominent among them being martyr day celebrations.⁷⁹ They narrated with triumph, how through these celebrations, they the “little people,” challenged the big and powerful politicians. One such was the Narayan Singh martyr day which was celebrated every year on December 19th, to commemorate a local tribal chieftain hanged to death by the British in 1859 for instigating a peasant rebellion. They recalled the spectacular aspect of their celebrations: “We all had helmets on our heads. We also were wearing uniform; men wore red shirt, green pant, helmet, shoes and carried bamboo poles. We [women] wore green blouse, and red sari. We had a huge procession where Narayan Singh was hanged. The people in the city were shouting that the *kala pathar* (black stone or coal) people” have arrived.” The Kala Pathar reference is to a Bollywood movie that came out in 1979, in which coal mine workers organized against their exploitative masters.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Interviewed on April 10, 2006.

⁷⁷ Interviewed on April 26, 2006.

⁷⁸ To see the relation between “repertoires” and “performances”, see Tilly, C. 2008. *Contentious Performances*. Cambridge University Press.

⁷⁹ CMM celebrated at least four martyr days a year and more depending on the availability of funds.

⁸⁰ In the movie, the hero, Amitabh Bachchan, organized the coal mine workers to fight against their oppressive masters. Many of his roles expressed the frustration of the common man in the 1970s. See Jain K. 224. “Muscularity and Ramifications: Mimetic Male Bodies in Indian Mass Culture.” *South Asia XXIV*: 197-224. This movie seems to have contributed a lot to the media attention of the CMM. The movie is also a pointer to the broader political situation in India where there was serious political imagination about workers’ movement and socialism.

The appearance of the participants in the celebrations in their militant worker attire- helmet and shoes, an integral part of a miner's attire red and green dress, the colors of the CMM flag signifying the worker-peasant duo, and bamboo poles showing defiance- must have naturally terrified the onlookers, as was the intention of the workers.

The workers contrasted their ability to organize a mass demonstration to that of the failure of their rival politicians to do the same. They ridiculed the powerful Congress Party for attempting to steal the CMM icons. For instance, the [provincial] state chief minister is ridiculed for unsuccessfully trying to appropriate the CMM martyr day:

“Once during our Narayan Singh martyr day, the then chief minister came here in his helicopter for his own meeting and procession. All facilities were given to him and we were given the dirty playground where now the school is. But all people were with us. Their march crossed the town intersection in an hour while ours took three hours. And their people were walking faster. The chief minister was so upset that the local representative of the Congress party did not get ticket in the next election.”⁸¹

The workers were proud that their demonstration mobilized more people than the powerful Congress Party supported by the state. The impact of the event was so strong that the standing member of the legislative assembly in the surrounding election constituency was declined ticket. The participants in the Dalli rallies were given free food, heaps of white rice and lentils, freshly cooked in the backyard of the CMM office in bamboo baskets and iron vessels. The fact that the “poor” Dalli workers did this through their monthly fee collections elevated their pride: “The Congress Party gave just bananas to the attendees. We gave our workers a full meal.”⁸²

During my fieldwork in 2006, most Dalli workers were retired, and many had returned to their villages, some quite far away from the township. However, their union participation had left a visible mark in their lives, as well as their life in the mining township.⁸³ In fact most of my interviews were conducted in the villages, where they now occupied high social status, one

⁸¹ Interviewed on March 24, 2006.

⁸² Interviewed on March 26, 2006.

⁸³ The interviewees referred to their eternal youth in the mining township due to the presence of iron in drinking water. Going back to the countryside, literally and figuratively symbolized frailty and old age.

conspicuous example being the brick and concrete houses they have made with retirement money, which contrasted with the mud houses of the villagers. Despite the comforts of their retired life, they were still actively involved in what they called “the persistent problems in our country.” They narrated the inadequacies of the leadership, the problems with the BJP rule, the need to bring in youth participation, and the disappearing jobs for the youth due to privatization. One of them said, “When there is a call from the office for a meeting, though I am weak, I still pick up my bamboo pole and walk to the bus stand.”⁸⁴

Bhilai workers’ fraternal union:

*“Community, which ideally should have
been banished from the kingdom of capital, continues to lead a subterranean, potentially
subversive, life within it because it refuses to go away”*

*Partha Chatterjee*⁸⁵

Bhilai workers told how they, a fragmented group of workers in different industries doing contract work, were brought together as a fraternal group by the union.⁸⁶ In Bhilai, where the workers faced a withdrawing developmental state⁸⁷ following economic liberalization in the 1990s, and industrialists that had accentuating power, the union had become more like “family”, a sheltering metaphor oft-repeated by most workers. The union gave them the power to face up to the nexus of state agents and industrialists, provided an alternative space to solve their every day survival issues, and created meaning beyond their immediate lives.

⁸⁴ Interviewed on April 12, 2006.

⁸⁵ Chatterjee, P., 1993: *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton University Press: 236.

⁸⁶ Unlike the mining township, most workers in Bhilai were men. There were strong women leaders in Bhilai, some workers and others who organized the families of the working men, but only two of my interviewees were women, compared to seven in the mining township.

⁸⁷ The developmental state is “roughly, those agencies of state and governmental practices that are charged with improving or protecting the incomes, capabilities and legal rights of people.” Corbridge, S. et al. 2005. *Seeing the State: Governance and Governmentality in India*: Cambridge University Press: 7.

Most Bhilai workers joined the union citing individualized and instrumental reasons, but were transformed by their union. A typical account started like this:

“I worked as a supply [contract] laborer for two years. If I work as a regular laborer, I can be made permanent in ninety days, there is provision. So the management used to lay us off in between and take us again. The management could not recruit new workers because they could not understand the molding job easily. I was a member of the AITUC, and the leader was fooling me by assuring me that I would become permanent worker. One day I met some old workers near the push cart selling tea. They told me to go to the meeting of the new red and green flag union (CMM). I went to the meeting, and heard the ideas of Niyogi *bhaiyya*. I felt he had something in him; and this union would do something for the worker”.⁸⁸

Most Bhilai workers cited the same reasons for joining the struggle: irksome trade unions and contractors. Once they became aware of the movement, they recall being “swept away” by it: “We never knew there was workers’ movement like this before. First time we saw the battle of the people.”⁸⁹ In another account, “When meetings used to happen outside the gates of my company, I used to listen carefully. I understood that this is how exploitation happens.”⁹⁰ By listening to the speeches offered by the CMM leaders, the workers realized that their demands were not individual, their exploitation was universal and their battle was the “battle of the people.”

The Bhilai workers solely privileged Niyogi for their “awakening,” whom they referred to as *bhaiyya* (brother). This brotherly relation, which was the foundation of their movement, was built on emotions, rather than on expectations of fulfillment of demands. Those workers, who started the movement in the ACC cement company in Bhilai, talked about their movement as a result of Niyogi deciding to take up their cause: “A few people from among us went to Dalli and conveyed our problems to Niyogi *bhaiyya*. We had heard of the union that was made in Dalli in 1977. Somehow we managed to communicate with *bhaiyya*. Then we started our struggle to

⁸⁸ Interviewed on June 26, 2006.

⁸⁹ Interviewed on June 21, 2006.

⁹⁰ Interviewed on June 24, 2006.

make the contract workers permanent.”⁹¹ Niyogi used the fraternal metaphor in his speeches. An interviewee recalled: “He was talking about two brothers; one brother is given *lathi* (bamboo club) to beat the other worker who is unionizing. I felt that it is true”⁹². This example was remembered by most of my interviewees. The Bhilai workers “listened to Niyogi,” “was attracted,” “understood,” “felt good” and joined the movement.

This fraternal metaphor was a requirement for mobilizing workers in Bhilai, where, compared to Dalli, the workers worked in different factories, lived in different neighborhoods, and intersected each other’s paths rarely. As a worker pointed out, before joining the movement, he did not know that many Chhattisgarhiya workers existed in Bhilai. After they joined the union they all became part of a big family: “Everyone was considered member of Niyogi bhaiyya’s family. If we had financial or personal problems, he would sit with us and solve it.”⁹³ When the industrialists refused their demands, and the state sided with the industrialists, the union leader was there as a brotherly figure, to listen to their financial and personal problems. As discussed earlier, the Bhilai workers were expelled, and Niyogi was assassinated, thus weakening the workers’ bargaining power considerably. The union, with the help of the contributions of the Dalli workers, did run an office canteen, health clinic etc. for some time. However, what the workers remembered fondly was how they gave each other a helping hand, when there was no work. The interviewees always recollected how they would fix each others’ roofs, which needed yearly repair.

The Bhilai workers’ fraternity was not bound by territories; they imagined that Chhattisgarhiya workers were part of the universal working class. They quoted Niyogi while talking about how their movement began: “Our movement is not for the money of the management. That we will get money, good job, good salary, it is not a fight like that. This is a class struggle, for the freedom of working class, this is a long struggle, it is possible that you will get some benefit, your job will be permanent, our struggle is not up to then, it will continue till the end when every worker is free.”⁹⁴ With the expulsion of the workers and the assassination of their leader, and the weakening of their movement by the court take- over of the workers’ cases,

⁹¹ Interviewed on June 6, 2006.

⁹² Interviewed on July 22, 2006.

⁹³ Interviewed on June 13, 2006.

⁹⁴ Interviewed on June 13, 2006.

the Bhilai workers must have found more meanings in Niyogi's words than mere rhetoric, which helped their every day sustenance. That they were "interpellated" in a universal workers' identity must have helped them to live beyond the movement objectives of permanent job. They asked me questions about the Chicago workers' movement, and celebration of May Day in the United States, showing a keen, educated awareness of workers' struggles in the United States, a country, which in daily parlance, was equated to "imperialist" intentions.

This identification of a bigger struggle of which they were a part, especially with the initiation of the state-sponsored neo-liberal policies, helped the Bhilai workers "rejuvenate" the movement, in 2006. With the onset of liberalization, which was translated to more powers given to private industrialists, workers felt betrayed by the state: "Atal Bihari Vajpayee [when he was the Prime Minister of India] gave this speech in Bhilai, where he said that any industrialist can throw away any worker, if that worker is in excess of the demand. The Prime Minister of the country is saying such bad things; the administration is openly supporting it. So we can be thrown out any time."⁹⁵ The Bhilai workers did not benefit from the developmental state. Their efforts to challenge the industrialists were forestalled by the state agents at every moment. Nevertheless, with liberalization, and the formation of the new state of Chhattisgarh and the consolidation of the power of the BJP, even the idea of the state as a guarantor of their citizenship was falling apart. The state, here not the greedy state agents, but the highest state authority, was openly supporting the expulsion of excess labor. The workers cited cases of workers that were arbitrarily thrown out immediately after this speech.

Workers had also lost faith in the court system, to which their cases had been referred to by a state instituted enquiry commission. They felt that the court system favored the industrialists: "Once a court decision is made, these people [industrialists] have so much of black money that they go from lower court to upper court. The legal system has this problem that it continues forever and people can die in between as well."⁹⁶ Workers also felt cheated by the judges and other experts. Once when I was in the CMM office, some workers returned empty handed from the regional court that was five hours away because their names did not appear in the judge's list. An irritated worker wanted to ask the judge, "Pardon me if I am doing the wrong thing. Am I a thief or beggar that you behave like this to me?" Workers also resented

⁹⁵ Interviewed on June 21, 2006.

⁹⁶ Interviewed on June 21, 2006.

that all accused, except the hired assassin, was acquitted in the Niyogi murder case in 2005. They believed that the court had all the evidence against the accused industrialists. One of them said, “Everyone in this country, starting from the president, is *sold*”.

Bhilai workers were keen to understand the current situation from the point of view of “historical juncture”, which also emphasized their historical role as workers. This perception of their significance created a new vigor in the movement; workers were talking about yet another imagined future: “If one does not study or try to understand history, one does not know which path to take, because one does not understand at what juncture one is. Niyogi himself understood all these by studying history.”⁹⁷ While I was in the field in 2006, the workers were enthusiastically planning public performances, picketing factory gates, and picking up scuffles with the police. They were organizing street plays in the villages and at the factory gates during various shifts and the workers met every evening in the office yard, and planned their strategies. They had faith in the ability of the workers to mobilize and act: “Workers here know how to fight. They know that court, leaders, or magic words cannot do anything. The fight you will do in battle field will be the fight for your izzat, and whatever you get out of it, will be your earnings. Our movement is continuing like that. Little by little Chhattisgarh is waking up.”⁹⁸

While preparing for their strategic battles in an uncertain political and economic environment, the workers also used the union as a ‘problem solving mechanism,’⁹⁹ a social support group to that intervened in contract workers everyday lives. This also helped the union in enhancing its mass support. The union helped them to run police cases against neglectful and “inhuman” employers. An interviewee mentioned how the union took up the case of a worker that had an accident due to working for twenty four hours continuously. Since he was a contract worker, the management refused to give proper treatment. “The friends of this worker approached the union. Union made this a police case. Being pressured by the union, the management provided medical treatment for two years in the steel plant hospital. Now he has started moving again. He has not been given any employment and is sitting idle.”¹⁰⁰ Many

⁹⁷ Interviewed on June 8, 2006.

⁹⁸ Interviewed on June 26, 2006.

⁹⁹ Javier Auyero uses this term to describe the functioning of Peronist clientele networks in Argentina. Auyero, J. 2001. *Poor people's politics: Peronist survival networks and the legacy of Evita*. Duke University Press.

¹⁰⁰ Interviewed on June 24, 2006.

accident cases similar to these where the union had to chip in to force the management to treat the workers were mentioned. I was also taken to meet one such worker, who had an injury in Beekay Company, and the state, the management refused to be accountable.

Union was in fact an essential component of their life, a requirement of their ontological well being. The Bhilai workers distinguished their union from the “company unions” that were mostly about “company work,” or for bargaining for wages and working conditions. Instead, the union meant the sacrifices involved in community building and the fulfillment attached to it. The services of the union were extended to everyone that was in need; not surprising in regions like Chhattisgarh, where penury is widespread.¹⁰¹ As one interviewee put it, the union was about “how to live our life:”

“This union is not like other unions; it is a twenty four hour union. It is not for company work. It is for how to live your life. No union is like that...It is true that our families sacrifice because of our union work. But if hundred people have to benefit, ten people have to sacrifice. We get fulfillment from such work. At least people can tell the union what happened. Or we can take an affected worker to the police. If it is a villager, even if he is not a CMM member, we can take him to Dalli hospital.”¹⁰²

Conclusion:

Dalli workers, when asked why their movement succeeded and the Bhilai movement failed, pointed to the role of the state: “We had the *sarkar* (state) here to support us and the Bhilai workers did not have the *sarkar*.” This attempt to entrust the state with some parental power can only be defined as the modesty of the workers, if not “misrecognition.”¹⁰³ The Dalli workers did manage to get full citizenship benefits from their state employers; their demand of regularization of workers was fulfilled. But that happened only in 1996, almost twenty years after they started their struggle. The Bhilai workers, in contrast, were ousted from work by their indigenous capitalist employers. However, the “lack of *sarkar*” and consequent lack of full institutional

¹⁰¹ Chhattisgarh is one of the poorest states, as per the planning commission of India. www.planningcommission.nic.in/plans/planrel/pl49ndc/chhattisgarh.htm - 51k, accessed on January 15, 2007.

¹⁰² Interviewed on June 24, 2006.

¹⁰³ Bourdieu, P., and R. Nice, 1990: *The Logic of Practice*. Stanford University Press: 68.

citizenship did not stop the Bhilai workers from pursuing their movement. The real success of the Dalli and Bhilai movement, I suggest, was in carving out a recognizable and useful social space for the ethnically Chhattisgarhiya workers within the frame work of the nation-state. They used this new social space to challenge, counter-act against and replace the hesitance of the state to grant them full citizenship.

An interesting empirical point raised by the findings is regarding the role of state in the neo-liberal era. Instead of the alleged de-limited role of the state during this period in its ability to enforce and regulate labor laws in the face of unbridled expansion of capital, scholars have pointed to how the state is significant in protecting workers' rights as citizens.¹⁰⁴ They thus show the significance of territorially determined resistance to global capital, unlike those who point at the "uprooted proletariat" that may and can demand global citizenship.¹⁰⁵ However, for most workers, especially those increasingly are joining the informal labor markets, the institutionalized channels of negotiations, with state having an active part, may have been in use, but may not have been effective. My evidence shows that there are ways in which the state and other power-holders can slow down, and sabotage the results of negotiations through such channels. I argue that there is more of a "blind faith" in the powers of the state as a protector from the part of the workers, rather than real results that perpetuate such perceptions. Ethnographic research needs to be done to assess whether and how much such faith has materialized into actual entitlements.

Another area that needs to be explored is the "collective" agency and the "old style politics" in use in India and elsewhere, in coping with global capital, beyond the (de-)politicization of resistance through non-Governmental Organizations. For instance, the World Social Forum in Mumbai in 2004 also saw the emergence of an oppositional Mumbai Resistance Forum that had around two hundred and fifty participating organizations (fifty from outside India) including many labor unions that were not content with the "global-loving" face of the former, and wanted a return to a more militant resistance to capitalism.¹⁰⁶ This

¹⁰⁴ Seidman, G. 2007. *Beyond the Boycott: Labor Rights, Human Rights, and Transnational Activism*: Russell Sage Foundation Publications; Agarwala, R. 2008. "Reshaping the social contract: emerging relations between the state and informal labor in India." *Theory and Society* 37:375-408.

¹⁰⁵ Hardt, M., and A. Negri. 2000. *Empire*. Harvard University Press.

¹⁰⁶ see the website, <http://www.ilps-news.com/central-info-bureau/events/mumbai-resistance-2004/program/>, accessed on 2/2/2009.

persistence of collective agency has to be kept in mind also while discussing the fragmentation and disappearance of politics in the period of globalization, and signifying the “everydayness” of struggles accompanied by the semi-political institutions of brokerage and clientelism.¹⁰⁷ The emergence of such institutions is true, but that does not sum up the urban strategies of coping. There is, I contend, rather a re-emergence of collective contentions, at least in the incipient stage, against the forces of capital.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Goptu, N. 2007. "Economic Liberalisation, Work and Democracy." *Economic and Political Weekly*.

¹⁰⁸ Omvedt, G. 1988. "The" New Peasant Movement." *India', Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 20:14-23; —. 1993. "Farmers Movement: Fighting for Liberalization." *Economic and Political Weekly* 28:2705-2715; Ortner, S. B. 1996. "Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal." *The Historic Turn in the Human Sciences*: 281–304.