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PERSUASIVE CITIZENS, UNCONVINCED RADICALS: COMPARING WORKERS'  
POLITICS IN TWO TOWNS IN CENTRAL INDIA

by

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József Böröcz

and approved by

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

### PERSUASIVE CITIZENS, UNCONVINCED RADICALS: COMPARING WORKERS' POLITICS IN TWO TOWNS IN CENTRAL INDIA

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In this dissertation, I do a comparative and historical ethnography of workers' movements in two adjacent towns in central India. I invite attention to the shift in workers' politics due to the retreat of the nationalist welfare state in the context of neo-liberal reforms. In the first town of Dalli-Rajhara, manually employed mine workers in state owned iron-ore mines persuaded the state employer to grant them labor rights. Their insurgent movement began in 1977, when the Indian state was aggressively pursuing economic nationalism. The workers could coerce the state to be accountable: All manual workers were eventually absorbed as regular mineworkers. In the second town of Bhilai, inspired by the first movement, casually employed workers in privately owned industries contended with their employers for labor rights. This movement began in 1990, which was the end of the era of economic nationalism and beginning of the neoliberal regime. The workers were losing to neoliberalizing state and capital, and their activism was fragmented. I argue that the basic shift due to neo-liberal reforms in India is not in the protective

role of the state, but in citizen's ability to hold the state accountable by challenging its legitimacy. This research is based on seventeen months of ethnographic and archival research in India conducted in 2003, 2004 and 2006.

My research intervenes in existing literature in two important ways. Much of the discussion on labor activism in the neoliberal period has focused on those working for capital centered in the United States. I show that neo-liberal capital is de-centered with receiving states as well as indigenous capital having very high stakes in the process. The focus of literature by Indian scholars in the neoliberal period has been on loss of employment of formal employees of the state. I draw attention to loss of work and resistance of informally employed rural migrants, the enormous mass of which are unlikely to be absorbed by the expanding sectors of the global economy. I suggest that given the fragmentation of conventional labor activism, this workforce could potentially mobilize as a huge social force demanding radical reforms.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract .....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Chapter 1    State and Labor in Transition .....	1
Different Moments; Similar Appeal to Sacrifice.....	1
The State and the Organized Workforce.....	6
Boundaries of Social Citizenship: The Unorganized Workforce.....	10
Centers and Subjects of Neoliberalism.....	13
Workers’ Repertoires.....	16
Workers’ Identities .....	19
Argument of the dissertation .....	21
The Case: Contract Workers’ Struggle in Chhattisgarh.....	23
Discussion of Methods .....	31
Government of India Documents.....	31
Trade Union Documents .....	32
Newspapers and Pamphlets .....	32
Ethnographic Sites .....	34
Interviews and Observation .....	35
Levels of Distillation .....	36
Outline of the Chapters.....	38
Chapter 2    Boundaries within the nation: Dalli-rajhara Mining township.....	50
The Steel Plants and Economic Nationalism.....	50
Establishment of the “Captive Mines” .....	52
Mining Township as a National Space .....	56



Boundaries of the National Space.....	59
Contract Work: Narratives of Desperation and Deception.....	62
Workers Multivalent Engagement with the Contractors .....	69
The Messy Politics of the Rival Unions.....	71
Conclusion .....	77
Chapter 3    Persuasive Citizens: Workers’ Contention in Dalli-rajhara.....	82
The Success of the Union.....	82
Militant Unionism against the State Employer .....	84
Insurgency and the formation of the union in 1977 .....	87
Mobilization based on neighborhoods.....	90
Discipline and secrecy.....	92
“We are the women of India; we are not flowers, but flames” .....	94
Militant tactics.....	100
Replacing the State.....	102
Challenging Political Power .....	105
Use of martyrdom.....	109
Conformist Futures? .....	113
Dalli-Rajhara now .....	115
The betrayal of the state .....	117
Conclusion .....	118
Chapter 4    From National to Neoliberal Space: Bhilai.....	124
Indigenous capitalists in Bhilai .....	124
Disciplined National Space in Bhilai.....	128
Boundaries: The Other Side of the Railway Line .....	132

Informal service economy.....	134
Contract Work in Bhilai .....	136
Commuters to Bhilai .....	140
Tragedy of the Indian youth: Nanthram and Dhaneswari .....	141
Contrast between father and son .....	143
The process of contract work in Bhilai.....	145
Company Unions .....	147
Conclusion .....	149
Chapter 5    Unconvinced Radicals: Workers’ Contention in Bhilai .....	155
Weakening of the Union.....	155
Militant Unionism against the Industrialists.....	156
Passivity in accounts .....	157
Mobilization of the contract work force .....	158
Tactics against the industrialists .....	161
Legalization and blunting of the union.....	165
Protests against the State .....	167
Activism and Meaning Making.....	176
Perceptions of the state.....	179
Unconvinced about Radical Tactics .....	183
Experience of CMM in a Village .....	185
Bhilai Now .....	189
Conclusion .....	193
Chapter 6    Rights and Resistance in the Neoliberal Era .....	200
Changing Discourse of Rights.....	200

Resistance or Survival?.....	203
Political culture of economic nationalism .....	204
Class and citizenship .....	205
Community and Violence.....	207
Conclusion .....	208
List of Abbreviations .....	210
Bibliography .....	212
Curriculum Vitae .....	222

### *List of Tables*

Table 1.1: Distribution of Employment between Organized .....	43
and Unorganized Sectors in India .....	43
Table 1.2: Estimates of Informal Employment in India .....	44
Table 1.3: Demographic Profile of Chhattisgarh, 2005 .....	48

### *List of Illustrations*

Figure 1.1: Production, Protest and Subjectivities: Mining Township.....	45
Figure 1.2: Production, Protest and Subjectivities: Industrial town.....	46
Figure 1.3: Political Map of India .....	49
Figure 1.4: Research Sites.....	49
Figure 2.1 Dalli-Rajhara Mines .....	78
Figure 2.2 Statue of the Brave Worker .....	79
Figure 2.3 Mine worker with Grandson inside her Home in Labor Camp1 .....	80
Figure 2.4 Miners at Work in Dalli-Rajhara Township .....	81

Figure 3.1 Workers' Procession .....	120
Figure 3.2 Workers' Protest on the Road to the Mines .....	121
Figure 3.3 A CMM Run School .....	122
Figure 3.4 Martyr Pillar in Front of the CMM Office.....	123
Figure 4.1 Welcome to the Bhilai Steel Plant.....	151
Figure 4.2 Workers in a Sub-contracting Firm.....	152
Figure 4.3 "Chick Sellers" in the Minidoor .....	153
Figure 4.4 Steel Rolling Mill-worker with Daughters and Nnieces .....	154
Figure 5.1 Workers Protests at the Factory Gate .....	195
Figure 5.2Workers Protests at the Factory Gate .....	196
Figure 5.3 Cycles in the Alley in front of the CMM Office .....	197
Figure 5.4 Street Play in a Village .....	198
Figure 5.5 July 1 Celebrations .....	199

## CHAPTER 1

### STATE AND LABOR IN TRANSITION

#### *Different Moments; Similar Appeal to Sacrifice*

Addressing the trade unions in the 36<sup>th</sup> session of the Indian Labour Conference in 2000,<sup>1</sup> the then Prime Minister Atal Bihari Bajpeyi observed that there was a growing belief that India could not reap the full benefits of economic reforms unless both labor laws and the administrative machinery which implemented them were reformed.<sup>2</sup> He urged the Indian trade unions to adopt positive and supportive attitude to economic reforms: “We would like you to be partners in the reform process since labour, capital, management, society and the state are tied to each other by the bonds of harmony and not of contradiction and conflict.” To facilitate better economic growth, he suggested creation of a new policy and legislative climate conducive to new investments in all sections of the economy. Bajpeyi legitimized the need for economic reforms “to increase the prosperity of all citizens” since the capacity of the old industrial infrastructure to provide employment to the rapidly growing population was very small.

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<sup>1</sup> Indian Labour conferences are tripartite meetings held annually to create an enabling climate for industrial growth. The conference in December 1947 came up with the Industrial Truce Resolution, which paved the way for industrial peace to assist planned economic growth in newly independent India. It was through these conferences that the Indian workers became legally institutionalized as “labor relations.” For more on the history of Indian labor relations, see Myers 1960, Vaid 1965, Venkata Ratnam, Botterweck, and Sinha 1994, Chibber 2005.

<sup>2</sup> *The Hindu*, Front Page, April 15, 2000.

Bajpeyi's appeal to the workers to sacrifice their rights for the nation, signifies a long lasting intimate relation between state and labor in postcolonial India.<sup>3</sup> It reminded one of a similar message in the 1950s, a time when the new Indian nation-state was in its formative stages after political independence from British colonial rule. The then Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru delivered the following message to the Indian National Trade Union Congress in 1956:<sup>4</sup>

The past few years have been years of marked change in both India and the world... It seems to me that in this age, our conceptions of social relations and national and international affairs must necessarily undergo a change. That would apply to the relationship subsisting between labour and management, and there is undoubtedly today, what is called class conflict. But it is out of date. I realize that many things that are out of date continue to exist and we have even to fight against them. But the fact remains that we have to consider these questions in a new context and try to adapt ourselves to this. Strikes and lockouts should no longer have any place in industrial relations. This means that the basic reasons for strikes or lockouts must disappear and that where there is such conflict there should be a fair and impartial method of resolving it peacefully. From the national point of view; increasing production is of greatest importance. Ultimately, the well-being of labour depends on it. Progressively, labour should be associated with management till really there is no difference between the two. (Hasan, Prasad, and Damodaran 2004, 126)

Nehru, the architect of modern India, was asking the working population to keep down their weapons<sup>5</sup> and participate in co-operative nation- building through increased production, which he pointed out, ultimately benefitted the workers. This

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<sup>3</sup>Postcolonial implies independence from colonial rule, the 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 1996: 248).

<sup>4</sup> Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC henceforth) is the trade union affiliated with the Indian National Congress (Congress Party henceforth), the political party that spearheaded the independence movement, and ruled the Indian state without interruption till 1977.

<sup>5</sup> The Indian labor movement had a militant history, especially in the late-colonial era. See the next footnote for more details on this history.

nation building was a necessity to establish the Indian nation- state's position in the global political order of the day: "our conceptions of social relations and national and international affairs must necessarily undergo a change." Through the subtle references to "class-conflict" and "social relations," Nehru was making the case for an end of thinking of the world in Marxian terms and urging for a political view of economic nationalism. Though the appeal was made to the INTUC, negotiations were going on with the All India Trade Union Congress, the biggest trade union in India at that time.<sup>6</sup> The AITUC had a militant past in colonial India, and the nation-builders understood that it had to be contained and channeled towards the making of the new nation.<sup>7</sup>

Nehru's request was made at that world historical time when India, along with many other nations that emerged after the Second World War, was building its economy and political institutions, mostly on the already existing framework provided by the colonial regimes. While many such postcolonial economies aimed at creation of production-oriented economies to compete with western capitalism, they also wanted a break with the colonial past, which belonged to the capitalist

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<sup>6</sup> All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC henceforth) is the trade union affiliated with the Communist Party of India. It was the primary trade union organization in India since its formation in 1920 before the trade union movement divided based on party lines prior to political independence. It has a history of militancy to its credit in the late colonial period and has organized textile mill workers in Bombay. See Sen (1975) for the history of Indian trade union movement.

<sup>7</sup> The AITUC did pay heed to Nehru's advice. The "class compromise" that the Indian working class (through their representative unions) reached was not as perfunctory as Chibber (2005) suggests. An examination of the AITUC documents reveals the heated debates and deliberations that accompanied the decision to support the new Indian state. The evidence I found rather supports Immanuel Teitelbaum's argument that the Indian labor movement has been much more contentious than usually imagined. (Teitelbaum 2006).

west (see Roy 2007, Goswami 2004, Chatterjee 1998, Seth 1995, and Chakravarty 1987). Hence, many opted for a more redistributive socialist political economy and the international political face of non-alignment. The mechanisms through which these objectives were to be achieved included state-directed industrialization in the heavy industrial sector, indigenous capital investment in other sectors, and import substitution. On the population front, this involved protection of the direct producers as the citizen-working class that participated in this process under the rubric of labor relations.

After less than forty years of this state-led nation-building process with the decisive role given to indigenous capital, and the incorporation of organized workers, the Indian state, along with many other states in the post-colonial/ developing world, was forced to give up on those policies in the face of foreign debt crises. The Indian state was forced to open up its economies to more foreign capital, as well privatize the hitherto state-owned sector, deregulate industrial policies and labor laws, facilitate flexible labor, and reduce social spending. In other words, the Indian state had to turn back on its promises made to the citizen-workers.

Bajpeyi's remarks, pointed to the above moment in world-historical time. Bajpeyi was asking the trade unions, once again, to sacrifice for the nation. The workers had to be partners in economic reforms since "labour, capital, management, society, and the state are tied to each other by the bonds of harmony and not of contradiction and conflict." This meant that the workers should not raise their weapons, which



they had voluntarily returned forty years back in exchange for partnership and rights, even when those rights were withdrawn.

The striking fact is that the state leaders, in both instances, appealed to the organized workforce or workers represented through the central trade unions. Unfortunately, this has only been around six percent of the total workforce in India (Government of India 2010). The organized workforce worked in formally registered enterprises, was represented by the national trade unions, and has been entitled to demand better wages and working conditions even from the resource-scarce Indian welfare state. They have strong bargaining power through their unions, resorted to strikes and other labor tactics when such rights were violated, and held their employers responsible through labor regulations enforced by the state.<sup>8</sup> Their resistance to the state's move to dispose of labor regulations and disinvest in the public sector,<sup>9</sup> has been evident from their joint national strikes since the 1990s, the last of which was in September 2010.

The history of association between the state and the organized labor force is not limited to India; in fact, it has been the content of much of labor movement history in the twentieth century. This has been true for the industrialized societies, as well as late industrializing societies. In the next section, I examine the scholarship that

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<sup>8</sup> The Indian state performed this function through an elaborate system of laws, which were built on the Industrial Disputes Act of 1947.

<sup>9</sup> One of the changes that were introduced through the new industrial policy in 1990 was the state reducing its investment in industries where it was the main shareholder. Such industries where the state was the main shareholder is called the public sector in India.

has attempted to interpret this long lasting relation between the state and organized labor.

### *The State and the Organized Workforce*

The organized workforce has been the focus of most scholarship on workers' movements within nation-states, primarily due to its contribution in sustaining democratic institutions. For instance, the introductory line of Charles Bergquist's book on comparative studies of labor movements in Latin America asserts, "Twentieth century Latin American historiography suffers from two grave deficiencies. It has failed to recognize the decisive historical role of organized labor and the labor movement in the evolution of the societies of the region..." (Bergquist 1986). This decisive role of labor movements in the societies of twentieth century meant that they were embedded in the political processes within nation-states, or they had an "institutionalized" history.<sup>10</sup> T.H. Marshall captured this in the concept of the social element of citizenship, ranging from the right to economic welfare and security to the right to participate fully in the "civilized" society, the institutions closely connected with it being the educational system and the social services (1950: 8). The incorporation of the citizen-workers into state projects, known as "statization" of working class organizations (Panitch 1981:22), led to the collapse of labor internationalism (Carr 1945). Hence, labor movements have been accused of reformism (Calhoun 1988 for instance). Explaining the reformism of the working class, Adam Przeworski argued that capitalist democracy became the socially

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<sup>10</sup> I draw on one of my articles, Nair 2009, in this discussion.

organized mechanism by which workers expressed their claims to the product of their labor. While as immediate producers, they had no institutionalized claim to the product, as citizens they processed such claims through the institutions of bourgeois democracy, fundamentally through electoral institutions (1977, see also Panitch 1981, Poulantzas 1978 and Therborn 1978 for the debates surrounding the working class and capitalist democracy).

States and labor movements in late-industrializing societies followed trajectories that were distinct from that of Western Europe, but they were still contained by the state. Unlike the statization of workers through the social citizenship model that Marshall suggested, in many cases though the labor movements supported the states, they also mobilized for wider interests than their own. Many such states were newly formed in the post- World War II era, after a long experience of anti-colonial resistance by national liberation movements that had relied on support from labor movements. After the formation of the new states, the labor movements collaborated in the nation-building project, making the nation-state the terrain of possibility and action for the working- class (Ahmad 1994). Frederick Cooper argued, for instance, that the French West African labor movement that had an original international and class-centered outlook was subsumed by the project of the construction of the national identity and nationalist struggles, finally ending up as partners in the elite-run state (1996, 2000). Gay Seidman argued that trade unions in Brazil and South Africa engaged in “social movement unionism,” an “effort to raise the living standards of the working class as a whole rather than to protect

individually defined interests of union members” demanding broad economic and social change outside the narrow boundaries of the political parties (1994: 2). The radical potential of labor movements, towards democratization in repressive regimes, though within the context of nation-states, has been pointed out by other scholars as well (see Koo 2001 for the case of South Korea; Collier and Collier 1991 and Bergquist 1986 for Latin America).

The above-embedded histories of state and the organized workforce were interrupted by neoliberal capital. Ching Kwan Lee has shown how this interruption has been understood as a breach of contract from the part of the state, by employees in erstwhile state factories in China (2007). In India, organized trade union response to this shift has been characterized as “acquiescence,” (RoyChowdhury 2003) where unions have followed the state imperatives to “rationalize” labor and thus sacrifice their entitlements as social citizens. This also means that they have paid some heed to the state appeal to sacrifice for the nation (once again). However, there has also been widespread dissent in the form of collective action, where the unions have spearheaded the cause of the Indian population in general. The most recent example of this dissent was the nationwide strike called by trade unions such as AITUC, INTUC, and CITU among others on September 2010, which I mentioned earlier (*Labour File*, September 7, 2010). Their charter of demands included stands against unprecedented price rises, rampant violation of labour laws, contractualization of the workforce, disinvestment of profit making public sectors and for provision of social security for unorganized sector workers. Their contentions have supposedly

forced the state to provide guarantees, albeit not in the form of rights, but as poverty alleviation measures, such as the National Employment Guarantee Scheme in India (Hensman 2010).

While the interruption in the relation between state and organized labor outlines the basic feature of the neoliberal shift towards capital from labor, I contend that the focus on the organized workforce as those “betrayed” by the state neglects a different, much-contentious, long standing relation: between the state and the unorganized workforce. One of my propositions in this dissertation is that the postcolonial Indian state employed the classic boundary drawing mechanisms between the organized and unorganized workforce to enable its capitalist growth. Unfortunately, most scholars have only focused on the organized labor force, due to their political and social power in building democratic institutions. In the next section, I show how the accounts of the state and scholars neglect the dominant workforce in the global South, the informally employed unorganized workforce. How have they fared in the economic nationalist era and what avenues have opened for them in the neoliberal era?

## *Boundaries of Social Citizenship: The Unorganized Workforce*

The most recent document on employment from the Indian Ministry of Labour has a pungent acknowledgement of the extent of unorganized labor<sup>11</sup> in the Indian economy:

An important aspect of quality of employment in India is the predominance of the unorganised sector. The size of the organised sector, characterised by higher earnings and job security is small, it accounted for less than 6% of the total employment in 2004-05. Around two-thirds of the total organised sector employment is in the public sector. Over the years, organised sector employment has grown slowly than the total employment, reflecting the faster growth of employment in the unorganised sector. As a result, there has been increasing informalisation of employment over the years. This informalisation has been more pronounced in the case of female workers. As a whole, about 96% of female employment is in the unorganised sector as against about 91% of males. In urban areas, the percentage of unorganised sector workers is close to 65-70%. Not all of them are poor but crude estimates suggest that close to half of this number is in dire need of occupational up scaling. A large proportion of the workers engaged in the urban unorganised sector is migrants from rural areas with poor educational, training and skill background and are employed in low-paying, semi-skilled or unskilled jobs. The productivity and earning levels in most of the enterprises are low and do not often provide full time work to those engaged. For the employees, the working environment is not conducive; working hours are long and most of the conditions of decent employment (e.g. paid leave, pension, bonus, medical support and health insurance, maternity leave benefits, compensation against accident, etc.) are nearly non-existent. The past trends and all the available evidence suggest that the bulk of the growth in employment in future will come from the unorganised sector. It will be an important challenge to ensure that employment in this sector consists of jobs with safe conditions of work, decent and growing earnings, and a measure of income and social security. (GOI 2010)

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<sup>11</sup> The Indian state uses the terms “workers in the unorganized sector” and “informal workers” interchangeably. Informal work is the more universally accepted term for workers without regulation and social protection (ILO 1991, Portes et al 1989). This includes workers who work in the informal or unaccounted and regulated sectors of the economy and those who are informally employed in the formal sectors of the economy. The cases I examine belong to the latter category. See tables 1 and 2 to understand the extent of informal employment in India. I prefer to use the term “unorganized workforce” mostly, since it also points to the fragmented politics of informal workers.

The document makes three candid observations. First is that though the informal workforce is disproportionately female, the difference between male and female participation in the unorganized sectors of the Indian economy is not too high (a seven percentage difference). Second is that most of those who work in the urban unorganized sectors are migrants from rural areas, who possess little or no skills. The third is that informalization of work is becoming a trend now in India and will continue to be so in future. There is an element of inevitability in the last observation, which implies that the state is not planning to interfere in the process of informalization of the economy.

This recognition of the enormity of the unorganized sector is not a new realization by the Indian state. The unorganized labor in the informal sector has been historically considered a “problem” in India, something that tarnished the face of the Indian developmental state. On the other hand, the contribution of the informal workers to the Gross Domestic Product has been so significant that the state has always been shy of interfering with this economy (as the previous statement of inevitability implied). The unorganized sector contributed sixty percent of the National Domestic Product, and three fourths of the national savings (GOI 2010). The state labor department recognized the significance of the unorganized sector as well as the problems that would arise in regulating it:

The enactment of legislations and other measures to bring them under the regulatory and social protection instruments will adversely affect the existing mechanism prevailing in the informal sector as it would lead to market imperfections creating hurdles in the smooth functioning of the

market led economy. Besides, it requires huge infrastructural and institutional arrangements involving financial implications beyond the capacity of the Government in the changing scenario all over the world.<sup>12</sup>

I suggest that this division and the maintenance of the division between the organized and unorganized workforce points to an important aspect of any state, and the postcolonial states in particular since they have built their institutions on the divisions enforced by the colonial rulers. They engage in boundary drawings based on ethnic, urban-rural and gender lines and they benefit economically from such boundary drawings. Immanuel Wallerstein has already argued that wage and non-wage labor, commodified and non-commodified goods, alienable and non-alienable forms of property are not “anomalies” but “patterns” in capitalism (Wallerstein 1991, 1992, 1990, 1974). Many have pointed out that India’s economic surplus is squeezed out of the unorganized labor that shuttles between the agrarian and industrial sector (Basu and Basole 2009). This dissertation will show how the state carried out this squeezing out process privileging skilled, educated subjects with full citizenship while withholding the same privileges from the unskilled and uneducated subjects. This dissertation, however, will also show how this process was conflict-ridden: These perceived unlettered subjects persistently demanded their share, both economic and social, in production and the product.

This dissertation attempts to consider the unorganized workforce as a political group with the potential of contesting the state. As pointed out by Agarwala (2008),

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<sup>12</sup> A report from the Government of India Ministry of Labour and Employment, <http://labour.nic.in/ss/INFORMALSECTORININDIA-ApproachesforSocialSecurity.pdf>, accessed on December 20, 2010.



much of the discussion among Indian scholars is about the definition of informality, and its measurement, which constructs an aggregate category of informal work. This kind of work has persisted among marginalized groups such as women, lower castes, and tribes and broadly the migrating population (Bremen 1995; Van der Linden and Amin 1997), and rising disproportionately in India after economic liberalization (Agarwala 2008, Harris-White and Sinha 2007, Carr 2002, Kundu and Sharma 2001). The neoliberal period has created the conditions for the unorganized workforce to make its appearance in the scene of labor activism in India and make its presence felt.

### *Centers and Subjects of Neoliberalism*

Labor movement scholars have paid increasing attention to the strategies available for workers in the neoliberal era. For some, the neoliberal period is characterized by a “race to the bottom,” where workers’ bargaining power, wages, and working conditions have weakened on a global scale (Bronfenbrenner 1996, Elliot 2003, see Silver 2003 for a detailed discussion of this literature). This happened in manifold ways: States were forced to de-regulate the hitherto protected and regulated sectors of the national economies, thus making labor available freely for indigenous and foreign capital, as well as state enterprises that have become for-profit. The controls over indigenous capital have been lifted,<sup>13</sup> making the entrepreneurs invest in hitherto state-owned sectors, as well as elsewhere in the world, and use cheap labor.

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<sup>13</sup> In India, local capitalists have always condemned these controls as the *License Raaj* or rule of the license, pointing to the government sanctions needed to begin a business enterprise.

States have created de-regulated spaces such as free trade zones within national borders, where the multi-nationals can employ local labor to produce, and export goods free of tariffs.

Neoliberalism takes a multiplicity of forms, empowering states and local as well as multi-national capital at the expense of labor. However, much of the scholarship about neoliberalism and labor activism focuses on workers in the free trade zones of economies. Given the non-existence of state regulations in such zones, workers, predominantly female, make use of cross-national campaigns and consumer boycotts to articulate their grievances (Bronfenbrenner 2007, Seidman 2007, Brooks 2007). Seidman and Brooks, in their nuanced analysis of labor protests, pointed out the limitations of such strategies to empower workers in negotiating with global capital: these consumer campaigns have limited powers of monitoring points of production, and they reproduce global race, class and gender hierarchies with unintentional consequences for the workers involved.

My departure from the above literature is in understanding neoliberalism as a “multi-centered” and “multi-subjected” process.<sup>14</sup> I suggest that the above focus on transnational labor unintentionally reproduces “U.S. centrism,” the anchoring of the global forces that are manifold, in the United States, thus reinforcing the latter as the most dominant global player in the neoliberal world. This focus, I suggest, neglects the other sites of neoliberalism, which are consequential for workers. For instance,

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<sup>14</sup> Paul Bowles (Bowles 2010) terms this approach to neoliberalism as multi-centered statism, though I disagree with the use of the term “statism,” to describe my approach, since I feel the neoliberal moment shows the subjection of the (redistributive) state to capital.

what strategies are available for workers to contend with indigenous capital gone global? Secondly, this focus also has the effect of robbing workers, of all kinds, of their agency, making them subject to the powers of transnational networks such as consumers.

Hardt and Negri (Hardt and Negri 2000), on the other hand, pointed to the liberating potential of the new global proletariat characterized by flexibility labor, immateriality and affectuality. This labor was homogeneous since it has transcended all existing temporal and territorial boundaries including that of the nation-state. They anticipate that the political demands of such a multitude should be global citizenship and right to (global) social wage (see Sassen 1996). Others have demonstrated the emergence of a new ruling bloc of transnational bourgeoisie, conditioned by the new global structure of accumulation and production, and a transnational proletariat replacing the old international proletariat (Robinson and Harris 2000, see Silver 2003 again).

In cases such as India, where workers have hitherto been embedded in a nation-state and nationalist political culture, how much power can transnational capital wield to re-organize labor politics beyond the boundaries of the nation-state is yet to be seen. Evidence suggests that many labor tactics in the neo-liberal period demand citizenship and depended on the state for some assurance of stability (Seidman 2007, Agarwala 2008). The incidents at the Honda factory in Gurgaon, Delhi in 2009 showed how the neo-liberal logic was still countered by the politics of

the traditional working class. Gurgaon is a fast developing special economic zone in India, and a hub of the automobile industry, with a big role in the supply chain of cars such as Ford and Honda. Contract workers, mainly migrants from rural areas, do most of the production. The disputes about recognition of unions and wage agreement led to the death of a worker, after which the AITUC union called for one-day-strike – around 80,000 to 100,000 car workers did not work on 20th of October 2009, leading to factory closures at GM and Ford in the US due to lack of parts.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the workers were still using conventional strike logics, through which they could still affect the global supply chain.

### *Workers' Repertoires*

If their employers as well as the state did not formally recognize workers, what tactics could the informal workers employ to draw attention to their cause?

Conventionally, the working class has used a given set of trade union tactics, as well as social movement repertoires. Beverly Silver, who has studied labor unrest world-historically, has recognized two types of labor protests to be counted as evidence of labor unrest (Silver 2003): Strikes, which were mostly recorded in newspapers, and the non-strike forms of protests such as slowdowns, absenteeism, sabotage, demonstrations, riots, and factory occupations, which were rarely recorded. Additionally, workers made citizenship claims on the state using the social

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<sup>15</sup> <http://gurgaonworkersnews.wordpress.com/gurgaonworkersnews-no-921/#fn26>, accessed on December 25, 2010.

movement repertoire, such as public meetings, pamphleteering, solemn vigils, petition drives, and statements to media.<sup>16</sup> In this dissertation, however, I, show that workers, especially those that were not in the organized sectors, drew their repertoires and resources from a multiplicity of sites, including class conscious rhetoric, neighborhood associations, ethnic , caste and religious identities as well as citizenship.

Sociological studies have shown that in most cases, a workers' movement is successful based on the use of neighborhood identities, community based networks and citizenship (Gould 1995; Chakrabarty 1989; Somers 1992; Perry 1999; Katznelson and Zolberg 1986; Chandavarkar 1998; Gooptu 2001). Most of the above scholars have argued that these identities should replace the prototypical working class-consciousness. Margaret Somers who studied the 18<sup>th</sup> century English working class argued, "They claimed their rights as citizens and focused on their membership in the political community, and a particular conception of the legal relationship between the people and the law" (Somers 1992: 612). Roger Gould argued that the uprising that led to the Paris Commune in 1871 was much more a revolt of city dwellers against the French state than of workers against capitalism (Gould 1995:4). Raj Chandavarkar (Chandavarkar 1998), in his study of the Mumbai working-class in the late-colonial period in India, showed that neighborhood was more important than the workplace in building associations that led to the success of the Mumbai

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<sup>16</sup> Charles Tilly identifies the "social movement repertoire" that have characterized much of contentious politics in the twentieth century, such as public meetings, pamphleteering, solemn vigils, demonstrations, petition drives and statements to media (2004, 2008).

textile mill unions. Don Kalb (Kalb 1997) showed how working class politics was inscribed in and controlled by shared values and modes of life in Netherlands. Rick Fantasia (Fantasia 1988) replaced class-consciousness with cultures of solidarity that American workers have shown in forming alliances and fighting domination.

Community has also been shown to fragment class unrecognizably. Dipesh Chakrabarty, for instance, pointed at the lack of a hegemonic working class in India due to the predominance of pre-capitalist relationships such as religion and authority that crosscut the former, thus imprisoning Indian labor in a static pre-capitalist culture (Chakrabarty 1989). He drew on sociological notions of community as (ascribed) participation in those traditional institutions such as ethnicity, religion, caste, and kinship. "Community was primarily defined by habitat and language. In addition to these factors, religion was another, perhaps the strongest, source of a notion of "community," and therefore, of a communal sense of identity and honor as well" (Chakrabarty *ibid*: 213). Community also was ties of caste and kinship. These institutions were hierarchical, and inegalitarian, quite unlike the equalizing and humanist class-consciousness. Partha Chatterjee suggested that community, which in the narrative of capital has been relegated to the latter's prehistory, the primordial stage in social evolution that hinders progress and hence must be superseded, nevertheless exists with potential subversive power disrupting the narrative of capital (Chatterjee 1993). "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” (Chatterjee 1993: 235).

While these communities exist, and are powerful, I argue that they and their politics have been steadily incorporated in the logics of the relentless expansion of capital. In workers politics embedded in nation-states in the last three centuries, it is only to be expected that workers act as citizens in their contentions. While the salience of citizenship is hence unbeatable as labor resistance, I suggest that spaces in which workers act as workers, drawing from notion of a universal “proletarian” identity exist. Yet, so do spaces where their community affiliations, based on religion, caste and kinship, become salient. In the neoliberal economies where demands based on citizenship have lost credibility, whether these workers eventually turn to new labor internationalism or to mobilizations based on communities, only time will tell. Instances of associations with other movements internationally and nationally by the worker leadership sent positive signals towards the former; however, my fieldwork also shows that the mass of the workers were also keenly collaborating with the new caste-based coalitions emerging as part of the rise of the right wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India.

### *Workers’ Identities*

A relational perspective on identities is central to my analysis of workers’ politics in central India. The relational approach to the study of society assumes that the social world is not static or pre-given, but exists and is produced within social relations

(Emirbayer 1997). While Somers (1992) uses this relational approach to show that working class consciousness is embedded in particular social relations, like the political-legal relations for the English working class, I show that workers' identities changed in many more complex ways, focusing on the spatial and temporal implications of the relational approach. Identities change spatially according to social relations, and identities change over time, according to the change in social relations. A disciplined citizen of a protective state may change in to a guerilla warrior when the state has failed to protect her. More important for this article is the first implication. Identities change across social relations. A citizen in relation to the state may simultaneously act as a member of a particular caste in relation to the wider matrix of castes.

The workers I interviewed articulated a salient sense of "proletarian identity" in their world views which crucially influenced their contentions with the industrialists and the big landowners in the countryside. However, while articulating their claims to the state, they acted as social citizens as well as adopted a secular identity while traversing the multicultural urban industrial space. They used the affective language and icons of ethnicity, nationalism and religion as well as the hierarchies of caste and kinship to mobilize a mass following and maintain its salience over the dominant political parties for a long period.



## *Argument of the dissertation*

In this dissertation, through a comparative and historical ethnography of workers' movements in two adjacent towns in central India, I invite attention to the ontological shift in workers' politics that arose due to the retreat of the nationalist welfare state in the context of neo-liberal reforms. In the first town of Dalli-Rajhara, manually employed mine workers in state owned iron-ore mines persuaded the state employer to grant them labor rights. Their insurgent movement began in 1977, when the Indian state was aggressively pursuing economic nationalism. The workers could coerce the state to be accountable: All manual workers were eventually absorbed as regular mineworkers. In the second town of Bhilai, inspired by the first movement, casually employed workers in privately owned industries contended with their employers for labor rights. This movement began in 1990, which was the end of the era of economic nationalism and the beginning of the neoliberal regime. The workers were losing to neoliberalizing state and capital, their activism was fragmented, and they contemplated new tactics. The relationship between the mode of production, outcome, and political subjectivities are depicted in Figures 1.1 and 1.2. I argue that the basic shift due to neo-liberal reforms in India is not in the protective role of the state, but in citizen's ability to hold the state accountable by challenging its legitimacy.

This dissertation does not argue that contract workers were well off under state-directed capitalist production and economy in India. On the contrary, it argues that

the Indian postcolonial state employed boundary-drawing mechanisms in its development and these contract workers belonged to such ethnic and geographic boundaries put in place to enable economic growth. In fact, I analyze some of the discursive strategies through which the state ensured that these workers accepted state hegemony. Nevertheless, sites of production are also sites of worker resistance. I analyze how the persistent struggle of contract workers gave them recognition as regular organized laborers. These workers constantly reminded the state of its obligation to them as citizens. This reminding was not just done through conventional labor union tactics, but through militancy, threatening and shaming of opponents. The workers attempted to appeal to not only their employer, but the prevailing political order as well as challenge it through mass mobilization. Finally, they also reminded the state of its ineptness by replacing many of its functions. However, these strategies worked only because of the nature of the state, which though partly repressive was also partly re-distributive. This is proved by the case of the second site where none of the above strategies of the workers bore fruit in the face of a neo-liberalizing state and ascendant capital.

I suggest that we need to shift our focus to the labor force that is in the informalized and peripheralized boundaries of the nation-state as the producer subjects under neoliberal governance. The discourses about floatation and flexibility of capital, work sites, cultures, markets and products under neoliberal production, somehow shifts our attention away from the concreteness of labor and labor practices in a global economy. Transnational scholarship highlights the networks and flows of

activism that transcends and even makes labor unrest appear “conventional” and outdated. Attention is hence shifted to transnational campaigns and the human rights regime as the appropriate counter mechanisms to neo-liberalism.

While neoliberal capital is supposed to be usually capital flowing from the advanced capitalist economies to those inhabiting the global South, I suggest that indigenous capital within national economies plays a significant role as neoliberal capital, pointing to the universal tendency of capital to expand. While Indian capitalists have always made use of national protectionism of the postcolonial state, currently not only have they encroached those sectors that have been privatized in the Indian economy, they also have collaborated with foreign capital. Holcim Limited, a Swiss cement company, and Ambuja Cements, an Indian company, now jointly own one of the industries pivotal to this study, the ACC Company. Another company Beekay engineering works, has “gone global” by investing in agri-business.

### *The Case: Contract Workers’ Struggle in Chhattisgarh*

The mineral rich Chhattisgarh region in India is a newly formed state within the Indian union, when the large and unwieldy state of Madhya Pradesh was divided in 2000 (see Figure 1.3 for the political map of India and the location of Chhattisgarh in it). It is comprised of the fourteen districts and the state capital is Raipur, which is just thirteen miles from the industrial town of Bhilai. Even after the division, Chhattisgarh is geographically bigger than Portugal and Netherlands (Singh 2002). The new state was formed based on the linguistic similarities of the population, who

speak the Chhattisgarhi dialect, and claims of distinct ethnicity. Unlike the neighboring Jharkhand, where a new state was cut out from Bihar, mainly due to claims of Indigeneity by the tribal population, the tribal indigenous articulations are not that strong in Chhattisgarh. Chhattisgarh is one of the poorest states in India, with around forty-two percent of the population below the poverty line.<sup>17</sup> Most that were employed in the industries are peasant- migrants, both tribal and non-tribal, from the countryside, usually from the plains, pushed to industrial work by frequently occurring droughts (see table 1.3 for the demographic profile of Chhattisgarh). Even the tribal people among them had an identity distinguished from the tribal people in the hill regions.

The Indian state had a very important presence in the Chhattisgarh region. In the 1950s, the new nation-state of India invested heavily in industries like iron and steel to strengthen the “muscles of the nation.” The trend of the public-sector driven quest for self-reliance was exemplified by the Bhilai Steel Plant (BSP) launched with 51% government investment and Soviet technical assistance. Bhilai region in Central Provinces was chosen as early as 1945 since it is adjacent to the Bombay-Howrah tracks of the Southeastern railways. By 1959, BSP acquired 7170.6 hectares of land displacing 94 villages and 5703 households (Srinivasan 1988). Another important power holder in the region was the private industrialist class. Since its launching, Bhilai has become the center of industrial undertakings extending to nearby regions of Rajnandgaon and Raipur. These included 120 small industrial

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<sup>17</sup> The national average is thirty three percent. Poverty Line is a conservative measure of poverty designed by the Indian state to assess the number of poor in the country.

units that depend on Bhilai Steel Plant for byproducts, and big enterprises like Associated Cement Company, Simplex Engineering and Foundry works, and Beekay Engineering Corporation, that are owned by indigenous capitalists.

Though politics at the local level was messy and unpredictable, the trade unions in Bhilai, which were affiliated to the national unions, fostered the nation building culture through state-sponsored industrialization. This was particularly due to the fact that the Indian industrialization project after political independence in 1947 favored the socialist approach and invited Soviet collaboration, especially in core industries like steel. *New Age*, the mouth piece of the Communist Party of India<sup>18</sup> 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.”<sup>19</sup> The seriousness of this position was evident during the national emergency in 1975, when the INTUC and the AITUC decided to support the state in preventing industrial sabotage and ensuring discipline. This pro-nationalist stance translated to collaborating with the industrialists to prevent the CMM’s attempts to disrupt production.

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<sup>18</sup> AITUC, the main trade union in the Bhilai industrial region is affiliated to the Communist Party of India.

<sup>19</sup> *New Age*, February 9, 1958.

Since the new state has formed, the right wing BJP has become powerful over the Congress Party that has traditionally controlled the state, and has gained mass support by intruding to the villages offering financial and other help for electoral support.<sup>20</sup> 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 pro-capitalist state government<sup>21</sup> vigorously attempted to foster economic growth and lure tourists and investors (See the official website of the Chhattisgarh state government, <http://chhattisgarh.nic.in>).

While the state deployed skilled workers to produce for the nation in its steel plant and mines, the unskilled local population was deployed as contract workers in the manually operated section of the mines and in the privately owned industries in Bhilai. The regular workforce in the steel plant and the mines were mostly from the educated parts of India. This regular workforce was represented by the AITUC and the INTUC. 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

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<sup>20</sup> While I was in the field in 2006, the BJP was winning support of the *Gond* tribes allegedly by gifting goats, one step above the usual liquor gifts from the rival Congress Party. 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. This also meant that the BJP was able to capture the support of many CMM followers, especially during elections. 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 Vajpayee. While I was in the field, this shawl had become an important marker of a new Chhattisgarhi identity in Bhilai.

<sup>21</sup> The BJP is well known for its simultaneous pursuit of cultural conservatism and economic liberalism.

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.<sup>22</sup>

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. Digging was done in couples, usually a husband-wife pair, and transportation was mostly done by male workers, though some female workers participated in that as well. 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 the so-called labor camps and returned to the villages to do farming when it rained. In 2006, most workers worked in “gangs” comprised of fellow workers rather than spouses.

*New Age*<sup>23</sup> gives some insight into the employment of contract workers in the mines prior to the 1970s. The mines came into production in 1958 under a manual process, and it was mechanized in 1961. However, the mechanized mines could not fulfill the requirements of iron-ore from the steel plant, and hence manual labor continued. In 1968, the manual work force was 8000 while the workforce in the mechanized portion of the mines was 3700. Many of the oldest workers, 50% of the

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<sup>22</sup> Steel Authority of India Limited Annual Reports 1955-2005, Ministry of Steel Annual Reports 1959-60 to 2005.

<sup>23</sup> *New Age*, April 14, 1968.

total workers, had been working since the beginning of the mines; yet they were kept under the contract system. The AITUC took this issue to the Indian Labour Conference in 1963-64 and a tripartite decision was made that the system should be abolished. Hindustan Steel Limited (the predecessor of SAIL which was the government owned company that controlled the steel plant) was a party to these decisions. Yet the contract system in BSP continued leading to perpetual poverty and exploitation. There were 11 contractors in the mines. Under the contractors, the workers were debarred from continuity of service because of the frequent change of contractors who were engaged on a “work orders” basis by the BSP for Rs. 25000 each.<sup>24</sup> The work order system, or “short term contracts,” was introduced by the BSP to help the contractors to commit artificial breaks in the services of the workers and to deprive them of various benefits granted under the law. The workers were paid Rs. 78 a month while BSP employees were paid Rs. 160.<sup>25</sup> They were forced to put thumb impressions in the blank registers with the result that it enabled the contractor to put the amount required to be paid on each account without actually paying the same.

In Bhilai, contract labor was the predominant form of employing labor, where the contractor acted as the mediator between the industrial management and the workers. Under the contract labor system, the industrial management passed the legal responsibilities to the workers; while the contractors maintained their herds of

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<sup>24</sup> 555 US\$

<sup>25</sup> 1.74 and 3.55 US\$



workers through long-established means of control (For the history of subcontracting of labor in Indian factory system, see Sen 1999, Chandavarkar 1998, Simeon 1995, Chakrabarty 1989). These contractors, who had their offices in the company yards, visited the labor camps to “call” workers, if there was some demand from the industrialists. Those who were around during that call got that job and the others were just unlucky. Unlike the miners, most Bhilai workers were males, though I met a few female workers as well. Some estimates of contract workers in the Bhilai industrial region are as high as 94%,<sup>26</sup> and their numbers are increasing since economic liberalization after the 1990s (Jha, Mitra and Nair 1999).

The contract workers’ movement, Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha (Chhattisgarh Liberation Front, CMM henceforth), began as a manual mine workers’ union in 1977 in the state-owned mines of Dalli-Rajhara, and had expanded to the neighboring city of Bhilai in 1989, forming an umbrella union of predominantly native contract workers in the private industries. Their union was “innovative” (Sarkar 2001) and “chucked the grammar” of trade unionism (Mitra 1991) by organizing the peasants in the countryside. This movement, at least for a while, displayed the potential to intervene in the social hierarchies in the region. The movement had infiltrated the land holding class’ hegemony in some of the villages surrounding the mining township and the city. The workers challenged the authority of the private industrialists in the region to bend the law and employ contract workers.<sup>27</sup> They

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<sup>26</sup> Editorial, Economic and Political Weekly, October 5, 1991, 2273-4.

<sup>27</sup> Though Contract Work in India has been regulated by a 1970 Government of India Act, the industrialists in the region used loopholes in the law to exploit the abundant supply of native migrant workers in the region.

organized against their management and used militant tactics to force them to grant their demands. They organized as a worker-peasant party, and ostracized the wealthy peasants in the villages surrounding the industrial area. They ran “a parallel state,”<sup>28</sup> and threatened the industrialists, state agents and political parties so much that even the industrialists were forced to take to the road in protest and appeal to the state in tears.<sup>29</sup>

However, the movements in the mining township and the industrial town took different trajectories. With militant trade unionism, the miners forced the state-owned mine management to confer benefits, including regularized wages and working conditions. The movement's final demand—the absorption of manual laborers, who included most of the miners—was fulfilled in 1996. The industrial workers, on the other hand, were expelled, their leader <sup>30</sup> was assassinated, and their union was reduced to a routine client in court. Some workers returned to their villages, some worked full time in the union, some found alternative employment, and some simply did not survive.

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<sup>28</sup> A rival union leader alleged that the movement was anti- state and ruled the region with its own laws.

<sup>29</sup> The local newspaper *Roudramukhi* reported that the owner of the Simplex Group of industries in Bhilai, Hairbhai Shah pleaded with the public to “forgive my sins and save my Simplex” from the clutches of the CMM. June 9, 1992.

<sup>30</sup> Sankar Guha Niyogi, the CMM leader, was shot dead on September 28, 1991, allegedly by an assassin hired by the private industrialists in Bhilai. The accused were initially sentenced to death and life imprisonment by the lower court, but eventually were acquitted (except the assassin) by the Supreme Court of India in January 2005.

## *Discussion of Methods*

This research uses archival and ethnographic information with an interpretive eye. The archival sources were used to study the practice of industrialization in independent India and its transformation during economic liberalization, the continuity and change in the labor deployment practices associated with changing industrial policies, the emergence of the Bhilai industrial region in Chhattisgarh, and workers' mobilization in Chhattisgarh. Ethnographic methods of observation, especially semi-structured and unstructured interviews, were used to investigate the how the movement instilled associations in the participants. The ethnography was done in the summers of 2003 and 2004 and the year of 2006.

### Government of India Documents

Vivek Chibber has noted the problems in accessing archives on contemporary Indian History (2003). My experience in collecting archival material for my research underscored the difficulty of that endeavor. Since the documents I needed were recent, they were still in the various state departments and had not been catalogued and treated as "archives" yet. This meant that I had to take the difficult route of approaching those state department offices, which had the usual problems associated with bureaucracies, which included the specific clientelist ways in which they have evolved in India. I was accused of being a spy in the heavily guarded Department of Industries library where I was looking at the very public and

mundane ministry of steel annual reports. This could very well have been a ploy to prevent my access to these documents, unless I bribed those who safeguarded them. Since I was studying a politically volatile issue, I had no access to any documents maintained by the police, except some judicial documents and files of court cases that were maintained by the CMM.<sup>31</sup>

### Trade Union Documents

I collected trade union documents from the Communist Party of India basement library<sup>32</sup>, which had a huge collection of newspapers of the post-independence period. These and the trade union documents in the P.C. Joshi archives of contemporary history in Jawaharlal Nehru University helped me re-create the circumstances surrounding postcolonial modernization, the role of the state and its approach to labor and also the approach of the formal labor organizations and the left movement in India to the Indian modernization process.

### Newspapers and Pamphlets

In Dalli-Rajhara and Bhilai, the files of newspaper cuttings and pamphlets maintained by the CMM as well as private individuals were a valuable resource for studying the movement. CMM maintains a newspaper archive (though sporadic

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<sup>31</sup> They have been uploaded in the Labour History Archives of V.V. Giri National Labour Institute. This institute, although it was headed by bureaucrats, had numerous researchers making valuable and bi-partisan contributions to labor problems in India. See <http://www.indialabourarchives.org/>

<sup>32</sup> The building is called Ajoy Bhavan

since 1999) in the form of registers of newspaper cuttings. The main newspapers retrieved were Deshbandhu, Dainik Bhaskar and Navbharat published from Raipur in Chhattisgarh. Unlike the national, English newspapers that often held CMM in high regard, the local newspapers held CMM in contempt. The regional newspapers in Chhattisgarh were most likely patronized, if not owned, by the industrialists that belonged to the indigenous business class whom the CMM considered its class enemy. The local news reporters might have been the college-going youth in Bhilai that were non-sympathetic at best to the CMM activists that were semi-rural and semi-literate. In using the newspapers as a source of evidence, this bias has been taken seriously. In the mining township, the newspapers were stored in moth eaten sacks, especially copies of Mitan, the CMM newspaper that were published during the golden years of the CMM. I did not have free access to them unlike in Bhilai, because there were not sure about my position about their split with the Bhilai people, and I was usually associated with the Bhilai group, which had many “outsiders.”<sup>33</sup>

The CMM has published an enormous number of pamphlets, printed on very cheap pink paper that disclosed both the financial crunch of the movement as well as effective cost cutting since a pamphlet was produced for the moment and was not to be preserved for posterity. The earliest of them the author has reviewed is in 1980 and the latest in 2006. Along with that there were pamphlets published by other unions and other organizations as well as political parties. These pamphlets ranged

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<sup>33</sup> The leading figures in Bhilai include Anoop Singh and Sudha Bhardwaj, two people originally from Delhi, who have immersed themselves in the movement.

from commentaries on political situations, responses to accusations, calls for demonstrations, announcements of martyr day and other celebrations, calls for protests and so on. Many of the AITUC pamphlets in the Dalli-Rajhara Township in the 1970 and 1980s displayed discomfort at the emergence of the CMM, the so-called reign of terror of the CMM, and pointed to some of the corrupt practices of the CMM leaders. More than anything else, these pamphlets showed the discomfort at a left leaning union like the CMM utilizing non-rational resources like religion and ethnicity to help in mobilization.

### Ethnographic Sites

The two ethnographic research sites were the mining town of Dalli-Rajhara in Durg district and the city of Bhilai in Chhattisgarh (see Figure 1.4 for the location of the sites). Dalli-Rajhara, approximately eighty miles from Bhilai, had the iron-ore mines of the Bhilai Steel Plant, and harbored most of the manually employed native workers in the plant. It had the first CMM office, the tombs of the CMM martyrs, and the schools and hospital run by CMM. It is proximate to the Dondi-Lohara Tribal Block where CMM (being a registered regional party) won a state legislative assembly seat in 1984. Bhilai, being the industrial center of Chhattisgarh, harbored laborers, both local and migrants. CMM had its city office in Jamul, an industrial labor camp near the Associated Cement Factory in Bhilai. The Jamul office of the CMM focused on industrial laborers, peasants in the neighboring villages, and activities in the neighboring districts of Rajnandgaon and Raipur. The population in

the Jamul industrial labor camp (a crowded settlement of laborers) included migrants from the neighboring states of Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh.

### Interviews and observation

The main evidence for this dissertation is in the form of stories of movement participation, which I personally gathered from semi- and unstructured interviews, and numerous casual conversations and observations. I interviewed around forty participants in the movement, including nine women, tribal people, and non-natives. Most of them were *mukhiyas* or meso-level leaders, who had some knowledge of Hindi, and were more or less educated in the everyday nitty -gritty of trade unionism. I interviewed until that point when I reached saturation regarding the accounts and stories that I listened to (Small 2009). A majority of the interviewees had some elementary school education, and a long history of trade union activism, which made them conversant in trade union language. However, these were nevertheless the regular contract-workers; their lived experience was similar to the typical contract-worker. I have had conversations with workers that have not held any position in the union and hail from the farthest of villages.

Most miners narrated their stories from the comfort of their village homes. Though these workers migrated from the countryside, they still maintained their village networks, at least in the beginning, because of the uncertainties involved in mine

work. They returned to do farming seasonally, and food from their villages sustained them at least in part during the strikes. While working in the mines, they expanded their farms in the villages, and with the lump sum they received from the mines upon retirement, they returned to the village as proud owners of partly mechanized farms that their children cultivated. Their multi-storied concrete houses, which towered over the usual mud huts in the village, symbolized their new status. Those still in the township also had this double life in the villages, where their children managed the farms.

Along with interviewing, I participated in union activities such as marches, accompanied their street theatre troupe, visited their households, and was a regular visitor of their union offices. I also interviewed, and had numerous casual conversations with, onlookers, regular workers, other union leaders, personnel managers, villagers, mine officials, contractors and many Delhi based activists-academicians who knew about this movement. Whenever anyone found out I was there to study the CMM, they had their two cents to offer. These comments were immensely useful in knowing the nuances of impact of this movement in the surroundings, and non-participant interpretation of the movement.

### Levels of Distillation

Raj Chandavarkar has noted that historians looking at official documents only get what has been recorded in those documents, which for instance is often an indifferent, if not biased interpretation of the event under analysis (Chandavarkar



1998). Details of a court proceeding reach the historian after being distilled by the often tired and bored clerk that does the transcription. But even before this distillation, the defendant or witness in the court already had performed her own interpretation. A mutineer, who was responding to the questions in the court, might report a story that might be “legible” to those in the court rather than the account she would give to her neighbor. A pamphlet that is published to be spread in the neighborhood will necessarily speak to the town people about sewage problems or lack of water supply; one that was meant for a bigger audience, might talk about broader causes like patriotism; one issued to be given to factory workers at the factory gate might discuss work related right violations.

While using ethnographic evidence, I have been careful to include and interpret the multiple levels of distillation of the events that had originally occurred. Accounts of the movement were actually an account of what was lived, experienced and interpreted by the participants and presented to the “ethnographer” who was their audience. I remember that the workers in the Bhilai office always switched off the TV., or shifted channels to more appropriate ones like discovery or national geographic channels from the Bollywood movies they were watching, when I entered the office, to assume a more professional role of activists. This, though discouraging in the beginning, was essential for me in knowing what they wanted to be known as, what they wanted to project. In turn, I must have been of ethnographic interest to them, being a successful woman, Indian, their fellow citizen, and who went to America, and they found it amusing that I spent around seventy thousand

rupees to be there to meet them.<sup>34</sup> They also used me, by asking me to pose as a journalist filming a factory gate picketing, and by introducing me to the workers whom they wanted to impress.

## *Outline of the Chapters*

In chapter 2, I examine the creation of a laboring-class in the Dalli-Rajhara mining township. The mines supplied iron-ore to the steel plant. The mines employed both regular workers and contract workers. Regular skilled workers came from all parts of India. With them, also came the INTUC and AITUC, the central trade unions. Manual work in the mines was done through contract work, where contractors recruited the workers, mostly natives. These mineworkers were from the neighboring regions, pushed to the mines through droughts. They came with families and worked in digging and transporting iron ore. Both men and women were employed in digging, and many a time they worked as a couple. They had to be at the beck and call of the contractors, and had no control over working hours and wages, though the unions enlisted them as members. They lived in unbaked mud houses, known as labor camps, partly because they thought of their work as temporary, and partly out of lack of money. Though most of the workers were Chhattisgarhiya, most workers came to know one another only through working and living in the same neighborhood. While there was a cosmopolitan national space

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<sup>34</sup> I worried at times that my coming from the USA, which the Indian left stereotypically considered as the bastion of imperialism, would be a problem for doing fieldwork, despite my being an Indian citizen. The workers, to my pleasant surprise, were not bothered by such stereotypes, and wanted to know how people in the United States lived, what they ate (how much a kilogram of rice, or okra cost), produced and so on.

in the mining township that was inhabited by the diverse group of regular workers who were protected by the mine management, the local Chhattisgarhiya were cut off from this national space. It was not surprising hence that the workers' accounts did not show enmity to their contractors as much as their anger at the mine management, rival union activists and political leaders.

In chapter 3, I narrate how the Chhattisgarhiya mineworkers acted as persuasive citizens in contending with the state employers for rights. They framed their demands for social citizenship, and forced the state through militant tactics to grant them rights as regular workers. They also challenged the dominant political order by becoming a regional political party. Finally, they replaced the welfare state in many of its regular functions. Since their contention was with the state and the platform was that which recognized this relation, they were successful in their demands. The workers and the state employers were engaged in a relation that recognized each other's existence; hence the workers were able to force the state to fulfill their demands. Their movement started as an insurgent strike in 1977, protesting against discrimination in a festival bonus hike. Their defiance resulted in the formation of a union exclusively for contract workers. They invited an outsider to lead their union. Through their militancy, they persuaded the mine management to provide them better working conditions and job security. Their tactics included protest marches, wildcat strikes, squatting on railway lines, holding managers hostage, and so on. Alongside, they also had community-building activities such as construction of a food canteen, hospital, banks and truck garage. They also formed a

regional political party, and stood in the first local assembly elections. They thus became a formidable challenge to the Congress Party. Eventually, all of the workers were absorbed as regular workers in 1996.

In chapter 4, I examine the construction of the Bhilai industrial region. The identification of Chhattisgarh as a “natural resource” due to its mineral deposits was a colonial legacy. However, the decision to utilize it for the capitalist development of India was the exclusive decision of the post-colonial state. The Bhilai Steel Plant started functioning as an exemplary nationalist project in 1965 on land acquired from villages. The workers in the steel plant and the associated mines were the organized workforce, for which the skills of the natives were not a good match. Still, many natives who worked in the construction of the plant were employed in non-executive positions. Organized labor in Chhattisgarh also brought the central trade unions to Chhattisgarh. The other outsiders that were interested in the region were the Indian capitalists, who, as I show, belonged to the indigenous capitalist class. In these industries that supported the steel plant, majority of production was done through contract work. The political culture of the industrial and mining region was formed by dominant political parties of the Congress Party and the BJP, as well as the nationalism of the trade unions. Some of the changes due to the transition to the neo-liberal era include the privatization of functions within the steel plant and the mines, intrusion of foreign capital, as well as de-regulation of labor laws. Due to a combined effect of these, contract work is now the main form of recruitment in Bhilai. On the political front, the right wing BJP is the powerful political party, eroding the mass base of all other parties and even trade unions. There has been an

unprecedented increase in caste and community based mobilization in Chhattisgarh in recent times especially after the formation of the new state in 2000. Bhilai was constructed as an exemplary national space in post-colonial India. The regular workers of the steel plant lived in quiet tree lined streets arranged in grids and in utilitarian living quarters. Their children went to the steel plant-operated school and they all went to the steel plant operated hospital. Many of these children have migrated to the United States for technical education, or attend prestigious educational institutions in India. This section of Bhilai was separated from the undisciplined and disorderly industrial area where the contract workers lived and worked. They worked for the private industries, lived in slum-like dwellings, and were necessary for the existence of comfortable urban living in Bhilai. Many worked as rickshaw pullers, fruit vendors, and household servants to the employees of the steel plant. The industrialists lived in a separate neighborhood than both the steel plant employees and the workers. The surrounding villages in Bhilai sent commuting contract workers to town, and were polluted by the industrial area. The contract workers worked in different industries, lived in different neighborhoods, and had little knowledge of one another before the formation of the movement. They were all recruited through the contract system. The industrialists evaded government regulation of the contract system by dismissing workers after 90 days of continuous work, not providing tangible identification to the workers, and bribing labor department officials.

In chapter 5, I investigate the formation of the movement in Bhilai. The movement began when contract workers in a steel plant started a wild-cat strike. Soon, the entire industrial workforce joined the strike with demands of regular work. All these workers were expelled from the industries, and the leader was assassinated. The cases of the workers were taken over by the court system following a police firing, which blunted the movement capabilities. Thus, the CMM became a union of expelled workers in Bhilai. The union has been conducting worker protests at the factory gate and bigger protests aimed at the state in greater Bhilai. However, with the neo-liberal reforms, even the steel plant is employing contract workforce, and the legal options available for the workers have become limited. The rival unions of the AITUC and INTUC have always supported the industrialists against the CMM, though there has been evidence of a more amicable relation between all unions due to the common enemy of neo-liberalism. Meanwhile, the Maoist movement has emerged in the bordering regions of Chhattisgarh, and the workers have been generally enthusiastic with the spread of the movement; however, since they inhabited a political culture that was nationalist, there was little chance that they would join any Maoist movement.

In chapter 6, I summarize the findings and discuss the theoretical and empirical implications of this research.

*Table 1.1: Distribution of Employment between Organized and Unorganized Sectors in India*

Sector	Employment (Million)		
	Formal	Informal	Total
Organized	30.66	25.79	56.45
Unorganized	4.02	336.29	340.31
Total	34.68	362.08	396.76

Source: G. Raveendran, SVR Murthy and Ajaya Kumar Naik, National Commission on Enterprises in the Unorganized/Informal Sector, India, 2006

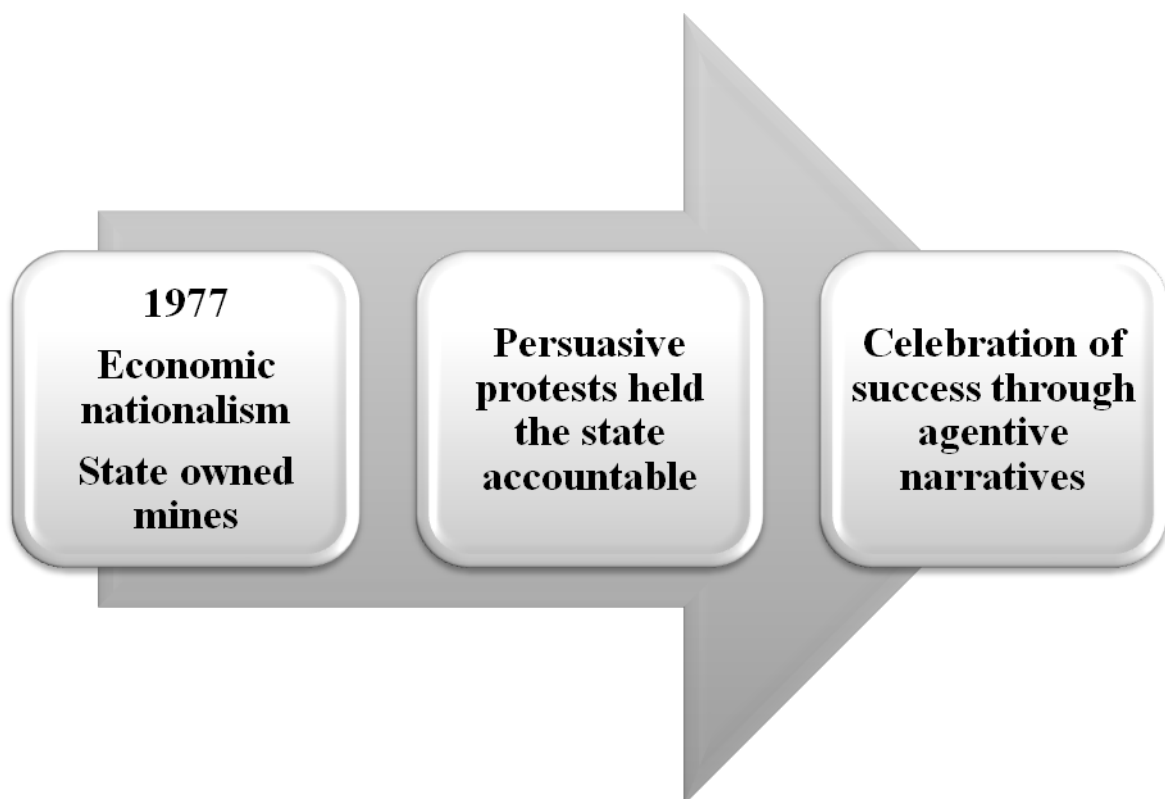
*Table 1.2: Estimates of Informal Employment in India*

Sl. No	Sector	Estimated number (Million)		
		Male	Female	Total
1	Agriculture			
1.1	Rural	138.67	88.06	226.73
1.2	Urban	4.91	3.28	8.19
	Total	143.58	91.34	234.92
2	Non- Agriculture			
2.1	Rural	47.46	13.91	61.37
2.2	Urban	53.43	12.36	65.79
	Total	110.89	26.27	127.16
3	All India			
3.1	Rural	186.13	101.97	288.10
3.2	Urban	58.34	15.64	73.98
	Total	244.47	117.61	362.08

Source: G. Raveendran, SVR Murthy and Ajaya Kumar Naik, National Commission on Enterprises in the Unorganized/Informal Sector, India, 2006



*Figure 1.1: Production, protest and subjectivities: mining township*



*Figure 1.2: Production, protest and subjectivities: industrial town*

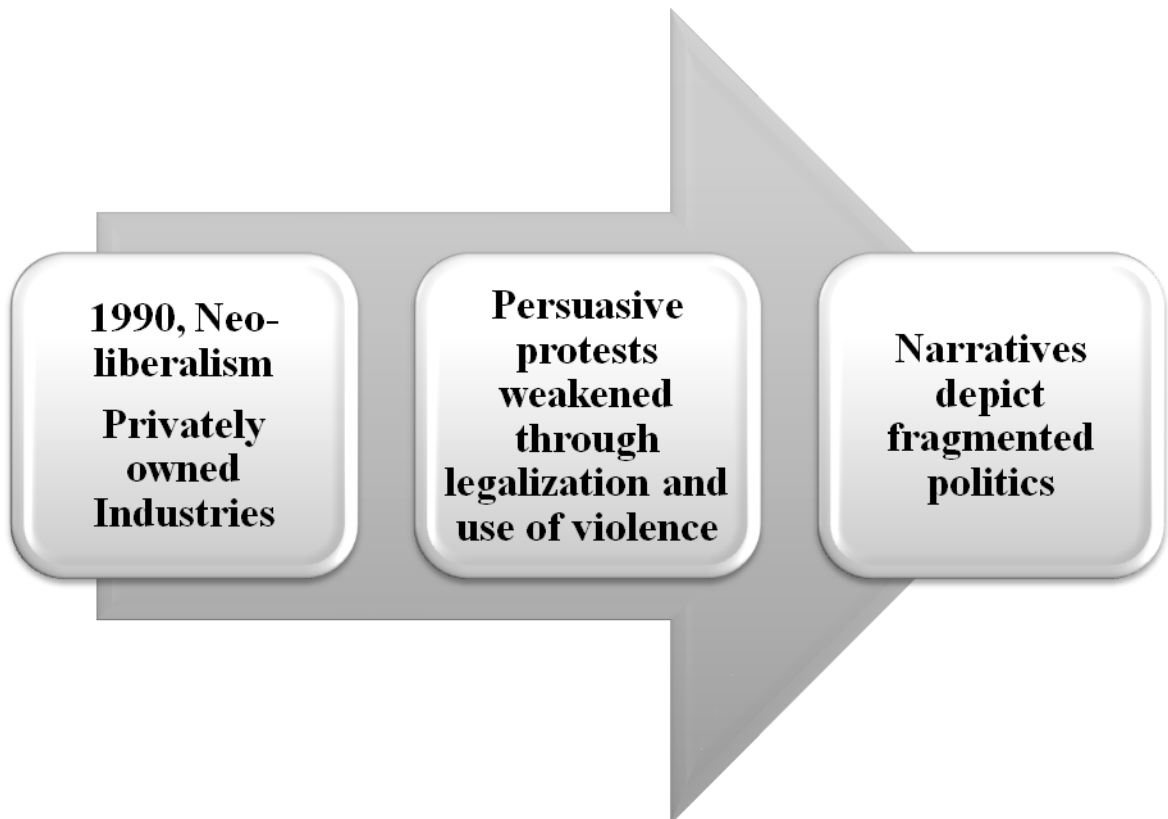


Figure 1.3: Political Map of India



 Chhattisgarh state

Source: Survey of India

*Table 1.3: Demographic Profile of Chhattisgarh, 2005*

	Chhattisgarh	India
Total population	20.8 million	1028 million
Urban	4185747 (20%)	27.8%
Rural	16648056 (80%)	72.2%
Sex ratio	989/1000 1004/1000 rural	933/1000
Scheduled castes*	11.61%	16.2%
Scheduled tribes**	31.80%	8.2%
Backward classes***	56.59%	
Literacy	64.66%	64.84%

\*The Scheduled Castes are notified in a separate schedule of the Constitution of India. They have been at the lowest end of the Hindu social caste hierarchy, based on birth and have been disadvantaged for generations.

\*\*Scheduled Tribes refer to communities listed in the Constitution of India as such, because they reside largely in areas that are designated as part of the Fifth and Sixth Schedules of the Constitution. Their social and economic backwardness stems from their long-term habitation in geographically remote areas.

\*\*\*The term Backward Classes refer to other communities who are considered to be particularly disadvantaged both socially and economically.

Source: Chhattisgarh Human Development Report 2005; Census of India 2001

Figure 1.4: Research Sites



Dalli-Rajhara Mining Township



Bhilai industrial town

## CHAPTER 2

### BOUNDARIES WITHIN THE NATION: DALLI-RAJHARA MINING TOWNSHIP

#### *The Steel Plants and Economic Nationalism*

The Indian state, formed after political independence from British colonial rule in 1947, started a program of economic modernization to speed up the process of catching up with the developed nations of the west. The hallmark of this program was a belief in progress as well as a faith in a production-oriented economy to attain that progress. Jawaharlal Nehru, the then Indian Prime Minister and architect of Indian planning, stated, “During the past two centuries [of colonial domination], we became static and fell away from the current of human progress” (Zaidi and Zaidi 1981, page 155). The post-colonial modernization program represented the Nehruvian attempts to make the Indian nation “work back into the trajectory of its ‘normal’ development” (Chatterjee 1986, page 138. Also see Chatterjee 1993, 1998, and Seth 1995).

The Indian leadership decided to have a production-oriented economy, with a “commodity-centered approach,” where more good were preferred to less, rather than follow the Gandhian principles of regulating the needs (Chakravarty 1987). However, the leaders felt that a simple copy of the socialist or capitalist pattern of the

successful nations might not work for India. As the president of the annual session of the party in power, the Indian National Congress, pointed out in 1955:

The general trend of economic development the world over, whether under a socialist pattern or a capitalist pattern of economy, is towards building up large organizations in the fields of production and distribution. In the Western countries, technological and mechanical progress, achieved in the means of production, goes to reduce manpower employment in the primary and secondary sectors. But there is such a large scope for absorption in the tertiary sector that there is no consequent unemployment. 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." (Zaidi and Zaidi, *ibid*, page 40)

The need for providing employment to the masses was, to the Indian state, as important as increasing production. The Indian state opted for a mixture of capitalism to attain material progress and socialism to redistribute the resources to the poor. In the mixed economy model that 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. This move appeased the Indian industrial class that already had a strong base by the late colonial era (see Mukherjee 2002), while not sacrificing the spirit of socialism that the Congress leadership felt was necessary to gain and maintain its legitimacy as a political party with a mass base.

The state invested heavily in steel to build the nation's strength.<sup>35</sup> 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]" (Zaidi and Zaidi 1984, p 158). Three steel projects, Durgapur, Rourkela, and Bhilai under the auspices of a state-owned company, Hindustan Steel Limited (HSL), which later became the Steel Authority of India Limited (SAIL), were put in place to attain the goal of mass production. The Bhilai steel plant project was completed in 1960 as a 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.

<sup>36</sup> 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.

### *Establishment of the "Captive Mines"*

The Bhilai Steel Plant was designated that space and locality in central India primarily due to the presence of the iron ore deposits in Dalli-Rajhara region, around eighty miles from the location of the steel plant. The government of India

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<sup>35</sup> *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.

<sup>36</sup> Report 1960-61, Ministry of Steel, Mines and Fuel, Department of Iron and Steel.



report stated, “Selection of this site in Madhya Pradesh for the location of a million ton steel plant was influenced primarily by the availability of good quality iron ore in the Dhalli<sup>37</sup> and Rajhara hills nearby and the possibility of utilizing the hitherto unexplored reserves of coal in Korba<sup>38</sup> and Kanhan.”<sup>39</sup> These mineral rich regions were to be developed as captive mines of the steel plant.

Implicit in the use of the term captive mines was the notion of subjecting nature to scientific will, which was a continuation of the colonial policies that aimed to turn nature into resources (See Scott 1998). The presence of iron deposits in the Dalli-Rajhara region was noted by colonial officials as early as in 1908. The Imperial Gazetteer of India of 1908, which was part of the colonial project to map “India” geographically, historically, economically and socially and make it more “legible,” noted the existence and use by locals of iron ore deposits:

Iron ores are found in abundance in the Western and southern parts of the [Raipur] District,<sup>40</sup> and some of these are very rich. A sample from Dhalli in the Dondi-Lohara zamindari<sup>41</sup> yielded on assay nearly 73 percent of metallic iron...A little iron is smelted by native methods in the Deori and Dondi-Lohara zamindaris, but it cannot compete with British iron.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Later known as Dalli

<sup>38</sup> Korba now provides electricity to central India through a power plant, utilizing the cheap coal in the region.

<sup>39</sup> Ministry of Steel, Mines and Fuel Report 1957-58. This ministry was the earliest version of what is now known as the Ministry of Steel.

<sup>40</sup> Chhattisgarh region was part of Raipur District in the Central Provinces and Berar in British India.

<sup>41</sup> *Zamindari* was an agrarian system for exaction of land revenue under the colonial rule.

<sup>42</sup> The Imperial Gazetteer of India, 1908, Volume XXI, p.55. The Imperial Gazetteer of India is a historical reference book about India. It was first published in 1881.

Mining in India, however, was not a British priority. Britain was an exporter for manufactured iron products, and obviously did not want to squander the availability of markets in India for iron just as for milled cotton (Ray 1998). The first major Indian capitalist, Tata and Sons group of industries did seem to have an interest in iron ore mining in Dondi-Lohara zamindari. Jhamsehdji Rustomji Tata, the founder of the Tata group, was looking for a site to set up his iron and steel plant in the 1900s and a recent blogger on Chhattisgarh suggests that the group did some excavations in the zamindari. There is evidence that Indian geologist P. N. Bose, a nationalist and product of Bengali renaissance, <sup>43</sup>invited Tata and sons to set up his plant in the princely state of Mayurbhanj, where he was working at that time. It is highly likely that JRD Tata decided on accepting this offer so that he did not have to negotiate setting up of an industry with the British since Dondi-Lohara was in Central Provinces which was directly ruled by the British colonial state. The Tata Iron and Steel Company Limited<sup>44</sup> in Jamshedpur in current Jharkhand was set up in 1907, with coal coming from Jharia coalfields, and exploitative mining using tribal miners.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> The letter has been reproduced in Chakrabarti, R., 2006. P. N. Bose (1855-1934) - An Eminent Geologist. *Indian Journal of History of Science*. 41(2), 199-206. While the Tata group has hitherto unacknowledged any such invitation, in 2005, it honored the memory of PN Bose for his "painstaking research and historical letter." *Telegraph*, Calcutta, May 12, 2005.

<sup>44</sup> Currently known as Tata Steel.

<sup>45</sup> This led to the emergence of *Jharkhand Mukti Morcha* or Jharkhand Liberation Front in Bihar, which spearheaded the movement for the separate state of Jharkhand.

What was Tata's loss became the postcolonial Indian state's gain. The Ministry of Steel, Mines and Fuel decided to start mechanized mining in Dalli-Rajhara with Soviet technical assistance (Figure 2.1 carries a recent photograph of the mines). The Annual Report of the Ministry outlined the enormity of Soviet assistance in design, supply of plant and equipment, leveling and construction of workers' colony (Krishna Moorthy 1987).<sup>46</sup> The Ministry of Steel, Mines and Fuel acquired 1470.5 hectares of land for the mines (Srinivasan 1984).

As a result of acquisition, from 94 villages, a total of 5703 persons in the Bhilai area and in the mines areas were displaced. The compensation paid to private owners amounted to Rs. 1.02 crores.<sup>47</sup> Though the displaced persons were offered alternate occupation in the project, the majority preferred to retain their traditional vocation, in new villages. Thus as on 1<sup>st</sup> April, 1984, the total land acquisition amounts to net 12086.6 hectares, for the plant, township and the mines. (ibid, page 40)

More information about the villages and livelihoods that were affected by the displacement is scarce. While the hills, which were turned into iron-ore mines, often, referred to as "pahadi,"<sup>48</sup> must have been less inhabited, the construction of the township must have displaced many tribal villages. Dalli and Rajhara were predominantly tribal regions, and inhabitants belonged to Halba and Gond tribes.

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<sup>46</sup> While the enthusiasm about Soviet help is evident in all the writings, there has also been a certain discomfort about allowing the growth of so-called subversive elements in central India. Krishna Moorthy states that there were fears that Soviet arrival in this hilly region would enable the growth of communism in India.

<sup>47</sup> Approximately 205700 dollars.

<sup>48</sup> Mountains

Relics of the old tribal villages were still evident in the township, such as the tribal chieftain's modest house in the locality of *Rajbara*,<sup>49</sup> which was still lying vacant.

### *Mining Township as a National Space*

The Dalli-Rajhara mining township was located in a geography that was rural and tribal; yet, it was constructed and imagined as a national space. The mines employed workers from all over India, and many of the second generation still lived and worked in the township.<sup>50</sup> Mines have attracted small business folk, belonging originally to the Marwari trading communities from Rajasthan, as well as truck owners and operators from Punjab. Private buses, jeeps and the government-owned trains connected this township to the district headquarters in Durg and the railway station, from where the state capital of Raipur was half an hour away. This transport system facilitated the continuous influx of people to this township. The township had an old world charm, when people did not think much about life beyond the township: The main road in the township had small businesses such as sweet shops, textile shops, and cassette shops, mostly run by the Marwari business folk. The *Gurudwara*<sup>51</sup> in the main road catered to the Sikhs who came to Chhattisgarh as

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<sup>49</sup> Literally meaning "the house of the king."

<sup>50</sup> This is true for males only. Girls of the second generation have been "married off" to boys outside and have left the town. For instance, I lived with a second-generation family during my fieldwork; the first generation had gone back to Kerala, and their daughter was married off in Kerala. The son was working in the mines as technical staff along with some self employment, and many of his friends were self employed as well, and were residing in mine housing quarters. For them Dalli-Rajhara was their hometown.

<sup>51</sup> Place of worship of the Sikh people.

truck drivers. The water fountain sponsored by the Buddhists<sup>52</sup> indicated the presence of Mahars, a community of erstwhile untouchables that converted to Buddhism. Water fountains were also sponsored by the Sindhi community, indicating their presence in the township. There were shops selling the South Indian fare of *idlis* and *dosas*, along with the Hindu hotel selling fried snacks <sup>53</sup> and sweets.

The multi-cultural ambience of the township was because it has been a haven for internal migrants pushed from their regions mainly due to economic hardships. Below, I provide three stories of arrival in the mining township. These stories point to the failure of the postcolonial state to have inclusive development practices in India, which untied the poor people to migrate and look for life elsewhere. Khonda Sardar<sup>54</sup> is from Amritsar district in Punjab, from a village near the Beas River. His father was in the army and had lost his leg. Khonda “got into trouble” in the village and his relatives asked him to escape from there. His uncle was in Chhattisgarh as a truck driver. Hence, he came to the township and started driving trucks. They did not share any of the enthusiasm I had for Punjab;<sup>55</sup> they said that most of the money in the Golden temple in Amritsar came from Canada and America. Khonda did not want to go back to Punjab. His wife told me that Punjab was not a nice place; their son was stabbed to death when he went to visit. Khonda now lived in a shack near

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<sup>52</sup> Boudh Sabha Pyaoo Ghar

<sup>53</sup> Namkeen

<sup>54</sup> The title of a Sikh person.

<sup>55</sup> Punjab has had a vivid history of participation in the nationalist struggle, producing martyrs such as Bhagat Singh, being the seat of the Jalianwala Bagh massacre and partition. I had just visited Golden temple in Amritsar and had relived this dramatic history of Punjab.

the main road in Dalli-Rajhara with his wife, two daughters, and the remaining son. Their rich Sikh neighbor narrated the uncertainties of living in Punjab which was in the border of India and hence constantly prone to war. Due to these unstable conditions, they never had an attachment to Punjab as a home. Coupled with this historical problem of Punjab was the loss of employment in the 1960s due to the mechanization of farms.<sup>56</sup> However, the neighbor also wanted to convey me that these Punjabi migrants were not refugees. He wanted to project the identity of a businessperson, thus having been entrepreneurial in attaching himself to places with opportunities. He now owned eleven trucks, and had houses here as well as in Nehru Nagar Bhilai,<sup>57</sup> and traveled to Chandigarh in Punjab, all for the sake of business. Khonda and his neighbor, despite being poor and rich, entrepreneurial and laboring, had replaced Chhattisgarh as their home.

The second story is that of Mohammed Habib who was a driller in the mines. He now lived in a two-storied house in Kusum, a nearby town. The gate of the house bore his name and identity: Mohammed Habib, BSP. His ancestors (before five generations) came from Jamunanagar district in Haryana.<sup>58</sup> They came as traders<sup>59</sup> bringing silk, walnut, raisins, cashews and such to the king in Khairagarh, who lived

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<sup>56</sup> In the 1960s, Punjab underwent the Green Revolution to modernize Indian agriculture, which involved the use of high productivity seeds, pesticides and introduction of machines. Many poor Punjabis migrated to other regions in India as well as outside to Canada and California in the United States during this period.

<sup>57</sup> The business folk in Bhilai lived in Nehru Nagar. More of their history is discussed in Chapter 4.

<sup>58</sup> A Northern state next to Punjab.

<sup>59</sup> *Tijarat* in Urdu

sixty-two miles from Dalli-Rajhara. The king gave them the fiefdom<sup>60</sup> of a village and asked them to settle there. By the time Habib was born, they were poor folks. He started working in Bailadila<sup>61</sup> mines and used to live in temporary shacks. Then he started working as a driller in Dalli-Rajhara and made his two-room house in Kusum because he had relatives there. One of his sons was in the army, a fact that his family was proud of, and he lived with his wife, daughters, granddaughter, and daughter-in-law.

As the above accounts show, the township did provide a home to most migrants from other states, but they were all not well off. The Sikh truck owner and Habib gained social mobility from being in the township, while Khonda was still poor. In fact, I saw many migrants who were living in shacks like Khonda and wondered what was holding them back here. It seemed that for many, there was a certain peace and religious tolerance that this township provided. Habib always wore a Keffiyeh, and told me that being Muslim has never been a problem for him in the township since Islam was his personal faith. The Sikhs mentioned how this township was one of the few places in India where there were no communal outbursts against the Sikhs in 1984 following the assassination of Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguard.

### *Boundaries of the National Space*

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<sup>60</sup> Jagirdari

<sup>61</sup> An iron ore mine in the nearby Dantewada district.

One of the premises of this dissertation is that the post-colonial state created and used boundaries on its population to assist its project of development. In this section, I examine how the spatial organization of the Dalli-Rajhara Township mirrored those boundaries. This distinction was achieved through the separation of the disciplined, ordered, accounted-for section of the city from the chaotic, old, and disorderly section. The outsiders, who were the citizen-workers, lived in the former while the local Chhattisgarhiya inhabited the latter spaces. However, the ordered and disciplined living of the citizen-workers was predicated on the numerous services from the local people, such as rickshaw pulling, domestic service, vending, and loading. The outsiders and the locals lived, worked, and socialized in separate spaces; however, these two spaces necessarily intersected.

The iron statue of the “brave worker” (figure 2.2) at the road intersection before the mining housing quarter alerted the visitor that she was entering the premises of the steel plant. Most citizen workers lived in these houses, which were either independent quarters or three storied apartment buildings. These houses were very small yellow painted one-bedroom apartments with narrow kitchens, bath, and toilets; through living in one of them during my fieldwork, I came to know the constraints on space offered by such utilitarian apartments. However, these apartments had running water, gas connection, and electricity, and huge yards around them with multiple fruit bearing trees.



The railway line that cut the main road in Dalli-Rajhara also severed the residential and commercial neighborhoods of the outsiders and the locals. On the other side of the railway line the shops that were available were for cycle repairing, lorry repairing, small *paan*<sup>62</sup> shops, teashops, and liquor shops intended for workers. This area housed the mines as well as Chhattisgarhiya mineworkers. Many worker neighborhoods sprawled in this area as well as in the labor camps nearer the mines. The labor camps in which the workers lived replicated village communities. Figure 2.3 shows a mineworker inside her house in the labor camp. The majority of the peasants who came for work in the 1960s did not intend to stay for long, and planned to return to their villages when the drought was over. Hence, they made unbaked one-room houses; and expanded these houses by adding a yard and more rooms in the passage of time. There was no access to drinking water, and workers used to drink water from the drain and many fell sick as a result. In addition, they did not have a hospital to go to in such circumstances. They used to take bath and wash in the same drain that contained the hard iron filled water that left a hue of red in their clothes and hair. The mine-run hospital, clinics, and schools were meant for regular workers, and the private health services were too expensive for them. The miners did not care for these initially since they had to survive only short-term, and they did not intend to stay for long.

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<sup>62</sup> A mild narcotic made of beetel nuts, wrapped in beetel leaves, with spices, and tobacco in some instances. Chewing paan is a pastime for many Indians and South East Asians.

When the mine management eventually offered the functional one bedroom concrete apartments intended for the workers, they refused the offer:<sup>63</sup> It did not give them space enough to entertain visitors from the villages, and relax in the afternoons in the yard. The labor settlement had houses lined in rows in the Chhattisgarhiya style, painted in blue, with a beautiful yard inside. In between the houses were the narrow unpaved lanes. Later we will see that this kind of organization of the worker neighborhoods strengthened the formation and sustenance of the union. Many of the workers houses were vacant now, after the occupants had retired and left the township. In a worker colony in Pander Dalli, which was located more centrally, workers who had title deeds for their houses were selling them before leaving the township.

### *Contract Work: Narratives of Desperation and Deception*

Jonathan Parry has written that the Chhattisgarhiya workers were afraid to work in the steel plant in the beginning, since they thought that humans were sacrificed to the machines inside (Parry 1999). People whom I met like a journalist in Bhilai, and the teacher with the new tribal identity discussed in the previous section, recounted this fear that must have prevented local workers from joining the mines. However, none of the workers whom I interviewed cited this fear as a reason preventing them from joining the mines. Rather, they told about their struggle to survive, in the face of real dangers of boulders falling from above while working, and deception by

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<sup>63</sup> I did know of a young Chhattisgarhiya mine official who was living in the quarters. The quarters must have meant civilized urban life to him.

contractors, mine management and rival unions. Figure 2.4 depicts miners and transporters at work. They barely have protective clothing, safety boots or gloves.

Most Chhattisgarhiya workers who came to work in the mining township were not from the poorest of the agrarian households; they had some school education and awareness of the outside world. Many Chhattisgarhiya workers came to the township in the 1970s to look for work and to escape the drought in the countryside. Plain land in Chhattisgarh has a long history of famines due to the dependency on rainfall for irrigation.<sup>64</sup> Workers came from all parts of Durg district, and the adjoining district of Rajnandgaon.<sup>65</sup> These were small peasant cultivators who used to farm with other family members and were left without food and income due to the seasonal droughts. Though Dondi-Lohara, within which the mining township is located, is a tribal block,<sup>66</sup> most workers whom I interviewed were not tribal people, nor also Scheduled Castes, though Durg district had a concentration of Mahars and Chamars.<sup>67</sup> They were mostly Sahoos, who engaged in cultivation.<sup>68</sup> Even the Halba and Gond<sup>69</sup> workers whom I interviewed were peasant cultivators from the plains in Chhattisgarh.

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<sup>64</sup> Gazetteer of India, Madhya Pradesh, various issues.

<sup>65</sup> Some of my interviewees told me that more than 50% of the workers were from Rajnandgaon.

<sup>66</sup> Tribal Development Blocks have more than 66% of the population tribal people; they have been designated for particular attention by the Indian state to improve socio-economic conditions. Tribal people have the gravest of nutritional conditions in India.

<sup>67</sup> 2001 census. In fact only once did I hear any reference to a Buddhist worker that belonged to Mahar caste.

<sup>68</sup> Teli sahoos traditionally were edible oil pressers (tel=oil).

Some who came to the township had already been recruited by contractors to work in other mines. Two such workers, Mukesh and Ghasnin came from the nearby Ari Dongri mines.<sup>70</sup> Their accounts of arriving for work and experience of work differ: Mukesh narrated a story of struggle for survival in the township, while Ghasnin told a story of deception by contractors and rival unions.

Mukesh was from a village that is forty miles from the township. He must be fifty-seven years old according to the registration cards in the mines.<sup>71</sup> He had studied up to sixth standard in school. He and his wife were both “razing” workers.<sup>72</sup> Now he worked as an attendant at the central canteen of the mines. His wife died two years back; he had unemployed sons,<sup>73</sup> who was living with him along with their families.<sup>74</sup> He worked in the mines canteen now and his earnings had to cover all expenses of this large family. He had bought three acres of farmland in the village and had built a house there with six rooms. He wanted to go back to the village once he retired. His narrative of arriving and settling in the township was thus:

<sup>69</sup> These are the predominant tribes in Chhattisgarh. Census 2001 shows that 60% of them are cultivators.

<sup>70</sup> The Arri Dongri mines is currently operated by a company called Godawari Steel. I have not been able to identify who was operating the mines in the 1970s. For more on these mines, see (Satyanarayana and Mukharya 1975).

<sup>71</sup> Their ages were raised in the registration cards since most of them were minors when they came to work.

<sup>72</sup> Engaged in digging the iron ore from the blasted mines.

<sup>73</sup> One is 10<sup>th</sup> pass and the other had attended college; nonetheless both were unemployed. Educated unemployment is just another of India's problems.

<sup>74</sup> Chhattisgarhiya boys marry very young. Normally, sons shared family with the parents while daughters were sent away in marriages.

I came to Rajhara in 1973. We had some farming in the village. There was a great famine in the village. Therefore, I came here. I had to take care of my stomach somehow. The village people used to work in Arri Dongri in the beginning. When they came back to the village, they told me that people are being recruited there. I used to work in contract system in Arri Dongri. I was very young then. My son was too little then. Many workers became “departmental” there.<sup>75</sup> My job went...We were told we would have to work in Dalli-Rajhara. We had to take care of our stomach somehow. Nobody thought that we would work for even 10 years. Somehow, we had to take care of our stomach by earning daily bread; that was the concern. At that time, we were with the tricolor flag.<sup>76</sup> It was called the Metal Mines Workers Union.<sup>77</sup> Workers were both in red flag<sup>78</sup> and tricolor flag. As many as 565 people from Arri Dongri came to Dalli Rajhara. We started residing in this camp. There was nothing here. We made huts<sup>79</sup> here and started living here. When we came to Dalli, and settled in camp1, the place we stayed came to be called “*kacchhe dafai*.”<sup>80</sup>

Mukesh’ story underscores the desperation faced by the rural Chhattisgarhiya to sustain themselves and their families that led to their flight from the villages and going wherever work was available. One reason that exacerbated this desperation was that they all had families with little children to feed. They were additionally vulnerable through their lack of exposure to the outside world. Mukesh and many others came to work following stories of recruitment told by their relatives and

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<sup>75</sup> The colloquial term for workers that have become regular workers of the mines.

<sup>76</sup> Tricolor flag of the Metal Mine Workers Union of the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), affiliated with the Congress Party.

<sup>77</sup> The workers never mispronounced the name of theirs or other unions.

<sup>78</sup> *Lal Jhanda*, or Red flag of the Union of Mine workers society (SKMS), of the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), affiliated with the Communist Party of India.

<sup>79</sup> Jhopdis

<sup>80</sup> Young dwelling. Another version is that these huts were made of unbaked (*kachhi*) mud, hence called *kacchhe dafai*.

others in their villages. Thus, they were easy targets for recruitment through contractors and by unions.<sup>81</sup>

Unlike Mukesh's story, which highlighted the personal effort to survive the difficult times, his friend and co-worker Ghasnin Bai narrated a story of suffering due to deception by the contractors:

When we were brought from Arri Dongri, we were told that we would be transported in buses to and from the mines. We were given work in Mayur Pani.<sup>82</sup> Now where was the bus? We got nothing. We had to walk up and down from the mines for work, almost 2 miles each way. Even now, we walk the same distance to go to work. Wages were very low, sometimes 15 rupees or sometimes 10 rupees<sup>83</sup> per week. That time rice and wheat were less expensive, so we could survive.

Ghasnin's outrage was right on, since mine buses took the regular workers to and from work, while Ghasnin and others had to walk or bike to the mines, which was an uphill climb.<sup>84</sup> Ghasnin had worked in the mines in gangs of other people, since her husband was not working. She had worked when she was pregnant with her children, and had lost one son to illness for which she could not provide adequate treatment. Her family was still able to survive despite the low wages because her

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<sup>81</sup> Mukesh, like most other workers never confused the AITUC with the INTUC, and did not mis-spell the names of the unions (SKMS and MMWU). These workers are not educated enough to understand the differences in unions (Mukesh had studies up to sixth standard); however, experiences with the CMM made them aware of these and other nuances in union politics.

<sup>82</sup> One of the mines in Dalli-Rajhara.

<sup>83</sup> 33 to 22 cents

<sup>84</sup> Even now, these women have no access to the mine buses. Another worker narrated how she still took the bus at times, since the driver had married to her village, (and hence was her son-in-law by custom). She covered her face with her *saree* out embarrassment every time she took the bus.

husband took care of farming in his village, which was nearby. She now worked in the mines office or in the garage. Her hut is close to the mines, where she stayed with her husband and their son, daughter-in-law and grandson.

For many workers, mine work was no different from farm work. Ghasnin had been to the mines since her childhood taking food to her father and mother who were miners, and had not felt any fear of the mines: "It was like farming only." Only one transport worker said that he went to work in the dam construction site, because of the fear of trucks overturning, only to return to the mines a while later.<sup>85</sup> Most stories were rather about the desperate search of mine work, whenever it was available. Some narrated stories of hunting for jobs in the mines: "We used to go to the hills looking for jobs. I did this for more than fifteen days at a stretch. If they [the management or contractors] caught us, they used to let us go, but also would frighten us. Sometimes we used to hide in the jungles for the fear of being caught. Later when we heard that contractor is taking people, we joined him."

Many workers loaded iron ore in train wagons to be transported to the Bhilai steel plant. This work had no regular working hours. The mine management minimized the cost of employing workers on the site continuously by arranging with the contractors to call workers from their houses when wagons were ready. A female worker told:

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<sup>85</sup> Bohrdi dam was constructed to provide water to the mining township.

There was no set time for wagon loading; it depended on when the wagons were available. We were called by our mate [leader of the work gang] when the wagon arrived. He used to come to the *dafai* and shout. We also would know that the wagon is there since we could hear the noise from here. Then we had to leave the rice in the cooking fire and run, often asking our husbands to make the vegetables.<sup>86</sup> We have loaded the wagons in night, with small kids and in the rain.

These workers could never see their kids since they started work before they were awake and came home after they slept. “When we used to come back, kids were already asleep. We never used to talk to them. We were so tired after coming back. Then we used to wash our hands and legs, eat, and stretch our hands and feet.” Earlier I thought that this narration of emotional misery of not seeing their children grow was of middle class origin and was picked up by the workers to appeal to outsiders. However, this distrust of the workers’ true intention, I realized was precisely the forms of intellectual arrogance that I had planned to overcome. Workers valued family in the heterogeneous nucleus form; they worried about their young and growing children, and mourned the dead. These were not necessarily developments due to modernization in the township. Villagers depicted the same sentiments, though they had many more children and many more sick and dead ones too. These, I now consider part of the universal human condition.

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<sup>86</sup> *Saag*, which literally means leaves, but also intended for other vegetables. The meal consists of white rice and a vegetable preparation, made spicy enough to finish the bland rice. Lentil, which is a source of protein, is expensive, and is kept for special occasions.



## *Workers Multivalent Engagement with the Contractors*

The CMM leadership, in their pamphlets and speeches, had singled out the contractors or *tekedars* as the most aggressive of oppressors and the tekedari system as the root of evil. The pamphlets and plays mocked the tekedars as descendants of the *Baniya*<sup>87</sup> moneylenders and usurers that has helped the British rule. However, I was surprised to find that the workers did not show as much enmity to their tekedars, as their anger at rival union activists and political leaders in the region. Even the mine managers, whom the workers held with some regard because they were state employees, as well as due to their education and upper social class belongings, were derided more than the tekedars. This, I argue, was because the workers were engaged in multivalent social relations with the Baniyas, some of which were exploitative, while others were co-operative. They ran most of the small businesses in the area and they had no qualms in lending to the workers that were always in need. Even in many of the villages nearby, these small business folk were considered the conduits of interaction with the urban world.

The only contractor whom I interviewed during my entire stay in the mining township<sup>88</sup> thought throughout the interview that I had come from Russia, since I was researching a workers' movement that was known for its rebellious bent. Hamirmal Jain was born in Kusum, and his father had migrated here from Jodhpur in Rajasthan. After passing metric exams, he started a shop like many other

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<sup>87</sup> Traders originally from Gujarat and Rajasthan .

<sup>88</sup> Others were either dead or had relocated.

Marwaris<sup>89</sup> in the region, and took to *tekedari* when it started in the 1960s. He was the first to make the first benches in the mines, and the walls of his house had a huge photograph of the mines with diggers and loaders. He ran two contract agencies for razing and loading and closed his *tekedari* in 1996 when all workers were absorbed as regular workers. This contractor wanted to project a very amiable relation that he had with the workers: "I have had no problems with the workers till now. Even now when they see me, they will say greetings saying it is our *tekedar*." He, like many outsiders, considered the Chhattisgarhiya as simple people. He remembered that his office would lie open all the time, and never was anything stolen from it."

The contractors and the workers, due to their close interactions, knew the personal details of each other. Most workers knew where their contractors lived right now, and what their children did. They made fun of the multiple marriages that one of their contractors had, and expressed sadness at his death due to cancer. Hamir Jain knew what many CMM activists were doing right now, and where their children were situated. While there was some degree of paternalism from the part of the contractors, that does not explain the lack of talk about friction with the contractors. It was more likely that since most of the workers' contentions were directed at the mine management and rival unions, workers remembered and loved to talk about those aspects more.

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<sup>89</sup> The mercantile community originally from the Marwar region in current Rajasthan, traditionally engaged in money-lending and banking. Not all Baniya are Marwaris.

The workers did have a history of struggles against the contractor. However, the miners' radicalism <sup>90</sup> was more directed to those who they perceived as repositories of power and manipulators; though they implicated the contractors in the beginning, their anger was more directed at unions that made false promises as well as the mine management that exploited them. The tekedars did not deceive them, they gave them work, and the mine management and unions, they believed, had more power to regulate the conditions of work, which the tekedars did not. However, the workers recognized that their contention is with those that have the power to withhold their absorption as regular workers, and the contractor was just an intermediary in the process.

### *The Messy Politics of the Rival Unions*

Newspaper reports on labor relations in the township in the 1960s portrayed the conflict-ridden relation between workers, contractors and the mine management. However, in my interviews with old AITUC activists in the township, they underplayed the role of the contractor and the mine management in suppressing labor rights, and instead thrashed the CMM in attempting to sabotage production in a nationalist plant. Both SKMS, the AITUC affiliated trade union, and MMWU, the INTUC affiliated trade union, derided the CMM for its "imperialist" connections and

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<sup>90</sup> Clark Kerr and Abraham Siegel argued that high radicalism among geographically or socially isolated, cohesive, homogeneous groups of workers (such as dockworkers, miners, and sailors) were a consequence of their alienation from the wider society and the unpleasant nature of their jobs. (1954)

Maoist leanings.<sup>91</sup> The Stories by CMM activists narrated how the MMWU, the INTUC affiliated union tried to sabotage the movement by bringing in workers from outside to replace the local workers. Union politics in the regional field was immensely messy. Many a time the central unions favored the management and the contractors against the CMM, thus compromising their national objectives.

The labor laws in the mines were regulated by the Industrial Disputes Act of 1947,<sup>92</sup> which meant that any union that could get worker support could register as a recognized union and negotiate with the management. In the mines, the workers were members of two predominant unions affiliated with the INTUC and AITUC. These were the Metal Mine Workers' Union (MMWU) and Samyukta Khadan Mazdoor Sangh<sup>93</sup> (SKMS), whom the workers referred to as the Tricolor flag<sup>94</sup> union and the red flag<sup>95</sup> union.

AITUC documents and newspapers in the 1960s and the 1970s depicted a turbulent atmosphere in the mining township, due to the prevalence of the contract system, and the stubborn attitude of the mine management to continue with the same

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<sup>91</sup> Enemies of the establishment were accused of treason, by either being Maoists or CIA in the period during or following the emergency. Pamphlets published by the SKMS as resplendent with such allegations about the CMM leaders.

<sup>92</sup> Unlike the Bhilai Steel Plant that was regulated by the Chhattisgarh Industrial Relations Act (CIRA), the labor laws of the state government, which stipulated that there could only be one company union affiliated with the INTUC.

<sup>93</sup> United Mine Workers' Society

<sup>94</sup> *Tiranga jhanda*, the flag of the Congress Party, which replicates the Indian flag.

<sup>95</sup> *Laal jhanda*, representing the CPI, which replicates the universal red flag.

despite protests by SKMS, the union affiliated with the AITUC. The AITUC newsletter *New Age* reported an incident in 1968, which underscored the tumultuous relations between the workers and their employers. On February 20, the SKMS leader, Ganpati Rapo was stabbed by assailants at night.<sup>96</sup> Rapo could recognize the assailants. One was the partner of Manoharlal Jain, who was the contractor and the other were two employees of another contractor, Premraj Jain. Earlier, on December 5, an agreement was signed between the contractors and union representatives to increase wage rates in the mines according to the Iron Ore Wage Board recommendations. Nevertheless, contractor Manoharlal Jain refused to implement it. He managed to win over the Tahsildar of Bhanoopratappur<sup>97</sup> who gave a fraudulent interpretation of the agreement to suit the contractor. The report accused the mine management of conniving to the acts of the contractor. The management was determined not to abolish the contract labor system. Nor were they even ready to implement the regulation of contract work. The report alleged that the contractors were the favorites of the mine bosses and they were being well nursed because contractors helped to feed the pockets of these bosses regularly.

When the mines started functioning, communist party affiliates crowded the region sensing the potential of a workers' movement. A retired mine worker and an AITUC activist narrated the following story of arriving to work in the mines in 1959:

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<sup>96</sup> *New Age*, March 10, 1968.

<sup>97</sup> A state official in charge of the administrative division of *Tahsil*.

My father is from Allahabad.<sup>98</sup> We came and settled in Nagpur.<sup>99</sup> I was teacher there. Earlier I was in Praja Socialist Party.<sup>100</sup> At that time, a communist party member left his family and sacrificed his life to Portuguese bullets in the Goa Liberation Struggle.<sup>101</sup> I became inspired by the nationalism of the communists. I resigned from the school (In the school they used to raise the spinning wheel flag)<sup>102</sup> and became member of AITUC. I came to Rajhara wandering here and there. I joined the mines through the muster roll as a daily wages laborer. I joined in October 19 and in August 15, 1960, I led the first workers' rally with the AITUC flag.

This activist converted to being a communist because of the nationalism and anti-imperialism of the communist party. His ideals persuaded him to leave his job in a congress party supporting school and come to Rajhara. This was in the 1950s, when national independence was just achieved and people must have been just figuring out where they stood politically or were choosing sides when a vast nation had to be built. He claimed that AITUC was successful in making the workers regular and giving them benefits according to labor laws. However, he was also aware of the mellowed militancy of the AITUC in the mines, especially since that has been blamed for the discontent and formation of a rival union by the Chhattisgarhiya workers. He attributed the more or less pacific nature of the AITUC to the agreement reached with the national leaders:

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<sup>98</sup> In uttar Pradesh in north central india.

<sup>99</sup> In Maharashtra in central india. Nagpur was part of the cetral provinces under British rule.

<sup>100</sup> A political party with a Socialist agenda under the leadership of known Indian socialist leader and thinker JayPrakash Narayan.

<sup>101</sup> The independence movement to remove Portuguese colonial domination from Goa.

<sup>102</sup>. The tricolor flag with the charka or the spinning wheel of the Congress Party.

Nehruji<sup>103</sup> wanted to make steel plant. All the other nations wanted to give us goods, not the factories. The communists only wanted him to take support from Soviet Union, which was ready to help India build itself. There was an unwritten agreement between Nehru and the communists that they will only run trade union, not politics in the steel plant. Even the AITUC flag had just AITUC written on it and nothing else.”

This activist thus affirmed the support of the CPI to the Indian nation-building process that I discussed in the introductory chapter. There were accusations against the attempt of Western countries to halt this nation-building process. There is some historical truth to it since earlier attempts by Indian officials to negotiate technological help from Britain and the USA had been unsuccessful (Krishna Moorthy 1984).

Most workers belonged to the SKMS than the MMWU. One reason was that there were many skilled workers from the states of Kerala and West Bengal where working class movements under the auspices of the Communist Party were strong and prevalent. It was easier to attract those workers and their network of friends to successful unions that they were familiar with in their home spaces. Many of these workers were named as “leaders” before they came to the mines, pointing to the fact that the AITUC did sent activists to enlist workers. One such leader that the worker mentioned was Sambal Chakravarty, who later came to prominence as an AITUC leader in Bhilai. Finally, many such leaders had genuine interest in improving the condition of the workers. Most Chhattisgarhiya workers fondly remembered an AITUC leader Moses who drowned himself while saving other drowning passengers

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<sup>103</sup> Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru

from a bus that fell into an overflowing river. “The only leader whom we knew before Niyogi was Mukesh<sup>104</sup> of the red flag union who died by drowning in the stream... There was no leader after that till Niyogi.”

Many current activists of the AITUC considered the local workers as “uninformed,” “uneducated” and “easily provoked.” There is an attempt to objectify the workers, denying them of any agency in their movement. The implication is that these workers, devoid of any ability to think independently, were manipulated by leaders such as Niyogi. There is also the inability of the AITUC to come to terms with the very vivid presence of the non-rational, non-progressive, “community” within the CMM. They could not come to terms with the celebrations of martyr days by the CMM or slogans such as “Niyogi was not a person, but a stream of ideas,” which they found “illogical.”

Before concluding, I wish to draw attention to a union that was formed under the auspices of the BJP in the landscape of Dalli-Rajhara.<sup>105</sup> The trajectory of this union exemplifies the flexibility and ease of making and breaking union alliances in the field. Kachra society or Mine Workers Welfare Co-operative Society <sup>106</sup> was formed in 1979 with the help of BJP, with 1554 members as shareholders. It was known in Dalli as Kachra society after its woman leader Kachrabai, a 65-year-old active member. Its function was to find work for the Adivasis. Later, when the CMSS

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<sup>104</sup> The Chhattisgarhiya workers referred to Moses as Mukesh, an Indian Hindu name.

<sup>105</sup> The BJP does have a national union, the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS).

<sup>106</sup> Khadan Sramik Kalyan Sahkari Samiti.



became powerful, this union merged with that union. Now these workers are with the AITUC. Now they do only civil work in the township since BSP does not give any more mine work. This was because they were running some case with the BSP. Recently, they did a road blockage due to this fact. It seems that the BJP initially tried to play the Adivasi card to create a space for some union activism in the township, but it was not successful. The readiness and ease with which this union changed sides from right wing to left wing unions suggests, once again, how flexible such identities are to incorporate practical logic.

## *Conclusion*

The Dalli-Rajhara mining township was constructed as a national space. It symbolized the period of state directed nation-building, through the participation of citizen-workers. The state-owned mines created these new citizen-workers, the public sector employees, through making them and their families entitled to have housing, health and education. They also were represented by the central trade unions that ensured that these entitlements were assured. However, these entitlements were not provided to the producers of the basic good in the mines, iron-ore. The iron-ore diggers and transporters, who were mostly the local Chhattisgarhiya, were treated as lesser citizens, and lived outside the prescribed boundaries of the national space. In the next chapter, I provide an analysis of how these workers persuaded the state through legitimate means, to grant them full citizenship.

*Figure 2.1 Dalli-Rajhara Mines*



Source: Jitendra S., Dalli-Rajhara

*Figure 2.2 Statue of the Brave Worker*



Source: Author, 2005

*Figure 2.3 Mine worker with grandson inside her home in labor camp1*



Source: Author, 2004

*Figure 2.4 Miners at work in Dalli-Rajhara Township*



Source: V.V.Giri National Labour Institute, Archives of Indian Labour

## CHAPTER 3

### PERSUASIVE CITIZENS: WORKERS' CONTENTION IN DALLI-RAJHARA

#### *The Success of the Union*

On a normal weekday, the neighborhood surrounding the road leading to the Dalli-Rajhara mines bustled with activity: trucks went in and out of the mines splashing saffron-colored water on pedestrians. The stains from iron ore persisted in your clothes reminding you of the mining township long after you left it. The air was red, people walked in red clothes, and shops and houses had splashes of red on the walls. Workers whose shift was over were doing groceries in the market, jeeps were gathering people for trips to the villages, the liquor shop, and teashops were tending to their many customers. Workers returned from the mines, in bicycles with lunch boxes hanging from the bell, or in mine operated buses. Women moved around in their ubiquitous mine-worker attire of muddy boots and headgear, while their tattoos and silver bangles betrayed their being Chhattisgarhiya women.

The boots and headgear, however, did not come along free with mine work. "We used to wear sandals to work; there was no helmet as well," reminisced a retired worker. The time in the 1970s, before the Chhattisgarhiya workers formed unions



was hard. The workers used to leave early for work, having yesterday's fermented rice. Their next meal was at ten at night. They had to walk two miles up the hill, carrying their tools. They used to work from seven in the morning until five in the evening, and were paid according to their work,<sup>107</sup> which was as low as three rupees a day.<sup>108</sup> The contractors, as well as the mine officials, always kept an eye on them while they were working. There was not shade from the sun or a place to take rest. Sometimes boulders used to fall from above and cause serious accidents.

This worker contrasted that time with the time after the union started: "After we started the movement, everyone had a cycle. Everyone had radio. Didn't we get more money? We got bonus and arrears every three months; so people used to go to mines listening to radio, listening to songs and news. The women folk started wearing silver jewelry. Now they are even wearing gold jewelry." He was now retired comfortably, and bought farmland in a village nearby with the retirement money. Many like him have made brick and concrete houses in the villages that stood out from the regular mud houses, and ran machine-operated farms with irrigation facilities.

How did these manually deployed, unskilled, local, poorly educated workers organize as a union, when the trend in India was that only organized skilled workforce formed unions? More importantly, how did they succeed? In this chapter, I argue that these workers were successful because they constantly and with

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<sup>107</sup>Or paid in piece rate

<sup>108</sup> Equivalent to sixty cents.

perseverance, reminded the state of its obligations to the citizens. This happened through militant unionism aimed at the state employer, building infrastructure to replace the governing developmental state and community-based mobilization to challenge the ruling political state.

### *Militant Unionism against the State Employer*

Being the employees of the state directly, the mine management was held with regard and the staff was addressed as *sahib* (term used to address colonial officers in India). The managerial staff was educated, and hence was accepted as superior to them by the workers. The fear of the process of negotiations was evident in the words of the participants. However, given the lack of recognition of the workers' rights from the management, the union had to force the management through militant tactics to concede to their demands, providing evidence to what Fox Piven suggests as the "disruptive power" of people (Fox Piven 2008).

Ramkishan Mukesh, who was the Chhattisgarhiya mineworkers' union president from 1985 to 1995, and whom we met briefly in chapter 1, summarized the relation of the union with the state authorities in the following words:

With our union, the district collector, the steel plant authorities, everyone sits down to talk. In our movement, we got a lot of co-operation from the government. It was not as if our movement was against the governing authorities. Our aim was not to confront the government; it was to prevent the government from confronting us. We used to say that we are going to do



a struggle and we are giving you a time limit to fulfill our demands. If they do not listen to us, then we do a picketing, strike, or *gherao*.<sup>109</sup> We demanded things within our limits<sup>110</sup> and we gave time for them to be granted.

He projected the union as a co-operative and not a confrontational one. Most demands made by the union were legitimate (“within our limits”) and the workers engaged in militant tactics like picketing and *gherao* only when these demands went unnoticed and unfulfilled. The union made sure that the steel plant and other authorities were given adequate time to negotiate with the workers. Moreover, whenever the workers resorted to militant activism, prior warning was given to the steel plant management.

Most workers, however, did not follow this portrayal of their union as a disciplined one. A woman worker recalled how the women activists instilled fear in the management through threat of physical violence:

We used to bring bamboo from the forests and make fat *lathis*.<sup>111</sup> We would assemble near the mine manager’s office. One of us would shout the question: “If our demand is not fulfilled, on whose head will the bamboo club fall”? The answer would be in a high pitch chorus: “in the head of the management.” Along with that, all *lathis* would hit the road. Everyone has been taught to say the manager’s head. Then how would the management refuse our demands?

This account portrays the union as an aggressive movement that subdued the management through terrorizing the mine officials. It is easy to imagine a meek

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<sup>109</sup> Holding the authorities hostage by blocking their exit from the premises.

<sup>110</sup> Aukat

<sup>111</sup> *Lathi*, or bamboo club, is a tool of political violence in India. Not long before, it was also the favorite tool of the police.

mine official hastily putting his signature on the necessary papers, sitting across from the union representatives, while fearless women outside the window were threatening to smash his head with fat *lathis*. This version of the union resonated in accounts of small business keepers in the township whom I found to be the most non partisan observers compared to other union activists, contractors and mine officials.

In fact, both portrayals of the union are accurate. The union framed their demands in terms of social citizenship as Mukesh argues, and did have negotiations with the management. However, the agreements reached over the negotiating tables in a non-violent manner were never fulfilled. One only need to be reminded of how the contractor Manohar Jain made the Tahsil administration change the interpretation of a national level tripartite agreement, which we saw in the previous chapter, to show the power the contractors and the mine authorities had in manipulating the legal system. The tactics that seemed to work in the end were militant strikes halting iron-ore supply to the steel plant, and threat of physical harm. The unnerving fact is that being in such hyperactive aggressive state had become second nature to the activists, and this aggression was aimed at just getting demands that were legitimate and trivial. In one worker's words, "it was just a demand for bamboo sticks for house repair before the rains."

## Insurgency and the formation of the union in 1977

The seeds for the union were sown in the form of an insurgent strike in 1977. The SKMS and MMWU unions negotiated with the management for a festival bonus, and agreed at three hundred and eight rupees for the regular workers and seventy rupees<sup>112</sup> for the contract workers.<sup>113</sup> Hearing the agreement, the contract workers “who knew the law” got agitated, tore the agreement papers, and left the union offices. The leader of this agitation was Bansilal, a razing worker, “who has had some education.” This is how the movement began in the workers’ own words:

They got 308 and we got 71 or 72. Bansilal understood this discrimination. The management considered those workers and us differently. How could they make a bonus agreement like this? Everyone has the right to get the same bonus. It is according to “production” and “productivity” and everyone has the right to get it. Bansilal placed the matter before us. This union (SKMS) makes the workers fight among themselves. And it gets its selfish interests fulfilled. Therefore, he made all workers assemble in the red field: we have to boycott the bonus agreement. We will not take bonus. Until the time we get 308, we will not recognize or obey the union. People from all unions joined. We ourselves organized this boycott. This is how our first battle happened.<sup>114</sup>

The account shows a precise understanding of the discrimination to which the workers were subjected. They were given a lesser share of the production of the

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<sup>112</sup> Equivalent to 1.54 and 6.78 US dollars.

<sup>113</sup> 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.

<sup>114</sup> Interviewed on March 21, 2006.

steel plant, while they were entitled to the same amount as the other workers, according to the rules of production and productivity. The workers tore the agreement<sup>115</sup> and decided to boycott the agreement, which for them meant that they would not receive the amount, which would have been a huge amount, given their paltry wages.

Strikingly, these accounts differ from the dominant accounts of the beginning of the movement in the mining township. Researchers, mine management, rival union leaders, and the media highlight the role of Sankar Guha Niyogi, a trade union leader who went in search of the oppressed mine workers to organize them. Niyogi was just released from prison, where he had been incarcerated for his radical political activity. Prior to his arrest, he had spent time studying the lives of the "poor" Chhattisgarhiya people, working in stone quarries, and wandering in villages. 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 workers] cannot dissect; only we can."

The Dalli miners' accounts clearly differed. The miners placed themselves at the center of the movement, thus reclaiming it. They talked about how they wanted a leader who was English-educated so that they could negotiate with management. After discussing many leaders they already knew, they decided on Niyogi: "We went and told Niyogi: 'bhaiyya, our organization has grown a lot. We have around ten to

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<sup>115</sup> It was an AITUC leader in Bhilai that told me that the workers who were handed down the agreement tore it and threw it on the ground.

twelve thousand workers, but no leader. The red and tricolor flag people have left us.' He said: 'If workers are ready for the fight, I am coming.' Thus our union began." In other words, although the workers were handicapped by their lack of knowledge of the language of official discourse, it was their decision that resulted in the invitation.

These workers gathered in a field near the mines, which was later named as the red field, and spent twenty-one days striking. Their families, including goats and chickens, participated in the strike. Their union leaders came to advise them asking them to return to work, lest they would lose their jobs.

The workers formed a union, Chhattisgarh Mine Workers Union (Chhattisgarh Mine Sramik Sangh, CMSS) following the strike since they realized that the SKMS and MMWU did not represent them. They formed a makeshift union office below a lime tree near labor camp 1, chose the office bearers, and almost immediately, the colors of the flag: red and green. This was not surprising given the symbolic value people placed on colors of the labor union flag. In the following two decades, these workers and their union dominated the political landscape of the mining township, forcing the mine management to accept their demands. They accomplished that through neighborhood-based mobilization, disciplined displays of strength, and sheer willpower.

## Mobilization based on neighborhoods

Most workers shared a common ethnicity, peasant past, local culture and kinship which strengthened the coherence of CMSS as a movement. It was easier for a Chhattisgarhiya female laborer to bond with other Chhattisgarhiya women who shared the same culture and kinship, than just another worker in the factory or the mines. Yet to attribute the success of the union to the pre-given community affiliations would be misleading. Most of the community networks of the workers were forged after coming to the township, and during and after the union was made. Most of the interviewees lived among co-workers from villages other than theirs, people who they never knew before coming to work. Though some workers came to work using the family networks, they pointed out how such family based associations fissured overtime, being away from the extended family household in the village, giving way to work-based associations and friendships.<sup>116</sup>

When did the movement use community affiliations then? I argue that the movement used them in helping mobilization in the worker neighborhoods, and peasant mobilization in the countryside. Though the open embrace of caste, kinship and gender hierarchies were considered as an affront to their working class identities, the leadership did not consider it wise to interfere with these dimensions

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<sup>116</sup> Jonathan Parry has already made this argument about workers in the Bhilai Steel Plant in Chhattisgarh (Parry 1999).

in the everyday lives of the workers. It can also be safely concluded that the movement welcomed the harmony and solidarity that these hierarchies ensured.

The labor camps where most workers lived facilitated a replication of life in village communities, which helped organization of workers on the basis of localities. The CMSS had divided worker neighborhoods into zones, each zone under the leadership of a *mukhiya*.<sup>117</sup> The mukhiya was in charge of gathering the workers and their families together in the event of a call from the union office for a demonstration. The mukhiya was engaged with her followers as a caring neighbor; and most of the followers had mutual associations as members of the same neighborhood community as well. These worker neighborhoods also had temples, and the worship was organized by the local neighborhood representatives of the union; many a time the worship at the temple was managed by groups of female workers.

The hierarchies of gender and kinship in the worker neighborhoods and families were reproduced in the union. Women addressed men as brothers, and covered their faces when they approached these men. As pointed out by Ethel Brooks (2007:131), this sibling relation, which was part of the regulation of sexuality in the families, was reproduced in the union. The leaders were venerated as elders, and many a time referred to as *siyan*.<sup>118</sup> It was also normal for followers to touch the feet of these leader-elders. The CMSS also did not question the caste system per se. Inter-

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<sup>117</sup> Leader or chief.

<sup>118</sup> Elder

caste romantic affairs, the rare occasions when they happened, were not supported by the union, as pointed out by the rival unions. As a union leader herself pointed out, the questions of breaking the caste boundaries was not primary for the CMSS, and would have cost the movement a lot in terms of following.

### Discipline and secrecy

A petrol pump owner, the nephew of contractor Hamir Mal Jain, told me that he once met a German researcher who came to study the union.<sup>119</sup> This researcher was interested in knowing how at one call from the union office, more than 20,000 people assembled for a demonstration. In comparison, even 200 people would not gather in his homeland, Germany. This petrol pump owner was friendly with the union, and supplied gasoline to the jeeps owned by the union. Yet he remembered the terror that he felt in seeing 20,000 people march on the roads of the mining township, and the huge roar of their slogans and the sound of bamboo poles hitting the road. During these demonstrations, the activists prevented people from crossing the road. See Figure 3.1 for the photograph showing the workers' procession.

I asked my interviewees how they sustained such instant mobilization and fiery displays for a long stretch of time. The workers unanimously answered that it was the discipline in their organization that created this success.<sup>120</sup> This meant workers

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<sup>119</sup> The presence of people from outside of India stirred allegations by the AITUC that the union was engaging in treason.

<sup>120</sup> Anusasan



never questioned the decisions that their mukhiyas made. There was a level of secrecy involved in the decision making, which was accepted by the activists. Workers accepted these because they understood that this level of secrecy was important in keeping their tactics and moves from the BSP, police and the contractors.

What the mukhiya said to you, it has to be done. What has been told to the mukhiya from the union office is not known by anyone else. What this mukhiya told the ten local chiefs, no one ever knew. His mantra through these ten people decided where we had to gather, where to raise slogans, what battle to fight and so on. The police, tekedar, BSP people never used to know.

<sup>121</sup>

Note the use of Mukhiya's "mantra" by this worker, which provides the quality of sacredness of ancient texts that has to be communicated only by reciting softly in the recipient's ears. After the mukhiya and the ten local chiefs made their decisions, they gathered people from their localities.<sup>122</sup> There were around thirty-six localities in Dalli-Rajhara. These people were never told where exactly the procession was going to start. One group would be taken to a locality on the other side of the township and vice versa. The police would be surprised to see so many groups of people marching to different locations. Until the exact moment when the procession started, the followers did not know the time or location of the demonstration. Police also feared the marchers due to their *lathis*. All people, both men and women, would move around with their *lathis*. This created an atmosphere of fear, and it was possible for women to roam in the township at midnight and after. Nobody dared to

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<sup>121</sup> Interviewed on March 30, 2006.

<sup>122</sup> Mohalla.

touch them. Though they did not intend to beat let alone kill anyone, there was the fear that they might attack a contractor or a shopkeeper.

The workers used to have their meetings at night. Their earlier union office was made of wood plastered with mud. It was easy for anyone from outside to listen to his or her conversations. Workers would gather uninvited for the meeting, it was easy for police officers to be there in disguise. Hence, the union used to do secret meetings. The leaders used to decide suddenly where to meet and police would never know. They used to meet in the forests near Kusum Kasa village, any other jungle, or near the dam in Mahamaya mine road. Many a time curfews were declared in the township that prevented the workers from meeting, let alone carry their bamboo flagpoles or *lathis*. Workers devised ways to meet away from the eyes of the police: if somebody carried a leaf and moved around in the township, it meant that there was a meeting in the forest near Kusum Kasa and if somebody carried a red chili, it meant that the meeting was in the red field.

“We are the women of India; we are not flowers, but flames” <sup>123</sup>

Many a time, I felt that it was the sheer will power of the women workers that was behind the success of the movement. They were the most vocal among my interviewees and claimed to have sacrificed more for the movement, including the care and education of their children. These strong and independent women represented the union in the township. Rival union activists, whom I talked to,

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<sup>123</sup> “Ham Bharat ke nari hai, phool nahin chingari hai.” This slogan is used by women of all political wings in India right now, and is a favorite of the rightwing party.

remembered women roaming the township at all times with their *lathis* and even beating them up occasionally. One of the dissident leaders of the movement suggested that they were displaying the characteristic trait of Chhattisgarhiya women who disregarded their husbands.

The women whom I interviewed narrated their undying devotion to Niyogi, who persuaded them to participate in the movement and take on positions of leadership. I would conclude that it was the recognition that Niyogi offered them within the movement that provided the initial push that made them participate in the movement. Syam Bai, who still works in the mine canteen, narrated how she started participating in the movement.

If we had to go somewhere for the union, he would say in Chhattisgarhi, “call the women folk,<sup>124</sup>they have to go somewhere.” He used to be our elder brother. He used to talk to us only in Chhattisgarhi, not in Hindi. He used to force us to do signature. “You know only to make food... Didn’t u study at all? What were you doing? Why didn’t u study?” He used to rebuke us like that. When someone had to talk to the *sahib* [mine official], he used to say, “It’s your money, you get it from him. Go *turiman*, go to the mines office, and talk to the labor officer. Thus we went.”<sup>125</sup>

Women were fierce in their loyalty to the union and were less likely to be manipulated by the management or other unions. Many men were prone to alcoholism and were ready to forget the movement in exchange for a bottle of Indian-made foreign liquor. In fact, while there are many stories of union leaders defecting to other unions later, no women defected. Rather, women narrated

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<sup>124</sup> *Turiman* in Chhattisgarhi

<sup>125</sup> Interviewed on April 9, 2006.

accounts of how they vilified those who were not loyal to the union or the workers' cause. Niyogi was shrewd in recognizing this lasting loyalty of women and persuading them to participate in leadership positions. Moreover, police would rarely touch organized women, since such acts could prove to be politically explosive. In sum, having more women as leaders and followers provided more legitimacy to the union; and women framed their stories of movement participation around concern for their children's future.

Women fondly remembered Niyogi as their brother,<sup>126</sup> and narrated stories of his devotion to them. Many of them accompanied him in his trip to Delhi in September 1991 and told how he ensured that they were provided food and flowers to celebrate the *Teeja* festival.<sup>127</sup> Niyogi was murdered after he returned from this trip. They still recollected the grief that the news created for them. "I announced to the women in the mines that our *bhaiyya* celebrated first *Teeja*, and will not be with us for the second *Teeja*. As soon as I said this, all women started crying, calling *bhaiyya bhaiyya*." My women interviewees recounted how they used to protect Niyogi in the mining township by always accompanying him to his house from the union office at night. They lamented that they could not extend the same protection to him in Bhilai, where he was killed.

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<sup>126</sup> Bhaiyya

<sup>127</sup> During this festival, women return to their parental village and stay there for over a week. For most women, this was a break from family responsibilities and a way to reconnect with old girl friends who had been married to and lived in different villages.

In 1977 June 1, police opened fire on the CMSS activists in their union office yard, killing thirteen of them, and arresting all their leaders. The women in the township, along with their children, started a demonstration and the police took all of them and dumped them in a forest far away. They just walked back all their way to the mining township, stopping and begging in villages on the way for food and direction. Accounts of their experience in the forest, show their hardship and resilience.

We all had small kids with us. Then police started their naked dance<sup>128</sup> after having alcohol. We sat with our eyes down. Let them blabber as much as they want. Then they danced, blabbered, danced, and blabbered. Then we got together, faced them, and asked them to dare to show their dance. Then they ran. Then we wandered in the jungle with our kids and came near one village. We told the villagers that they need not give us any food, but can they feed our kids? The farmers of that village fed us all. There were around 70-80 people. Everyone had two-three children as well. When we had eaten and were putting the kids to sleep, our brother folk came looking for us in scooters. Initially we thought they were the police and were thinking where we would hide with these small kids.

Raj Chandavarkar has argued that the police is the way in which the poor people see the state in its most brutal form (1998). Other scholars suggest that this alleged brutality and partisanship of the police is most probably based on concrete experience (Brass 2003, Harriss-White 2003).<sup>129</sup> The women perceived the police as vulgar in their power, but also as lacking in the face of their collective show of

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<sup>128</sup> Nanga naach

<sup>129</sup> In the CMM participant narratives, police is brutal, but also vulnerable. Police stands for the impersonal and brute force of the state, and thus becomes the target of attacks with a vengeance. People recount stories of how the police officers were beaten by them. They also narrate stories of how they fooled the vigilant eyes of the policemen during the curfew.

strength.<sup>130</sup> This strength, as the women pointed out most of the time, was moral, derived from their being mothers of small kids.

Women took credit for their accomplishments in the interviews. During the twenty-one day strike in the beginning, the police came searching for their leader, and the women hid him beneath their dress.<sup>131</sup> Passerini has argued that women's recollections are subversive of the moral code; these women excelled in showing how they deployed their bodies in the struggle (Passerini 1987, page 41). Women told that they instructed the leaders about particular recourse to take in difficult situations. Once when there was a curfew order in the township, the leaders were not sure how to organize the movement. My interviewee said to them, "I am a woman, but I can give some suggestions as to what the workers should do. We have to find ways to assemble people and break the curfew. They understood my words. After that wherever I went I organized workers and finally I made the movement." She even took credit for organizing the movement all by herself. During the police firing, a woman worker, Anasuya Bai was killed. While the union has portrayed her as an unarmed activist who sacrificed her life for the union, my interviewees went a step ahead and told me that she was actually putting up a fight with the police

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<sup>130</sup> The incident of being fed by farmers in a village is remembered by most interviewees, including men. Food is very significant in the villages that are far off from the township because there are no shops to buy from, and you are at the mercy of the villagers. Preparing food is a very labor intensive process since it has to start from scratch and has to be done in clay ovens with wood as fuel. However, most workers also were pointing at the natural bond between the worker and the peasant, (*mazdoor-kisan*) one reason why the movement expanded to become a regional party.

<sup>131</sup> Chhattisgarhiya women wear *sarees* like most Indian women in rural areas. The *saree* is worn at a shorter length than normal, probably to prevent tripping and falling while doing manual labor.

officers. “I saw that this sister [Anasuya Bai] was fighting with the policeman by pulling his gun. Then he fired. That is how she became a martyr.”

Their militant-worker identities in the past had left distinguishable marks on their lives when I visited them in 2006. Many were younger compared to the men and were still employed in the mines. They were treated with respect as “women on duty,” and husbands, (unemployed) sons, daughters, and daughters-in-laws performed their household chores. After returning from the mines, they shopped for groceries, visited the bank, and went for union meetings in the evening. They were my best companions in the field, always opening their doors and hearts to me. They were also the most loyal to the union ideals. There has not been a single complaint or accusation about their misusing funds or employing close kin in union related positions, while such accusations against men were plentiful.

In many ways, these women subverted not only the gender roles assigned to them by the union leadership, and the moral codes, but also the masculine project of nation- building. The role assigned to women was as domestic caretakers of citizen-workers. There were no regular women employees in the mines or the steel plant. These women could work in the mines only because their work was informal, not “recognized” by the state-employer, and they were working with their men.<sup>132</sup> They appropriated this opportunity to challenge their informal existence. Figure 3.2 depicts women holding their protest demonstration on the roadside leading to the

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<sup>132</sup> Except in few cases where they worked independently as transport workers.

mines. Their fierce and aggressive presence in the political field of the mining township silenced the state backed notions of disciplined citizen-workers.

### Militant tactics

While strikes in the form of work stoppages were useful as a tactic to get the attention of the management both in the mines and in the steel plant, the workers did not resort to that all the time. One reason was that stopping work would also mean that workers had to be without pay. Secondly, SKMS and MMWU would bring in workers from elsewhere and countering that was yet another huge task for the union. It also seems in retrospect that workers did not want to affect the production in the steel plant, which was producing for the nation. The tactics that the workers used were more violent than the usual union tactics, but which guaranteed immediate rewards.

One such tactic was the *gherao* or holding mine officials and the contractor's hostage. The rationale was that since the workers were going through physical hardship in the mines, the management should go through them as well. Women used to surround the officials and would make them stand for three to four hours in the mines. "Stand in the sun, then only you will know how we feel": They made a mine manager walk down the mines for almost five miles barefoot: "Walk in the sun barefoot and feel our hardship." Once they gherao-ed the security officer of the mines, nine police officers and the mine manager, who came to rescue them. They



were let go only around midnight: “We are workers, we should be given respect. We should not be misbehaved with. That is why we misbehaved with them.”

Many tactics were instantly chosen and the workers would not know what the outcome would be. “ We used to leave our children and go for our battles. Once we heard the slogan of *Inquilaab Zindabad*<sup>133</sup> in the union office we knew there was something happening. Then we would take our *lathis* and go there.” Once there was an attempt to mechanize part of the mines and the contract was given to an industrialist in Bhilai. The union decided that there should be no mechanization in the mines and manual workers should be employed instead. This move was resisted by the SKMS with the help of the police. The mines also got a stay order against us from the court and we were doing hartal. There was the BSP people there as well. The workers were in a dilemma since we were acting against the court order. The atmosphere was very tense. The workers felt that there might be a police firing. There were officers of the central industrial security force holding guns accompanying the machines. “We took a few minutes to decide on the future course of action. We lined up on both sides of the road and chanted the slogan:

“ Tu tu tu chi chi chi,<sup>134</sup>  
Look at these intermediaries,<sup>135</sup>  
They drink the blood of the poor.”<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Long live the revolution!

<sup>134</sup> The sound of spitting

<sup>135</sup> Dalaal

<sup>136</sup> Interviewed on March 30, 2006.

The union was not able to influence the bigger forces that led to the almost complete mechanization of the eight mines in Dalli-Rajhara. It thus could not provide for the children of the next generation, a livelihood in the township. The union, however, did succeed in its goal of making the Chhattisgarhiya workers the regular workers of the mines, though, in the end. Most workers became regular mineworkers with benefits in 1996.

### *Replacing the State*

The union has been accused of trying to “run a parallel state” in the township. The accusers were pointing to how the union upturned the regulatory mechanisms in place, and enforced their own laws and discipline; hence the persistent reference to activists roaming around in *lathis*, and women beating up rival union activists. While these accusations are open to dispute, the union did try to compensate for many functions of the welfare state.

In 1983, the union built the *Shahid*<sup>137</sup> hospital in Dalli-Rajhara. The hospital, built entirely with the physical and monetary contribution of the workers, started providing free service to the poor, the workers, and people from the villages. The BSP run hospital did not provide medical services to workers. The incident that triggered the decision to build a hospital was the death of an activist due to pregnancy-related illness. She represented many workers, as well as most women in rural India that had little access to healthcare.

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<sup>137</sup> martyr

The union newsletter *Mitan*<sup>138</sup> devoted an entire issue to the construction of the hospital. Mitan claimed that the hospital was “for the health of the workers, an own program by the workers.”<sup>139</sup> It further told the state, “you gave death to us, we gave life.” The reference here is to the police firing that killed the union activists. Another report told on February 14, 1983, around 1000 mineworkers together concreted the roof of the hospital with 300 sacks of cement. The report asked, “What strength is more than that of the laborers united”<sup>140</sup>? The hospital is still fully functional, and has expanded its facilities to include an operation theatre, around 100 beds, and laboratory testing services. For many from the countryside, this is the only access to any health service other than a primary health provider. While in Dalli-Rajhara, I witnessed the death of a patient from malaria, a common disease there, which came to the hospital from a village, which started as a refugee camp for Bengalis during partition. This village is so cut off from the mainland that this patient had to wait until the last moments of his life before he could get medical attention. My interviewees 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.”

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<sup>138</sup> Friend

<sup>139</sup> Mitan, June 3-9, 1983

<sup>140</sup> *ibid*

The union started six schools in the township to provide education to children.

Figure 3.3 shows one such school. Most of them are named after victims in the police firing. These schools were started because the workers' children had no access to schools run by the mine management. It seems that while some of these schools have been taken over by the state, the union still maintains their hold over them. I know of a situation when a US based nongovernmental organization that was financing education for poor children in India tried to provide money to the union. The union rejected the offer since it found the guidelines of the organization oppressive.

Behind the union office is a canteen that provided food free to anyone who visited the office. The food was plain rice and vegetables, and occasionally the luxurious lentils. I met many of my interviewees over a cup of tea in this canteen. They all pointed out that the canteen was built and run by them.

The union activists, especially women, threatened liquor shop owners, emptied liquor barrels and warned of group suicide in front of the liquor shops. Alcohol symbolized the nemesis of the union for the activists in many respects: a workers' loyalty and (the secrets of the union) could be easily bought by the management, rival unions, or contractors through liquor. Workers spent their hard-earned money on liquor shops, leaving less for their families. A worker, paid and sent by the union to take care of an issue in a village, might spend his time and money rather in the liquor shop. Due to these reasons, the union led an anti-liquor campaign, which

disrupted routines of the liquor shop, as well as boycotted the workers that consumed alcohol. A further reason was that the Punjabi owned liquor shop that was selling Indian-made foreign liquor overpowered the Chhattisgarhiya made mahua liquor. There were even stories of an Adivasi woman selling mahua liquor killed and dumped near the dam site by the goons of the liquor shop owner.

### *Challenging Political Power*

I was surprised that even when the union was in a stage of infancy, the leaders were already contemplating formation of a political party. The workers chose the colors of the flag as red and green in a move to identify with the rural communities.<sup>141</sup>

Workers also decided to mobilize support from the countryside. “That day [when the union was formed] itself we chose the flag to represent the workers’ blood and the greenery of the farmers. We decided then that we would also organize the farmers. We will fight, we will die, and we will spread everywhere.”

Why did these workers with not much political experience or training embark on becoming a political party? It is possible that the idea of widening as a regional party was provided by Niyogi. He had long experience working with trade union movements in Bhilai. He was an activist of the AITUC earlier and was expelled from the Bhilai Steel Plant for his activism. He had worked in stone quarries near Dalli-Rajhara gaining experience of the workers. He had travelled widely in rural Chhattisgarh disguised as a tribal person before his imprisonment. He must have

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<sup>141</sup> Green, representing farmers.

learnt about the need and potential for political mobilization in Chhattisgarh. It is highly likely that he initiated the idea of starting a new political party in Chhattisgarh.

The workers' accounts did not privilege Niyogi for the conceptualization and expansion of their movement as a regional political party. On the contrary, they appear as shrewd Machiavellians in their planning to invade the political arena. "We started a party because we wanted our voices to be heard in Bhopal (the Madhya Pradesh state capital)." The workers wanted electoral representation. The state legislative assembly was located in Bhopal before the formation of the new state of Chhattisgarh and the workers seemed to recognize the need for sending their representatives there.

Workers' decisions must have also been shaped by the volatility of national politics after the emergency and Indira Gandhi's defeat in the 1977 elections. This event signified the vulnerability of the Congress Party, which has historically been dominant in Madhya Pradesh. The Congress Party governed Madhya Pradesh from its first legislative elections in 1956 till 2003,<sup>142</sup> with brief intermissions in the late 1970s when the Janata Party was in power<sup>143</sup> and from 1990-1992 when the state

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<sup>142</sup> Like the most of India, the people in power in Madhya Pradesh were the elites in colonial India. The first chief minister by Pandit Ravi Shankar Shukla derived his wealth from cotton mills. Digvijay Singh who was the chief minister for a long period of time in Chhattisgarh was from a royal family.

<sup>143</sup> As retaliation to Indira Gandhi's emergency, people elected the Janata Party to power in India.

was ruled by the BJP.<sup>144</sup> The Rajhara Township was under the Dondi- Lohara assembly constituency where Congress Party had always won until 1984 when a CMM candidate won.<sup>145</sup>

Many of my interviewees, especially those that held offices in the union and played a formative role in its early years explain the change in national political leadership around the time when their movement began. “That time election was also there. Morarji Desai was running for prime minister’s office from jail. Indira Gandhi government had sent him to jail... He was fighting from the jail and he won. He had to be released to take the office. Then he said... All leaders, trade union or other, should be released from jail without any condition immediately.” Workers must have found close parallels between the defeat of Indira Gandhi and the Congress Party and the rise of the Janata Party and their own victory over the conventional trade unions that supported the Congress Party, especially in suppressing workers resistance during the emergency period.

For the workers, the Congress Party represented the political order, and forming a regional party and contesting the party was like challenging that order. The union decided that many activists would spend time in creating grass root support. “We used to come back and report about the problems in the villages about jungle, land,

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<sup>144</sup> The murder of Niyogi and the police firing on CMM activists in Bhilai happened in this brief period.

<sup>145</sup> In 2006, the influence of the BJP was evident in the township and the surrounding areas.

and water. This way CMM was made: to fight the exploitation in the villages.” The workers launched their own candidate in the first assembly election after the formation of the union. A razing worker stood for the nearby Balod election seat and a tribal mine worker stood for the tribal election constituency in Dondi-Lohara.

As briefly mentioned in an earlier section, in 1977 June 1, police opened fire on the CMM activists in their union office yard, killing 13 activists, onlookers and a young boy. Police arrested Niyogi at night without warning after negotiating with the contractors for a house repair allowance. In turn, the agitated and angry workers held some police officers hostage in the office. The police used tear gas followed by guns on the activists that were already muddled by the teargas. There was another round of firing the following day. The workers expressed disbelief that “a simple matter of bamboo sticks for house repair” escalated to a situation demanding police intervention. Instead, they offered the explanation that it was the handiwork of Jhumuklal Bhedia, a Congress politician, who was contesting elections at that time. The rising strength of the CMM threatened him and he intended to kill the movement in its infancy: “[He] was behind the police-shooting at the CMM office, since he was scared of the CMM in the forthcoming elections.” He became an object of mockery for losing the seat to the rival BJP, since despite these aggressive attempts, the BJP won the Dondi-Lohara election constituency.



## Use of martyrdom

The police-firing incident gave certain legitimacy to the CMM as the true representatives of the Chhattsgarhiya people. The CMM-run newspaper at that time portrayed the victims as martyrs or *shahid*, drawing close parallels between them and the martyrs in the nationalist struggle for independence. Figure 3.4 shows the martyr pillar erected in the courtyard of the union office. The union started celebrating martyr days every year. This challenged the supremacy that the Congress Party had as champions of the independence movement. The CMM, instead, tried to show that independence was not yet attained.

One such martyr invented by the CMM leaders was Narayan Singh, a local tribal chieftain hanged to death by the British in 1859 for instigating a peasant rebellion. The CMM started celebrating December 19 as Narayan Singh day. They recalled the spectacular aspect of their celebrations: "We all had helmets on our heads. We also were wearing uniforms; men wore red shirts, green pants, helmets, shoes and carried bamboo poles. We [women] wore green blouses, and red saris. We had a huge procession where Narayan Singh was hanged. The people in the city were shouting that the *kala pathar* (coal) people have arrived."<sup>146</sup> The *kala pathar* reference is to a Bollywood movie that came out in 1979, in which coalmine workers organized against their exploitative masters.<sup>147</sup> The appearance of the participants

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<sup>146</sup> Interviewed on April 9, 2006.

<sup>147</sup>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*

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 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 was 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.<sup>148</sup>

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

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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.

<sup>148</sup> Interviewed on March 24, 2006.

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.”

CMM’s martyr day celebrations estimate to be an affirmation and display of workers’ power. The strength is measured by the number of people that attended, which is advertised in newspapers. A report of the Niyogi martyr day in 1997 in a regional newspaper, read like this:

On the occasion of Niyogi’s sixth death anniversary, there was a big crowd of workers and peasants in Dalli-Rajhara...From the previous night onwards, people started coming in from different regions in Chhattisgarh in jeeps. By morning there were so many people that it reminded one of the strength of the organization in 1985. At twelve noon, the march started from the CMM office. When the frontline of the rally was entering Rajhara cricket ground, which was 1.2 miles away, in the canteen, people were still having food before joining the rally. It is difficult to count but there must have been some 40,000 workers in the march.<sup>149</sup>

This particular event was witnessed by me while I was on a separate field research, and I can vouch for its verity, though what I remember is what seemed to be a million hands rising against the saffron colored sky while repeating slogans.

What the Congress Party leaders lacked and what the activists valued was honesty and truthfulness. All of the interviewees recalled the story of Moses, an old union leader, who gave up his life while trying to save drowning bus passengers. “He was a good leader.” During their first strike, they debated a lot about which leader to be

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<sup>149</sup> *Dainik Bhaskar*. Sept29.1997

chosen as their leader. Many names were suggested, but were rejected as bad people. The only good leader was their chosen leader, Niyogi:

His way of life was ordinary. He used to eat yesterday's rice. We used to provide for his food. We used to give him rice. He never used to take money. We used to buy his clothes. If there is some festival, we used to buy clothes for his family. Initially when he came, when some decision was made on our bonus, we bought very good clothes for him: terry coat shirt, pants, vest, blanket, and other stuff. But he threw away our gift. Then we returned those clothes and bought handloom clothes.

Stories of how he used to break stones in mines and how he lived in the villages as tribal person selling hosiery and selling goats are narrated. In the story and in the narrative, a Gandhian sense of simplicity, honesty and truth are valued and appreciated.

While the main political opponent of the CMM as a regional party was the Congress Party, the workers did not miss an opportunity to ridicule the communist parties,<sup>150</sup> due to their contentions with the left affiliated trade unions in the township. However, the workers still seemed to acknowledge the paternalistic role of the left movement in India, and the Communist Parties specifically. I would like to draw attention to a story told by an activist who went to visit Calcutta, the state capital of West Bengal, which was dominated by the Communist Parties. On the way to a meeting, he had to pass the city crematorium and stopped by to see it with the curiosity of a rural person. He found to his astonishment and disgust that bodies had to wait for four days before they were burnt, due to lack of facilities. He referred to

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<sup>150</sup> The Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)) split with the CPI in 1964. These two parties are the major constituents of the parliamentary left in India.

this incident in his speech at the meeting: “Your government is so incompetent. In Chhattisgarh, we might have to wait for rice, kerosene, and sugar in lines, but not for burning the dead. Here, the dead have to wait for four days in line!” Hearing this, the chief minister fetched him in the state vehicle and apologized.<sup>151</sup> He said that the activist opened his eye, and he had ordered for seven more locations for cremating dead bodies. The next day, the news of how the chief minister was humbled by a Chhattisgarhiya was in all newspapers in Calcutta.

### *Conformist Futures?*

“I cannot read and write, but those who have read Niyogiji’s writings have not found a word about using violence,” said a mine worker in hushed and anguished tones, after my tape recorder was switched off. She was commenting on what she heard about some of the Bhilai industrial workers alleged talk about the need for radical tactics, and justifying that using the writings of Niyogi.<sup>152</sup> This worker was angered and pained that the Bhilai industrial workers were not paying attention to her: She had even sacrificed her children’s education for the sake of the movement. Bhilai industrial workers were not listening to their peers (*siyan*) that have more experience in running a movement.

As discussed earlier, most Dalli mine workers were comfortably retired, during my fieldwork in 2006, and many had returned to their villages, some quite far away

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<sup>151</sup> The chief minister at that time was Jyoti Basu

<sup>152</sup> The Bhilai workers were disillusioned with the state after their long rather fruitless struggle and some were openly sympathizing with the Maoist movement, which angered the Dalli miners.

from the township. The miners were complacent about the present, with the retirement of many, and even the last of their demands of absorption of all laborers as regular workers having met in 1996. Their struggle for recognition was over, their demands were now routine like “watches as bonuses,” or delivery of money. The mine workers, despite their militant and often violent past that held the township at ransom, shunned away from the mention of violence. However, this denunciation of violence was not just a reflection of this new status, or old age, which could have weakened their militant capabilities. Their union participation had left a visible mark in their lives, as well as their life in the mining township.<sup>153</sup> Despite the comforts of their retired life, they were still actively involved in the movement. 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.”

The denunciation of violence was rather a reflection of the miners’ old style of politics and the relationship with the nation-state. They had from early on, spurned any suggestions of association with the Maoist movement, though accusations have been plenty. Maoist allegiance in the 1970s was a sure way of de-legitimizing a movement. Niyogi was claimed to be a naxalite by the rival unions.<sup>154</sup> Miners explained to me that this was a “rumor” to de-stabilize their movement, despite the

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<sup>153</sup> 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.

<sup>154</sup> Naxalite is the Indian term for the Maoists, after the Maoist led insurgency in naxalbari village in West Bengal in 1967. An AITUC leader told me the following about Niyogi: “Niyogi was a naxalite. He was associated with the naxalite movement in Durg (district capital). He was brought to Dalli by me and two other persons. When he came, we made him take a vow by keeping his hand on the photo of Lenin that he is interested in trade union activities only and nothing else.”

militancy their movement was nevertheless a disciplined trade union. “We would sit down with the administration and talk, before taking to the streets.” The miners’ denunciation of the violent tactics of the Maoists in 2006 was just a re-statement of their support of militant, yet non violent tactics.<sup>155</sup>

### *Dalli-Rajhara now*

Chhattisgarh was reorganized as a new state of India in the year 2000. In the first assembly election following that, the Congress party was victorious. The first chief minister Ajit Jogi embarked on a policy to attract indigenous and foreign investment by liberalizing labor and industrial policies. The state granted contracts to foreign companies for diamond digging, started the ground work for the establishment of a software park in Bhilai, and planned on relaxing taxes, and supplying cheap electricity lure investors to its manifold mineral deposits.<sup>156</sup> The BJP came to power in Chhattisgarh since 2003 and Dr. Raman Singh is the second chief minister. In an interview with the business newspaper *The Economic Times* in April 2010, he defined “brand” Chhattisgarh thus:

For an informed Indian, Chhattisgarh is the lungs of India with around 44% of its area under enchanting forest cover; rice bowl of India with around 70 lakh metric tonnes of rice production and the land of ethnic people with rich heritage and profound cultural diversity. For a keen international observer, Chhattisgarh is the richest State in mineral resources. India’s 17% of Coal,

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<sup>155</sup> For more on this aspect of Indian trade unionism, see Nair 2009

<sup>156</sup> Indian National Congress Proceedings, January to June 2001, Encyclopedia of political parties, Editor in chief O.P.Ralhan, Anmol Publications, New Delhi, 2002, pages 38-39.

16% of Iron ore, 14% of Dolomite, 4.5% of Bauxite, 5.15% of Lime Stone, 38% of Tin of India are produced in Chhattisgarh.<sup>157</sup>

The industrial policies of the state in 2004 and 2009 upheld the creation of “an enabling environment for increasing industrial production, productivity and quality upgradation to face the challenge of competition emerging from economic liberalization,” which implied that “necessary steps will be taken for simplification of labour laws.”<sup>158</sup> Special incentive was given to private sector participation and a special law was passed in 2002, the Chhattisgarh Investment Promotion Act, 2002, which aimed to avoid time delays in processing investor applications by creating a single Point-of-Investor Contact.

Meanwhile, the central government initiated the Raoghat mines project in Bastar district near Dalli-Rajhara to find new iron ore mines. A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) has been signed between Chhattisgarh Government and Tata Steel in June 2005 in this regard to set up a five million ton per annum green field integrated steel plant in two-phases with the help of Rs. 100 billion investment.<sup>159</sup> This effort has faced resistance from tribal communities in the region as well as from Maoists waging a war.

What impact did this have on the CMM activists? Their children were without employment. The leaders' children were working in the hospital or some other

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<sup>157</sup> *The Economic Times*, “How does Raman Singh define brand Chhattisgarh?” April 14, 2010.

<sup>158</sup> Chhattisgarh State Industrial Policy Documents, 2004, 2009, available at the Chhattisgarh state official website, [http://cg.gov.in/govtpolicy/industrial\\_policy.htm](http://cg.gov.in/govtpolicy/industrial_policy.htm).

<sup>159</sup> *The Hindu*, June 5, 2005.



institution run by the CMM. Everyone else was running a cassette shop or a pushcart selling *paan*. As an interviewee pointed out, “If everyone is selling betel nuts, who will buy them?” Those who had managed to purchase land in villages, had their sons cultivate them. Many youth whom I talked to, were discontented with the CMM and were active in a movement started by Niyogi’s son. They had recently done an agitation against mechanization in a mine.

With the formation of the new state, CMM had lost many of its village followings to the Congress and the BJP. One significant symbolic shift was that the CMM had to give up its earlier election symbol of bow and arrow to the right wing Shiv Sena, and adopt a more subdued one of “house.” The irony of that is that this symbol did not reflect any of the houses in Chhattisgarh, either of the rich or the poor. The workers referred to their new symbol as a more realistic “jhopdi” (hut) instead.

### The betrayal of the state

One can see a changing perception of the state, at least in some miners’ accounts. Miners had a belief in the state institution during the pre-global period though they considered the state agents a failure. This belief has been replaced by a sense of betrayal by the state. The state was accused for closing the mines, mechanization, allowing private capital, leading to a loss of employment opportunities in the township. The children of the workers did not find employment in the township and many were returning to the villages with their parents to engage in farming. Even in

the villages, the faulty government interventions for alleviating poverty did not benefit the workers. As an interviewee commented:

The programs in the villages do not give any benefit to the workers, despite who is running the government. Workers just desire to have work with both their hands, that our farms get water, that we do hard work and maintain our families. Now this program [an employment generation scheme by the government] is telling us that we will be given jobs for a month, but has not the government taken away our jobs already by putting machines in our place? The hands of the workers are empty now.<sup>160</sup>

The above interviewee, unlike the other miners, admitted that she favored more violent tactics to hold the state accountable in the neoliberal era. She must have been referring to the naxalite movement in her neighboring district.

## *Conclusion*

In this chapter, I analyzed how the contract workers in the Dalli-Rajhara mining township were able to persuade the state to grant them entitlements as regular workers. This question was significant since most of these workers were not literate, were seasonal migrants to town, and were not educated into conventional trade union politics. Despite these limitations, they started a union on their own, struggled for labor rights, and sustained their movement for over thirty years. The answer I give is that they were able to hold the state accountable through their multi-pronged strategies. They challenged the state employer through militant union tactics, questioned the legitimacy of the developmental state by replacing some of its welfare functions, and threatened the ruling Congress party by their

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<sup>160</sup> Interviewed on April 8, 2006.

show of strength in numbers. Especially significant was the role played by women who subverted the gender codes of union activism and the nation-building project.

*Figure 3.1 Workers' Procession*



Source: V.V. Giri National Labour Institute, Archives of Indian Labour

*Figure 3.2 Workers' Protest on the Road to the Mines*



Source: V.V. Giri National Labour Institute, Archives of Indian Labour

*Figure 3.3 A CMM Run School*



Source: V.V. Giri National Labour Institute, Archives of Indian Labour

*Figure 3.4 Martyr Pillar in Front of the CMM Office*



Source: V.V. Giri National Labour Institute, Archives of Indian Labour



## CHAPTER 4

### FROM NATIONAL TO NEOLIBERAL SPACE: BHILAI

#### Indigenous capitalists in Bhilai

In chapter 2, we saw how the BSP was established as a nationalist project in the 1960s, with the Indian state as the primary owner and caretaker of that undertaking (see figure 4.1 for a snap shot of the BSP). As was planned in the Indian mixed economy model, this core industry was designed to assist the development of privately owned subsidiary industries. Since its launching, Bhilai had become the center of industrial undertakings extending to nearby regions of Rajnandgaon and Raipur. They were known as the auxiliary industries. These included around hundred and twenty small industrial units and big enterprises like the Associated Cement Company, which used by products like slag or supplied spare parts and equipments to the steel plant. There were a number of privately managed firms that sub-contracted work from the BSP as well (see Figure 4.2 for the picture of a small subcontracting firm). These were owned mostly by members of the *Baniya* community, a powerful constituent of the indigenous capitalist class in India.<sup>161</sup> Some of these industrialists were already prominent since the late colonial period, and the others made their profits in the region, and later used that fortune for

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<sup>161</sup> Most tekedars and shop keepers in the mining township and Bhilai belonged to the Baniya community.



expanding their operations within India and forging overseas collaborations. In the following, I discuss the most prominent of these industries.

ACC (Associated Cement Companies Limited) started functioning in 1936 when ten existing cement companies belonging to the four business groups of the Tatas, Khataus, Killick Nixon, and Dinshaw merged.<sup>162</sup> The company manufactured cement and concrete and ran sixteen cement factories and forty concrete plants in India. Between 1999 and 2000, the Tata group sold all fifteen percent of its shareholding in ACC to Ambuja group, and the latter started an alliance with the Holcim group of Switzerland in 2005. Currently, Holcim and Ambuja together own thirty-five per cent of the shares of the company. The local plant in Bhilai was known as the Jamul Cement Works,<sup>163</sup> and was set up in 1965 with the capacity of sixteen lakh tons. It utilized blast furnace slag, a waste product generated in Bhilai Steel Plant, in cement manufacturing.

Simplex Engineering and Foundry Works, founded in 1941 in Jabalpur, Madhya Pradesh, manufactured agricultural implements, steel structure, and castings. It moved to Bhilai in the 1950s following the decision by the state to start the Bhilai Steel Plant “to be closely associated with the building of the Bhilai Steel Plant.”<sup>164</sup> Currently it has four manufacturing units engaged in manufacturing equipment for

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<sup>162</sup> <http://www.acclimited.com>, accessed on August 4, 2010.

<sup>163</sup> This plant has nothing to do with the Jamul Portland Cement Manufacturing Company in the United States.

<sup>164</sup> <http://www.simplexenggg.in/company.html>, accessed on August 4, 2010.

core industrial sectors like steel, railways, power, mining, cement, and material handling. It has export markets in Japan, USA, and Australia. The chairperson of the company is H B Shah, the son of the founder of Simplex, Bhanji Monji Shah. His nephew Moolchand Shah, who passed away in May 2010, managed the company for a very long time. He was supposed to have played a prominent role in orchestrating the assassination of Niyogi in 1990. The company has making huge profits now, according to recent news reports.<sup>165</sup>

Bhilai Engineering Corporation Limited (BEC) was an industrial group that has diversified tremendously over the years. It has been involved in engineering, fertilizer manufacturing, food processing and manufacturing plant growth regulators in collaboration with a US company. It thus truly has become a global firm. It has a turnover of about fifty million dollars.<sup>166</sup> The founder and chairperson is BR Jain. Its engineering and division manufactured equipments for steel plants, coal, power, and cement industries and bogie frames for the railways. BEC has collaborations with two German companies, one British company, and a French company for mining, coke ovens, ball mills and other equipments. BEC manufactures plant growth regulators, supposedly resulting in phenomenal growth in plants. It has a modern food processing unit engaged in the manufacture of hybrid tomatoes and packaging of tomato, mango and guava.

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<sup>165</sup> <http://profit.ndtv.com/news/shows/simplex-castings-net-profit-rises-30-71-in-the-march-2010-quarter-40435>, accessed on August 4, 2010.

<sup>166</sup> <http://www.bec-group.com/>, accessed on August 4, 2010

Bhilai Wires Limited manufactured different sizes of mild steel and carbon steel wires. The company started business in 1973. The main customers included the Post and Telegraph Department of India, and various electricity boards. The chairperson and managing director is H.P. Khetawat. Beekay Engineering Corporation was established in 1967 for manufacturing equipment and spare parts for Bhilai Steel Plant. It soon began catering to the requirements of other steel plants at Rourkela, Durgapur, and Bokhara. The Managing Director Vijay Gupta was implicated in the Niyogi murder case. Kedia Distilleries Limited belonged to the Kedia Group of Companies, which had a license for the manufacture of Indian Made Foreign Liquor. The Chairman is Kailash Pati Kedia, who started his business as a molasses trader, and later shifted his business interest to the liquor industry by setting up the first distillery in 1969.<sup>167</sup>

How much did the Indian industrialists act according to their interests as a class, and how far were they influenced by nationalist ideals? This question is significant because class interests that inspires capitalists to cross borders in search of lowering costs and increasing profits comes into conflict with the boundaries posed by economic nationalism. As Silver (Silver 2003) argues, the neoliberal era could be described just as capital being freed from the control of nation-states. Aditya Mukherjee (Mukherjee 2002) argued that the Indian capitalist class, at the time of Indian political independence, had a mature nationalist stance, while also being economically entrepreneurial. Vivek Chibber (Chibber 2003) argued that the Indian

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<sup>167</sup> Not much information on the Kedia distilleries Limited is available online, except a police case and a high court order against the owner Kailash Pati Kedia.

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, enlisting the collaboration of the nation-state. The stories of the industrialists in Bhilai showed a more complicated picture of how the industrialists realized their class interests by using the nationalist rhetoric. To give an example, the newspaper advertisement of the Kedia group in Bhilai in 1995, had the Indian flag and photograph of Jawaharlal Nehru kissing the forehead of a child saying, “Keep this nation under your care,” followed by the motto of the Kedia group, “aiming higher.”<sup>168</sup> Kedia thus has become Nehru’s true prodigy by taking care of the nation through its entrepreneurial endeavors. As we will see in chapter 5, the industrialists used the nationalist rhetoric to appeal to the public, media, and the state against workers. They consistently portrayed the CMM activists as sabotaging national production and employment, and enlisted help from the local administration in suppressing the movement.

### *Disciplined National Space in Bhilai*

Bhilai was a city of contradictions. In the middle of the chaotic rest of the city, the steel township stood out as a space of discipline, cleanliness, and order. The streets in the township were tree lined, and the township was divided neatly into eleven sectors. The employees of the Bhilai Steel Plant lived in strictly utilitarian apartments in these sectors. I lived as a paying guest in an apartment in Russian

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<sup>168</sup> *Deshbandhu*, August 15, 1995

Complex in Sector 7, during my stay in Bhilai. These modest apartments housed Russian engineers in the beginning, and now have many upper level technical staff of the steel plant. The apartments were the Russian engineering staff currently resided were demarcated from the space occupied by Indians. It was a self-sufficient system with markets, banks, schools and a huge hospital run by the steel plant mainly for its employees.

Many paid tribute to the Soviet Union for the enforcement of the extraordinary work culture in Bhilai. Ravi Aria, then vice-president of the steel workers union at Bhilai<sup>169</sup> and member of Madhya Pradesh Legislative Assembly said:

If Bhilai evolved a splendid work culture, it was because each and every man who came here from the USSR-expert or workman-he had only one background, the background to work and a total commitment to work. They did not bother about anything else. They differed from other foreign experts. They performed as workers whatever their rank. On many occasions even the leadership at the grass root level on the shop floor was provided by them. (Krishna Moorthy, 1987, page 98)

The men that came from the Soviet Union had submerged their expertise and skill differences in the commitment to work. It is highly likely that this inspired the Indian workers to do the same. This neutralization of differences, such as those of caste, region, as well as rank was new to the Indian worker, especially being displayed by white men. These men were very different from the white men the Indian consciousness had dealt with so far: "They differed from other foreign experts."

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<sup>169</sup> Affiliated with the INTUC

In Bhilai, the creation of a national space was in the agenda of the postcolonial state project, and this engendered a variety of institutionalized practices to construct that space. Srirupa Roy argued that the Indian steel towns were upheld as exemplary national spaces for the new India after independence; and the workers in these steel towns were the "producer patriots" ( Roy 2007). The term "patriots" is an exaggeration. What the workers imbibed was a work culture that gained legitimacy because production was done for the nation. This created a secular, multi-cultural, egalitarian, and disciplined space, which was inhabited by the workers in the steel plant.

Commenting on social change in Bhilai because of the Bhilai steel plant, a scholar, Srinivasan wrote that the availability of food from various parts of the country had resulted in the retreat of untouchability.

In Bhilai town, the prevalence of a cosmopolitan atmosphere has enticed the population to take to food, which was either taboo earlier or which was not in vogue in their area background. As a consequence, it can be seen that Bhilai, through its numerous canteens and the more popular food stalls, provides a variety of cuisine, ranging from "Channa-Batura" of Punjab, "Bhel Puri" of Gujarat, "Rasagolla" of Bengal or "Idli- Dosa" of Madras. Non-vegetarian varieties range from "Moghlai" dishes to "Tandoori" chicken. The variety in vegetarian and non-vegetarian food is endless. Thus, the availability of non-traditional food is a great inducement factor in tasting the erstwhile "forbidden" fruit... It has the sociological significance that in the wake of industrialization the age-old evil of untouchability has fast receded, in the region. (Srinivasan 1988, page 139)

Despite the sweeping “sociological” conclusions drawn by Srinivasan, it was true that a multi-cultural national space was created in Bhilai due to the existence of the Bhilai steel plant and the influx of the workers from varied regions in India.

Living in Bhilai was not about maintaining multi-cultural identities; it was about acquiring a new Indian identity. This was especially true for the second generation of those steel plant workers. I came across this blog by such a second generation woman who was stating what made Bhilai different:

What made Bhilai unique are the inhabitants. People from all parts of the country came here for living and adapted themselves forging their identity and culture. The locals of this region never objected to the presence of outsiders. With friendliness and peace loving nature, they embraced the new comers. Now it is difficult to identify who is a local and who is non-local. People from all states have gelled with the local population. Other than this, people communicate well in Hindi. In fact, Hindi has become the household language of the Bhilaiana. <sup>170</sup>

This author’s parents came to Bhilai from South India. She shows pride in giving up that identity in place of being from Bhilai. Being from Bhilai, thus implied more than just assimilating to the local culture: it was more about being part of an Indian identity and learning to converse in Hindi, the national language. Elsewhere, Jonathan Parry discusses how communal violence had been relatively absent in Bhilai in 1984, during the anti-Sikh riots following Indira Gandhi’s assassination by her Sikh bodyguards (Parry 2008). This absence is significant while the Rourkela

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<sup>170</sup> [http://travel.sulekha.com/living-in-bhilai\\_bhilai-travelogue-4332.htm](http://travel.sulekha.com/living-in-bhilai_bhilai-travelogue-4332.htm), accessed on March 25, 2011.

steel plant in nearby Orissa was the seat of widespread communal uprisings. The social organization of the city and its residents must have contributed to the relative peace in Bhilai.

### *Boundaries: The Other Side of the Railway Line*

The railway line in Bhilai, as in Dalli-Rajhara, separated the organized, formal, and orderly part of the city from the unorganized informal and chaotic part. The railway line figured as the symbolic marker that distinguished the undeveloped, non-modern, and poor “Bharat”<sup>171</sup> from the modern “India” in my conversations with the contract workers. The most conspicuous symbol of the undeveloped India was the ACC labor camp, where (primarily) Chhattisgarhiya workers in the industrial region resided.

A visitor from the steel township to the industrial region had to change the mode of transportation at Supela junction in Bhilai. To get to the ACC labor camp, one had to share an auto rickshaw with at least eight other people (four in the back seat, two in a make shift seat behind the driver and two on either side of the driver), which in off peak time, involved waiting for a long time. Though I could pay for the trip on my own, many a time I chose to travel with other passengers. Rather than being an ethnographic tactic, it was due to the discomfort in disrupting the routine of fellow travelers. The auto rickshaw crossed the ACC plant and the gated ACC colony where

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<sup>171</sup>This distinction between Bharat and India is used in popular Indian discourse.



regular workers lived, to go to the sprawling labor camp, where the CMM office in Bhilai was located.

The ACC labor camp was at the fringes of Bhilai, just two miles away from Dhour village. It was built on the outskirts of a pre-industrial village, Jamul, that still existed as a locality<sup>172</sup> within it devoid of its farmlands, which were taken over by Jamul Cement Works. Many labor camps started initially in the 1950s to temporarily house the laborers engaged in the construction of the steel plant. They have stayed on to become almost permanent mud housing clusters representing the villages. Like the villages, the huts were painted blue, had narrow alleys in between, and lacked proper drainage and sanitation. Many residents went to industrial wasteland for latrine since the public toilets were dirty and stinking.

The labor camps thus existed in sharp contrast to the Bhilai Township with the clean array of houses for the employees, and the labor colonies where the regular employees of the big industries lived, demarcated from the rest of the region with boundary walls and security gates. They also existed as an inevitable eyesore to the posh Nehru Nagar, just a few miles away, where the businessmen, civil servants, and the INTUC leaders lived. Many activists of the CMM resided in other localities such as Shiv Puri adjoining the Jamul industrial area, the defining features of which were broken roads and smog, incessant truck traffic, and a barren landscape.

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<sup>172</sup> basti

## Informal service economy

The Ministry of Steel Mines and Fuels Annual report in 1958-59 suggested that while the new township needed accommodation for the new workers, many of those who provided essential services to them might live outside the township.

“Accommodation would also have to be provided to some extent for a few shop keepers, barbers and washer men and such like who are essential for the life of a community. At the same time, it could be expected that a number of these people might live outside the steel town proper.” (ibid, page 21-22). The state officials were foreseeing the emergence of an informal service economy, which was a basic need for the township to function well, but could emerge and sustain itself on its own without state assistance. The informal service economy was thriving in Bhilai.

Two modes of public transportation widely used in Bhilai were the “minidoors” and rickshaws, both predicated on the increasing presence of unemployed youth for their operations. Minidoors<sup>173</sup> were three wheeler taxis that were bigger than auto rickshaws and could seat up to twelve persons (Figure 4.3 depicts a minidoor). They were a very convenient mode of transportation in Bhilai since the rates were affordable.<sup>174</sup> The operators were very enterprising; they would solicit travelers on the road and wait for them in road intersections. They traveled long distance between Bhilai powerhouse and the Durg bus station. The experience of travelling in the minidoor is not very pleasant due to the physical proximity of “strangers,”

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<sup>173</sup> In Delhi and Rajasthan, they are called *fatfati*.

<sup>174</sup> In 2006, the minimum charge was four rupees.

much more so than in a crowded metropolitan bus. However, these were less impersonal: they accommodated me once, despite not carrying my wallet. These were also spaces of the “public sphere” where conversations of everyday life and politics (among men) happened. Many a time I listened to Bollywood movie songs in them and pondered about how such experience influenced the imaginings of a national community. The extent to which my fieldwork depended on this service economy became evident when I had to cancel my visit to the CMM office once because of a strike of the minidoor operators.

Cycle drawn rickshaws were the very poor relatives of the minidoor. They were everywhere, from Durg railway station to the powerhouse, normally used for short distance travel. In Bhilai, people took them to go to their particular streets from the main road. Most often you see them in the rickshaw stand, and with the driver, usually a man in ragged clothes, sleeping in his rickshaw seat. In most cities in central and eastern India, including Bhilai, the rickshaw pullers were immigrants from poor states such as Orissa and Bihar. Many rickshaw pullers I have met in various parts of India drowned their sorrows and tiredness in alcohol at the end of the day.

Most domestic workers in the Bhilai steel township were local Chhattisgarhiya women. A domestic worker would distribute her work in at least ten houses a day, doing the daily chores of washing dishes, laundry, sweeping and mopping floors. The relations between such part-time domestic servants and the owners of the

house were ubiquitously similar: one of distrust and dependence. The middle class household would come to a standstill if the domestic worker failed to appear,. People would go to fetch her from her home. And when she is at the household of her employer, her every move is followed: the old woman in the house where I stayed as paying guest followed the servant from room to room to keep an eye on her and prevent from stealing. While this distrust and dependency was embedded in the work, there were also lasting relations between the women of the household and the domestic workers, perhaps as inhabitants of the intimate spaces within the household. I have seen the sharing of memories, problems and worries between the workers and their employers, something that was not guaranteed in formal work.

### *Contract Work in Bhilai*

Most contract workers whom I interviewed were second-generation migrants to town from far off villages from Durg and Rajnandgaon district. Their parents were employees of the steel plant or the ACC and settled with family in the ACC labor camp or other nearby residential areas for workers. The children had some education, and looked for work in the industrial area. By that time regular work had become obsolete and most workers were deployed through contract work. (see Figure 4.4 for the picture of a rolling mill worker who migrated from Rajnandgaon district). In the following, I present three snap shots of the different types of workers whom I interviewed in Bhilai. The first two snap shots show the deterioration of the standard of living of these worker families over time. The parents of both workers were permanent employees, while they were contractually

employed. The third one is of a migrant worker from Madhya Pradesh, pushed from his village due to poverty. Unlike the others, he was a Brahmin, though that did not provide much of an advantage for him in finding jobs. His case also shows how caste superiority loses its meaning in urban Bhilai.

Kisun Sahoo was from Sahja village, which was forty miles from Durg. He used to work in Jamul Cement Works on a contract basis, until he was fired from work for unionizing in 1989. He was from the beginning associated with the CMM. Earlier, he tried to associate with BMS, the trade union affiliated with the BJP. However, he left it when he found that workers did not benefit from them. His parents came to Bhilai in 1966 and were regular workers in Jamul Cement Works. Since they were not educated, they were low level workers. Despite that, they were given entitlements of regular workers, providing evidence to my claim that neoliberalism accentuated the power of private industrialists over labor. Kisun joined the cement company as a wagon unloader after his mother retired. He had only studied up to second grade,<sup>175</sup> since he had to take care of household chores. His sisters were married off when they were in their teens and he married when he was twenty-one. Marrying at a young age was customary in Chhattisgarh. His father purchased five acres of land in their village and they now cultivated it through sharecropping. They brought their share of paddy and chickpeas home for consumption. After losing his work, Kisun has become a full time activist in the CMM. His father passed away three years ago. His family now lived with his mother, four brothers, and their families. His main

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<sup>175</sup> Despite his lack of education, he like many other activists was able to cite the violations of labor laws by the employers, explain the court proceedings, as well as narrate the globalization of Jamul Cement Works.

concern about leaving work was that rest tires him. “Whatever work you do, if you do it continuously, it becomes everyday practice. One feels refreshed after work. We never feel sick when we are working since our blood evaporates as sweat and the body has to produce new blood. If we sit at home, we get cold, fever and so on because of lack of blood circulation.”

Hemchand Devangan’s father was an employee in the BSP. His family moved to Bhilai from the village Malodh in nearby Raipur district. They used to live in the BSP employee housing. While he was in high school, his father passed away and mother was diagnosed with cancer. He left schooling and started working in a rolling mill as a contract worker, where he had to work from twelve to twenty four hours with minimum pay. Then he moved to Beekay and started working as a molding laborer. He had to face the heat of the molding plant, and his job required some skills; despite that he was paid half the wages of the regular worker. The AITUC leader made him join the union, promising job permanency. When CMM started their mobilization of contract workers in Bhilai, Hemchand gathered forty five workers, went to the owner, and demanded a permanent job. They threatened that they would join the CMM otherwise. The owner Vijay Gupta had had some previous experience of contention with CMM in the mining township, while he was given the contract to deliver machines to the mines. Moreover, these workers were difficult to replace since they had acquired skills over time. Thus Hemchand became a permanent worker in Beekay. Now, he has been working for thirty years in Beekay.

Madan Mohan Dubey<sup>176</sup> came from a village near Katni district in Madhya Pradesh. His family was poor, and he left school and came to Bhilai looking for work in 1986. He did many odd jobs before joining Jamul Cement Works. He got this job through the father of his friend who was an employee there. He has been working in the fabrication and maintenance section of the cement plant since then as a contract worker. The company had trained him in his job, but he was paid the same wages as someone who joined recently. He did not possess proof that he was an employee in the steel plant. He did have a document in which he had his photograph, company signature and contractor's signature. The company took this paper back when the CMM began. Now he had a gate pass with the sign of the contractor. He lived in ACC labor camp with his wife and two kids, and was actively involved with the CMM.

The three workers were well aware of the labor laws, and how their company management violated them. They interpellated into their identity of unionized worker, much more than the workers in the mining township. They were of a younger generation than the mine workers, and inhabited an urban culture, which must have contributed to this educated perspective. However, it was also to be noted that their position within the industrial region was gifted by their parents; something they were not in a position to provide to the next generation.

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<sup>176</sup> Madan always used the collective pronoun "we" in his personal narrative, which was characteristic of movements, especially labor movements, as discussed in a previous chapter. I have taken the liberty of presenting his story as a personal story. This is also true for the accounts of Kisun and Hemchand.

## Commuters to Bhilai

Many workers commuted for work daily from the villages of Dhour and Kachandur. These workers could sustain their families by being able to simultaneously maintain subsistence farming. These workers were better off than their counterparts in Bhilai and the villages. Many of these workers' parents were employees of the cement company or the BSP, and this had helped them to purchase farmlands and use artificial irrigation facilities to counter the irrational rainfall. These workers were not a huge proportion of the villagers, and their work did not alter the life of most villagers that were small peasants or landless laborers. However, working and unionizing in Bhilai made these workers think about their villages in new ways. In chapter 5, we will discuss the impact these new perspectives had on the organization of life in these villages.

I spent a month and a half in Kachandur village in 1997 doing field surveys and interviews to assess the impact of neoliberal reforms on the villagers.<sup>177</sup> Kachandur was a village just around five miles from the city of Bhilai, yet inaccessible through the public transport system, like most villages in Chhattisgarh.<sup>178</sup> It was a peasant village, with all of its 347 households engaged in cultivation directly or indirectly.<sup>179</sup> Some supplemented their earnings by working in the industrial plants in the city, to which they commute by bicycles or mopeds. Dhour village, midway between

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<sup>177</sup> The results have been published as a Focus on the Global South report, Jha, Mitra and Nair 1999.

<sup>178</sup> When I visited it in 2007, there was a minidoor connecting it to Durg.

<sup>179</sup> Jha, Mitra and Nair, *ibid*.



Kachandur and Bhilai, had more claims on the city than the latter. In the seemingly bucolic village where shepherds move around with goats, one often met villagers returning in bicycles from “*difty*” (a colloquial term for duty or industrial work) in Bhilai. Visually Dhour was framed by the rising chimneys of the Jamul Cement Works, which was built on the fields acquired from Dhour. To get to Dhour from Bhilai, one had to cross the industrial wastelands on the outskirts of Jamul.. Many aged inhabitants of the village worked in the cement company (most likely due to some contract regarding compensation by the company), many in the State-owned Bhilai Steel Plant. The youth in Dhour, if non-farm employed, worked in some company in Bhilai. These villages were the locations where the contradictions in the Indian state’s development planning played out. I turn to the story of two young people in Kachandur village that exemplify those contradictions.

#### Tragedy of the Indian youth: Nanthram and Dhaneswari

Nanthram and Dhaneswari were our companions in 1997 while we were doing fieldwork for the Focus on the Global South- sponsored study mentioned in a footnote earlier. I could follow their lives closely till 2006, till one of them committed suicide and the other was married off to another village. Their stories were symptomatic of the broader problems of postcolonial development in India: the inability to absorb the youthful workforce, whom the state could educate, into its production systems.

Nanthram’s family was well off; his brother was a successful farmer and could provide Nanthram some technical education. However, he had not been able to find

a job, since his brother did not have enough cash to spend on that process. When I visited Kachandur again in 2004, he was still with no steady job. He had become active in the BJP, and had campaigned for the BJP candidate who was also from his *sahoo* caste in the previous assembly elections. However, he said that he did not have faith in the state assembly or the elected BJP office bearers of the state government. Meanwhile, he was found to have tuberculosis. In 2007, when I visited, I heard that he had killed himself by drinking poison. Dhaneswari was his friend, from another more or less wealthy family. She had postgraduate education in economics like me and she was a well informed person with whom I could share my findings. In 2004 when I visited the village, she was still unemployed and unmarried, the latter a bad thing to happen to a woman in the Indian countryside. In 2007, I could not meet her, but I heard that she was married to an elderly man, had moved to her husband's village and had given birth to a child.

These faces from Kachandur village reminded me of my older friends from my childhood. I had met similar men and women in their youth, who had college education, but with no hope for the future (except marriage for the women) in terms of employment or assured future. Their family background and education had set them apart from the working poor, while they were not skilled enough to get good jobs. Suicide rates are high in Kerala, and unemployment among the youth has been cited as a reason.<sup>180</sup> These men and women were from a very different part of India,

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<sup>180</sup> A perfect case of egoistic suicide.

but their stories were very similar to those of Nanthram and Dhaneswari.<sup>181</sup> In other words, they were all produced by the inadequacies, sometimes deliberate, of Indian postcolonial development.

### Contrast between father and son

Ramadheen was from Dhour village near Bhilai, and was one of the daily commuters to Bhilai. He used to work in BEC, joined the CMM and was expelled from work. He had started a subcontracting firm near Supela in Bhilai, where he employed some young workers. He was an active member of the CMM and when I visited him, he was persuading his neighbor in Bhilai, a steel rolling mill worker, to join the CMM. Ramadheen's father retired from the BSP. I interviewed him. The pride that he had in his work is evident from the photograph of his wife and him inside a framed certificate from the BSP at the time of retirement. In this section, I draw attention to the contrast between the experiences of father and son and draw implication for the direction in which neoliberal India is moving.

Ramadheen's father Dasrath used to work in Jamul Cement Works and the aerodrome construction work in Bhilai as a contract laborer, with many other villagers. He was illiterate.<sup>182</sup> He decided to join BSP when he found that the BSP was paying better wages. He had an interview at the BSP, and he was enrolled as a rolling mill worker. After two to three months of working, he started getting a hundred rupees as wages, plus a bonus. At the time of his retirement he was getting

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<sup>181</sup> Kerala, which has a very high unemployment rate.

<sup>182</sup> *Angoota chhap*, or someone who puts a thumb imprint.

paid ten thousand rupees a month. He had a retirement party, which he remembers fondly.

Ramadheen used to work in BEC in the molding department as a contract laborer<sup>183</sup> with thirty to forty workers from his village. They were recruited for three months and then laid off, to prevent their being absorbed as permanent laborers.<sup>184</sup> He spent four years working this way. Many fellow contract workers had accidents at work, but they could not get compensation from the management since they had no record of being workers in BEC. These workers also moved from department to department, and were made to work in sites where they did not have any prior experience or skill.

The contrast between the father and son points to the lack of intergenerational social mobility in these villages. This was in stark contrast with Bhilai, where the children of the steel plant employees usually moved to the United States as IT professionals. There was no “transition” of these villages to an urban industrial world, despite the starting of many industries that did require land as well as labor from them.<sup>185</sup> As in the mining township, industries were rather a rupture, which altered the lives of those who found work in them. For their next generation, and the rest of the villagers, the impact was minimal.

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<sup>183</sup> The term that the Bhilai workers used was *supply mazdoor* (worker).

<sup>184</sup> According to regulation, a worker should be made a permanent worker after she has worked continuously for a period of ninety days in the factory.

<sup>185</sup> These experiences closely resemble that of the miners’ non-linear modernization described by James Ferguson (1999).

## The process of contract work in Bhilai

Contract work has been regulated since 1970 in India. This law insists that contract workers should be made regular workers after ninety days of work. This law has provided enough loopholes of the factory management to employ contract labor. As in the mining township, workers were recruited through contractors or *tekedars*. Unlike the mining township, there were many of them, and they conducted their operations inside their tents in the factory compound. This office was known as the “time office,” and was fully in charge of the contract workers that were recruited through the contractor. In the following, I discuss how contract work reduced the cost of production in the companies in the region. It turns out that such cost reduction was because of the tactics used by the contractor and the company to evade the 1970 contract labor regulations.

Keeping work irregular: In Jamul Cement Works, a worker was called from his locality by his contractor when work was available. If he was not at home this time, he missed work and pay. The company benefitted from this arrangement for work that was irregular like wagon loading and unloading. Instead of workers working on shifts and waiting in factory, they waited in their houses, and hence were not employed by the company. The company was not accountable for paying the worker

when they waited. In case they missed the call it was their mistake, and the company was not accountable.

Re-recruiting labor: Most companies employed workers for ninety days, dismissed and recruited them again. The workers had to sit at home in between for some days without working. This meant that the worker was not employed continuously for more than ninety days. The company needed these workers because they had developed some skills after working and it was expensive for the company to hire new laborers every time. For instance, Hemchand used to sit without pay for seventeen days in between his dismissal and re-recruitment. The molding job he did required some experience and the company wanted to rehire him, though it did not want him to be made a permanent worker.

Absence of proof: The workers were not given ID cards or any other identification, which would show that they were working for the company. Their recruitment papers were written in pencil to ensure that they could be erased in need. If some identification was given, at the end of ninety days, they were taken back and burnt. Payment was on a monthly basis, but there was no record. The workers had to put their signature on white paper. It was written later in that letter that they were paid much higher amount than the actual payment.

Collaboration with the labor department: If there was an inspection by the labor department, the management was tipped off by the officials. The workers were then hidden or asked to not report to work that day.

Collaboration with company unions: Company union leaders were paid by the company to represent their interests and not the workers.

These tactics depict company managers and contractors as shrewd people, cleverer than the mine management in devising schemes to fool the state and manipulate the workers. However, as I have mentioned in the previous chapters, it was not that the state employer was benevolent compared to the oppressive private industrialists. In fact, both groups acted in their class interest, and tried their best to continue with the practice of employing contract laborers. It was the fact that the workers could put the state employer in its place by questioning its legitimacy, and they could not do that to the private industrialists, that created the different experiences of the workers in the mining township and in Bhilai.

### *Company Unions*

Unlike the Bhilai Steel Plant that was governed by the Madhya Pradesh Industrial Relations Act (MPIR, now Chhattisgarh Industrial Relations Act or CIR), the labor relations in the private industries were governed by the Industrial Disputes Act. This meant that a trade union, which represented the workers adequately, could negotiate with the management, using the institutional mechanisms provided by the

state. While in the steel plant, INTUC was the solely recognized union by the management, the AITUC became the recognized “company union” in the private industries. Very little information could be collected about the work of these company unions. All the AITUC activists I talked to in Bhilai were involved in the unions in the mines of Dalli-Rajhara, Nandini and Hirri, which were also governed by the Industrial Disputes Act. They preferred to narrate stories about that experience, especially since I was interested in researching the emergence of the CMM. The current AITUC leader in Bhilai, who took me to the personnel manager of one of the companies was originally from Dalli-Rajhara, and preferred to talk about the emergence of the CMM. A well known trade union leader, Sambal Chakravarty, refused to be interviewed.

All workers that I interviewed conveyed negative impressions about the AITUC. It is possible that at one time the AITUC did try to organize workers in the region. However, it is also highly likely that their attitude to the contract workers was as discriminatory as in the mining township. Workers complained of how they approached the AITUC leaders for redress, but they got only assurance in return. Once the CMM was formed, the AITUC must have tried hard to break the CMM. The leader Sambal Chakravarty was accused of bringing in workers from outside to replace CMM-supporting workers.

The newspapers I read discussed the conflict between AITUC and CMM activists, which ended in scuffles and mutual injury. The CMM activists wanted to portray the



AITUC as forming a nexus with the industrialists to sabotage them. Such amiable alliances were likely at the company level. Many AITUC leaders must have been bribed by the company through money or favors to join force with them. AITUC must have also had a genuine interest in sabotaging the rise of the CMM, after seeing its rise in the mining township. As I argue in the next chapter, this must have created strange bed fellows for some time. However, since the national leadership and policies dictated what local unions could and could not do, it is also highly unlikely that the alliance with the industrialists rose to anything more than company level-associations. In sum, it can only be assumed that AITUC was representing most workers in the industries, and these workers had secured many rights through this union.

## *Conclusion*

In this chapter, I showed how some of the contradictions in the postcolonial nation building were embedded in the construction and trajectory of Bhilai as a national project. The steel plant and the township where its workers resided were developed as exemplary national spaces, where citizens lived disciplined secular lives. These spaces were defined by their separation from the chaotic spaces where the residual, undocumented masses lived as the urban working poor. Their work, though unaccounted, was essential for the sustenance of the steel township, precisely because it was unaccounted and hence underpaid.

The peripheries of the national space, however, refused to be considered redundant.

The insurgency that the contract workers in a cement company started in 1989 became a huge social force gathering the marginalized populations from the backyard of Bhilai, as well as peasants from the neighboring villages that had become dependent on the urban township for survival. We turn to an elaboration of these processes in the next chapter.

*Figure 4.1 Welcome to the Bhilai Steel Plant*



Source: Author, 2006

*Figure 4.2 Workers in a Sub-contracting Firm*



Source: Author, 2006

*Figure 4.3 “Chick Sellers” in the Minidoor*



Source: Author, 2006



*Figure 4.4 Steel rolling mill-worker with daughters and nieces*



Source: Author, 2006

## CHAPTER 5

### UNCONVINCED RADICALS: WORKERS' CONTENTION IN BHILAI

#### *Weakening of the Union*

Contract workers' protests started as an insurgent strike in Bhilai in 1989, and their demand was the status and benefits provided to the regular workers in the industrial region, for which they were eligible. They mobilized contract workers from all industries in Bhilai, enlisted the help of the CMM activists in the mining township, and started a full-blown strike. However, the workers have not been successful in achieving these demands. In this chapter, I argue that workers movement was not successful like the one in Dalli-Rajhara because these workers faced the industrialists with increased power due to neoliberal reforms, and a state, that facilitated capital. The industrialists aggressively resisted workers trade union tactics. The state ignored the workers' disciplined repertoire and responded with violence when the workers were forced to resort to disruption. Since these workers acted as citizens, accepting the legitimacy of the postcolonial state, they could never choose alternative radical tactics, though they were well aware of how the state had failed them.

## *Militant Unionism against the Industrialists*

Workers' unrest in the Jamul industrial area began in 1989 as a wild-cat strike in the ACC Jamul Cement Works. Trouble began when the INTUC allegedly entered into an agreement with the management for reducing workers in the wagon unloading department. Kisun, an expelled worker and CMM activist, narrated the resentment against the union and the management that led to the strike: <sup>186</sup>

We had been working in the wagon unloading section with no regular work or pay, and no regulation of working hours or conditions. The tekedar used to summon us from the *basti* whenever the wagons were ready for unloading. Sometimes we had to work continuously for eight hours. Initially we used to have six workers to unload a wagon. The management reached an illicit agreement with INTUC, and reduced the workers to three per wagon. We sat on a twenty four hour tool down in the wagon unloading area. The management told us our strike is illegal and ordered us out of the company gate. We were expelled.<sup>187</sup>

The above incidents at the cement company revealed the curious plight of the contract workers and the power of the industrialists. The workers had real grievances, which they tried to express as “workers” by going on an unannounced strike. However, the usefulness of such a strike existed only in those settings where all the concerned parties had an unwritten agreement. While this unwritten contract was valid in the state owned mining township, this was absent in the industrial area. The despotic industrialists had no qualms in expelling the workers. While the

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<sup>186</sup> In this chapter, I have borrowed from my two articles, Nair 2009 and 2011.

<sup>187</sup> Interviewed on June 6, 2006.



contract workers understood themselves as eligible labor, the industrialists considered them disposable labor.

The wild cat strike was not planned solely by the cement company workers. Once they felt the management entered into agreement with the INTUC, the workers contacted the AITUC and BMS for support. These unions did not pay heed to them, and hence they went to the mining township and contacted the CMM. The CMM does not seem to have any upper hand in organizing this resistance. It was already in the making, and the workers were a cause without a union and they were looking for a union to support them. Many had heard about CMM through the media coverage, especially of the police shooting in 1977 and the martyr day celebrations. Some of the workers had a relative that had married someone in the township, and they had attended some meeting or listened to some CMM leaders, and felt inspired. They went to meet the CMM leaders, enlisted their support for their resistance, came back and started their wild-cat strike.

### Passivity in accounts

Unlike the silencing of external influence in the Dalli accounts, the Bhilai industrial workers solely credited their "awakening" to Niyogi bhaiyya. The workers who started the movement in the Jamul Cement Works talked about their activism 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 make the contract workers permanent."

Instead of "starting" the movement, the Bhilai industrial workers used more passive language: they "listened," "heard," were "attracted," "understood," or "felt good," and thus joined the movement.

While this passivity in their accounts troubled me in terms of accuracy of how things happened in 1989, it also was evidence to my argument that these workers were "unsure" about their agency and tactics. Their multivalent experience of being subordinated to state and industrial power had placed them in a political space that was ambiguous goals and tactics.

### Mobilization of the contract work force

Soon, the entire contract workforce in Bhilai joined the movement. Most contract workers worked in different factories, lived in different neighborhoods, and rarely crossed one another's paths. How did the movement mobilize the contract workforce? First, the leaders appealed to the experience of being a Chhattisgarhiya local and treated like a second-class citizen in the industrial town. Second, they chose strategic locations in the industrial area that all people had to pass on the way to work, erected makeshift tents, and started giving speeches. This mobilized, not just workers, but many passersby that had no direct engagement with the industries. Third, the movement encouraged the workers to let their families participate in the movement. This created the mass support base of women, though

there were very few of them that were working in the industries. Finally, workers, especially the commuters, encouraged the villagers to participate.

Most Bhilai industrial workers became aware of the movement and its leaders while passing by the road intersections in their cycles and listening to the speeches. They recalled, they were "swept away": "We never knew there was a workers' movement like this before. First time we saw the battle of the people." 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." By listening to CMM leaders' speeches, they realized that their demands were not individual, their exploitation was universal, and their battle was the "battle of the people."

Many onlookers joined the movement inspired by its momentum. For instance, Syamvati, who has been very active in the movement since its beginning, was working in a school. She was on her way to work one day when she encountered the workers and joined them:

I was going for work to my primary school in my bicycle,<sup>188</sup> which was in *Khursipar*. I saw workers that were coming in my direction shouting slogans such as *Inquilab Zindabad*. These workers were from the BEC, working in dumping garbage. When I saw those people, I remembered what I had read in papers about the workers in Dalli-Rajhara. They have been fighting for poor people since 1977. When I saw them coming, in my mind, there was pride and sadness. I knew Kisunlal and Biselal who were among them. They were going in front. So I asked them where they were going. They said, sister we are going to Jamul, to join the fight against the ACC. I decided, I can go to the school tomorrow. Young women with children on their shoulders were

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<sup>188</sup> Angan vadi

marching shouting slogans. I joined them and started slogan shouting from there.<sup>189</sup>

Syamvati had already heard about the workers' struggle in Dalli-Rajhara.<sup>190</sup> She also personally knew a few workers in the industrial area. She saw women who were holding her children and shouting slogans. She was so excited by all this that she postponed her work (I can go to school tomorrow) and joined the movement. Since then, she has played a very active role in the movement. I became acquainted with her during a meeting in the CMM office. She had spent the night at the office participating in discussions, despite her ill health.

In Bhilai, women were not employed in large numbers as in the mining township. Some women were employed in janitorial work and were embedded in the movement from the beginning. However, from the experience of the struggles in Dalli-Rajhara, the CMM leaders felt that women were an important constituent of successful mobilization. Hence, the workers were asked to encourage their wives and mothers to participate in the movement. CMM also found a mass base in the villages near Bhilai from where workers commuted to work in the industrial region. In course of time, this mass base became the source of a show of strength by numbers.

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<sup>189</sup> Interviewed on July 22, 2006.

<sup>190</sup> Since her account was made in an interview conducted in 2006, it is possible that the reference to Dalli-Rajhara movement emerged from her later associations with the CMM. Many workers, however, mentioned that they knew about the Dalli-Rajhara movement from newspapers reports, or relatives.

## Tactics against the industrialists

The workers resorted to creating an industry-wide protest movement by the contract workers. They made a make-shift tent in the road intersection near the cement company and started a sit-in agitation, hunger strike and speeches addressed to passersby. The speeches were not about living conditions and minimum wages. They were about a life of “honor”<sup>191</sup> for a Chhattisgarhiya laborer that was creating the wealth for the “capitalist.”<sup>192</sup> The leaders reminded their fellow workers that the fight was not easy, since they were not fighting a particular industrialist, but the industrialist class that had national reach, and held the “state”<sup>193</sup> as a puppet in their hands. The violation of justice to the cement company workers fuelled the sentiments of the contract workers in the region. They all shared a sense of denial of “entitlements” due to an “unholy” alliance between the state and indigenous capital. Driven by the immensely powerful rhetoric of the leaders, workers joined the struggle, ignoring the threats of other trade unions and management.

Negotiations with the CMM mediated by the district administration and labor department were stymied since the management made two pre-conditions: the agitating workers would not be taken back and the wagon unloading workers would

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<sup>191</sup> Izzat

<sup>192</sup> Poonjipati

<sup>193</sup> sarkar

not be made regular workers. Later, the industrialists in the region expelled all the workers participating in the CMM- led agitation. They also gathered the support of the local bureaucracy in suppressing the movement. In 1991, the district magistrate in Durg announced that the CMM leader Niyogi was going to be extradited from the Chhattisgarh region. Niyogi was accused of inciting the workers in the region to violence and thus was held culpable under the MP People's Security Act.<sup>194</sup> Before the extradition could proceed, Niyogi was assassinated, allegedly by goons hired by the industrialists in September 1991.<sup>195</sup>

The assassination of Niyogi led to a politically tense situation in Bhilai. The CMM anger at the prime suspects in the Niyogi murder, the owners of Simplex Company, led to disruptive picketing at its factory gates. Street-fights and brawls at the factory gates<sup>196</sup> with alleged goons of the industrialists was reported in newspapers. The CMM complained about goons being stationed at the factory precincts and the industrialists demanded that the CMM activists be prevented from holding bamboo *lathis* and other weapons. In January 1992, CMM threatened a complete disruption in the industrial belt through "direct action"<sup>197</sup> any time, though not specifying the implications of the term. The CMM leader announced that on January 25<sup>th</sup> a day before the Indian Republic Day, a hundred thousand workers would venture into

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<sup>194</sup> *Swadesh*, April 15, 1990.

<sup>195</sup> *Deshbandhu*, July 30, 1991

<sup>196</sup> *pathrav-marpeet* in the Indian dictionary of contentious repertoire

<sup>197</sup> *sidhi karwahi*

Bhilai and disrupt the industrial area.<sup>198</sup> The frightened district administration declared Section 144<sup>199</sup> that prohibited the CMM activists from holding public demonstrations. Since the regulation prevented any gathering of activists, the direct action day went uneventful.

As mentioned earlier, the industrialists complained that the CMM was sabotaging “national production” and demanded the assistance of the state in putting down the labor resistance. The extent of the industrial tension in Bhilai created by the efforts of CMM activists is evident from the sixteen-kilometer long protest rally conducted by the industrialists, not a regular repertoire practiced by them. The rally on foot led by the Simplex and Kedia distilleries owners represented seventy-two industries in the industrial region. This incident received wide newspaper coverage. At the end of the rally at the district collector’s office, notices were distributed warning of a lockout, thus affecting the economy and the country’s interests and employment.<sup>200</sup> The local member of the state legislative assembly decried the event and said that the district administration was responsible for not executing what the state government wanted, and that labor was responsible for the unrest, fear and anarchy in Bhilai.

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<sup>198</sup> *Deshbandhu*, January 1, 1992

<sup>199</sup> Section 144 of the Indian Criminal Procedure Code, if declared in a region, bans assembly of four or more persons to maintain law and order.

<sup>200</sup> *Deshbandhu*, January 26, 1992.

The “anti-national activities” of the CMM were emphasized by the rival leftist unions as well, with whom the industrialists found strange bed-fellows. As discussed previously, the AITUC was already at odds with the CMM in the mining township where it accused the leadership of the latter of being separatists and Maoists, thus emphasizing its own nationalist credentials. Scuffles involving AITUC-supporting workers and CMM activists, aided by bamboo clubs and leading to bloodshed, were reported in Bhilai.<sup>201</sup> The AITUC constantly accused the CMM leaders of betraying the interests of the nations, and of allying with “imperialist” interests,<sup>202</sup> and bringing instability to the state-run steel plant.

Desperate that neither an agreement with the industrialists was reached, nor was the district administration allowing the activists to force the industrialists through disruption, the CMM planned squatting on public property. Venturing into confrontation with the state proved costly to the movement, since it was exposed to the oppressive face of the Indian state. CMM activists shifted to and squatted on a BSP property near Bhilai Power House railway station in the end, threatening that they would block the railway lines, the nervous system of the steel plant and the industrial area. On July 1, 1992, CMM activists blocked the railway line, angered by the disregard they faced from both the state and the industrialists. In the evening, the police fired at the gathering killing seventeen people, including an onlooker. The union office was sealed, activists were arrested, and a curfew was declared.

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<sup>201</sup> *Deshbandhu* January 17, 1992.

<sup>202</sup> International help, in the Indian left-wing vocabulary, means help from the United States and other “imperialist” forces.



## Legalization and blunting of the union

After the police shooting, according to the routine enquiry commission report submitted by Justice P.C. Aggarwal,<sup>203</sup> the cases of the expelled workers were taken over by the industrial court, seriously restricting the scope of the labor movement repertoire of the movement. As a CMM activist commented, “When our dates come, we go to attend the court cases. When a court decision is announced, we go to the road or the company gate and do a demonstration.” 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). Interviewees also narrated stories of death by starvation.

To force the industrialists to obey the court orders, the CMM started engaging in tactics such as *Gherao*, a form of harassment whereby workers detained their employers or managers on the premises, refusing to let them depart until their claims were granted, and *Band*, the total blockade of the area. In 1995, the workers

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<sup>203</sup> The report is available on the open-access digital archives of the V.V.Giri National Institute of Labour, New Delhi, <http://www.indialabourarchives.org/>, accessed on March 25, 2008.

blocked all gates of the ACC Jamul Cement Works, preventing entry and exit, and blocked the gates of the ACC colony where the regular ACC workers stayed.<sup>204</sup> The newspapers lamented the breach of routine life in the area, once again showing how much the well being of the regular workers mattered to them: <sup>205</sup>

Common people suffered a lot. Due to the blockade of roads, school buses and water supply trucks were stopped. An eleven- year old student going to school was beaten with sandals; and a sick person was stopped from being taken to sector-9 hospital [hospital operated by the BSP for the regular employees in the industrial belt]. Since the milk supply was stopped, the kids in the colony could not have milk, house maids did not go to work, and even a van that was carrying the dead body of an official's mother was not let inside.

The *Gherao* was repeated in 1996, when the industrialists used multiple tactics to avoid the re-instatement of the workers. The companies Simplex and Bhilai Engineering Corporation had advertised in newspapers that they would give interim compensation to the workers. Simplex management specifically mentioned that the workers need not come to the gate every day; they could send an application by registered post.<sup>206</sup> The CMM filed a case against the industrialists in the local police station, started a sit-in and picketing at the factory gates. On November 30<sup>th</sup> the activists *gherao*-ed Kedia, Simplex, Bhilai Engineering Corporation and Bhilai Wires and prevented the Bhilai Wires owner from going out of the company gate till late at night.<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> *Navbharat*, December 12, 1995.

<sup>205</sup> *Navbharat*, December 13, 1995.

<sup>206</sup> *Deshbandhu*, October 20, 1996.

<sup>207</sup> *Dainik Bhaskar*, November 31, 1996.

Despite these protests of desperation, the CMM activists have not been able to hold the industrialists accountable to the workers. Their demand, which initially was permanence of employment for contract workers, changed to re-instatement of expelled workers and to compensation for expelled workers. However, the industrialists have so far withheld any assistance to the workers in any of the forms.

### *Protests against the State*

The CMM's repertoire against the state consisted of meetings, rallies, petitioning, and demonstrations. I refer to those tactics as the *public repertoire*, since they were enacted for a wider audience, compared to the factory gate maneuvers. The leaders used fierce rhetoric against the state, but the real actions were cautious and contained. The CMM always issued prior notices before any public repertoire as required by the district administration. The CMM used this opportunity to issue threats of "intense" action that were never carried out, and what followed were routine non-disruptive practices. Discipline in public demonstrations was a "rule" and anything beyond that was outside the realm of the "possible, natural, or imaginable" (Gordon 1996:16).

The main public tactics used were celebration of martyr days with the co-operation of the district administration, peaceful demonstrations with prior notice and threats of disruption never followed by action. The CMM started celebrating the July 1

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martyr day commemorating the victims of the 1992 police shooting in Bhilai. All martyr days followed the same routine: A rally from the cement company road intersection to the railway station where the police shooting happened followed by offering worship at the railway platform near the site of shooting, followed by a public meeting. The CMM always obtained permission from the authorities before conducting the event, and the police force that was usually present during the event co-operated with the organizers. The following is the description of one such martyr day in 1996:

Bhilai Nagar: Today noon, a huge rally started from the industrial belt with red-green flag and CMM banner and reached the gate of the power house railway station. Morcha workers entered the station platform with the widows of the martyrs and offered flowers at the place of martyrdom. The District Superintendent of Police and a huge police force including women ensured normalcy at the station. Soldiers [possibly the Central Industrial Security Force] carrying guns were also seen. After the offerings, the activists crossed the railway line to go to the public meeting site at the Great Eastern [national highway] road intersection. At that time the railway traffic was stopped for almost one and a half hours. The Howrah-Ahmadabad express was stranded at Bhilai-3 station from 2:00 to 3:30 p.m. The police did not interfere with the incident and hence the program moved very peacefully.<sup>208</sup>

As the report said, there was complicity and co-operation on the part of the administration, and the police force peacefully co-existed with the activists. In fact, a news report in 1996 titled “the resting policemen and the CMM” had a photograph of the railway platform, where the police were sleeping with the permission of chatting activists nearby, before a CMM program.<sup>209</sup> Another report in 1998 stated

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<sup>208</sup> *Deshbandhu*, July 2, 1996.

<sup>209</sup> *Deshbandhu*, July 6, 1996.

that the workers did not cross the railway line on the martyr day, following an agreement with the local administration.

The CMM threatened disruption when court decisions were delayed, but the threats were not followed by action. When the Indore industrial court was contemplating announcing a decision in the July of 1996, the CMM leader Thakur declared that there will be a rail blockade on the martyr day of July 1 as a prelude to the court decision and demanded “permission” from the central railway minister who was earlier sympathetic to the movement.<sup>210</sup> As the earlier discussion on the same martyr day showed, the event went “peacefully” with co-operation from the side of the administration and the CMM and there was no intended rail-blockade. During the public meeting on that martyr day, the CMM leader announced that if the Indore court decision was not favorable to the CMM, there would soon be an “agitation.” He mentioned that the rail-blockade of the martyr day was “symbolic” of the real agitation to follow.<sup>211</sup> The Indore court decision was delayed and on July 10th, the CMM activists engaged in “picketing” as the start of the agitation, which involved slogan shouting. The newspaper commented that the picketing was “peaceful” and did not disrupt normal activity at the road.<sup>212</sup> In August 1996, Thakur again announced that the agitation could take a “fierce” form and the workers were ready for a “historic struggle.” The CMM, without notice, conducted a public meeting at the

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<sup>210</sup> *Dainik Bhaskar*, July 2, 1998.

<sup>211</sup> *Deshbandhu*, June 23, 1996.

<sup>212</sup> *Deshbandhu*, July 2, 1996.

road intersection as a prelude on August 31st.<sup>213</sup> Another newspaper reported that Thakur exhorted the activists to get ready on September 2<sup>nd</sup> with their flags and bamboo clubs (*jhande-dande*) for the violent agitation.<sup>214</sup> On November 22,<sup>nd</sup> the Division Bench of the industrial court at Indore ordered that eight hundred workers should be taken back by the industries, putting an end to the call for agitation. A similar pattern was repeated in October 1999, when CMM was awaiting another court decision from the Raipur industrial court regarding the expelled workers. Threats of rail and road blockades and mass suicide were made during a routine torchlight procession in the industrial belts of Bhilai and Raipur.<sup>215, 216</sup> Once again, none of the threats were enacted by the CMM.

Whenever the CMM did engage in a disruptive act against the state, like a rail blockade, they voluntarily committed to arrest and removal by the police. In 1997, there was an unannounced railway blockade, surprising the district administration. The police arrested and removed around six hundred workers sitting on the railway lines for almost two hours.<sup>217</sup> The newspaper also reported that the state bus that was taking the arrested activists to Raipur jail broke down and the workers refused to be taken in trucks and did slogan shouting.<sup>218</sup> An activist narrated to the author,

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<sup>213</sup> *Deshbandhu*, July 10, 1996.

<sup>214</sup> *Deshbandhu*, September 1, 1996.

<sup>215</sup> *Dainik Bhaskar*, September 1, 1996.

<sup>216</sup> *Dainik Bhaskar*, October 6, 1999.

<sup>217</sup> *Dainik Bhaskar*, October 11, 1999.

<sup>218</sup> *Navbharat*, April 21, 1997.

the subsequent protest at the jail against the low quality tea and flat bread<sup>219</sup> provided; indicating that the anger at the state was expressed indirectly, compared to the industrialists. Narrating an earlier incident when CMM acted without prior notice, she further explained the difference between “secret” and “non-secret” forms of contention:

We were planning for a *gherao* in the state capital Bhopal since none has listened to our voices. It was a secret plan. When a notice is given, it's a non-secret plan. It was decided that people will get into the train from different places at different times. Around two hundred and fifty people boarded the train from Bhilai power house. They sat on the train in two bogies in the general compartment and started slogan shouting. Then the police came and asked them to get down. The same happened in all other places too. The police emptied some buses on the road and took all of us to Raipur jail.

From the activist's account, it is evident that the *gherao* was simply intended to be a threat. If the intention was to carry out the “secret plan” to reach Bhopal, one hundred and fifty miles away, and engage in a disruptive tactics, the activists would have been discrete about the journey. At least they would not have engaged in slogan shouting in a general compartment, thus drawing attention. Thus they were voluntarily equipped for the eventuality of the police arrest.

One reason why the state extended its co-operation to the CMM sponsored events was that the provincial state government was reprimanded by oppositional political parties and national political leaders for the police shooting. After the police shooting, there was public outcry against the chief minister and his ministerial

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<sup>219</sup> roti

cabinet for tackling the agitation using force. Questions were raised regarding the contract labor system in the legislative assembly. In the 1993 assembly elections that followed, a new ministry came to power that governed till 2003. The new chief minister, though, did not get involved in the court proceedings, but offered compensation to the victims of the police shooting. He even made a statement that “The contribution of Niyogi to the workers can never be forgotten. To win, the workers should follow the path outlined by Niyogi.”<sup>220</sup> CMM leaders regularly met with the Durg district administration to decide on the compensation offer and even to discuss of a venue to place the statue of Niyogi.<sup>221</sup> All police cases against the CMM activists, not including murder or murder attempts and attack of *sarkar* or police, were withdrawn. Thus the state accommodated the CMM and the latter was co-operative.

The CMM leadership consistently framed its opposition to industrialists and the state as a defense of the institution of the nation-state against its corrupt operators. In 1991, when the struggle in Bhilai was in the initial stage, Niyogi went to the national capital, Delhi, with CMM activists, and submitted a petition to the president of India with fifty thousand signatures of workers in Chhattisgarh, discussing the plight of the Chhattisgarhiya people. He also met with the prime minister and national political leaders and let them know that the workers wanted facilities “within the system.” CMM activists conducted protest demonstrations in front of the

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<sup>220</sup> *Deshbandhu*, April 29, 1997.

<sup>221</sup> *Navbharat*, October 10, 1995.



labor and industrial departments of the central government, as well as visited the national monuments. The meeting was central in clarifying the stand of the CMM as supportive of industrialization for nation-building, while opposing the “anti-labor regulation” activities of the industrialists in the Bhilai region.

The idea that the “state” was good, while its operators were bad and it was the obligation of the CMM to protect the institution of the state, underlay the CMM repertoire. CMM used to have advertisements in newspapers requesting the public to donate books to the “Martyr Niyogi Book Bank.” Most of the advertisements depicted a first person appeal of a child, whose father had been expelled, to support his or her education. One such advertisement read:

My name is Uttara. I study in sixth standard in the government school in Bhilai. My father was thrown out of work on January 24, 1992. He used to work for many years as boiler-operator in the factory of Kedia. His mistake was to join Niyogi’s red-green flag union and ask for the right wages. The court decided on December 10, 1995 that my father and all his friends should be taken back to work and given their right. Even after that the case is still dragging in the high court. The court is not able to deliver justice, nor is the sarkar doing anything. I want to pursue my studies, and become a judge so that I can give work to workers like my father and the rightful price for their work. And I also want to punish those who break the law. Will you be on my side in fulfilling my dreams?<sup>222</sup>

Through this plea to the newspaper reading public, CMM drew attention to the fact that its struggle was for what is due to the workers “rightfully” and the Kedia factory, court and sarkar were on the wrong. It emphasized that the system of the

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<sup>222</sup> *Deshbandhu*, June 30, 1996.

court and sarkar was not wrong; it was the particular way they currently operated that was wrong. To set them right, children like Uttara had to get educated (unlike her parents who were not educated) and be judges to deliver justice to the poor.

The CMM maintained a law-abiding relation with the state. It used a social movement repertoire such as public meeting, pamphleteering, solemn vigils, demonstrations, and petition drives and statements to media against the state. A close reading of the repertoire shows that the relation was not absolute and hegemonic; it could be summed up only as ambivalent. The CMM did tread the boundaries of what was “legal” and “illegal,” like when squatting on public property and volunteering arrest. It was fiercely critical of the state, though participating in state attempts at reconciliation. It challenged the state treatment of them as lesser citizens. However, the CMM participants made sure that they operated “within the system.” It could be argued that the routine of threats, which were not meant to be followed by action, was partly due to the fear of the 1992 railway blockade and consequent police shooting. However, such fear of repression was not the only explanation. The 1992 police shooting was associated with a feeling of betrayal by the state, rather than fear, in the narratives of the participants. One of the interviewees said: “We were already blinded by the tear gas and were in the process of leaving the railway line when they started shooting at us without notice.” The fact that the police started shooting without prior “notice” at the order of the apathetic state, pained the CMM activists, as if the former breached an unwritten contract.

The tactics used against the national and the provincial state governments were different. Unlike the industrialists that were immediate and recognizable, the state was multi-level. The local bureaucracy was immediate and the provincial state government was distant, but both were clearly sympathetic to the industrialists. The national state was politically more accessible, but was twenty-four hours away by train. The central government-owned BSP, its infrastructure and citizen workers represented and symbolized the apathy of the national state to the Chhattisgarhiya workers. The public repertoire embodied such nuances in relations and perceptions. In contrast to the distant and hence vague national state, the CMM opposition to the provincial state representatives in Bhilai was more of an everyday maneuver.

Though there was not much newspaper coverage of what was happening between the industrialists and the CMM after 1999, my field visits in 2003, 2004 and 2006 indicated that routine (hence not news-worthy) agitations were going on at the factory gates. Many factory gates had make-shift tents where CMM activists regularly performed sit-in demonstrations, shouted slogans and sang songs. In 2006, while I was in the field, a court order asked the ACC to take back the workers and give them compensation for the wages lost in between. To force the ACC management to obey the order, the CMM workers blocked the factory gate for eighteen hours and performed picketing. There was *lathi* fight with the “goons” of industrialists in which CMM activists, including women, were injured. Every morning before the first shift the current and expelled workers from the company gathered at the gate and shouted slogans (see Figures 5.1 and 5.2).

## *Activism and Meaning Making*

While the union in Bhilai did not succeed in its goals on absorption of the Chhattisgarhiya contract workers as regular workers in the industries, it still has been sustaining a movement for almost seventeen years. How could the union sustain itself after repeated setbacks? In this section, I point to how the participation in the union created interpersonal meanings for the participants. I suggest that this was activism in retreat, withdrawal from the political field of contention to a moral, personal field.

Unlike the language of collective awakening in the miners' accounts, the cement workers described their movement as a brotherly relationship, built on filial emotions toward Niyogi rather than expectations that their demands would be fulfilled. Most of my interviewees remembered a fraternal metaphor that Niyogi used in his speeches: "He was talking about two brothers; one brother is given lathi (a bamboo club) by the industrialists to beat the other brother who is unionizing. I felt that it is true; all workers are brothers."

This fraternal metaphor must also have been necessary 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."

The workers' use of fraternal signifiers and filial emotions in their participant accounts transferred meaning, desires, and feelings to a familial terrain rather than one of action and direct agency. The Bhilai industrial workers felt that their movement was not as successful as the Dalli miners' were since they could not show successful outcomes in terms of realizing workers' interests. The industrialists refused their demands early on, and most of them were expelled in the beginning. The state favored the industrialists,<sup>223</sup> and Niyogi was assassinated, thus weakening the workers' bargaining power considerably. The union, with the help of the contributions of the Dalli miners, did run services, including an office canteen and a health clinic, for some time. However, what the workers remembered or chose to remember fondly was how they gave each other a helping hand when there was no work. The interviewees always recalled fixing each other's roofs, which needed yearly repair.

The Bhilai industrial workers' fraternity was not bound by territories; they imagined that the Chhattisgarhiya workers were part of the universal working class:

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

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<sup>223</sup> To give one instance of the reality of state support to the industrialists, a previous researcher told me that none of the files of the complaints filed by the workers were available with the state-appointed labor officials. Most probably, they had been destroyed to suppress evidence.

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.<sup>224</sup>

With the expulsion of the workers, the assassination of their leader, and the weakening of their movement by a court takeover of their cases, the Bhilai industrial workers must have found more than mere rhetoric in Niyogi's words, which helped their everyday sustenance. That they were "interpellated" in a universal workers' identity must have helped them to live beyond the movement objectives of permanent jobs. They asked me questions about the Chicago workers' movement and the 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 the bastion of "imperialist" intentions.

The Bhilai workers outlined the role of their union as a "problem solving mechanism,"<sup>225</sup> a social support group that intervened in contract workers' everyday lives. The union helped them to run police cases against neglectful and "inhuman" employers. An interviewee mentioned that the union took up the case of a worker who had an accident after working for twenty-four hours. Since he was a contract worker, the management refused to give him proper treatment. The friends of this worker approached the union. Being pressured by the union, the management provided medical treatment to this worker for two years in the steel

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<sup>224</sup> Interviewed on June 13, 2006.

<sup>225</sup> Javier Auyero uses this term to describe the functioning of Peronist clientele networks in Argentina. (Auyero 2001).

plant hospital. Though he has started moving again, he has not been given any employment and was sitting idle.

The Bhilai industrial workers' union was understood in terms of the sacrifices involved in community building and the fulfillment attached to it. The services of the union were extended to everyone who was in need. 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 a 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.

The union was in fact an essential component of their life, a requirement of their ontological wellbeing.

### Perceptions of the state

Unlike the miners' narratives about the triumph they had against the political order through electoral victories and mass mobilizations, Bhilai workers' narratives had a broader narrative. They referred to the nexus of the state, industrialists, and politicians who were not only subjugating their interests as workers, but were also detrimental to the nation. The Bhilai workers frequently talked about the industrialists as looters of the nation's wealth and accused the state agents of conniving in this banditry. This "national" concern was relatively absent in the

miners' accounts. Part of the reason was that unlike the miners, who faced mostly a single employer state, the industrial workers constantly faced the state in its multiple and layered forms: state government, district administration, labor department, justice system, security force, and the police—all of which seemed to favor the industrialists. The state agents were understood through a more familiar narrative lens of corruption,<sup>226</sup> as well as a more radical lens of "oppressors."

A worker in a casting factory in Bhilai narrated the success of industrialists thus:

After the [Bhilai] steel plant was made, the riches here were so great that these people [industrialists] were restless in their homes. They wanted to come here. They said, "let us go to Bhilai, the people there are simple and easily manipulated." Initially they started small industries, like a small leath-machine operating unit in a shed. They started their work like that. Now they are becoming steel king and casting king. How did they become rich? Of course they loot workers, but they also loot the Bhilai Steel Plant.<sup>227</sup>

The industrialists were identified as a "class" of greedy and manipulative "outsiders" who came to loot the "simple" workers of Chhattisgarh.<sup>228</sup> These industrialists were looting not just the workers, but also the riches created by the Bhilai Steel Plant, which is state's property, and hence belongs to the workers as

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<sup>226</sup> Akhil Gupta has argued that corruption is the narrative lens through which state agents are routinely viewed in India, while others argue how in practice, the narrators themselves collaborate in producing such state governance. The Dalli workers, in this instance, point at their ideals of state and leadership, faced with the failures of the postcolonial developmental state. Akhil Gupta, "Narratives of corruption: Anthropological and fictional accounts of the Indian state." (Gupta 2005, also see Gupta 2006)

<sup>227</sup> Interviewed on July 22, 2006.

<sup>228</sup> The miners and the Bhilai workers perceived themselves as simple country bumpkins that were easily manipulated. Terms like *Chhattisgarhiya Parbuddhiya* (A Chhattisgarhiya follows another's brain) were used by the workers and villagers alike to refer to their simple mindedness.



people of India. The workers also have a separate claim to the steel plant as natives of Chhattisgarh, whose wealth has enabled the creation of the steel plant.

While the industrialists were only displaying their selfish interests as a class, the state agents were implicated in selling the interests of the Indian nation due to "greed." Workers expressed their helplessness at the connivance of the local labor department officials in allowing the irregularities perpetuated by the industrial owners. Along with their own loss of rights, the workers bemoaned the plight of Bhilai, a genuine state project, having been destroyed at the hands of the industrialist-state agent nexus. The state agents who were responsible for ensuring the welfare of the workers collaborated with the industrialists:

If we go to administration or to the labor department, there are no results. The labor department people, for instance, inform the management [of factories] before each inspection. The management then keeps only regular workers and shows that safety requirements are met. The labor department knows everything. Even after getting paid from the government for everything, the officials there do this out of greed. This is how Bhilai is.

The workers implicated the police in assisting their subjugation to the industrialists, but this implication was qualified and nuanced. One worker suggested, "The industrialists' people even wear police dress and beat the worker. One pregnant comrade<sup>229</sup> was beaten on her belly by one such fake policeman." Notable here is the characterization of the cruel policeman as fake, a goon of the industrialists, rather than a true employee of the state. Despite the troubled interactions between the police and the CMM activists, especially during the police

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<sup>229</sup> sathi

shooting of 1991, the workers were reluctant to implicate the police, in part because they belonged to the same [subaltern] social class. Instead, the activists always implicated the police officers in charge who were giving the orders.

Workers had lost faith in the court system, to which their cases had been referred to by a state instituted inquiry 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." Workers 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, which was five hours away, because their names did not appear on 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 that all accused, except the hired assassin, were 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."

With the increased power given to the private industrialists due to economic liberalization, the formation of the new state of Chhattisgarh, and the consolidation of the power by the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), even the idea of the state as a guarantor of workers' rights was falling apart. The state as the highest national authority, not the greedy state agents, was openly supporting the expulsion of excess

labor: "Atal Bihari Vajpayee [prime minister of India during the BJP rule from 1998 to 2004] gave this speech in Bhilai that any industrialist can throw away any worker, if the worker is in excess. 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." Informants cited cases of workers arbitrarily thrown out immediately after this speech.

### *Unconvinced about Radical Tactics*

While the Bhilai industrial workers, driven by desperation, could have taken a radical stand against the state and capital than the Dalli miners, they were still unconvinced about radical tactics and attitudes. While their union helped the workers to face the absent, withdrawing, or countering state, it excluded certain other forms of politics.

When I was doing research, the Maoist movement was strong in the Bastar region in Chhattisgarh. This region had a predominant tribal population, which was mobilized by the Maoists. Allegedly, the Maoists were creating a contiguous liberated corridor cutting through the tribal dominated belt from Andhra Pradesh to Bihar through Chhattisgarh, Orissa, and Jharkhand.<sup>230</sup> The movement was declared a "problem" that demanded a military solution, and efforts like state-sponsored military action were in place to counter the movement.

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<sup>230</sup> Nandini Sundar, "Bastar, Maoism and Salwa Judum," *Economic and Political Weekly* (2006), 3187-92.

The Bhilai industrial workers expressed happiness in the growth of the Maoist movement. They were keen to understand the Maoist "problem" from the point of view of "historical juncture," which also emphasized their historic 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." The workers were enthusiastically planning public performances, picketing factory gates, and scuffling 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 to plan 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 honor, and whatever you get out of it, will be your earnings. Our movement is continuing like that. Little by little Chhattisgarh is waking up.<sup>231</sup>

The Bhilai industrial workers, nevertheless, were not ready to embrace radical politics challenging the state. One activist said, "CMM agrees to the aim of the naxalites, but do not 'right now' follow the path it takes. There are two types of path, through friendship and animosity. It takes the friendship path now." While the above remark could be treated as a cautious response to an outsider, there was more evidence that the Bhilai industrial workers' politics were still anchored in the

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<sup>231</sup> Interviewed on June 21, 2006.

past of old-style "nationalist" trade unionism. For instance, they did not join the World Social Forum in Mumbai in 2004, instead affiliating with an oppositional Mumbai Resistance Forum, which advocated a return to more militant and nationalist resistance to "imperialism."<sup>232</sup>

### *Experience of CMM in a Village*

In this section, I examine how the participants in CMM upturned the class hierarchy, albeit for a while, in the village of Kachandur. Episodes like this happened in many other villages near Bhilai as well as Dalli-Rajhara. I conducted fieldwork in this village on a different project and hence had access to these accounts. This example, I argue, that how much the people in the Indian countryside are aware of the unchanging class structure that encases them and the ease with which they topple it if given a chance. It also shows how such change could be nullified in a short period, given the lack of a broader political support system.

Kachandur was a village just around five miles from the city of Bhilai. I introduced the commuters to Bhilai from this village, as well as told the tragic story of two young people. It was a peasant village, with all of its households engaged in cultivation directly or indirectly. Many supplemented their earnings by working in the industrial plants in the city, to which they commuted by bicycles or mopeds.

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<sup>232</sup> See <http://www.ilps-news.com/central-info-bureau/events/mumbai-resistance-2004/program/>, accessed February 2, 2009.

In Kachandur, a few households belonging to the *Kurmi* caste,<sup>233</sup> controlled most of the land and were hence powerful compared to the majority that are small peasants or landless agricultural laborers belonging to the artisan and lower castes. The distinction currently was manifested in the form of farms that were green throughout the year through irrigation, compared to the others that had to lie fallow. A notable feature of the village was a dirty stream that cut through it, reeking of the stench of chemicals as well as dead fish. This stream was the drainage from distilleries in Bhilai. This stream had polluted the ground water in the village leading to diseases, especially among children.

The CMM leader in the village was a peasant owning around three acres of land, given as a gift to his *Brahman* family, being invited to the village as priests. His house, nothing more than a two-room mud hut, a yard with the sacred Indian basil plant, and cattle shed, also hosted the village CMM office, marked by the red and green paint on the door. He joined the CMM on September 29, 1991, a day after Niyogi was assassinated. He was earlier associated with the BJP and was the president of the local co-operative bank on a Congress Party ticket. When Niyogi, an outsider, sacrificed his life for the sake of Chhattisgarh, Krishna, in a nationalist moment, left the national political parties discussed above and joined the CMM.

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<sup>233</sup> Kurmis are a representative cultivating caste. Prior to the Abolition of Proprietary Rights in 1951, they held a number of villages in *Malguzari* rights. Gazetteer of India, Madhya Pradesh, Raipur. 1967: 111.

Within years, in Kachandur, the CMM gained the support of eighty percent of the households, and the village assembly.<sup>234</sup> The remaining twenty percent (just 10-12) households were the Malguzars of the colonial period. This division crosscut caste: the CMM was led by the Brahman priest and included small farmers from the landowning Kurmi caste, the rest belonging to the sahoo<sup>235</sup> and lower castes. Many wealthy *Rawats*, by occupation the cattle grazers, supported the Malguzar group.

The class divide, the crystallization of enmities that were generational, was cemented by an incident that gained wide media attention. The incident came to be known as the Durga Bai murder episode in which an old lady from the landowning class was killed and her ornaments were stolen on 25<sup>th</sup> November 1994. The CMM accused a relative of the woman of the murder, and started an agitation demanding the immediate arrest of the culprit. The specificities of the CMM agitation are evident from the letter written to the state Chief Minister by one among the accused.<sup>236</sup> The letter claimed that the CMM leader who considered himself “a comrade” and his clique of eight people ran the village. This group accused the complainant and many others of murder, abused the police superintendent and district collector, and threatened to deliver punishment to the culprits personally. Many had been pressurized to join the CMM, under threat that agricultural workers would abandon their households and they would be extradited from the village.

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<sup>234</sup> Panchayat

<sup>235</sup> The *sahoo*, the majority caste in Chhattisgarh, is a business community of traditional oil pressers turned money lenders, but the members are poor and underrepresented.

<sup>236</sup> Published in *Nav Bharat*, July 20, 1995.

Now the verity beneath this letter was questionable. It is a one- sided account of persecution published in a newspaper, the local correspondent of which was mostly likely a young friend of the complainant who was a student in the Industrial Training Institute, a vocational school for the youth, in Bhilai. Nevertheless, during my first visit to Kachandur in 1997 I could see that some households were extradited from the village by the CMM, which meant that the villagers refused to work in their land or households, stopped talking to them, and prevented them from using the community property, and were ridiculed in public. The “Durga Bai Murder” was talked about whenever a prospect was available,<sup>237</sup> and even during my field visit in 2004, the “killers” were singled out and shown to me.

Thus, through the CMM, the villagers inverted the power relations in the village. They were able to form a class-based alliance that crosscut caste and marginalized the hitherto powerful. They used the institutions provided by the post-colonial State like the village panchayat to mobilize their resources. They also resisted the state by disregarding the immediate representatives of the state like the police and the district collector who for them were allied with the landed elite.

When I visited Kachandur in 2004, the panchayat was ruled by the BJP. People told me that CMM had lost much of its mass support to the BJP. The divisions in the

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<sup>237</sup> For instance, the village *Sarpanch* led a march against interference in Durga Bai murder investigation in 1996. *Dainik Bhaskar* October 10, 1996. The Hatyakand became one among the many rapes and killings that the CMM would refer to indicate the disintegration of law and order in the state. It was cited as a reason for the CMM decision to celebrate June 26<sup>th</sup> 1999 as the Black Day. *Deshbandhu* June 24, 1999.



village were no longer prominent as in 1997. In 2006, the CMM leader in the village was accused of becoming a “corrupt” and “pleasure-seeking” leader driven to extremes due to “alcohol” in the public discourse. Despite this failure by the movement to sustain the overturning of hierarchies, it was still an accomplishment.

### *Bhilai Now*

During my visit in 2006, despite the failures and desperations, the CMM activists were showing the potential of revival, which was new compared to my experience in 2004. The office was vibrant with activity following a court victory against the Jamul Cement Works. Figure 5.3 shows cycles lined up the alley in front of the CMM office in Bhilai. In this section, I discuss the martyr day celebration of 2006, which displays the above vibrancy. I closely watched the CMM office in Jamul, Bhilai in June 2006, while it was throbbing with activity surrounding the martyrs day of July 1st. Even the mundane rituals that varied from petition writing, circulating tea, arguing, making pamphlets, rehearsing cultural programs and organizing protest marches, reeked of excitement.

The martyrs’ day of July 1 commemorated the police firing that instantaneously killed sixteen activists of the CMM in 1992. The activists were protesting on the train line against their expulsion from the factories, and the refusal of the state bureaucracy to redress their grievances. Since then, every year the CMM has celebrated the martyrs’ day with huge processions from near the office to the train line where the killings happened and worship of the martyrs photographs at the end

of the train station platform. In 2006, the CMM participants had prepared grand celebrations in view of the court victory against the cement factory that obligated the factory to re-compensate the workers or take them back. There was general excitement, though everyone knew that the company need not comply with the court judgment and most probably would appeal in a higher court.

An artist from Raipur, brother of a CMM activist, came to live in the office temporarily with his wife and two small kids. He was there to paint the banners for the martyrs' day, and related to others his newly found commitment to the movement: "I was till now following the wrong path. Now I am doing the right thing by being part of the movement." His brother and others in the office spent their time rehearsing for the street play that the cultural troupe planned to perform in urban neighborhoods and the villages. This also meant the entire group of actors and singers that included young boys and girls were constantly breaching the rhythm of the office. The entire office yard was filled with banners spread around, that presented an atmosphere of festivity, accentuated by the clothes of women and kids hanging on strings, reminding one of a busy household with visiting relatives.

The excitement surpassed the office to the worker neighborhoods in the vicinity. My ethnographic interviews were interrupted by my interviewees being asked from the office to participate in the preparations. The activities included announcing (using loudspeakers in cycle rickshaws) in the neighborhoods, painting the walls with slogans in Bhilai, and distributing posters. Very often, in the middle of interviews,

messenger boys arrived passing the message of an impromptu after-dinner meeting at the office. The interviews also become a site of access when women of the household were requested by my companion from the office to gather their neighbors and join the procession on July1.

Efforts were made to spread the word of the celebration to the villages, some as far as in Rajnandgaon (not less than 200 miles from Bhilai). For the villagers, participation in the celebration followed the cycles of village life, alternating with cultivation and festivities. Going to Bhilai with family and friends was looked forward to, though the possibility of farming in the event of unpredictable rain could not be ignored. I accompanied the cultural troupe of the CMM to the two villages. The villagers, especially women, kids and old men, were entertained by the troupe and assured the CMM activists of their participation in the celebration. Figure 5.4 shows the performance of the street play in one of the villages.

On the day of the martyr day celebration of July1, the CMM office in Bhilai had been converted into a green room. Girls solicited my help in wearing the green 'saris' with red blouses (Indian female dress, usually worn by adults). Two guests had arrived from the city of Mumbai, both of them activists in a workers' movement. A group of women suddenly arrived in a jeep from some far off village. They were tired after the obviously long journey and squatted on the office verandah. The CMM leader sat down to talk to them and hinted at the exploitation in the Indian villages and

explained it using the labor theory of value. She told them that the only way to resist is to organize. The women nodded in excitement.

We all proceeded to the road intersection from where the martyrs' day procession to the train station was to begin. It suddenly started raining (awaited by peasants in Chhattisgarh) and the participants hurried to take shelter in nearby shops. The loudspeaker demanded that the "fighter comrades" beat the rain and join the procession, and the participants left the shelters and formed lines getting completely drenched in the rain. A collective vow was taken at the statue of Niyogi at the road intersection, and the procession began. Someone commented that even on the fateful day of July 1, 1992, it was raining like that. Women volunteers made sure that no one broke the procession, not even to cross the road. Slogans were shouted passionately through the loud speakers. Once the procession reached the meeting ground where a makeshift stage has been made, a group of representatives walked to the train line where the police shooting had occurred. People took turns in lighting incense sticks, and offering flowers on the photographs of the martyrs. Widows lamented and fainted, which I knew from my experience in the mining township as part of routine celebrations. A public meeting followed where speeches were made touching upon global politics, U.S. imperialism, fall of the welfare state and the need for workers and peasants to organize and resist all of them (See Figure 5.5) Meanwhile some men and women moved to the other side of the meeting ground to attend the vendors selling mangoes and knick-knacks, before returning to their villages in the evening.

I visited the CMM office again after a gap of two days and saw a group of people assembled in chairs and talking about the successful performance of the martyrs' day. The office was otherwise empty, resembling a stage that the performers have left. I asked, the office clerk what the next activity of the CMM was going to be and he replied: "we have September 28 martyr day coming along." In the meanwhile, he and others would have to take care of the court cases, and also the sowing and weeding in their village fields. They were also planning to go for a public meeting and demonstration in Delhi along with a similar workers' movement in Delhi, which showed that the movement was building alliances and associations to combat the new era.

### *Conclusion*

The tactics of the industrialists in Bhilai showed how their class and national interests were not contradictory. They were able to portray the CMM activists as sabotaging national production and employment, and enlisted help from the local administration in suppressing the movement. The 1990s was also the time when economic liberalization measures began in India, leading to private investment and labor de-regulation in the industrial sector. Economic liberalization might have exacerbated the power of the industrialists and further weakened the power of the workers.

Unlike the industrialists with whom the CMM had a clear and visible clash of interest, the state was too vague for the CMM to grasp and contest, making it easier

for the state to contain the movement. The state was assuredly patrimonial in attempts at reconciliation and protection of the workers while engaged in their social movement repertoire. However, despite being a redistributive state, it did not overpower the interests of the industrialists in favor of the workers. Through its attempts to maintain peace, it ensured that industrial production was not sabotaged. While the judiciary made court decisions favoring the workers, the same were not enforced, leaving the workers in penury.

Bhilai workers, a fragmented group of contract workers in different industries, were brought together as a fraternal group by the union. Facing a withdrawing developmental state following economic liberalization in the 1990s, and industrialists that had increasing power, the union had become more like "family," a sheltering metaphor often repeated by 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 everyday survival issues, and created meaning beyond their immediate lives.

*Figure 5.1 Workers Protests at the Factory Gate*



Source: V.V. Giri National Labour Institute, Archives of Indian Labour

*Figure 5.2 Workers Protests at the Factory Gate*



Source: Author, 2006



*Figure 5.3 Cycles in the Alley in front of the CMM Office*



Source: Author, 2006

*Figure 5.4 Street Play in a Village*



Source: Author, 2006



*Figure 5.5 July 1 Celebrations*



Source: Author, 2006

## CHAPTER 6

### RIGHTS AND RESISTANCE IN THE NEOLIBERAL ERA

#### *Changing Discourse of Rights*

In 2005, the Ministry of Rural Development of the Government of India implemented the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), which provided a legal guarantee for one hundred days of employment in every year to adult members of any rural household.<sup>238</sup> The Act has been hailed as a testimony to the ruling United Progressive Alliance Government's<sup>239</sup> commitment to helping the poorest of the poor.<sup>240</sup> This was the first national legislation to guarantee employment, while many such schemes existed as temporary schemes.<sup>241</sup> NREGA has been claimed as a success. Dreze and Khera<sup>242</sup> have argued that the scheme has

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<sup>238</sup> [http://www.indg.in/agriculture/rural-employment-schemes/nergs/copy\\_of\\_nrega](http://www.indg.in/agriculture/rural-employment-schemes/nergs/copy_of_nrega), accessed on November, 2010

<sup>239</sup> Headed by the Congress Party

<sup>240</sup> <http://www.thehindubusinessline.in/2005/08/24/stories/2005082400771000.htm>, accessed on November 2010

<sup>241</sup> [http://www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/downloads/FP2P/FP2P\\_India\\_Nat\\_%20Rural\\_Emp\\_Gtee\\_Act\\_C\\_S\\_ENGLISH.pdf](http://www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/downloads/FP2P/FP2P_India_Nat_%20Rural_Emp_Gtee_Act_C_S_ENGLISH.pdf), accessed in March 2011.

<sup>242</sup> *Frontline*, Volume 26-Issue 01: Jan 03-16, 2009

been beneficial to the rural poor, though workers have had to battle for this entitlement, like all others. For instance, in Rajasthan, in 2006-7, the average rural worker per household worked for as many as seventy-seven days under this scheme (Dreze and Khera *ibid*). In other regions, rural wages were rising, and migration was slowing down (Dreze and Khera *ibid*).

Quite recently, on March 23, the same government introduced what has been claimed as an anti-labor law, titled the Labour Laws (Exemptions from Furnishing Returns and Maintaining Registers for Certain Establishments) Amendment Bill, 2011, in the upper house of parliament. This Bill exempted employers of establishments employing up to 40 persons from the obligations of almost all the basic labour laws governing matters such as minimum wages, payment of wages, working hours, contract work, and payment of bonus.<sup>243</sup> Though initially the exemption was for a larger number of employees, protests from the left parties reduced the number to forty. It is argued that even with the number of employees down to forty, nearly seventy-eight percent of the workforce in the manufacturing sector would be out of the purview of the basic labour laws.<sup>244</sup>

In April 2011, while I am concluding this dissertation, workers of Jamul Cement Works are doing yet another sit-in at the road intersection near the company (now named Niyogi *chow* or Niyogi road intersection) to demand that the company implement two successive orders of the industrial court and high court for

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<sup>243</sup> *Frontline*, Volume 28 - Issue 09: Apr. 23-May. 06, 2011

<sup>244</sup> *ibid*

regularization of contract workers.<sup>245</sup> Holcim, the Swiss multinational that has taken over ACC, has been refusing to implement these orders or, for that matter, the cement wage board agreement, which is binding on it since 1978 and according to which contract labor was, prohibited altogether in cement production. Holcim paid US\$8 an hour to European workers and US\$2.17 a day to Indian contract labor (32 times less). Its top executive's annual salary was US\$ 771956 in the year 2008; in that year the annual salary of a contract worker in Bhilai was US\$811- (1000 times less). The top 10 executives of Holcim earned more than 20 million dollars in a year; that was more than the 10 years arrears that would have to be paid in regularizing 100 contract workers from the year 2000.

There has been a shift in the discourse of rights in India. Workers, especially the ones like those in Bhilai, no longer have entitlements as workers. But as the poor, they have entitlement to work, only if they leave their contentions in Bhilai and return to their villages. This shift in discourse thus resonates perfectly with the fragmentation of politics that I have been trying to point out in this dissertation. What resistances are feasible to counter such state directed fragmentation of workers' activism? Are there still spaces for collective resistance in the face of capital that seems relentless in its pursuits?

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<sup>245</sup> This piece of information, and the analysis of the wages of the workers have been provided by the CMM leader Sudha Bharadwaj.

## *Resistance or Survival?*

Many scholars have pointed to how the state is significant in protecting workers' rights as citizens in the neoliberal era (Seidman 2007, Agarwala 2008). In India, central trade unions like the AITUC have become more grassroots organizations mobilizing support on the pressing demands of labor and questioning the legitimacy of the state. They have been able to play a significant role in preventing the complete repudiation of labor laws (as in the case of the labor bill discussed in the beginning) and in enabling the passing of bills for social security like the employment guarantee scheme. It does seem that citizenship has been valued in this era, as an inclusive category that ensures social protection to all, and not as exclusive labor entitlements.

However, for the workers I studied that were not represented by the central unions, and those who have been struggling for basic citizen rights from the beginning, does citizenship mean anything? These workers experienced second-class treatment based on their rurality and ethnicity. They have been on the other side of the boundaries of development and modernization in India. Yet my evidence shows how many such marginalized populations are dependent on the very processes of modernization for their survival.<sup>246</sup> Agriculture in Chhattisgarh that is still seasonal cannot absorb all its workers.<sup>247</sup> Even the new state identity of Chhattisgarh did not

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<sup>246</sup> Partha Chatterjee has argued that the industrial transformation in India might not have the potential to absorb all its labor (2008). This was not good news for the workers.

<sup>247</sup> Chhattisgarh and famines have a long history of coevalness. Official documents show famines being recorded in 1834-5 (when price of grain increased to 25 seers per rupee, compared to 140 seers normally, leading to 1000 death), in 1868-9, 1895, 1896, 1897, 1900, 1907-8, 1918-19, 1920-

translate to sustainable practices to alleviate poverty; rather they continued to become stronger foothold of private and global capital that need not pay attention to the local environmental concerns. If the workers were still dependent on the state for their survival, they had a reason.

### Political culture of economic nationalism

While the Maoists were around the corner, these workers were very reluctant to embrace them not just because of their need to survive. These workers participated, and built their “social movement” on a “nationalist” dominant political culture, which did not accommodate the ongoing changes in the institutional role of the state.<sup>248</sup> The workers had a keen awareness of the change in the nature of the state and their relations to it. Though these workers were characterized by their marginality in dealing with big institutions of the state and the industrialists, their everyday confrontations with the latter gave them a much clearer picture how the affairs were, and less of an uncertainty, unlike their middle class and organized sector counterparts. Still they were reluctant to radicalize their politics. I suggest that this was because their politics was anchored in a political culture of good, secular citizenship conducive to nation-building. This dominant political culture was fostered through institutions such as state-owned and privately owned industries, trade unions and the national state. When institutions like private industries and the

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21. Gazetteer of India, Madhya Pradesh, Raipur, date missing in the document, could be 1967? (195-199).

<sup>248</sup> I define political culture as the legitimate ways of doing politics (Ray 1999, Gamson 2003, Swidler 1986, 2002).



BJP and the very local state colluded in the neo-liberal era against workers, the old political culture still prevailed, which right or wrongly prevented the possibilities of radical resistance.

The Indian state should learn some lessons from the Chinese state, which it treats as its competitor in many other respects. Alvin So has shown that the Chinese state has supported workers against transnational corporations in many instances. (So 2010) He argued that following the “rightful resistance” of Chinese workers against the employment practices of transnational corporations, which did not question the state, the state decided to have labor regulations more in congruence with the interests of labor. The new labor law that was introduced in 2008 set standards for workers on probation and overtime, and especially for migrant workers and expanded the role of redress through the court as well as the role of official unions and collective bargaining. Though I have noted earlier that legalization, might blunt labor activism, it seems that in the Chinese case, labor activists have been able to use that for bargaining for labor rights.

### *Class and citizenship*

Through my findings, I wish to restore the significance of working class identity in creating a sense of agency to social groups in the periphery of the nation-state.

Sorting through the ethnographic evidence from central India, one sees how working class still remained a salient identity around which the aspirations of my ethnographic subjects crystallized. A corollary to that is the disenchantment with citizenship, to which they were still attached seemingly by convention. In social

science research that is pre-dominated by the notion of citizenship, attention should be paid to whether the same has become a reified category, like class before. In the neo-liberal era, in countries like India, where the state has increasingly become a facilitator of private investment, is there still a potential for new imaginaries of a universal working class brotherhood, which was alive once, and is still alive among these contract workers?

The workers, in personal interviews, underlined a class-consciousness, which they projected over peasant, regional and even citizen identities. Their accounts showed how being workers and forming a union created a sense of collective agency, an “awakening” through which they re-constructed their lives. Yet they also demanded social citizenship from the state, recognition of rights and entitlements as citizen-workers, equal treatment with regular workers, improvement in everyday living, and general inclusion in the space of the nation-state, from which they were partially excluded. They used their community affiliations, affections and networks to expand the union to the countryside and to the neighboring towns, and gain leverage as a regional political party. They even succeeded sending their representatives to the state legislature, competing with the conventional power of the Congress Party. It could be argued, citing a single one of those versions that the workers “were acting” (Gould 1995) as workers, as citizens, or community members. I show, however, that they existed simultaneously, each expressed within a particular relation in which the workers were participating.

The workers did not engage in these practices “as they please[d]” (Marx: 1852); nor were their identities entirely arbitrary. They did not choose from a set of infinite or limited possibilities and nor did they optimize their outcomes. These workers were situated in multiple, historically inscribed social relations. They were influenced by ideology of the “working class” tempered by the lived experience of being contract workers, participation in the nation-state as citizens, and the historically given “habitus” (Bourdieu 1990) of community associations to draw from, as well as the experience of being in a political system where such associations were used and repertoires were drawn from. In other words, these were “intentional and non subjective” (Foucault 1990:94). They were strategies with particular objectives, but nonetheless without creators. These varied influences made them class-conscious workers, citizens and community members simultaneously.

### *Community and Violence*

Despite the conventional Marxist objection to religion as pacific, or violent, the workers struggles have mobilized resources based on religion. The use of religious symbolisms by the CMM calls for cross-national comparisons, especially with the Latin American social movements. For instance, liberation theology re-interprets the role of Jesus Christ as a revolutionary preaching against poverty and social classes. In the case of the CMM, the good and evil distinction in the Hindu religion has been appropriated to represent the character of the workers and the industrialists. The movement also secularized many religious rituals associated with

sacrifice, worship, celebrations related to death, which have then been legitimately utilized for political mobilization.

Another implication of my findings is in showing how both class and community have been used at the service of effective politics. This finding directly challenges scholarship on India, other Asian and the Middle Eastern societies, in which community “essentially” stands for the non-rational, religious domain of human practice, which when politicized, has the potential for violent subversion of the state and civil society. I show that community has also been used at the service of humanist practice, or actions based on the perception of social justice and reason. This hitherto under-examined potential of community shows that community is pliable to multiple articulations, even those that are not very distant from what is considered its very enemy, the *Gesellschaft*.

## *Conclusion*

In this dissertation, I asked two questions: 1) Why did the Dalli-Rajhara miners’ movement for absorption as regular workers succeed and why did Bhilai industrial workers’ movement for absorption as regular workers not succeed? 2) What impact did the success and failure have on the political subjectivities of these workers? I argued that the shift in modes of production shaped workers’ protests as well as political subjectivities. In the first town of Dalli-Rajhara, manually employed mine workers in state-owned iron-ore mines persuaded the state employer to grant them labor rights. Their insurgent movement began in 1977, when the Indian state was aggressively pursuing economic nationalism. The workers could coerce the state to

be accountable: All manual workers were eventually absorbed as regular mineworkers. In the second town of Bhilai, inspired by the first movement, casually employed workers in privately owned industries contended with their employers for labor rights. This movement began in 1990, which was the end of the era of economic nationalism and beginning of the neoliberal regime. The workers lost to neoliberalizing capital, withdrew from activism, and contemplated radical tactics.

The real success of the Dalli and Bhilai workers, I suggest, was in carving out a recognizable social space for the ethnically Chhattisgarhiya workers within the framework of the nation-state. They used this new social space to challenge, counteract, and replace the hesitancy of the Indian state to grant them justice and entitlements as citizen-workers.

Workers and their movements were encased in national political economies and political systems, cultures and processes, and not on autonomous terrains; transnational labor activism is possible only by knowing these systems and processes. I suggest that understanding the situatedness of workers' politics is important to know what tactics and politics are possible and feasible.

*List of Abbreviations*

ACC	Associated Cement Company
AITUC	All India Trade Union Congress
BEC	Bhilai Engineering Corporation
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
BMS	Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh, Indian Workers' Union
BSP	Bhilai Steel Plant, not to be confused with Bahujan Samaj Party
CITU	Center of Indian Trade Unions
CMM	Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha, Chhattisgarh Liberation Front
CMSS	Chhattisgarh Mines Sramik Sangh, Chhattisgarh Mine Workers' Union
Congress Party	Indian National Congress
CPI	Communist Party of India
CPI (M)	Communist Party of India (Marxist)
GOI	Government of India
HSL	Hindustan Steel Limited
INTUC	Indian National Trade Union Congress

MMWU	Metal Mine Workers Union
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
MP	Madhya Pradesh
MPIR	Madhya Pradesh Industrial Relations Act
NREGA	National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme
SAIL	Steel Authority of India Limited
SKMS	Samyukta Khadan Mazdoor Sangh, United Mine Workers' Union

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