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FORUM ARTICLE

Anthropological and Historical Perspectives on India's Working Classes

ANDREW SANCHEZ

Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Advokatenweg 36, 06114 Halle, Germany
Email: sanchez@eth.mpg.de

CHRISTIAN STRÜMPELL

South Asia Institute, University of Heidelberg, 69120 Heidelberg, Germany
Email: struempell@uni-heidelberg.de

Abstract

With reference to original ethnographic and historical research on India, the papers collected in this forum suggest conceptual refinements that might re-centre the study of class in regional scholarship. Through discussions of class politics in industrial, construction and agricultural contexts, the authors interrogate the conceptual oppositions between stably employed fordist labour forces and the 'working poor' that have often constrained ethnographic and historical analyses of India's working classes. Inspired by Marxist historiography, this forum engages with the historically contingent emergence of Indian working classes through different types of labour, gender and ethnic struggles, and considers the complex political boundaries that are produced by such processes.

Anthropological and historical perspectives on India's working classes

The papers collected in this forum are written by ethnographers of India, who share in an assumption that the study of 'class' still matters for the social sciences. The authors presented here broadly situate themselves within a Marxist tradition, which considers that a relationship to the means of production is an important determinant of one's class position, yet also considers how this relationship is

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itself related to the social facts of ethnicity, kinship and gender. Whilst there is currently no shortage of academic interest in the wage labourers, entrepreneurs and agriculturalists who constitute India's working classes, it occurs to the editors of this forum that regional analytic work would benefit from focussing more attention on the class *concept* itself. Through discussions of industrial employment regimes in eastern Indian steel towns (Sanchez and Strümpell), agricultural cash cropping in Kerala (Steur), sexual politics on Chhattisgarhi construction sites (Parry) and labour contracting in Tamil Nadu (De Neve) the purpose of this collection of papers is to critically revisit the idea of the Indian working class, and suggest how the concept might be refined in ways that enhance its analytic utility.

The anthropology of India currently benefits from pervasive critical attention to the processes of economic liberalization, which has inspired a rich body of work that considers how macro-economic change allows India's middle classes to access new avenues of distinction: from the growth of gated estates[1] to increasingly diverse forms of commodity consumption.[2] The field has likewise inspired attention to the impact of liberalization on the rural poor, whose agricultural base is eroded by cheap imports, corporate resource extraction and the predations of creditors.[3] But whereas research on the living standards and habits of India's working and middle classes

[1] Brosius, C. (2009). 'The gated romance of 'India shining': visualising urban lifestyle in images of residential housing development', in: M. Gokulsing and W. Dissanayake (eds), *Popular Culture in a Globalised India: A Reader*, Routledge, London, pp. 174–191; Waldrop, A. (2004). Gating and class relations: the case of a New Delhi colony, *City and Society* 16(2): 93–116.

[2] Brosius, C. (2010). *India's Middle Class: New Forms of Urban Leisure, Consumption and Prosperity*, Routledge, London; H. Donner (ed.). 2011. *Being middle class in India. A way of life*, Routledge, London; Fernandes, L. (2006). *India's New Middle Class: Democratic Politics in an Era of Economic Reform*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis; Gupta, D. (2000). *Mistaken Modernity: India between Worlds*, HarperCollins, New Delhi; Lukose, R. (2009). *Liberalization's Children: Gender, Youth and Consumer Citizenship in Globalizing India*, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina; Rajagopal, A. (2001). 'Thinking about the new Indian middle classes: gender, advertising and politics in an age of globalisation'. In: R. Rajan (ed.) *Signposts: Gender Issues in Post-Independence India*, Kali for Women, New Delhi, pp. 57–100; Sridharan, E. (2004). The growth and sectoral composition of India's middle class: its impact on the politics of economic liberalization, *India Review* 3(4): 405–428; Thapan, M. (2004). Embodiment and identity in contemporary society: femina and the new Indian middle-class woman, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 30(3): 411–444.

[3] Aiyer, A. (2007). The allure of the transnational: notes on some aspects of the political economy of water in India, *Cultural Anthropology* 22(4): 640–658; Banerjee, A. (2009). Peasant classes under neoliberalism: a class analysis of two states, *Economic and Political Weekly* 44(15): 49–57; Bijoy, C. R. and Ravi Raman, K. (2003). Muthanga: the

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has expanded in recent years, the class concept itself has undergone little less intellectual refinement. This is not altogether surprising, and relates to a general decline of focus upon the class concept in the social sciences since the postmodern turn. With excellent exceptions,[4] in many areas of the world, ethnography has progressively jettisoned the assumption that social structure is an appropriate object of analysis, and has begun to turn its back on the broad social formations of class altogether.[5] In some sense, this process most likely mirrors the evangelical individualism of neoliberalism.[6]

However, the decline of the class concept is not distributed evenly across the study of different global regions. As Chibber suggests in a discussion of the decline of class analysis in South Asia, the study of class, capitalism and imperialism notably persisted in Latin America and Africa in spite of the postmodern turn.[7] Explaining this trend, the revolutionary socialist and anti-imperialist struggles taking place in Africa and the Americas in the 1960s had a pronounced impact on the students of these areas. In the generations of regional scholarship that followed, questions of kinship, ethnicity, gender, religion, colonialism, statecraft, development and labour relations were widely discussed

real story—Adivasi movement to recover land, *Economic and Political Weekly* 38(20): 1975–1982; Deshpande, R. S. (2002). Suicide by farmers in Karnataka: agrarian distress and possible alleviatory steps, *Economic and Political Weekly* 37(26): 2601–2610; Ghosh, K. (2006). Between global flows and local dams: indigenousness, locality and the transitional sphere in Jharkhand India, *Cultural Anthropology* 21: 501–534; Halliburton, M. (1998). Suicide: a paradox of development in Kerala, *Economic and Political Weekly* 33(36–37): 2341–2345; Mishra, S. (2006). Farmers' suicides in Maharashtra, *Economic and Political Weekly* 41(16):1538–1545; Mohanakumar, S. and Sharma, R. K. (2006). Analysis of farmer suicides in Kerala, *Economic and Political Weekly* 41(16): 1553–1558; Mohanty, B. B. (2005). 'We are like the living dead': farmer suicides in Maharashtra, Western India, *Journal of Peasant Studies* 32(2): 243–276; Ravi Raman, K. (2005). Corporate violence, legal nuances and political ecology: the cola war in Plachimada, *Economic and Political Weekly* 40(25): 2481–2483; Stone, G. D. (2007). Agricultural deskilling and the spread of genetically modified cotton in Warangal, *Current Anthropology* 48(1): 67–103.

[4] Evans, G. (2006). *Educational Failure and Working Class White Children in Britain*, Palgrave Macmillan, London; Evans, G. (2012). 'The aboriginal people of England': The culture of class politics in contemporary Britain, *Focaal*, Volume 2012, Number 62, pp. 17–29; Wacquant, L. J. D. (2008). *Urban Outcasts: A Comparative Sociology of Advanced Marginality*, Polity, Cambridge; Malden, Massachusetts, .

[5] Carrier, J. (2012). The Trouble with Class, *European Journal of Sociology*, 53: 263–284.

[6] Gregory, C. (1997). *Savage Money. The Anthropology and Politics of Commodity Exchange*, Harwood Academic Publishers, Amsterdam, pp. 1–40.

[7] Chibber, V. (2006). On the Decline of Class Analysis in South Asian Studies, *Critical Asian Studies* 38(4): 357–387.

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in terms of class struggle, sometimes with quite creative results.[8] By comparison, remarkably little of the vast body of work produced about India in the past 40 years has applied the class concept in such a fashion. Although during the heyday of academic Marxism, *The Journal of Peasant Studies* and *The Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* (*Critical Asian Studies* since 2001) published a number of quality class analyses of Indian agrarian and urban wage labour relations, the topic remained of relatively marginal interest in a field that was still dominated by the tropes of caste and colonialism.[9] Following the postmodern turn of the 1980s, many regional class analyses were led by the Subaltern Studies group based at Sussex and Canberra Universities: a development that inspired a sharp rise in the number of regional labour studies,[10] which

[8] Bloch, M. (1975). 'Property and the end of affinity', in M. Bloch (ed.), *Marxist Analyses and Social Anthropology*, Malaby, London, pp. 203–228; Comaroff, J. and Comaroff, J. (1991). *Of Revelation and Revolution Vol I: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago; Comaroff, J. and Comaroff, J. (1997). *Of Revelation and Revolution Vol II: The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago; Gill, L. (1994). *Precarious Dependencies: Gender, Class, and Domestic Service in Bolivia*, Columbia University Press, New York; Harris, O. (1995). 'Ethnic Identity and Market Relations: Indians and Mestizos in the Andes' in B. Larson and O. Harris (eds), *Ethnicity, Markets and Migration in the Andes: At the Crossroads of History and Anthropology*, Duke, Durham North Carolina, pp. 351–390; James, C. L. R. (1980). *The Black Jacobins*, Allison and Busby, London; Meillassoux, C. (1981). *Maidens, Meal and Money: Capitalism and the Domestic Economy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge; J. Nash (1979). *We Eat the Mines and the Mines Eat US*, Colombia University Press, New York; Rodney, W. (1969). *Groundings With My Brothers*, Bogle-L'Ouverture, London; N. Scheper-Hughes (1993). *Death without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil*, University of California Press, Berkeley; Seddon, D. (1978). *Relations of Production: Marxist Approaches to Economic Anthropology*, Frank Cass, London; Stephen, L. (2002). *Zapata Lives! Histories and Cultural Politics in Southern Mexico*, University of California Press, Berkeley; Taussig, M. (1980). *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America*, University of North Caroline Press, Chapel Hill.

[9] Andre Beteille's classic essays on class and Jan Breman's work on agrarian relations stand out in Indian sociology of this period. See Beteille, A. (1979). Homo Hierarchicus, Homo Equalis, *Modern Asian Studies* 13 (4): 529–548; Breman, J. (1974). *Patronage and Exploitation: Changing Agrarian Relations in South Gujarat, India*, University of California Press, Berkeley.

[10] Arnold, D. (1980). Industrial Violence in Colonial India, *Comparative studies in Society and History*, 22, 2, pp. 234–255; Chakrabarty, D. (1981). Communal Riots and Labour: Bengal's Jute Mill-Hands in the 1890s, *Past and Present*, 91: 140–169; Chakrabarty, D. (1983). On Deifying and Defying Authority: Managers and Workers in the Jute Mills of Bengal *circa* 1890–1940, *Past and Present*, 100: 124–146; Chakrabarty, D. (1989). *Rethinking Working-class history: Bengal 1890–1940*, Princeton, Princeton New Jersey; Ramaswamy, E. A. (1983). The Indian Management Dilemma: Economic vs Political Unions, *Asian Survey*, 23, 8, 976–990; Ramaswamy, E. A. (1988). *Worker Consciousness and Trade Union Response*, Oxford, New Delhi.

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Chandavarkar noted was paradoxically accompanied by a general degeneration of the class concept itself.[11]

Inspired by E. P. Thompson's Marxist historiography of the English working class,[12] throughout the 1980s Subaltern Studies provided a platform for the loose collection of historians who united under Ranajit Guha to recover the colonial history of India's subaltern classes.[13] The Subaltern Studies historians borrowed freely from Thompson's early analyses of English labour politics to theorize class as the outcome of political struggle, whilst using his later studies of pre-industrial plebeian culture to frame a class analysis of regional and ethnic distinctions.[14] However, the Subaltern Studies scholars applied Thompson's ideas in a way that reduced the subtlety of his class concept to a prescriptive typology, so reifying an Orientalist notion of a robust and pre-capitalist Indian culture. In classic analyses of wage labourers and the peasantry, Subaltern Studies championed the insurrectionist politics of its subjects, whilst simultaneously claiming that their consciousness was still governed by the feudal hierarchies and communal conflicts of traditional village life.[15]

Working on an assumption that the weakness of capitalist development in colonial India prevented the emergence of an Indian working class,[16] Subaltern Studies' analyses of Indian workplaces unwittingly reproduced a series of entrenched colonial stereotypes:

[11] See Chandavarkar, R. (1997). 'The Making of the Working Class': E. P. Thompson and Indian History, *History Workshop Journal* 43: 177–196. Notable exceptions during this period include Holmström's monograph on South Indian industrial labour, John Harriss' analysis of the relationship between the urban labour aristocracy and working poor, and Jan Breman's study of rural labour migration in Gujarat. See: Breman, J. (1985). *Of peasants, migrants, and paupers: rural labour circulation and capitalist production in west India*, Oxford University Press; Holmström, M. (1984). *Industry and Inequality. The social anthropology of Indian labour*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge; Harriss, J. (1986). The Working Poor and the Labour Aristocracy in a South Indian City: A Descriptive and Analytical Account, *Modern Asian Studies*, 20, 2, 231–283.

[12] Thompson, E. P. (1966 [1963]). *The Making of the English Working Class*, Vintage Books, New York.

[13] See Guha, R. (1982). On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India. In R. Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies I*,Oxford University Press, Delhi, pp. 1–8.

[14] Thompson, E. P. (1978). Eighteenth-Century English Society: Class Struggle without Class? *Social History* 3 (2): 133–165. See Sanchez and Strümpell, this Issue.

[15] See Arnold, Industrial Violence in Colonial India; Chakrabarty, Communal Riots and Labour, On Deifying and Defying Authority; Guha, R. (1999 [1983]). *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, Duke University Press, Durham North Carolina, p. 76.

[16] Guha, On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India, p. 6.

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most notably the prevalence of violence and communalism on industrial shopfloors[17] and workers' acceptance of managerial paternalism.[18] However, as is suggested by Chandavarkar, Indian capitalism had not failed to develop during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but rather had assumed a distinctly 'Indian' shape based upon cyclical labour migration between rural agriculture and urban industry.[19] This pattern was antithetical to the ideal-type industrial proletariat against which Subaltern Studies measured its imperfect peasant subjects, but which was well disposed to the creation of rational and radical class consciousness, rooted as much in neighbourhoods as in workplaces.[20] As Chibber and Sarkar[21] have argued, the Subaltern Studies reading of Thompson inspired a cultural essentialism that failed to properly consider the wider political-economic contexts in which subaltern histories are placed: principally the fact that internal divisions of caste, gender, region and religion were frequently the aggravated and contested products of industrial capitalism itself, rather than the expression of timeless and intrinsically Indian cultural logics.[22] During the years in which the history and anthropology of India might well have developed a class concept that embraced the finer points of Thompson's work, influential areas of the field seemed to have run out of ideas. The Foucauldian 'textual turn', which the Subaltern Studies collective took after its fourth volume in 1984, eventually bereaved its subjects of agency altogether by constructing colonial rulers as the motors of Indian history.[23]

We like to believe that the cupboard looks a little less bare than it once did. And although the tone of this forum is critical, it is nonetheless hopeful. Galvanized by the economic liberalization

[17] Arnold, Industrial Violence in Colonial India; Chakrabarty, Communal Riots and Labour.

[18] Chakrabarty, On Deifying and Defying Authority.

[19] Chandavarkar, 'The Making of the Working Class'.

[20] Ibid: p. 179. And See Chandavarkar, R. (1994). *The origins of industrial capitalism in India. Business strategies and the working classes in Bombay, 1900–1940*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

[21] Chibber, On the Decline of Class Analysis in South Asian Studies; Sarkar, S. (2000 [1994]). 'Orientalism Revisited: Saidian Frameworks in the Writings of Modern Indian History', in V. Chaturvedi (ed.), *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial*, Verso Books, London; New York, pp. 239–255.

[22] Cf. Sen, S. (1999). *Women and Labour in Late Colonial India. The Bengal Jute Industry*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge; Joshi, C. (2003). *Lost Worlds. Indian Labour and its Forgotten Histories*, Permanent Black, Delhi.

[23] Chandavarkar, 'The Making of the Working Class', p. 191.

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of the 1990s, regional scholarship has since turned its attention to the macro processes of modern Indian political economy, in an effort to understand the mechanics that underpin the widening gap between India's haves and have-nots.[24] Significant studies of this process include Kalyan Sanyal's modelling of post-colonial global capitalism, and Partha Chatterjee's provocative analysis of its effects in *Politics of the Governed*.[25] As suggested, the 'neoliberal turn' in regional scholarship has more broadly inspired a serious engagement with the habits and politics of India's middle classes. The wealth of quality work which this project has so far produced would indicate that the field still has something distinctive to offer the academy. Closer to this forum's interests, Chandavarkar's call for a more subtle and historically grounded class concept has been met in some excellent regional histories,[26] whilst a generation of Indian labour studies have addressed important empirical questions regarding sociality, work discipline, employment security, labour migration and enterprise.[27]

However, although a critical mass of scholars has put the study of India's working classes back on to the regional agenda for the coming

[24] Corbridge, S. and Harriss, J. (2000). *Reinventing India: Liberalization, Hindu Nationalism and Popular Democracy*, Polity Press, Cambridge; Harriss-White, B. (2003). *India Working: Essays on Society and Economy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

[25] Sanyal, K. (2007). *Rethinking Capitalist Development: Primitive Accumulation, Governmentality and Post-colonial Capitalism*, Routledge, New Delhi, Chatterjee, P. (2004). *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Political Society in Most of the World*, Columbia University Press, New York.

[26] Gooptu, N. (2001). *The Politics of the Urban Poor in Early Twentieth-Century India*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York; Joshi, *Lost Worlds. Indian Labour and its Forgotten Histories*.

[27] Breman, J. (1996). *Footloose labour: working in India's informal economy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge; Breman, J. (2004). *The making and unmaking of an industrial working class: sliding down the labour hierarchy in Ahmedabad, India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi; Chari, S. (2004). *Fraternal Capital: Peasant Workers, Self-Made Men, and Globalization in Provincial India*, Stanford, Stanford California; Cross, J. (2010). Neoliberalism as unexceptional: economic zones and the everyday precariousness of working life in south India, *Critique of Anthropology* 30(4): 355–373; De Neve, G. (2005). *The Everyday Politics of Labour. Working Lives in India's Informal Economy*, Social Science Press, Delhi; Fernandes, L. (1997). *Producing Workers: The Politics of Gender, Class and Culture in the Calcutta Jute Mills*. University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia; Harriss-White, B. (2003). *India Working: Essays on Society and Economy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge; Heuze, G. (1996). *Workers of another world: Miners, the countryside and coalfields in Dhanbad*, Oxford University Press, Delhi; Nadeem, S. (2011). *Dead Ringers: How Outsourcing is Changing the Way Indians Understand Themselves*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey; Nisbett, N. (2009). *Growing up in the Knowledge Society: Living the IT Dream in Bangalore*, Routledge, London; Parry, J. P. (2013). 'The Embourgeoisement of a Proletarian Vanguard?' in S. Jodhka (ed.), *Interrogating India's Modernity: Democracy, Identity and Citizenship*, Oxford University Press, Delhi.

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years, the field has yet to engage in a sustained rethinking of the class concept itself. Many regional analyses still tend towards the use of binary tropes that clothe class struggles in terms of distinctions between relatively homogenous sectors of the rural poor and the formally employed urban elite.[28] Whereas this work brings the field into productive dialogue with comparative cases of neoliberal reform elsewhere,[29] Indianist studies are nonetheless somewhat inclined to analyse broad class struggles without necessarily interrogating the formations that fit within them. Set within this disciplinary history, the aim of this collection of papers is to take class seriously, not only as an ethnographic field through which one might encounter the trends of neoliberalism, but as a conceptual framework in its own right, whose utility demands a greater degree of collective attention.

The papers collected here do not present any sweeping conclusions on the composition of the Indian working class. However, what they do suggest is a shared idea about what type of thing the social phenomenon of class is, and what the appropriate methods for studying it are. Whether they discuss why steel workers do not strike in support of labour migrants (Sanchez and Strümpell); how class hierarchies structure sexual politics on building sites (Parry); why modern indigeneity relates to class struggle in rural Kerala (Steur) or if labour contractors in Tamil Nadu really are the exploiters that some believe them to be (De Neve), what unites this forum is the notion that class is a historically contingent state of power that is rooted in

[28] Cf. Sanchez, A. (2012). Deadwood and Paternalism: Rationalising Casual Labour in an Indian Company Town', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 18: 808–827; Questioning Success: Dispossession and the Criminal Entrepreneur in Urban India, *Critique of Anthropology* 32.4: 435–457.

[29] Carbonella, A. and Kasmir, S. (2008). Dispossession and the anthropology of labor, *Critique of Anthropology* 28(1): 5–25; Freeman, C. (1998). Femininity and flexible labor: fashioning class through gender on the global assembly line, *Critique of Anthropology* 18(3): 245–263; Genda, Y. (2005). *A Nagging Sense of Job Insecurity: The New Reality Facing Japanese Youth*, International House of Japan, Tokyo; Harvey, D. (1987). Flexible accumulation through urbanization: reflections on 'post-modernism' in the American city, *Antipode* 19(3): 260–286; Harvey, D. (2003). *The New Imperialism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford; Harvey, D. (2005). *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford; Kasmir, S. (1999). The Mondragon model as post-Fordist discourse: considerations on the production of post-Fordism, *Critique of Anthropology* 19(4): 379–401; Kosugi, R. (2008). *Escape from Work: Freelancing Youth and the Challenge to Corporate Japan*, trans. Mouer R., Trans Pacific Press, Melbourne; Mathur, C. (1998). Transformation as usual? The meanings of a changing labour process for Indiana aluminium workers, *Critique of Anthropology* 18(3): 263–277; Wilson, A. (1999). The empire of direct sales and the making of Thai entrepreneurs, *Critique of Anthropology* 19(4): 401–423.

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relations of production, but which nonetheless relates dialectically to the social structures of ethnicity, gender, kinship and popular politics. This class model is dynamic, and owes a good deal to Thompson's emphases on production and political struggle as the motors of history. It also invites a much closer degree of attention to the local details that fall between the cracks of less subtle formulae. For a collection of ethnographers, this is an encouraging thought that vindicates our rather specific way of being social scientists. Nonetheless, the papers collected here should pose provocative, and hopefully productive, questions for the broad field of Indian studies.

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