Meaning of Development, Experience of Work

In this thesis, I have attempted to explore the meaning of development and industrialization through the prism of labour relations. I have sought to understand how the miners of the Jharia coalfields experienced their lives in the mines. There are a few connecting threads that bind the chapters together. I look at (i) the diversity of experiences within the space of work and outside, (ii) the shifts within the forms of labour subsumption and the changes within the labour process, and (iii) the link between material progress, on one side, and the political cultural development, on the other. My study begins in the last decade of the nineteenth century when the first mines were coming up and ends with the 1970.

The thesis as a whole seeks to present a critique of the liberal, modernization theory. I also draw attention to the translucence of conceptual processes shared by the critical social theory, and to the fact that the progress of the industrial society was neither uniform, nor seamless, nor even was it linear. The miners decidedly saw the colliery employment as attractive compared to farm labour: it was better paying and more fulfilling, despite the precariousness of their lives, and the dangers they faced at the work place. Over time, they fought for reforms in the language of humanism, civilization, asking for a minimal respect to the needs of human living, as opposed to that of beasts. They posed the demands in the light of experiences when they confronted a contradiction between the demand made by the industry on their life opportunity and their desire to have more than a traditional meaning of human life. As members of the colonial society, they conceived the meaning of new industrial work not by comparing it
with the previous world of labour as handicraftsmen and artisans, or village workers. Rather, they learnt to compare the condition of their new work with their vision of a new life, their fantasy of a better life.

The lives of women and children changed dramatically in the aftermath of the prohibition or restriction on their employment in the mines in the 1920s. The restriction was not accompanied by any adequate social security, nor was there any marked improvement in male wages, flowing from the idea of a single breadwinner. Women who lost their jobs and the children, who no longer could help their parent underground, now crowded in the service economy. Many became domestic savants in the houses of managers and supervisors (Chapter, 'Space').

Other colliers also confronted changing conditions of work. With the imposition of a new disciplinary regime, supervisors were appointed to oversee work, reducing the importance of the mining sirdar. The change meant that the relationships of familiarity, and community that bound the workers with those who supervised their work were broken. The new supervisors belonged to communities other than that from which the miners came. Such developments came into effect particularly from the late 1930s. There was an increasing pressure to introduce new forms of safety rules, and this meant the appointment of many new supervisory hands. In reaction to the tighter controls, new rules, and new figures of authority, miners now demanded industrial democracy and participatory accident-control mechanism. This explains the labour militancy witnessed from the late 1940s.

The gradual improvement in productivity of labour and the spread of new technologies of mining, the reduction of hours of work, all seem to affirm the thesis of linear progress of modern society. This was, however, not true on many other counts. The experience of women offers us a contrasting narrative. Similarly, the miners found, for instance, that the new short workdays, gradually introduced from the 1930s, actually led to the intensification of labour effort, and increased workload. (Part, 'Time'). The improved wages, paid to them since 1944-45, meant an involution within the class of direct-producers. The employers developed strategies through which they could deny
miners the right to permanent employment, bonus, and stipulated minimum wages. Through control over attendance registers, denial of attendance, the rights of colliers could be negated within the terms of the new industrial rules. In the long-run, the real wages of miners improved, even though there were marked fluctuations over the period we studied. The schemes of compensation and restitution, introduced since the 1920s, helped to normalize workplace risks in the colliery populace (Part, ‘Precarious’).

The definite ideological and political development of the working people expressed itself in the claims, articulated at various points of time, for a new ‘civilised’, ‘human’ industrial life, along with a control over the labour process as well as the production process. The miners insisted on their right to happiness, freedom, dignity, and human integrity. Such emphases called for a restriction on the employment of women and children; the demand for the payment of family living wage to the male breadwinner; job security and other rehabilitation programmes. At the same time, miners fought for the payment of equal wages for equal work to all irrespective of gender difference, and the abolition of contract and unfree labour (Chapter, ‘Wage Politics’).

The nationalists and the public supported the demands of the miners in the 1930s and the 1940s. From the late 1940s, strike waves spread through the Jharia coalfields. The demand for industrial peace, law and order, led on the one hand to military action to re-impose industrial discipline, and on the other to the establishment of the colliery conciliation board. The conciliation board perfected strategies of domesticating the defiant collier. In the end, it was the balance of political and military power that settled the matter, consolidating the rule of private capital.

Scholars have often reflected on the combined presence of emancipatory and conservative/retrogressive elements frequently seen in the struggles of working classes and the peasantry. Three differing arguments have been offered as explanations. One has seen it as an expression of the uneven development within the colonial mode of production, and the consequent co-existence of pre-modern and bourgeois social formations (Kosambi, 2005; Bhattacharya, 1986). Opposed to such structuralist logic, the second has emphasized the mediation of pre-bourgeois culture in industrial life (Chakrabarty, 1989; Robb, 2007). In contrast, Chitra Joshi (2005, 2006) has suggested a
third explanation. Focusing on the constitutive power of human agency, she has suggested that workers' actions helped refashion social relations and cultural patterns. What is important is to analyse the scope and the nature of such re-constitution of and negotiation with the dominant structure or culture. At the level of explanation, my thesis has sought to engage with these concerns with respect to different issues. I have examined how work-time relations; safety politics, family life, structure of wages, and the notion of leisure have been shaped by the conflict of actions, which themselves are mediated by other forces. The emphasis of the thesis, after Burawoy (1985), is on the ideological ground on which interests were organized and the historical conditions that determined which characteristic of capital labour relations would be most marked. Our analysis points out that the working people and their publicists from varied walks of social life decidedly re-constituted industrial life and social relations in a manner which capital did not readily offer to them.

Writings on labour and industry are often framed within two contrary frames. One celebrates industrialisation as an engine of economic growth and well-being. Another sees industrialization in tragic terms, focussing on the disarray it causes and the suffering it produces. The latter frame very often underlines revolutionary visions of a new fulfilling life for workers. I have sought to develop a frame that seeks to transcend this binary. I have demonstrated the experience of trauma, arduous life, precarious conditions of work, the nature of slaughter mining, the problems faced by women and children and the way colliers sought to negotiate the varied worlds they inhabited. However, at the same time, I have suggested that there were changes and developments within technology and production process, within rules and norms, which needs to be recognized. We need to look at the implication of these developments, without repressing the fact that they often marked a certain progress, a definite betterment within the lives of working people. The exploitation of hidden productiveness of human effort itself was the basis of new opportunity, hence a matter of celebration. These developments created new conditions of oppression with new visions of transcendence.

My thesis has also sought to question the usual temporal focus of historians, by stretching the study to the period beyond 1947. I have attempted to write a connected
history of the colonial society and the post-colonial society within the Indian subcontinent. Moving beyond the framing debate of continuity and change (Chandra, 2000), I have underlined how some of the crucial moves for improvement of conditions of work and life, and the pressures for reform, developed within the womb of colonial society and polity. For instance, the interventionist approach to control the production process was in place by the end of the 1930s and the new wage and welfare programme by mid 1940s. These expressed the effort of the colonial polity to come to terms with technical problems affecting the source of wealth, and the power of the critiques that undermined the political and social stability of the mining regime. The new republic of India consolidated the rules of the game already in place. In one important way there was a marked shift in the decades after 1950. This was the move towards a new form of industrial democracy.