Introduction

Until the lions have their historians, history will always be told by the hunters. For the record it is an ageless South African saying passed on from one generation of Zulu warriors to another. While the lions may never have a historian and the hunters may hunt the hunted to extinction, the profundity of the proverb, with a wee bit of creative liberty, can be transplanted to the realm of the social.

The sudden upsurge in the last three decades in movements of protest – whether feminist, environment or labour – articulating concerns of paradigmatic nature has caught academics flatfooted. These protest movements unearth and bring forth forms of consciousness that cannot be subsumed within larger and dominant concerns or explained by categories of analysis, which mainstream academia has gotten used to. Like the metaphorical lions, many groups see these movements as their historians – creating space, deriving meaning, recreating structures and reconstructing social logic, all of which eventually add up to a critique of the metanarratives and the monolithic theories that have come to dominate social sciences.

For many of the orthodox in the left, these movements do not constitute valid subjects of study simply because they do not conform to the logic of dialectical materialism or class struggle of Marxism. For many of the conservative elements in the right, these movements are a real danger to the kind of stability, order and governance envisioned by them. Such an ironical combination of elements of the left and that of the right has often led to attempts to keep these movements off the academic mainstream. Such attempts have variously categorised these movements as trivial or as contingent upon a society reaching a post-industrial stage in the development cycle.

In either case, contemporary movements in countries of the South, many of which radically departed from the traditional movements in terms of organisation, articulation of issues and methods adopted, did not attract the kind of academic attention that they deserved. Quite few of the contemporary movements articulate concerns – for instance
feminist and environmental movements – that are contemporary not only by virtue of issues raised, but also by the inadequacy of the class-caste-political economy framework to situate and sufficiently explain these movements. Another bunch of such movements articulate concerns that cannot be exactly defined as contemporary by virtue of the concerns themselves. Such concerns have been raised by traditional movements earlier, and analysed using traditional tools of analysis. But here it must be clarified that many of the traditional movements – for instance the trade union movement in India – were monolithic in character and defined by one prominent constituency – organised industrial labour in the case of trade union movement. Though these traditional movements took up the articulation of related issues – for instance the issue of child labour was taken up by the trade union movement – the relative position accorded to them, and by extension to the actors articulating them, were either determined ideologically or by class, caste categorisations.

Now if contemporary movements are articulating concerns that have already been appropriated by traditional movements and studied using regular tools of analysis, a logical question arises. What is it that classifies such movements articulating essentially established issues as contemporary? At one level it is the characteristics of these movements that comprehensively differentiate it from the traditional movements that had articulated the same concerns, whether in a singular or in a related manner. The characteristics of these movements are many and varied, but often include the following:

- A coalition of different groups,
- Integration with other non-party political processes,
- Internal ideological pluralism buttressed by mechanisms of participation,
- Means of struggle consisting of extra-parliamentary methods, parliamentary processes and legal activism,
- Kinship with formal academia,
- Independent research,
- Networks at an international level,
- Operate at the level of civil society, without rejecting the institutions of the State.
At another level, these movements are defined as contemporary due to their approach to the respective concern/s in question. Essentially these movements consider their approach to their respective concerns is one of the numerous entry points to question established paradigms of social order, politics and development. For instance contemporary environmental movements, while focussing on basic issues such as depleting forest cover, pollution and the like, also extend their span to critique the model of development itself. Such movements are also not ideologically limited giving them the flexibility to move across concerns and establish linkages with other contemporary movements.

Indian labour is enormously complex and multi-layered and a review of the recent writings on Indian labour will reveal it. [Mohapatra 1997; Chandavarkar 1997; Fernandes 1999]. Indian labour’s complexity if coupled with the inadequacy of conventional analytical categories in explaining issues of child labour, rights of women labour, environment -- only of marginal interest to the trade union movement -- mounts a direct challenge to the singular conception of working class. Needless to say the challenge extends to all theorisations surrounding any kind of universal or monolithic conceptualisation of social phenomenon.

The conventional definitions and boundaries of Indian industrial labour confine itself to the formal industrial sector. Thus the category of working class is implicitly defined not only as the industrial working class but also far more narrowly as that part of it which is in the protected sector. Such an extraordinarily narrow view emerged and persisted because of the existence of two interrelated reasons -- (1) The paradigm of development followed by the Indian policy makers necessitated such a logic (2) The paradigm itself was based on a conceptual framework that assumed a unitary conception of working class.

The unitary conception of working class was an offshoot of the assumptions surrounding the history and emergence of the ‘western working class’. It was assumed that the level of economic development informed the structure and character of labour, its social organisation and its political consciousness. The notion of stages of industrialisation
yielded a corresponding notion about stages of class-consciousness. Underlying this notion is the assumption that class-consciousness is inevitable and contingent only upon economic factors. This became the backbone of Marxian analysis.

Studies that were conducted within the Marxian tradition, despite variations, had certain common features. First, a theory of correspondence between structure of society, informed mainly by the mode of production which in turn determined the degree of capitalist penetration, with the level of consciousness was unduly emphasised. Second, class-consciousness was linked to a teleological narrative of development and assumed a transition from peasant to trade union to revolutionary class-consciousness. Third, overt conflict and militant unionism were overemphasised, so much so that workers consciousness came to be measured against it.

These assumptions created major problems. Firstly, Marxist writers have been unable to fully account for identity-based consciousness such as caste, religion or gender. Secondly, the non-emergence of a pure working class having class-consciousness, in the strict sense of the term, was sought to be explained in a variety of phenomena: the continued rural linkage of the worker, persistence of pre-modern mentalities, coexistence of multiple modes of production and segmentation of the labour market [Sen 1998]. Ironically, modernisation theorists also arrived at similar conclusions. The similarity of conclusion can be explained by the fact that both paradigms shared an evolutionary teleology and assumed a correspondence between structure (economy, industry and class) and consciousness.

Analyses of the non-Marxist variety, of Indian labour in general and the trade union movement in particular, are dominated by an intellectual urge to demonstrate the limited relevance of class as a means of understanding social reality. Many studies start with the argument that politics in India has been shaped by politics of cultural identities such as caste and religion, rather than by politics of class. Studies of organised labour drawing upon the logic of such an argument identify ‘cultural’ reasons for the inability of the
Indian working class to produce a single unified labour movement. [Rudolph&Rudolph 1987; Chaterji 1990]

Underlying their conclusion is the implicit assumption that there is one universal form of labour organisation and behaviour. This universal reference point invariably conforms to an Eurocentric conception of industrial unions, organised labour movements and class based parties. Moreover such studies point out the lack of an organised labour movement, limited scope of formal labour organisations, primarily trade unions, to question the relevance of class as an analytical category in the schema of Indian politics [Rudolph&Rudolph 1987].

Such studies: (1) equate class with particular forms of labour organisation thereby ignoring other forms of class politics like womens’ network, community organisation and other cultural modes of expression [Berger 1989; Ong 1988] (2) assume the existence of a natural division between cultural politics and class politics and by implication, assume a division between class and cultural identities without exploring the possibility of both intersecting each other. Correspondingly, pre-capitalist tradition and behaviour is presumed to have a natural boundary with capitalist tradition and behaviour. (3) measure the behaviour of the Indian working class against an idealised conception of working class. Consequently, Indian working class is either similar or different in relation to the ideal working class.

This is the broad scenario within which my study – *New Forms of Labour Mobilisations: A Case Study of Bhima Sangha* – needs to contextualised. Bhima Sangha is a working children’s union. The issue of child labour was institutionally recognised by the International Labour Organisation in 1918 and trade union movements all over the world, including India, have appropriated the issue to be their own. But the trade union movements due to variety of factors, one of which is their emphasis on organised industrial labour that can eventually be traced to the way working class has been conceptualised, have invariably pushed it down the hierarchy of various issues that they articulate. So while the trade union movement claims to be representing the working
children and articulating their issues, contemporary working children’s movements consider their concerns to be separate from the trade union movement and have evolved mechanisms to articulate their specific issues and create their own space of operation. Such working children’s movements fall within the category of contemporary movements due to their various differences with the traditional trade union movement. Bhima Sangha is one such example of a union that considers itself as different, and situates itself separately from the traditional trade union structure.

Most of the research projects based on a case study approach essentially look to focus exclusively on the case. Such an approach is more often than not sufficient for research subjects that do not question in a comprehensive manner the existing paradigm of understanding social reality. Initially, to be frank, I assumed that such an approach would be sufficient for my research project too. But as I went deeper into studying contemporary labour mobilisations, especially working children’s organisations and finally situated Bhima Sangha within this framework, I was convinced of the necessity to deal with the theoretical and the paradigmatic questions that these movements and organisations raise.

It is due to such an approach that my thesis is divided into three parts with two chapters each constituting the first two parts and three chapters constituting the third part. Each part and each chapter in the parts is thematically linked and in order to understand the logic inherent in my division, the thesis has to be considered in a holistic fashion. One of the essential features that characterises contemporary movements, particularly new forms of labour mobilisations in my case, is an inherent critique they mount against dominant paradigms of understanding social reality. While outlining their critiques and analysing it is an obvious and an essential approach, their critiques also indirectly extend to the categories of analysis that have been provided by theories that have dominated social sciences for decades. Any attempt to question the prevalent tools and categories of analysis necessitate an understanding of the specific historical and social context that shaped them.
Part I of my thesis consists of two chapters — *Origins and Evolution of Working Class* and *Working Class Movement in India*. Contemporary labour mobilisations are a powerful critique of the monolithic conceptions of working class, class-consciousness and class struggle. But the concept of working class has evolved in a specific manner within the context of the industrial revolution in England, in particular, and its spread to mainland Europe in general.

*Origins and Evolution of Working Class* focuses on the industrial revolution in England with specific reference to the changes it brought about at the social and political level. An understanding of the industrial revolution is often incomplete without a foray into the phenomena of renaissance, reformation and the scientific revolution. Such a foray becomes essential if one has understand the evolutionary line..ity and the concept of structured reality that came to dominate social science theorising of that period. One must understand that the concept of working class is the product of the post-industrial revolution social science theorising. The chapter explains the evolution of the specific character of the working class in England and Europe and how that came to seen as the definitive indicator of the concept of working class. The Eurocentricity of the concept, which many authors refer to, can be traced back to the evolution of the working class in England and Europe. Any reference to working class cannot be divorced from Karl Marx and the group of theorists who were deeply influenced by his philosophy of dialectical materialism and concept of intelligible social reality. The chapter deals with the philosophy of Karl Marx and how working class came to occupy a central stage in the scheme of social order envisaged by him. Contributions made to the philosophy of Karl Marx – from Lenin, Gramsci, Hall and Poulantzas – are also touched upon in this chapter.

*Working Class Movement in India* is a comprehensive account of the development of the working class in India, its progressive levels of organisation and the eventual emergence of a trade union movement. The main aim of the chapter, with reference to my approach mentioned earlier, is to explain the inadequacies of the working class movement by situating them in the specific contexts within which the movement evolved. The basic question of why didn’t the trade union movement articulate broader labour questions is
answered through a study of the specific trajectory of evolution that the working class movement followed, and the factors that determined the trajectory. The chapter delves into the emergence of the Indian working class and probes its historical roots, which were enmeshed with the British colonial enterprise. The first signs of an organised working class, in the classical ‘western’ sense of the term, were found in the Railways, Coal, Jute and Tea industries. It was the beginning of the 20th century that saw the emergence of the first official trade union. Trade unions at this point in history were more of enterprise level unions concerned with factory level issues. An organised trade union movement emerged in the early 1920s and it transformed itself from an economic demands oriented movement to one having larger labour concerns by intertwining itself with the struggle for national liberation. The trade union movement, by and large, had its conceptual roots in the postulate of Marx and Lenin. The movement, because of its conceptual underpinnings and due to the larger political focus being on the emerging industrial centres, confined itself to mobilising and articulating predominantly economic concerns of the organised industrial working class, thereby significantly reducing its emancipatory potential. Ironically the ‘bourgeois’ parties articulated broader labour concerns during the phase of national liberation. The chapter traces the evolution of the Indian working class, their different phases of development and their transformation into a trade union movement modelling itself on such movements in the industrialised countries of Europe. What such an evolution did, as the chapter will show, was the marginalisation of other labour concerns. Unionism came to be identified with the mobilisation of the industrial workers. Post-independence Indian State was a complex coalition of competing interest groups. Its development strategy, which was a combination of import substitution and heavy industrialisation, and the politics associated with it, institutionalised trade unionism and co-opted it within the system. This systemic co-option changed the nature and character of the trade union movement. The trade union movement, which was broadly anti-systemic during the colonial period because of its resistance to the colonial system, became systemic after independence, becoming an important cog in the political economy of the Indian State. The anti-systemic resistance role of the trade union movement in the colonial period was transformed into a systemic oppositional role in the post-colonial period. In the process, mainstream trade unions became another instrument
of hegemony articulating dominant political and economic concerns. Trade unions consequently lost their potential for transformative and emancipatory action. The chapter also deals with the post-1991 politics, which has been dominated by a broad consensus for market economy fuelled by the logic of globalisation and liberalisation, and how it has further contributed to the marginalisation of trade unions. Apart from reducing its space for action vis-à-vis its concerns, the post-1991 scenario also further marginalised peasant and labour movements. Ironically such a marginalisation, as will be brought forth in the chapter, set the stage for the creation of space for contemporary labour mobilisations.

Part II consists of *New Forms of Social Mobilisations: Theory and Practice* and *Contemporary Labour Concerns: Child Labour and the Discourse on Child Rights*. This part is a logical extension of Part I in terms of focussing on theoretical approaches surrounding contemporary movements and in dealing with how such movements operate at the ground level. *New Forms of Social Mobilisations: Theory and Practice* essentially points out various entry points to understand contemporary social movements. The chapter also deals with the concept of New Social Movements (NSMs) and why it is used to differentiate contemporary movements from ‘old’ social movements, which could be explained through conventional analytical categories and whose demands, primarily about the distribution of economic resources, were directed towards the State for resolution. On the theoretical front, revisions in Marxism that were broadly defined as post-Marxism is dealt with in the chapter. The focus on post-Marxism is to highlight academic developments at conceptual level that took place in response to a rash of movements from environmental, gay and lesbian rights, gender equality and feminism and child rights that took centrestage from the early 1980s. Within post-Marxism, the works of French post-Marxists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe are given specific attention due to their attempts to establish an alternative framework of left politics that specifically encompasses the contemporary movements. Laclau and Mouffe also evolved a different manner of conceptualising working class and the position accorded to it in the traditional Marxism that gives a more appropriate theoretical framework and tools to study contemporary forms of labour mobilisations. The chapter also deals with how the
concept of NSMs has been harnessed as an explanatory tool in the context of social processes in contemporary India.

*Contemporary Labour Concerns: Child Labour and the Discourse on Child Rights* concentrates its attention on the issue of child labour and the various approaches and mechanisms that have traditionally been used to tackle it. Is child work synonymous with child labour? Is there a universal conception of child labour? And does such a conception apply to all contexts and countries? These and other such questions trigger off the larger debate on the different conceptions of childhood in the west and in countries of the South and the concept of child rights. The concept of child rights is specifically situated within the context of the United Nation Convention on Child Rights, which is primary document that is supposed to direct all institutional interventions in the field of child labour. But does the CRC take into account the multiple realities that working children face? And do such ‘blueprints’ actually help in crystallising action on the multidimensional issue of child labour? The chapter will give you a new perspective on the issue of child labour, which has been treated as an ‘evil’, necessary at its best, which has to be ‘eradicated’. Special attention is also given to one particular approach to the issue of child labour that considers compulsory primary education to be the ‘panacea’ to stop children from working.

Part III has the final two chapters -- *Working Children’s Organisations: A Case Study of Four Outfits* and *Bhima Sangha: A Case Study*. This part focuses on how the recent debates on the issue of child labour, its difference with child work, the concept of child rights have influenced the emergence of working children’s organisations. These organisations are different from traditional organisations – also called as first generation organisations – in terms of considering working children to be active participants in determining their future and policies affecting them. *Working Children’s Organisations: A Case Study of Four Outfits* throws light on the working children’s movements in Latin America, Africa and India through the study of National Movement of Street Boys and Girls (Brazil), Movement of Working Children and Adolescents from Christian Working Families (Peru), African Movement of Working Children and Youth (Senegal and West
Africa) and Bal Mazdoor Sangh (India). The chapter establishes not only the differences between these organisations, but more importantly showcases the fundamental departures that they constitute in comparison to traditional movements.

The title of the sixth chapter Bhima Sangha: A Case Study is self-explanatory. Bhima Sangha, a union of working children, officially came into existence in 1990. It is active in the state of Karnataka (see Appendix I) and has 25,000 working children in the age group of 6-18 years as its members. Supported by the Concerned for Working Children (CWC), Karnataka, its predominant area of operation include the districts of Udupi, Davangere, Bellary, Shimoga, Bangalore, Uttara Kannada and Belgaum (see Appendix II). Bhima Sangha has established certain precedents in countercultural politics. Bhima Sangha’s unique position arises from its internal modes of organisation viz. it being a coalition of different groups, its integration with other non-party political processes, its internal ideological pluralism buttressed by mechanisms of participation, its means of struggle consisting of extra-parliamentary methods, parliamentary processes, legal activism, its kinship with formal academia, independent research and its coalition building and networking at an international level, providing for wider support and legitimacy within civil society. Members of Bhima Sangha feel that they are protagonists and can impact on social, political and economic structures in order to mould the society closer to their vision. Bhima Sangha operates at the level of civil society and seeks to bring about empowerment of working children through interventionist measures keeping in mind the context of the political economy of the districts. One of the defining characteristics of Bhima Sangha is its focus on issues other than child labour. This arises from its approach that does not conceive of child labour as a standalone issue, but as an issue connected with the model of development being followed. As a result Bhima Sangha has made several interventions in the areas of environment, education, governance and even created a separate political space for itself. The establishment of Makkala Panchayats (Children’s Panchayats) with linkages with the rural panchayat and the rural/block administration is a revolutionary concept in governance. The chapter focuses on this attempt at redefining the dynamics of what constitutes ‘political’ and locating it in civil society. Bhima Sangha also recognises the fact that trade unions do not understand their problems and adult
initiatives at tackling child labour are incremental and narrow. This is one of areas where Bhima Sangha differs from other child labour unions like the Bal Mazdoor Sangh, where initiatives are generally adult driven and are aimed at 'eliminating' child labour. Bhima Sangha recognises working children as social actors aware of their different identities and roles and aims at empowering them through initiatives formulated and implemented by the social actors themselves. Bhima Sangha is particularly aware of the ill effects of liberalisation and conceives itself as a node of resistance. It also recognises that their concerns, which were secondary to the trade union movement, have now been completely marginalised in mainstream social and political discourse due to the dynamics of post-1991 politics. Chapter seven Conclusion strings together my findings at the ground level with the conceptual developments that have been explained in Part I and Part II of my thesis building up a strong case for the reorientation of categories of analysis and frames of reference for understanding social reality. The chapter essentially makes a case against monism and excessive structuralism that have come to dominate social science theorising.