INTRODUCTION

THE THEORETICAL CONTEXT:
A STUDY OF CONTESTING FRAMEWORKS

Radical political economy examines not merely the structural relations of exploitation but also identifies the agencies that bring about social transformation. Radical political economy is necessary to examine the different agencies responsible for specific or general forms of social change. In this tradition it is thus important to analyse the nature of the agency and trace its historical development in order to find out its potential for change in and outside the social order.

This work proposes to examine one particular agency, viz., the working class, its structural formations and history of development seen both in terms of its relations to the growth of productive forces under capitalism and also in terms of its political projects intertwined within the larger context of social formations. There are indeed a few Indian studies which examine both the aspects. But their main focus is on the working class in the colonial setting.¹ Most of the studies on the working class in post-colonial

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India fall on the other hand within the liberal sociological tradition.\(^2\) Their discussions are usually about formal trade unionism, its organisational structure; they do not examine the potential of the working classes as it exists outside the apparently discrete production units or outside the social formation.

There are some theoretical questions on the formation of the working class briefly examined here. What is the notion of class formation? How does one look at the formation of a subaltern class such as the working class? What are the structural locations which constitute the working class? In any discussion of class formation, is it necessary to put forward a case for subjective forms of consciousness corresponding to various levels of class structuration? Can we, in other words, argue that it is not merely structural locations but also, as Gramsci suggests, contradictory common sense which constitute integral aspects of the working class formation? It is important to describe both the structural locations and levels of consciousness for the purposes

of our investigation. This approach has its advantages over the structuralist tradition that fails to recognise levels of consciousness as pertinent in any understanding of the question of working class formation.

A final set of theoretical questions may be asked. Can we say that the formation of the working class be properly investigated once its everyday processes of subordination and antagonism are examined? Or, shall we also have to examine the process of transformation of subordination to counter-hegemonic challenges by the workers as also the process of their 'winning over' the other subaltern allies like the peasantry? The process of counter-hegemony has to be seen in economic, cultural and political terms. Here, both means and ends to realise these terms have to be examined. Means refer to internal structure of the organisation and ends refer to tactics and strategy of the organisation. At this level the relations between means and ends are crucial. The formation of the working class, as we shall see, cannot be considered complete till workers become aware of the social relationship which shapes their common identity as well as the conflicts arising therefrom.3

As it is necessary to evolve a framework before any empirical investigation, a review of contesting frameworks is made below. This review will also indicate the need for a more comprehensive framework than the ones under scrutiny to examine the formation of the working class. Section I deals with this issue. A brief examination of the approaches and hypotheses adopted to analyse the

Indian working class follows in Section II. Finally, in Section III we shall examine the nature of the research strategy adopted in our enquiry into the labour force of the Rourkela Steel Plant during 1958-87.

I

The concepts, approaches and key propositions on working class formation are examined below with due respect to the controversies associated with them. Our intention is to turn their statements into hypotheses for empirical investigation. We shall briefly note some of the key ideas of the following approaches on class relations in general and on the working class in particular: (i) Weber and stratification school, (ii) elite theory, (iii) pluralist-elitist equilibrium approach, (iv) scientific management school, (v) human relations approach, (vi) centre-periphery approach, (vii) Marxist tradition: economic approach, structuralist approach, Hegelian-voluntarism, (viii) finally, a proposal for a more comprehensive framework to examine the working class formation.

1. Max Weber and stratification school:

Max Weber, following Marx, claims that class relations constitute the 'objective' feature of economic relations founded upon property relations. Property or the lack of it define all class situations, Weber argues. Accordingly, relations may be further divided into class types. Thus Weber argues that every class situation brings together individuals who share similar sets of economic interests in terms of possession of goods and opportunities for income, i.e., those who share equal 'life
chances' in what he calls 'market relations' consisting of labour or commodity markets. Weber defines classes primarily in terms of 'market relations'. For him property relations may be broadly divided into, first, the kind of property usable of returns like ownership of dwellings, workshops, warehouses, agricultural usable land in large or small holdings, rentier, etc.(i.e., the class of rentiers) and, second, the kind of services that can be offered in the market, e.g., ownership of mines, cattle, disposition over mobile instruments of production, especially property which has money equivalents (i.e., the class of entrepreneurs).

The stratification school claims that to speak of property in the context of class analysis is to speak of property as capital and not as personal possession. The basic thesis runs as follows: classes are not defined specifically in relation to their place in the productive process as in Marxist analysis but in relation to their prevalent modes of closure, exclusion and usurpation. This principle of closure where 'exclusion' is the principal mode of class formation also defines the relation among social classes to be that of dominance and subordination. Thus in capitalist societies, there exist, on this understanding, two predominant modes of exclusionary closure: control of property or capital and secondly, control over professional qualifications and credentials through acquisition and sustenance of material privileges.

Unlike the Marxist model of class polarisation, the principle of closure which is non-hereditary in bourgeois society clearly indicates a hierarchy of groups or a multiple number of substrata; each of which attempts to close off the remaining rewards and

opportunities for the others. But it does so by deploying justificatory arguments that claim to be universal. The argument notes that conditions of membership in bourgeois society are, in principle, at least, attainable by all.

The process of the formation of the bourgeoisie is performed by two exclusionary modes: firstly, by guarding the institutions of property they prevent 'general access' to the means of production and its fruits; secondly, by a principle of credentialism they monitor entry to key positions in the division of labour.

While such are the forms characterising the formation of the bourgeoisie, the working class formation is marked by the following modes of exclusionary practices where the state acts as a mediator in enforcing these practices, first, through the process of individual expropriation from the means of production (due to technical reasons) in a large-scale production unit; secondly, through the process of general (collective) expropriation from the means of production for economic reasons; thirdly, through the process of loss of control over the labour process at an individual level and finally, the dependence on wage for livelihood. The working classes are the propertyless wage earners in capitalism and thus, their relation with the capitalist class is one of subordination. But both Parkin and Giddens argue that there exists class difference among the propertyless (property seen as capital, not personal possessions). This is because of policy of credentialism which has encouraged a section of the

5. Ibid.
propertyless to acquire and sustain some of the crucial material privileges of the capitalist society. This section constitutes a substratum of its own. Of course, all those who are propertyless (non-owners of capital) are not members of the working class.

In Weber's own language, social classes are divided into – (1) the working class as whole, (2) the petty bourgeoisie, (3) propertyless intelligentsia and technical specialists, (4) classes privileged through property and education. Further Weber deploys the category of the 'middle classes' meaning 'self-employed farmers and craftsmen'. Weber, however, is quite vague about the process of interconnections existing among the various 'class types'. This is a question to which later Weberians, as seen above, have addressed themselves in their attempts to develop Weber's notion of 'market relations' as a response to the criticism by Marxists. This is a point to which we shall return later. At the moment, a few more words on the stratification school, on its views of class-conscious organisation and class unity.

A class conscious organisation more specially of the working class succeeds most easily against the immediate economic opponents, (1) if large number of persons are in the same class situation, (2) are concentrated at work place, 'workshop community', and (3) are led towards goals by men outside their class (intelligentsia). Weber following Marx (in Capital III) suggests that class unity in the face of skill differentials is possible. Two great shifts in class struggle are specific to modern capitalism: first, the competitive struggles in commodity market during the transition to modern capitalism, e.g., the fights between merchants and workers in the putting-out system of domestic handicrafts; second (and this is more important today) the
wage struggles in labour market, i.e., the determination of the price of labour. Thus in Weber's analysis, the struggles for wages, better living conditions, better educational opportunities and so forth are the central forms of class struggle by the working class.

2. Elite theory

Elite theories derived from the functionalist-empiricist perspective have attempted to investigate inequality and stratification. Social stratification, here, is conceived of in terms of rank, status and behaviour. The 'social arena' is divided into two categories: elites and masses. The relation between the two is deemed to be hierarchical, a relation of dominance and subordination. This hierarchy is depicted as a continuum rather than a distinct set of levels. Therefore, the political arena becomes a function of one basic opposition between elites and masses.

According to this theory history therefore becomes an ideological setting where, for example, the elites mobilise support from the masses to gain political control or political independence as in the Third World countries. Once this has been achieved, the argument continues, the interests of the masses are left behind as the elites proceed to tackle political development/modernisation. The masses are portrayed as passive, inert and without capabilities of their own for political affiliation. One should now well imagine what, according to this model, could be the position and capability of the workers!
Argued from within this framework, all types of trade union politics become the political arena for the elite manipulation of the working people. This is a classic example of the conspiracy approach to trade union politics. Such an approach is distinct from Weber's formulations as seen above. For Weber, class action on the part of the working class is possible in and through a class conscious organisation that articulates issues of labour or commodity markets. Types of struggles such as wage disputes, claims for better housing facilities, etc, are seen as specific to working class situations within the overarching market relations under modern capitalism. In Weber, unlike the conspiracy approach of the elite theories, there is a recognition of the genuine interest of the working class, however limited these interests may be within the boundaries of market relations. But unlike the Weberian approach we would call such class interests of the workers as immediate, though real, yet not fundamental interests under capitalism, a question to which we shall return later.

3. Pluralist-elitist equilibrium model

The pluralist-elitist approach is a revision of the classical elite theory in the sense that it does not adhere to the classical thesis that there is 'continuum' in dominance and subordination in social relations or in the political arena. According to this model, what characterises the political process in capitalist society is the phenomena of competition and bargain among all political groups including the political organisations of the masses or the working class. There may be a variety of elites but they are unified at the level of political competition. This process of competition and bargain creates conditions of
equilibrium in the political system - a proposition that is basically in conformity with the classical elite approach.

'The top trade unionists', 'the top personnel' of all political parties, 'the top managers' of monopolies and industrial houses, 'the top bureaucrats' of the state apparatus are all clubbed as political elites engaged in competition and bargain for political power.

The similarity between elite theory and the pluralist school is evident. The masses or, for that matter, the workers are seen as the mute passive observers of history, if at all they are granted the status of observers! A striking similarity also exists among the Weberian, elite and pluralist approaches in that the model of organisation of the 'class situation' of the workers is seen as external to their capacities. Such organisation comes into existence only at the instance of an external intervention, i.e., by intelligentsia existing outside of the class.

However, the differences exist between the Weberian approach and elite theories in that a class conscious organisation of the working class, for the former, comes into existence because of class situations in the market relations whereas, for the latter, such organisations exist in the order of conspiracy as constituted by the 'outsiders' such as the intelligentsia or elites who are solely interested in competition or bargaining with power that be. These three propositions are crucial for empirical investigation.

4&5 Scientific management approach and Human relations approach.

The scientific management approach and human relations approach are important because they represent contrasting liberal
modes of thought on the nature of the labour process. While both address questions such as how to establish harmonious relations between labour and management and how to get the workers to work more productively, they do so from different angles.

One of the key assumptions of the scientific management approach or what is popularly known as Taylorism is that the close supervision of the labour process is much easier for the capitalists when tasks are technically simple and routinised and their pace is determined by machinery rather than the worker. Thus, capitalists look for innovations which tend to "deskill" the labour force, and reduce the autonomy of workers on the job.6 The culmination of this process was the mass production assembly line regulated by principles of Taylorism, in which the worker lost all autonomy and became virtually a human component of the machinery.7

Furthermore, in recent decades the crude scientific management advocated by Taylor has been replaced at least partially in some corporations by the "human relations" approach to the problem of labour productivity. An aspect of the new approach is, in principle, the 'enrichment' of jobs and the enlargement of the sphere of decision-making under the control of the worker. However, such experiments are confined within very narrow limits of the labour process. This results chiefly in the redesigning of jobs to increase productivity which in turn affects the structure of the working class.

Both of these counter-tendencies to the general process of deskilling and the erosion of worker autonomy in the labour process continue to emphasise the salience of control over the working class. In the so-called scientific management approach the emphasis is on coercion, robot-like control and machine-like pacing of the workers. As against this, the human relations approach with its emphasis on "worker participation" in management argues that gaining internal motivation from the workers for greater productivity is necessary. But, such an approach makes it abundantly clear that the management should not share any board room prerogatives with unions, work councils, or other worker representatives; that the management must resist attempts to usurp its ultimate authority to make major decisions as regards industrial relations. Far from showing any elusiveness in the term 'worker participation' in management, the human relations approach reasserts the importance of control of the labour process by the capitalists as a dimension of class relations and subsequently asserts workers' alienation from the labour process as vital for 'productivity' and industrial relations. But we must note here one important trend: At present many of the experiments in enlarged 'worker participation', especially in Europe, have been the result of pressures from workers rather than initiatives from capitalists.\(^8\) This only reaffirms the fact that control of the labour process is a constant dimension of class relations.

6. Centre-periphery thesis or underdevelopment theories

Unlike the approaches discussed so far, in the centre-periphery thesis every nation-situation is examined in the

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8. Ibid., n.59, p.67.
perspective of a world system. The world system is divided into a range of 'centres' called imperialist powers and 'peripheries' which are colonised underdeveloped parts. But peripheries are further divided into cities as centres and agricultural sector as satellites. These sectors are internationally as well as nationally tied together in a network of relations of exploitation which are defined in terms of exchange relations, not production relations.

Within the peripheral areas, the agricultural sector is responsible for the most significant generation of foreign exchange. It is exploited by the urban sector which in turn is responsible for the maintenance of foreign interests in the national economy. However, urban sectors are further split between 'formal' and informal sectors, 'organised' and 'unorganised' sectors. The formal sector is once more dualistically split into different grades of industrial units. Like, the relationship between centre and periphery within the world system, the relations between the formal and informal or between industrial units, say, iron and steel vis-a-vis cotton textile are always relations of exploitation, defined on the basis of circulation of wages and profits. 9

The underdevelopment theorists' understanding of the working classes is based on the above formulations. Their understanding of the proletariat may be described as follows: 10

(a) First, proletarianisation is defined as "the increasingly 'necessary' character of participation in the labour market, and hence to the closing off over time of available alternative means of getting livelihood". The labour market may be in the urban or rural sector.

(b) Second, the effects of proletarianisation within the urban centres are noted as also the split of the urban sector into 'formal' and 'informal' sectors. The underdevelopment theorists consider the labour forces in the informal sector as part of the proletariat because: (i) they are employed (or underemployed) as manual workers, (ii) they are the greatest anti-imperialist and anti-exploitation forces in the political arena.

(c) Thirdly the labour forces in the 'formal sector' are characterised as the 'labour aristocracy'. The labour aristocracy is defined strictly by two determinants, viz., wage levels and political class consciousness. They are a small, highly paid and usually organised group of semi-skilled workers employed in major industrial units. It is primarily because of the higher wages or higher income (acquired through their politics, etc.), that they participate along with the capitalists in the process of exploitation which is marked by the extraction of surplus and its siphoning off from the informal sectors as well as the agriculture sector. And since those highly-paid workers have always an interest in the higher wages and its politics for which they are unionised, these workers are party to or responsible for the exploitation of the informal sector or agricultural sector and even of lesser productive industrial units within the formal sector itself.
To sum up, this thesis is posed and developed as if without such demands on payments of higher wages to the workers in the formal sector, there would have been no such exploitation or its escalation; as if there would not be any transfer of surplus from the agriculture or from lesser production units of the formal sector! This thesis completely ignores the fact that there are non-supervisory manual workers of the formal sector who also produce surplus which is siphoned off by the capitalists over whom the direct producers do not have any control notwithstanding their politics of higher wages. It also ignores the fact that this politics of higher wages has stimulation effects on the workers of lesser production units or on the informal sector, and that serves them as a model of inspiration. This thesis does not note that higher wages are not voluntarily given to the workers. These are achieved through often protracted struggles against capital. Finally, this thesis fails to comprehend the fact that the burden of maintaining the formal sector through higher wages for its workers is transferred to the informal sector, workers are nowhere involved in such decisions by the capitalists. Further such mechanisms are not usually known to the workers. The demand for higher wages is rather more often guided by situations in commodity markets or else, occasionally provoked by the profits amassed by the concerned industries. If profits are made by directing terms to the informal sector, workers of the formal sector are in no way party to this process. Thus the centre-periphery thesis is essentially flawed in its position on the formal sector labour force.
7. Marxist tradition

Within the Marxist tradition, there is no single theoretical discourse on class formation, and particularly on the working class, and on the means and ends of its political projects. There are different arguments which sometimes converge, yet on other issues are sharply opposed to each other. We have classified these issues into three large problematics on social classes and on the agency of the working class: economistic approach, Hegelian-voluntaristic approach, and the structuralist approach. Finally, we propose a more comprehensive approach than those discussed here.

(A) Economistic Approach

The social totality is divided into base and superstructure: the base refers to the economic structure, i.e., the social relations of production, and the superstructure refers to the legal and political spheres. The economic structure ultimately determines the superstructure, and in the context of their interaction this approach examines the totality of social relations. The class relations are seen in terms of the economic structure denominating production relations. The production relations are ranged in between the owners of means of production and the non-owners. Their relations are seen as a process of domination and subordination associated with the labour process. While the workers, by virtue of their alienation from the means of production are forced to sell their labour power which is the only thing a worker owns, the capitalists own the means of production and also control it in the labour process and are consequently able to appropriate the surplus. So, for the Marxists class relations under capitalism are constituted not merely on the basis of the
ownership and control of the means of production and also its expropriation from the working class but also that such relations must be located in the labour process characterised by the production of surplus value by free-wage labour and its appropriation by the capitalists. These class relations condition the nature of the polity and politics.

Argued on this basis, the working class assumes certain characteristics. First, it owns labour power only and must sell it to any capitalist as a means of survival. Second, it is expropriated from the means of production and any control over its use. Third, it enters into a contract with the owner of means of production for certain wages to be accorded to the worker as a means of survival. Finally, it produces surplus over which it has no control which corresponds to the workers' loss of control over the labour process. This subordination in the labour process may be characterised into three broad types.' (a) They all produce for others who do not produce for them. The capitalist is the immediate recipient of the entire product produced by the worker in return for the wages the worker receives; (b) within the production process they are commonly subject to the authority of the capitalist, who is not subject to their authority (the authority may be exercised directly or delegated to an overseer); (c) in so far as their livelihood depend on their relations with the superiors, they tend to be poorer than the latter. Each non-producer typically receives more of the fruits of production than does each producer.

While redefining the proletariat within the above broad framework, Cohen suggests some corrections. He argues that the lack of means of production is not characteristic in itself of proletarian status as is traditionally maintained. It is important to note that a proletarian is one who sells his labour power in order to obtain his means of survival. He may own some means of production, but he cannot use them to support himself save by contracting with a capitalist. This approach posits a structural definition of the working class. Superstructural elements are altogether excluded. As an answer to when and how the working class comes out as a class, this approach suggests that it can act as a class only by passing through a process of cultural and political formation. That the working class becomes a self-conscious group with definite political predispositions is an issue related to the concept of class-for-itself, not class-in-itself. A discussion of the class formation must stick to the process of 'class-in-itself' at the level of production relations. The agency question is not relevant here. Only the structural definition of the working class is crucial.

(B) Voluntaristic approach

Thompson argues that in the economistic approach the working class is treated as a 'thing', an 'it', an 'object' and in fact, an economic category. The working class is thus reduced to an economic object. The worker exists as an object without 'mind' of his/her own or, if you like, without any form of subjectivity. Against this, Thompson states that in any study of the working

12. Ibid., p.72.
13. Ibid., p.77.
class, specific conditions must be identified to indicate the working class as an active historical subject. Thompson's conclusion may be summarised thus: class formation is not simply a matter of economic relations but involves the culture and politics growing out of them. Class formation involves a process of self-creation on the part of production relations-defined groups.

Przeworski, however, notes that the last proposition introduces voluntarism by emphasising that the working class is formed in and through its own action which is not merely economic but cultural and political as well. Against Thompson's method he argues that classes are formed, not in themselves, not through their own action but through class struggle articulated within the context social relations.15 Following Przeworski, Thompson's approach may be characterised as voluntaristic. We will return to this idea after examining below some of the key positions of the structuralist school.

(C) Structuralist school

The structuralist school posits a structural definition of the working class. But, as we shall see below, this is an improved version of the structural definition as offered by the economistic approach. For the structuralist school, a theory of mode of production is essential to understand social classes.

Nicos Poulantzas' seminal work 'Classes in Contemporary Capitalism' is the representative work of this school. We will use here his structural definition of the working class. For him such a definition rests on the following three basic premises.

a) Like all classes, the working class cannot be defined outside of class struggle. But class struggle does not mean 'class consciousness' but the antagonistic contradictory quality of the social relations.

(b) The concept of working class refers to certain objective positions occupied by that class in the social division of labour.

(c) Like all other classes, working class is structurally determined not only at the economic level, but at the political and ideological levels as well. These political and ideological instances cannot be relegated to the process of transformation from 'class-in-itself' to 'class-for-itself'.

Poulantzas argues that the crucial question for understanding the structural determination of the working class centres on how one draws the boundary between the working class and the segment of 'new petty bourgeoisie'. His basic conclusion is that only manual, non-supervisory workers who directly produce surplus value (productive labour) should be included in the proletariat. Other categories of wage labour (unproductive employees, mental labour, supervisory labour) must be placed in a separate class.

Against the economistic approach Poulantzas argues that economic criterion alone does not help one identify the working class. Following Althusser he argues that (social) relations of production, on the basis of which classes are defined, constitute economic, political and ideological instances. In the case of his structural definition of the working class, his economic criterion refers to the distinction between productive and unproductive labour, the political criterion refers to the distinction between
non-supervisory and supervisory positions and the ideological criterion designates the distinction between mental and manual labour. On this basis, his structural definition of the working class runs as follows.

Even though surplus labour is extracted from a wage worker in commerce who is engaged in realising surplus value, he is not directly exploited in the form of the dominant capitalist relation which refers to the creation of surplus value. They are thus unproductive wage earners. And all unproductive wage-earners are members of the 'new petty bourgeoisie' and cannot be included in the working class.

All productive labourers, however, are not part of the working class. Some productive labourers in every factory system are engaged in supervision of the labour process and some others are technical 'experts'. At the economic level, supervisory labour in commodity production is exploited in the same way that manual labour is exploited, but at the political level, supervisory labour participates in the domination of the working class. It is so placed as to extract surplus value from the workers and to exercise political domination within the social division of labour (or production relations), if not within the technical division of labour (or productive forces). On this basis, supervisory labour must be excluded from the working class altogether and it becomes therefore part of the new petty bourgeoisie.

Finally, the technically 'expert' workers who help the capitalists to exclude the workers from the control over labour process are direct carriers of the ideological domination. Thus, like supervisory labour, they are excluded from the working class.
Because of the primacy of the social division of labour over the technical division of labour, all types of manual labour whether productive wage-earners-cum-supervisors or subaltern technicians (non-supervisory labour) occupy a position of ideological domination of the working class. Thus deploying a triple criteria of exclusion, Poulantzas concludes that only non-supervisory manual productive labour are the potential revolutionary force because of the complete and total domination over them in the labour process at the economic, political and ideological levels.

The economistic approach is straightforward in its emphasis on production relations alone as being the constituent of class relations and, hence, the formation of the working class is located within sets of production relations. It has no room for political and/or ideological criteria as part and parcel of production relations.

Both Thompson and Poulantzas, two foremost critics of the economistic approach, try to introduce political and ideological criteria, in addition to the economic criterion, to define the working class. But both of them paradoxically locate the working class within the domain of production relations, not beyond it within the ideological and state apparatus. Here they concur with the economistic approach, that production relations alone constitute the working class formation. Notwithstanding their mutual differences, their concurrence is quite striking. All these three problematics locate the workers in the production sphere and ignore the exploited group in the reproduction sphere such as state administration or trade and commerce. Hence a new framework is required.
(D) A New Framework

The working class may be located not merely in the production sphere but also in the reproduction sphere. The members of this class, typically, occupy positions where they are forced to sell their labour power and their labour is extracted not merely in the production of surplus value but also in its realisation. The production and realisation of surplus are two concomitant processes of capitalism. While the factory worker participates in the production of the surplus, the worker of a commercial enterprise or the class IV employee of the state administration participates in the realisation of surplus value. Their positions form a 'series' of capitalist structures. Thus it is necessary to locate the exploited groups in this series. To ignore this and merely locate the workers in the production sphere would imply a narrow and blinkered perception of the interlinked levels of capitalism.

In every factory system both the production and reproduction spheres are present. The production sphere, however, is the dominant terrain of each factory. The productive non-supervisory manual workers are preponderant as against the unproductive non-supervisory manual workers usually employed in the administrative departments of the factory. There are thus important skill differences among the workers of a factory. Yet, as Marx and Weber argue, in spite of their skill differences, political unity is possible among the workers. Any discussion of the working class in a factory system must address itself to the politics of the workers in the production and reproduction wings of the factory.
Following the above ideas, Wright redefines the working class as comprising those who:

"(a) occupy the manual labour positions within the production relations, i.e., wage labour which is excluded from control over money capital, physical capital and labour process, or

(b) are linked directly to the working class through immediate family or class trajectories, or

(c) occupy working positions within political and ideological apparatuses, i.e., positions which are excluded from either the creation or execution of state policy and ideology". 16

Wright's redefinition is valuable in that it helps to locate the workers in a series of structural positions in capitalism. However his problematic has an inbuilt structuralist bias, for it ignores the everyday life of the workers occupying the structural positions. In Wright's reformulation, workers are reduced to mere 'objects' or 'bearers' of structures. They become 'things' or what Thompson calls 'its'. It may be argued a la Thompson that a level of subjectivity is central to the structural positions workers occupy. Though it is useful to retain Wright's criteria to identify the working class members in different interlinked structural positions, it is necessary to go beyond his problematic. Gramsci's formulation of everyday life of the exploited groups offers us the necessary means to break with the structuralist, voluntarist and economistic approaches as described above.

In the approaches examined so far, no 'practical critical activity' is associated with the structural positions of the

workers. An omission or negation of the subjectivity of the workers results in a return to mechanical materialism. Historical materialism on the other hand, Gramsci suggests, recognises a form of subjectivity corresponding to the working class positions. Gramsci argues that this form of subjectivity may be characterised as contradictory common sense which constitutes an integral/inseparable part, especially, of the subaltern group such as workers, peasants or women.

Before we elaborate on this issue, let us reconstruct a Marcusean reply to this question in vogue since the 1960s. Bourgeois ideology, it argues, has so captured the mind of the workers that they are "hooked on to capitalism and virtually unaware of the structural antagonisms or of a socialist alternative". Following this, Cohen suggests that this answer no doubt gives a part of the truth. But it is important to realise that it is not the whole truth. Cohen argues, "workers are not so benighted as to be helpless dupes of bourgeois ideology nor all so uninformed as to be unaware of the size of the socialist project." The truth is that each is "insufficiently confident that rebellious action on his part would be supported by others." It is precisely here our arguments veer towards Gramsci's concept of commonsense as applied to the working class positions. His argument runs as follows:

"1. Commonsense is not a single unique conception, identical in time and space. It takes countless different forms.

2. Its most fundamental characteristic is ambiguous, contradictory and multiform. It is fragmentary, incoherent and inconsequential.

3. That to refer to commonsense as confirmation of truth is nonsense.

4. Finally, the most vital aspect is that commonsense is in conformity with the social and cultural position of those masses/workers whose philosophy it is." 19

The traditional Hegelian concept of "class-in-itself" as also the structuralist language ignore this problematic of commonsense of the workers. As a result, their approaches give us a very mechanical understanding of the working class. In Gramsci's historical materialism, the working class exists as an agency constitutive of a correspondence between the material relations and a commonsensical ordering of these relations - an ordering which is in contradiction with those of the other social classes. But one must treat the formation of the working class as a process, not merely as a development at particular point in time and capable of no further evolution. Przeworski argues that class formation may be defined as the relations within a particular class, and not within the entire class structure. He further argues that class formation is a continuous process of the organisation, disorganisation and reorganisation of the relations within a particular class. Let us recapture this process in the case of the working class formation as highlighted by Gramsci himself.

To sum up, in the words of Gramsci, "the subaltern classes, by definition, are not unified and cannot unite until they are able to become a 'state': their history, therefore, is intertwined with that of civil society and state." Hence, as Gramsci continues, it is necessary to study:

1. the objective formation of the subaltern social groups, by the developments and transformations occurring in the sphere of economic production; their quantitative diffusion (possibly corresponding to law of unevenness and their origins in pre-existing social groups, whose mentality, ideology and aims they conserve for a time).

2. their active or passive affiliation to the dominant political formations, their attempts to influence the programmes of these formations in order to press claims of their own, and the consequences of these attempts in determining the processes of decomposition, renovation or neo-formation of the subaltern groups;

3. the birth of new parties of the dominant groups, intended to conserve the assent of the subaltern groups and to maintain control over them;

4. the formations which subaltern groups themselves produce, in order to press claims of a limited and partial character;

5. these new formations which assert the autonomy of the subaltern groups, but within the old framework;

6. those formations which assert the integral autonomy.....etc. The study must record and discover the causes of, the line of development towards integral autonomy, starting from the
primitive phases, via every manifestation of the Sorelian spirit of cleavage to revolutionary assertions, etc."

In concluding our discussions on the contesting frameworks, it may be reiterated that the working class formation needs to be treated as an agency question, and not merely a structural question. It is also worth repeating that the working class members are located in a series of social structures which include both productive and reproductive apparata, and not merely the sphere of production relations. Following this it is necessary to take into account both productive and non-productive non-supervisory manual workers as members of the working class. Added to this procedure of identification of different categories of workers is Gramsci's six-stage proposal to inquire into the working class formation as a process. Such a proposal serves our purpose in treating the working class formation as an agency question. Hence this comprehensive framework may be taken up as a broad approach for our empirical investigation. However, it would be necessary to tie up this with an examination of the contending approaches and hypotheses pertaining to the growth of the Indian working class. In the next section we shall deal with the latter issue.

20. Ibid., pp.52-53.
The Indian Working Class:
Some Questions and Hypotheses

We will briefly discuss here the Indian working class, and some of the substantive questions and hypotheses developed in the course of the studies on the colonial and postcolonial working class formations in India. We may divide this discussion under two broad headings: first, structural relations of the working class and second, its political projections.

(a) Structural relations

There are some basic questions concerning the character of the Indian working class since its emergence:

(1) the roots and nature of the labour supply to industrial units

(2) the social division of labour within the production unit

(3) the question of mechanisation and its effects on the labour process

(4) the forms of labour subjection to the managerial controls

(5) the interrelationships among the workers and work ethics within the factory

(6) the survival of the pre-existing social forms in the workers' lives.

Given below are some crucial formulations concerning these issues.
Approach 1:

The studies on early phase of industrialisation have convincingly pointed out that the economic compulsions of the village were such that the caste rigidity or traditional moorings were no serious obstacles for the adequate supply of labour for industrial development. The workers drawn from various pre-existing social forms like occupational (rural or urban), ethnic, religious, linguistic groups or caste backgrounds adapted themselves well to the requirements of industrialisation. The unit of analysis in such studies is the factory relations, not relations outside the factory.

Approach 2:

Numerous studies on 'labour commitment' to industrial ethics, on norms of industrial relations with regard to the division of labour, managerial controls, etc., have tended to ignore the influence of pre-existing social forms on all these issues.

Approach 3:

However, a survey of the existing literature provides ample evidences as to how the pre-existing social factors are in constant

interplay with the division of labour and with the larger issues of industrial relations specific to the growth of capitalism. These studies further demonstrate the existence of caste and communal prejudices amongst the workers, caste clusterings in jobs or occupations (division of labour in factory), or caste, linguistic and religious biases in the recruitment of the workers.  

But in such studies, the unit of analysis is restricted to the sphere of factory relations. Consequently, it appears that the workers lead a life compartmentalized between the factory and outside world. The examination of class solidarity or the absence of it among workers who are influenced by precapitalist values and practices in this regard has been ignored. Thus, new ideas have emerged, as a result of a questioning of this approach.

Approach 4:

Life and struggle within the factory does influence the workers' social life and is in turn influenced by the 'community neighbourhood relations'. These studies attempt to resolve the dichotomy between the structural relations of the workers within the factory and the relations in the community neighbourhood.

(b) Political projections

The basic thrust here will be to examine the extent labourers are responsive to the new political philosophies of the times. The studies dealing with this issue have been classified into different

approaches, based on their relative emphasis on different themes of workers’ politics. These approaches may be termed as formalist approach, patron client model, linear class development model and finally, subaltern perspective.

Formalist approach:

The politics of the working class is examined through the formal trade union activities. This approach is concerned with trade union programmes, official strike committees and government inquiry reports, the ground swell of strikes and protests, causes of success or failure of the strike, etc.⁵⁻ All these are, essentially, issues of formal trade unionism. This approach, therefore, does not pose the question of how the workers are ‘organised’ to do what they do.

Patron-client school (a):

This school examines the question of ‘solidarity’ of the labourers but argues that the jobber system which works as a patron-client relationship is responsible for ‘solidarity’.²⁶ It is, however, a leadership-oriented study of the shop-floor and ignores the solidarity evolved in and through community relations which influence the solidarity on the shop-floor.

Patron-client school (b):

This approach is an extended version of patron-client school. It highlights the issues of 'solidarity' of workers extending beyond the work place to community neighbourhood relationships. Their complex interrelationship is emphasised to indicate how solidarity is achieved among the striking workers or in the organisation of the trade unions or how the strikes can be sustained.27

Linear class development model:

This approach emphasises 'solidarity' as class solidarity, not as jobber-oriented community solidarity nor merely jobber-oriented shop-floor solidarity. This is a solidarity which always grows because of fluid class contradictions that constitute aspects of this solidarity. Once such class solidarity is evolved out of the primordial ties, i.e., when workers irrespective of religion, caste, region, nationality join political movements evolved along class lines, the ties of primordial solidarity do not become dividing line for industrial proletariat.28 Consequently, this approach ignores the zig-zag course of political development and the fact that the continuing links with caste, religion, regional consciousness do at times undermine class perception. This approach assumes a linear development of class solidarity and class

28. For an example of work in this tradition, see G K Lieten, Colonialism, Class and Nation: The Confrontation in Bombay around 1930, K P Bagchi Co., Calcutta, 1984; see also R P Dutt, op. cit., pp. 409-435, for economist forms of class solidarity represented as great political awakening of the Indian working class.
consciousness among the workers. As stated before, such an assumption is flawed in the light of experiences of the setbacks of the left trade unions due to communal or caste riots in Bombay, Ahmedabad, Jamshedpur, Rourkela, so on and so forth.

Subaltern perspective:

According to this perspective there exists a striking similarity between all these paradigms discussed above. That is that they are all leadership oriented studies. They assume that the political maturity of the working class is reflected in policy statements/praxis of the leaders. As a result, they ignore the fact that even in a situation of adhesion to the leadership or factory management, the perception of the workers may be at variance with that of the political leadership or management."

It may be argued, notwithstanding their respective limitations, each approach possesses its own strength. In order to understand the working class politics it would be thus necessary to explore the following issues:

(a) the ground swell of strikes and protests, their causes of failure or success and the trade union programmes;

(b) the manner in which the solidarity of the workers is organised and expressed on the shop-floor and community which mutually reinforce each other;

(c) whether this solidarity is jobber oriented community solidarity or shop-floor solidarity and/or class solidarity;

(d) and finally, whether the workers in a relatively autonomous way adhere to or break affiliations with the political leadership or factory management.

Most of the studies on the Indian working class discuss only the 'social bases' of working class politics and their related solidarity. They tend to underplay the political dynamics of struggle. They thus suffer from sociologism. What is however important for our enquiry are the following questions - Whether the political formations assert integral autonomy of the workers vis-a-vis the ruling class and state power or whether these assertions are partial and limited in character, or whether these are mainly intended to conserve the subaltern assent to ruling class politics, etc. Gramsci's scheme, as stated before, is particularly sensitive to the political dynamics of struggle. Hence his six-stage proposal, which is more comprehensive in its presentation of the political formation of the subaltern classes, may be adopted as our reference framework in the course of the field investigation.

III

Research strategy:

In order to examine the working class formation on the basis of the framework as proposed above, an attempt is made to historically explore the nature of the labour force in the Rourkela Steel Plant during 1958-87, over a period of 30 years. As the plant came into existence in 1957-58 and started its full-fledged
operation in 1959, the unions came into being simultaneously, initially concentrating their focus on the displacement of the local people and their employment in the newly established Rourkela Steel Plant (henceforth RSP). So the year 1958-59 could be taken up as the starting point of our enquiry. As the field work was conducted in 1988-89 in the two phases, for about three months each, the year 1987 is adopted as the terminal point for our enquiry into the process initiated in 1958. However, as some interesting political developments took place in the course of our field investigation in 1988-89, an attempt is also made to capture this process in order to indicate certain recent trends in political development that seemed to be emerging among the steel workers.

Basically, three sources were consulted: (a) the RSP management, (b) unions and (c) workers. There are about 40,000 workers in the RSP. A representative sample of 10 per cent, following M.N. Srinivas's proposal, would require a survey of 4,000 workers to arrive at certain valid generalisations. However, a comprehensive survey of 4,000 workers is a near impossible task for an individual scholar with minimum objectives to be fulfilled. Instead of sampling, therefore, the case study technique was adopted in selecting respondents from among the workers and union leaders. The criteria of their selection are explained below.

Two leaders of long-standing experience and two worker activists from each union are selected in order to prepare the union's case history. A special emphasis is also given to select respondents from the two different generations of the workers/activists of each in union. In the RSP (since 1958), there are three generations of workers, the first generation being
employed in the late 50s and early 60s, the second in the late 60s and the third in the early 80s. There has been, however, no general recruitment drive in the RSP since the mid-70s. As a result, the third generation of workers do not constitute a numerically significant section as compared with the earlier two generations. So in our study we have devoted more attention to study the first two generations of activists and workers in the RSP. Another point to be noted is that all the unions active in the past or present have been covered so that no major gaps exist in our coverage of the 30 years long history of workers' politics in the RSP.

In the course of the field work it was realised that apart from the union leadership it would be especially necessary to interview the 'dissidents' in each union in order to find out what alternatives were available to the working class movement. Their positions in the union may also indicate the nature of the union. An attempt is also made to talk to the suspended or dismissed workers to find out the nature of the labour control strategy adopted by the RSP management. Since the dismissal of a worker is the highest punishment inflicted by any management, the grounds on which such managerial decisions are made may offer clues to the political nature of the management.

Specific attempts are also made to find out the responses from various grades of workers, viz, khalasis, helpers, semi-technicians and supervisors who are independent or members of different unions. As tribal workers constitute more than 20 per cent of the work force, discussions were held with some of them who are employed as contract workers or who figure in the lower grades of regular employees. Thus our respondents from the workers are
divided in terms of their identities expressed in economic, social and political criteria. But such identities of the respondents are not mutually exclusive. For example, one respondent is a local tribal and also a helper in the Blast Furnace section. Another is formerly a supervisor, dismissed from service who subsequently became a leftist dissident. Thus all the respondents except few senior trade union leaders working on a full-time basis have multiple identities.

The probing interview technique has been adopted to collect information from the leaders as well as workers with regard to the union’s case history and the respondent’s life history. The interviews were intensive and were sometimes conducted over 3 or 4 hours in a day in the case of each respondent. More often than not the interviews with the first generation union leaders were conducted over 3 or 4 days. Though each respondent was asked some common questions, the interview was basically open-ended. Each response, then, was cross-checked with the union’s published records such as booklets and also with the subsequent respondents of the same generation activists. This is how the case history of each union was constructed.

The RSP management has collected data from 1968 onwards on the industrial disputes on the shop-floor, wage structures, accidents, supervision and dismissal of workers, manpower position of the regular employees, etc. The management also has collected information (from 1980 onwards) on the manpower position of the contract workers. Some data are also available on the functioning of the Joint committees since their formation in the mid-60s. Files in the Industrial Relations Cell, Contract Labour Cell, Manpower Cell, Joint Committee Cell, Vigilance Department, etc. of
the General Administration of the RSP were also looked into. As most of the officers were reluctant to talk and some even refused to come forward for a meeting, it was quite impossible to cross-check the union responses with the RSP management.

In so far as the secondary literature on Rourkela labour history are concerned these are few in number: for example, one dissertation on Rourkela labour politics during 1980-85, a massive project work on the contract workers sponsored by the Asian Workers Development Institute, Rourkela and a two volume ICSSR-sponsored thesis work which has a brief section on the Rourkela Mazdoor Sabha, the recognised union of the RSP. The contract labour project has been used as a major source of information for the present work. An attempt, however, has been made to fill up some gaps in this project work and also update its information with regard to the contract labourers movement.

The thesis is primarily concerned with the following three questions pertaining to the labour history in Rourkela:

(a) first, how did a non-tribal elitist leadership, on the basis of a certain kind of socialist rhetoric, emerge within the working class movement and get recognition by the RSP management?

(b) second, how were the left challenges aborted at different points of time?

(c) finally, how did the workers, marginalised by the 'organised' unions, pose challenges by occasionally organising themselves into what may be called 'autonomous unions'?

Chapters 2, 3 and 4 deal with the above three questions respectively. In the following Chapter 1, an attempt is made briefly to introduce the industrial scenario in Rourkela and Orissa and also examine the socio-economic background of the RSP workers - the different grades of workers, their wage structures over time, the growth of the labour aristocracy, etc. In the conclusion, an attempt is made to sum up the trends in working class politics, relate them to the framework as proposed in the present essay and find an explanatory scheme.