

punished. The question of regional identity is discussed at considerable length in the book – the tensions between local Kannadiga workers and the migrant Tamil workers resulting from the 1970s in a change in recruitment policy in favour of the “sons of the soil”. The larger context of Kannadiga politics framed such company strategies and influenced plant-level workers’ social interactions.

This is a long book and it traces the history of ITI from a rich combination of sources: documentary (from the company records), oral narratives (interviews of workers, union leaders, and managers) and ethnography. It gives us a textured, layered, and nuanced history of a major area of India’s economy over a period of half a century. This brief review can by no means do justice to the complexity of its many arguments. But special mention must be made of the sixth chapter, the ethnography of work at the ITI. There are very few such detailed ethnographies of work in Indian literature, which tends, as Subramanian points out, to describe the work process in depersonalized terms. In this chapter, the author brings together a remarkably keen eye and a number of interviews to draw in rich narrative detail the dynamic picture of workers at work.

In recent years, scholars have turned their attention to the informal sector, for very long neglected in labour studies. Subramanian’s book tells us that there is a great deal about the formal sector that we still need to understand. The analytic strength and originality of the book is in the focus on the public sector, the hard core of the formal manufacturing economy, the drawing together of the business and labour ends of production, and the focus on the plural roles of the state. The tension between the scholar’s diagnosis of the ills of public-sector companies such as the ITI and the ideological resistance against their dismantling remains as a running thread in the book. Twenty years ago the book may have informed, more critically and informatively, and perhaps with far better consequences for companies such as the ITI, the debates on the public sector and shifted them from the very fixed channels in which they have moved. It is not too late, however, and it is to be hoped that other than scholars and students of business and labour history, bureaucrats and policy-makers will also pick up the book and reflect on the potential and possibilities of the public sector.

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TALIB, MOHAMMAD. *Writing Labour. Stone Quarry Workers in Delhi*. Oxford University Press, Oxford [etc.] 2010. xiv, 278 pp. Ill. Maps. £30.00; doi:10.1017/S0020859012000326

All detailed descriptions of actual work processes and their associated labour relations should be welcomed. They are, after all, rare (especially outside the global West and outside the industrialized sectors) and yet an important – if not the *most* important – empirical basis for labour history. In India, this applies especially to the so-called “informal sector”, ie. that part of the labour market which de jure or de facto falls outside the protection of labour laws – which at present would include about 95 per cent of the total workforce. Talib’s study of stone quarry workers in New Delhi is therefore a welcome addition to our knowledge about labour relations in India. More than that, it is an outstanding example of research in this area: detailed, thorough, and full of surprising new information.

The scene of the action is a large stone quarry in the foothills of the Aravalli hill range in the south-west outer suburbs of New Delhi, established in 1952 and, at the end of 1980, shifted to the bordering states of Haryana and Rajasthan. A look at the historical buildings of the different Old Delhis and of New Delhi, erected a century ago, would reveal a lengthy prehistory, but that is not the subject of this book. All workers (around 1,200 households in 1981, if I read p. 27 correctly) lived apart per caste together at the village Pul Pehlad, near Tughlaqabad Fort, in close proximity to the stone quarry. From 1984 to 1987, the author carried out extensive anthropological fieldwork there (not, I should note for readers of this journal, archival research) and on that basis he defended his Ph.D. dissertation in 1989, at the Jamia Millia Islamia University in New Delhi. For various reasons, explained in the preface, he was able to return to the subject only in 2005. Adding extra information, but more especially epistemological reflections on his research (extensively elaborated in footnotes and in the introductory and concluding chapters), he turned his experience into the present book.

Central to his story, I think, is the development of pieceworkers, who were initially greatly divided among themselves, into active participants in collective action – action which culminated in a tragic failure, because of political indifference and resistance. It was a situation from which the employers obviously profited, although they were not necessarily behind it, and indeed did not *need* to be behind it. That was the tragedy. Talib's description of the failure of the Indian political system on all sides to meet its legal requirements, and enforce the observance of labour laws (as well as minimal health and educational provisions), is poignant. The author does not say it in so many words, but he suggests strongly that caste differences between bureaucrats, police, and employers on the one side, and the workers (who belonged without exception to three different scheduled castes) on the other side were responsible for this outcome. However, the unholy alliances among the actors in the dispute are not presented as the main theme of the book. Instead, it is primarily concerned with documenting the living conditions, and especially the consciousness of the workers, which inspired their actions.

Talib collected demographic and migration data in a survey of 612 workers, which – if I am not much mistaken – would represent about half of all the employee households. In this group were 406 married men, and he analysed their households (comprising 880 earners and 1,409 dependents) to find out more about household size, sources of income, and indebtedness. Since the budget results which he calculated did not seem very credible in some respects, he finally selected 10 households for more detailed research about the relationship between incomes, expenditures, and debts.

However remarkable his descriptions of the work process and the labour relations may be, the author could – in my opinion – have detailed and analysed them still more, and more precisely. I suspect that, in reworking his research as a book, he was more concerned with creating a well-founded theoretical-anthropological framework than about this aspect. It is typical that, while he sketches wonderful “personal profiles” of eight workers in two places in his book (pp. 4–8 and pp. 132–147), he hardly discusses what kind of work exactly was done by these people; which persons they worked with day in day out; who determined the division and sequence of work tasks; how their wages were calculated and paid out (time rates or piece rates); to whom exactly payments were made; and how the money was then mutually shared out, etc. Various aspects of working life at the quarry remain rather unclear. At the risk of interpretative errors, allow me to sketch briefly some characteristics of Talib's workforce sample, to indicate their significance.

The workers were all migrants, or the children of migrants – originally mostly casual workers, share-croppers or marginal farmers (in that order), especially from

Rajasthan (two castes from the Beawar Bharatpur and Nagaur districts), and also Uttar Pradesh (one and the same caste from the Banda, Mathura, Meerut, and Gonda districts). Impoverished (and half of them in addition also locally indebted), they were recruited by middlemen called *jamadars*, to work in the quarries. These *jamadars* took over possible debts from the original creditors, advanced travel money, and took care of the new job arrangements (and necessary tools) in the quarry. In turn, they deducted their own expenses from the workers' wages. Employers at the quarry also extended loans to the workers, especially for sickness and unemployment costs and marriage costs.

At the time of Talib's field research, the outcome of this continual process of indebtedness proved to be financially disastrous for the workers. At the time of the study, only 5 of the 207 households who had been debt-free at their place of origin, were still free of debts. In addition, only 7 of the 199 families who were indebted prior to their migration had settled their debts. The most important consequence of persistent indebtedness to the *jamadars*, and especially to the operators of the quarry (the *thekedars*), was that the workers could not leave the quarry to find other work. And the hired "muscle-men" guarding the entrances of the village made sure that they did not leave. In addition, all the debts were only contracted verbally, and creditors constantly claimed that workers' debts had not been repaid yet by far, or even that, instead, their debts had increased. If it did not exist already, this combination of debts, the impossibility of verifying the amounts, and ultimately the application of brute force, maintained and extended a system of bonded labour.

At first, the workers consciously and willingly entered into this situation by hiring themselves out to a *jamadar*. This is explained, above all, by their hope that through working hard, they could pay off their debts, and ultimately return home. After all, the quarry offered badly needed work opportunities, at wages which were reasonable compared to the wages at home. In addition, one-third of the households had other sources of income, partly in the villages where they were born (with which close ties were maintained). But workers' hopes were more especially focused on the *kbandar* piecework system, in which many ended up working (although, regrettably, it never becomes clear how many exactly were involved). In their eyes, it had the following advantages: "they experienced *ajadi*, which is latitude in conducting work at one's own pace. Under this system, the quarry workers considered themselves their own supervisors. There was no immediate authority – not at least in the shape of any watchful overseer controlling and assessing their productivity. A piece-rate work setting made most workers believe that they could earn as much as they liked, whereas to work under an employers' eagle eye and constant supervision was seen by many as a condition of slavery" (p. 60). Talib mentions other advantages here, such as the freedom to use one's own labour power and that of family members both in the quarry and at home (during the season when the quarry offered less work or no work). On the other hand, he also shows, in the statements by older workers, the specific disadvantages (such as overwork at a young age).

What stands out in the text from which I quoted, however, are qualifiers like "believed", "considered" and "was seen as" – in particular when he talks about the "myth" and the "illusion" of the advantages of piecework as the workers perceived them (pp. 61 and 66). With his explicitly negative valuation of the practice of piecework, the author places himself in a lengthy tradition of labour studies which, he considers, begins with Marx's *Capital*. Such an approach is striking, in particular because, elsewhere in his book, Talib argues extensively and emphatically that the researcher ought to take his informants' judgments seriously. He does so very well, for example, when he analyses their world

view, their perspective on society and their rituals. But he fails to do so in the case of piecework. This methodological inconsistency gets him into trouble, I think, when he tries to explain the motives behind the workers' collective actions.

Workers' collective protests and struggles since 1972 are discussed in chapter 3, which is, for labour historians, probably the most interesting part of the book. I would have liked a more detailed account, especially given that information about the leaders of the actions is lacking. Talib shows that the impressive actions taken by the workers were by no means obvious and predictable. It was certainly true that working conditions were appalling, for reasons already briefly indicated, and because of the horrific dust clouds in the quarry, which caused silicosis. But misery as such is not enough for the emergence of collective action. Especially the deeply-rooted antagonisms between the three castes present seemed to prevent every kind of cooperation among workers to improve their lot. Despite this, a large cooperative movement was formed which strenuously tried to oust the *thekedars*, and contract the quarry work independently, exactly according to the principles of the *khandar* system. In these parallel developments, I think, resided the attraction of the new movement. Alas, in the end, despite successful appeals to juridical authorities right up to the Supreme Court, to NGOs, and to public opinion, a movement which could temporarily unite workers from all castes floundered – because of lack of political will, more so than because of the power of the employers. The employers were, so to speak, the laughing third party, while trade unions stayed on the sidelines throughout. I think this drama merits a thorough analysis in a further book, although Talib's account is, to be sure, already rich in information.

In summary, *Writing Labour* is an important work, qua content, method and theory – not just for Indian labour history, but also for labour historians worldwide. It shows how an empirically serious analysis combining work processes, labour relations, primordial identities (in this case, of caste and religion), and class identities can lead to deeper insight into the history of work. The few criticisms which I have, cannot detract from this achievement.

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ATZENI, MAURIZIO. *Workplace Conflict. Mobilization and Solidarity in Argentina*. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke [etc.] 2010. xv, 171 pp. £60.00; doi:10.1017/S0020859012000338

The increase of “new” forms of social conflict in Argentina since the late 1990s revitalized the theoretical discussion about collective action. But in a neoliberal scenario where employment was becoming a vague notion, the *piqueteros*¹ and unemployed workers' movements took the centre of the scene and their forms of protest have been the most frequently studied and analysed by social researchers. At this stage of academic interest,

1. *Piquete* (picket) is an action by which a group of people blocks a road or street with the purpose of demonstrating and calling attention to a particular demand. The people belonging to that group or performing such actions are called *piqueteros*. They were the main political actors during the last two decades in Argentina.