Buchbesprechungen/Reviews

Strümpell, Christian: Steel Town Adivasis: Industry and Inequality in Eastern India. 390 pp. London: Routledge, 2024. ISBN 978-10-32759-85-2

Christian Strümpell's *Steel Town Adivasis* is a major contribution to the literature on urban industrial India. Well-grounded, analytically cogent, it concerns issues that matter. Based on twenty months fieldwork among industrial workers over several stints since 2004 in the steel town of Rourkela in the state of Odisha, it focuses on the intersection between class, ethnicity and caste; on how the relationship between these axes of inequality, and their relative salience, changes with shifts in political economy. One of three mega steel plants commissioned under India's Second Five-Year Plan (1955-56), Rourkela was among those 'temples' to India's industrial modernity that Prime Minister Nehru enthusiastically promoted. Material foundation and inspirational model for 'a socialist pattern of society' based on secular principles, such projects supposedly heralded a brave new world that would set individuals free from atavistic collective identities based on caste, religion and ethnicity. That did not, of course, entirely work out – especially not in Rourkela.

The public sector Rourkela Steel Plant (RSP) and its township were constructed with West German aid and expertise in Odisha's remote and rural northwestern highlands, to which it would bring 'development' and jobs. Previously part of a princely state, this 'tribal' area was incorporated into Odisha only one decade earlier. Land was requisitioned from 92 villages. Sixty per cent of those displaced were autochthonous Adivasis, members of various so-called Scheduled Tribes, one-quarter of them Christian converts. Scheduled Caste Hindus, 'Untouchables', accounted for another ten per cent. Displaced households were promised monetary compensation for their fields; a building subsidy and house plot in one of three resettlement colonies on the township periphery; arable land further out; and eventual appointment to a regular plant post of one male able-bodied member.

Initially, workers came from all over India. The temporary construction workforce reached 46,000. Some became regular production operatives. This permanent workforce grew to 39,000 by 1990, when the trend turned downwards as neo-liberal economic reforms bit. There were no compulsory redundancies, however, and the pay and conditions of those still in post remained privileged. Recruitment was largely suspended, and the labour of retirees was replaced by that of temporary contract workers who, without job security or other rights, could be required to work at higher intensity

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for much lower wages. Satellite industries grew up in both public and private sectors. Though the package was less generous, other state-run factories also provided regular labour with organised sector employment rights, as did *some* private factories to *some* workers. The majority were casual labour. In addition, a considerable multiplier workforce in the unregulated informal sector supplied goods and services to the town and its industries. Historically, however, Rourkela had an unusually high proportion of households with secure formal-sector employment. Strümpell focuses on the fierce competition for such jobs, on what happened when that sector contracted, and on the varying importance at different junctures of the compulsions of class, caste and ethnicity for workers' lives. Baldly stated, the trajectory was from ethnicity trumping caste and class, to class crystallizing as the dominant axis of distinction.

One fundamental contradiction in Nehru's 'socialist' programme is immediately obvious. It was from the outset subverted by an industrial strategy that largely created, and certainly entrenched, a chasm *within* the manual workforce between on the one hand a privileged 'labour aristocracy', like regular RSP workers, and on the other hand the casual contract labour that worked alongside them in organised sector industry, and the coolies, cobblers and all the rest who worked outside it. In terms of pay, perks, prestige, job security and working conditions, the gap has been vast. RSP workers have middle-class incomes and often middle-class aspirations and life-styles. 'Middle-class' is how many identify and are identified by others. They are clearly distinct and have different interests from the informal 'labour class', a distinction reinforced by residential segregation, different consumption and educational standards, and divergent values. But it is not entirely stable, and Strümpell nuances his account with two instances when these different fractions of labour temporarily transcended their differences in response to the imperatives of ethnic politics or in opposition to management. Though over time the class boundary sharpened, there were episodes during which its edges were blunted.

At least in the company township, caste takes a back seat. Inter-caste dining is not an issue, hierarchy is downplayed, and breaches of caste endogamy widely condoned. The caveat is that Untouchables continue to be set apart, and inter-caste sociality is heavily inflected by regional ethnicity. Religious identities between Hindus and Muslims are deeply contentious and were the pretext for horrific bloodletting in 1964 when hundreds perished in an anti-Muslim pogrom. Its broader context was repeated violence between *regional* communities – and the context for that was competition for RSP posts. Rather than iconic of the new *India,* as Nehru intended, within a decade Rourkela epitomised *Odia* xenophobia. Billed as a catalyst to local employment, outsiders cornered the jobs - Punjabis, 'Madrasis' and Bengalis monopolizing the skilled and remunerative ones. Odias, including local Adivasis, were deeply resentful, and these 'foreigners' became their targets. It was, however, the so-called *Katkiyas* from coastal Odisha, who entered these backward highlands with the mindset of colonisers, who could best take advantage. The exigencies of electoral politics gave them significant leverage with the state government, which controlled local employment exchanges

and exerted considerable influence on RSP recruitment. By the end of the 1960s, that was heavily skewed in their favour, and they soon established a stranglehold on the pre-eminent union. Adivasis were left out in the cold. To them, *Katkiyas* were no less exploitative outsiders, and now Adivasis joined out-of-state 'foreigners' in competitive unions. That's been the not quite consistent pattern: rather than pursue a class agenda, unions have more commonly served as instruments of ethnic competition. Eventually, however, many Odias were themselves alienated by the corruption and loud-mouthed chauvinism of their union, which was ousted; the early cohorts of non-Odia workers retired, and space opened up for new Adivasi recruitment. During Strümpell's fieldwork, the workforce was overwhelmingly Odia and Adivasi. Ethnic identities remained crucial; ethnic stereotypes greatly influenced postings to different departments and the assignment of shopfloor tasks. Odias are disproportionately sent to the more forgiving mills, while Adivasis – as befits their 'natures' ('more brawn than brain') – go to 'hot' shops with the toughest conditions (against which their alcohol consumption is prophylactic).

A particular strength of Strümpell's analysis concerns the way that space refracts class and ethnicity. Aside from the crucial division between a salubrious company township with many amenities and the slummier resettlement colonies, we learn of middle-class developments for retired RSP workers, densely populated commercial and semi-criminalized neighbourhoods around the station, squatter *basti*s built on encroached RSP land and vestiges of erstwhile villages. Residential spaces are often ethnic enclaves. Though early on the township accommodated many non-Odias, it became a pre-eminently Odia space, socially, culturally and linguistically. Local Advasis built in the resettlement colonies (or in squatter *basti*s), where they were joined by Adivasis incomers. There were too few RSP quarters for the whole workforce, though it was also a positive preference. Who wanted to live alongside overbearing Odias? Indeed, at the planning stage an educated Adivasi elite insisted that to preserve their culture they needed their own space. The upshot was not only residential *segregation* between Odias and Adivasis, but also class *integration* between Adivasi RSP employees who lived alongside Adivasi informal-sector labour in the colonies. That changed. As the RSP workforce shrunk, township quarters became easily available, and Adivasis – both new recruits from outside and established employees living elsewhere – eagerly moved into them, mainly because township schools are far superior and the kids more likely to acquire the qualifications and social polish that will advantage them in an increasingly competitive job market. Emptied of RSP workers, the colonies have become 'sinks' for the 'labour class'. At the same time, these upwardly mobile township Adivasis have distanced themselves from their uncouth colony cousins and dropped support for the renewed campaigns of the latter - campaigns demanding that allegedly unfulfilled promises of plant jobs in lieu of their land should finally be honoured. Class has progressively superseded ethnicity as the mainspring of identity and driver of social action.

The tenacity of ethnic stereotyping, however, makes it hard for township Adivasis to feel secure in their 'middle-classness'. Tribal identity remains an indelible 'mark

of Cain', as is reported of Dalit ('Untouchable') identity in one of Rourkela's sister steel plants. Disappointingly, Strümpell takes the comparison no further, and we must speculate whether the two cases are as similar as he implies. Of Rourkela *Dalits* we hear very little; and – unless by class – little more about the way in which the category 'Adivasi' is internally differentiated today, though we do learn that the RSP workforce includes representatives of a dozen different 'tribes' which in the past were to some degree hierarchized. The impression one gets from Strümpell's account, however, is that such differences no longer count for much – at least not in the face of the wider society. But how true would that be of urban Dalits? Is there not much in the comparative literature that might suggest more intractable differences between them? The political implications of that would matter.

Inevitably there are gaps, but overall this is an impressive book and essential reading for anybody with any interest in industry and inequality in South Asia. A pity about the quality of the copy-editing and proof-reading.

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Vepřek, Libuše Hannah: At the Edge of AI. Human Computation Systems and Their Intraverting Relations.
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Given the overwhelming number of publications on the rise of AI as the most recent instance of sweeping digital transformation, why should you read this particular book? The answer is that Libuše Vepřek's *At the Edge of AI: Human Computation Systems and Their Intraverting Relations* not only provides a comprehensive and up-to-date overview of perspectives on technology and AI from cultural anthropology and from Science and Technology Studies (STS), it also introduces the concept of 'intraversions' in a thoughtful consideration of the complexities and transience of human–machine configurations. This makes her work a meaningful contribution also to the sociology of technology, as it addresses one of its hardest problems: how to capture agency in complex, changing systems whose future is hard to predict. Vepřek also offers valuable insights into the everyday practices of the many actors involved in human computation (HC). These systems, which are often situated within citizen science and feature game-like elements, rely on networks of both human and non-human actors. They aim to solve complex problems with a level of accuracy and scale that would be impossible without such hybrid collaboration.

The book comprises eight chapters, beginning with a thorough grounding in theories of human–nonhuman agency and technology assemblage, followed by an overview of the methodology and an in-depth ethnographic analysis of three HC case