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**Work practices and norms:
A comparative and historical
perspective**

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Preface

The International Institute for Labour Studies cooperated with the ILO Bureau of External Relations and the World Council of Churches in organizing an inter-cultural dialogue on decent work which was held from 22 to 25 February 2002 in Geneva. The purpose of the dialogue was to sensitize the partners to the concepts and issues underlying the decent work strategy, and to engage them in a reflection on the policy dimensions of this strategy. The present paper was commissioned in connection with the inter-cultural dialogue.

The paper examines some cross-cultural perspectives in the development of labour institutions. Focusing on the evolution of industrial capitalism in the West and on the emerging industrial society of India, the author points out that the norms of work have not remained the same in all societies under all conditions.

It is the responsibility of every society to ensure that work does not degrade or defile any individual worker. To this end, work may be regulated either by impersonal sanctions or by the more personal sanctions of the home and the community. In neither case are the sanctions foolproof. In a society which is moving from an agricultural tradition to an urban industrial economy there is a danger that sanctions may break down. In this situation work may become the site for the exploitation and oppression of children, women and other vulnerable members of society. It is under conditions which violate the norms of human dignity that the need for institutions to regulate work is most acutely felt.

Current ideas about work in the economically advanced societies are the end product of a historical process that began with the Industrial Revolution 200 years ago. This process led to a particular definition of work; to a separation between work and the domestic sphere; and to a breakdown of the sanctions to which work was subjected by both home and community.

The Constitution of India and the Directive Principles established governance structures intended to safeguard the rights and interests of the working people. However, the existing institutions may need to be adapted in order to meet the changing requirements of an industrializing society. The state, the social partners and civil society all have an important role to play in bringing about the positive changes needed to make the nation's institutions more compatible with the environment of the modern labour market.

André Béteille served as Professor of Sociology in the University of Delhi where he has taught since 1959. A Fellow of the British Academy, his research interests include stratification and social class; equality and social justice; and race, caste and ethnicity. In addition to papers in scholarly journals, he has published *Caste, Class and Power* (1965); *Castes: Old and New* (1969); *The Idea of Natural Inequality and other Essays* (1983); *Essays in Comparative Sociology* (1987); *Society and Politics in India* (1991); *The Backward Classes in Contemporary India* (1992). His most recent publications are: *Chronicles of Our Time* (Penguin Books, 2000), *Antinomies of Society* (Oxford University Press, 2000), *Sociology* (Oxford University Press, 2002) and *Equality and Universality* (Oxford University Press, 2002).

Work practices and norms: A comparative and historical perspective

Introduction

The nature and conditions of work are almost infinitely variable. Even in a single country such as India one has only to compare how work is performed and regulated in a tribal village with the way it is performed and regulated in an industrial city to appreciate the diversity. The different spheres of work are today increasingly connected to each other, and an individual may move from a village farm to an urban factory in the course of a single year, not to speak of a whole lifetime.

Not only is work organized differently, the norms and standards by which it is regulated also differ from one setting to another. In a world where individuals are moving continuously between different work settings, it is natural to compare and contrast different conditions of work and to think of a common set of standards. The International Labour Organization has played a leading part in drawing attention to the need for such standards as well as in their formulation and adoption. It must not be forgotten, however, that the movement towards a set of common or core labour standards applicable worldwide is a relatively recent development in the history of work, and that the initiative for it has come mainly from the industrially advanced countries.

By any standard, the conditions of work in less-developed and transitional economies are often appalling. There is bonded labour, exploitation of women and abuse of children. Such conditions are a challenge to the conscience of right-minded people the world over. But they are different not only from the conditions that now prevail in the advanced industrial societies, but also from those that generally prevailed in stable agrarian communities before the advent of industrial capitalism.

The social organization of work, whether in relatively stable agrarian communities or in rapidly changing industrial societies, is governed by a variety of factors: technology, size and density of population, social morphology, economic policy, legal rules, and religious and cultural traditions. The combination of elements by which work practices are governed from day to day varies not only from one society to another but, within the same society, from one work setting to another. The various elements act upon one another, and no single one among them, whether technology or religion, may be said to have a decisive or determining influence on all the others. New technology does bring about changes in the conditions of work, but so do new laws; and it would be futile to try to make a radical change in those conditions by altering any one element without considering all the others.

The value assigned to work and the norms for the regulation of work are not the same everywhere or at all times. 'Value' here refers to culturally prescribed ends, and 'norms' refer to regulatory rules (Smelser, 1962, p.24; Bêteille, 2000, pp.208-37). There is no society without its own culturally prescribed ends and none without its own regulatory rules, although values and norms as defined above are neither invariant nor immutable. What has to be understood about countries of the size and complexity of India is that, along with diversity in work conditions and practices, there is also heterogeneity in the norms and values by which work is governed.

Norms and values change over time, but they do not change at the will and pleasure of well-intentioned individuals or even of benevolent organizations. Major social changes are in large part the unintended consequence of the actions of innumerable individuals and other social agents. What was acceptable in the past yields to new conceptions of what is right, proper and desirable not only in the workplace but in society as a whole. But this does not happen all at once or uniformly in every sphere of society. The co-existence of old and new norms and values is a feature of every large and complex society. It is particularly marked in India where the principle of accretion has since time immemorial allowed the continuance of old elements even after the adoption of new ones that are apparently incompatible with them (Karve, 1968, p.7).

In India, as in many other countries, an improvement in the conditions of work will require the formulation and institutionalization of new norms and values. But little will be achieved if we do not pay careful attention to the existing norms and values and to the sources of their strength. It will also help to recognize that the norms and values now prevalent in the advanced industrial countries have not always been prevalent and that they are likely to change further with the passage of time. In short, a comparative and historical perspective is indispensable in determining what needs to be done and what can be done to create and sustain better conditions of work the world over.

I. The evolution of work-related norms

It cannot be too strongly emphasized that the adoption of the core labour standards by the ILO and their general endorsement worldwide is the culmination of a historical process that began in modern times with the Industrial Revolution in England in the eighteenth century. The need for such standards would not be felt or even understood in an isolated band of hunter-gatherers or a self-contained community of peasants. What is more, the attempt to impose such standards would have received little general support 150 years ago even in England, which was then the most advanced society in the world.

One cannot take the view that work is not valued in pre-industrial or non-industrial societies, or that there are no work norms in them. The ethnographic and historical records show that there is a great variety of such societies, and there is something to be learnt from a consideration of work-related values and norms in non-Western societies of the past and the present. Work is socially organized in all human societies, and underlying that organization are distinct assumptions about which members of society should be expected or required to do which kinds of work. Even outside the Western world, the social organization of work in a simple tribal society is very different from its organization in a complex hierarchical one. The technology is different, the division of labour is different, and the rules relating to the performance and avoidance of work are different.

The division of labour by age and sex is a conspicuous feature of virtually all non-industrial societies. In most tribal and peasant communities children are expected to work from a fairly early age, although their tasks are not the same as those of adults. The work that children are assigned in such societies in the household, on the farm or even in the marketplace has to be distinguished from child labour under capitalism in its early phase. Such work is governed by its own social code, and should not be seen as a form of exploitation or abuse in every case. It is not always easy to convince peasants in societies in a phase of transition that their children should be in school and not at work.

In modern industrial societies the general presumption is that wherever children are engaged in gainful economic activity, there is exploitation and abuse of children. This reflects partly a change of attitude towards children and partly a change in the nature and conditions of work. There is no doubt about the widespread misuse of children in transitional economies, but it will be a mistake to view the work done by children everywhere in the light of the industrial-capitalist division of labour. In traditional tribal and peasant communities children are not only put to work early but are also highly valued by the family and the community for their own sake and not just as a source of economic profit.

In Kano in northern Nigeria children begin to work for wages outside the home at a fairly early age. Girls are more actively engaged in this kind of employment than boys. They are assigned tasks considered unsuitable for adult married women who are required to observe *pardah* in this predominantly Muslim society. Married women remain at home and produce various articles which their children take for sale outside, keeping a part of the proceeds for themselves. All of this is done within a relatively close-knit community. Although children are not regarded as the equals of adults, or girls the equals of boys, the sanctions of the community act against the arbitrary treatment of children, including girls (Schildkrout, 1979).

Still remaining with the example of Kano, while both men and women work, their spheres of work are very different. There is no question of equal pay for equal work, for men and women are not expected to compete with each other at work. The work done by men and women is not only different, it is unequally rated. Women's economic contributions are indispensable and their earnings may be substantial, but they are subordinate to their menfolk, economically and socially. 'There are constraints on the status of women which limit the transferability of economic gain into social or political advantage' (Schildkrout, 1979, p.71). But again, this does not mean that women can be economically exploited or oppressed at will.

In more complex hierarchical societies, the allocation of work was governed by other social distinctions based on birth in addition to age and sex. The most important of these were the distinctions based on caste or its analogues. For centuries the Indian caste system has been the social basis of an elaborate division of labour in which birth rather than performance was the basis of social and economic standing. The choice of occupation was severely restricted by the caste into which the individual was born. Access to every kind of work was not open to all persons but restricted to a large extent by the rules of purity and pollution (Hutton, 1946).

In many past societies the most menial and defiling forms of work were made the obligation by custom, if not by law, of certain races, certain communities and certain strata whose members were then denied access to the more esteemed and remunerative forms of work. Equality of opportunity for all individuals is a modern value, and, in the ethnographic and historical perspective, not a universal one. Discrimination on grounds of race, caste and gender was the rule rather than the exception in pre-modern societies.

II. From social norms to labour standards

a) The Industrial Revolution

The emergence of industrial capitalism marks a watershed in human history. It has had a profound effect on work practices and work norms, and indeed on the very conception of work as a distinct and autonomous sphere of activity. Its contribution to the creation of a new kind of society with distinctive forms of organization and distinctive norms and values can scarcely be exaggerated.

The Industrial Revolution began in England in the second half of the eighteenth century. Throughout the nineteenth century the new economic and social order that it created was largely confined to a few Western countries. Indeed, well into the twentieth century, industrial society was regarded as coterminous with Western society. But as the twentieth century progressed, it became evident that there were variant forms of it. Raymond Aron (1967) distinguished between two principal types of industrial society, the 'capitalist', located in the United States and Western Europe, and the 'socialist', located in the Soviet Union and other East European countries. His main argument was that, despite the great ideological divide between the West and the East, there were fundamental similarities in the organization of work in the two types of industrial society.

The old ideological divide on which Aron dwelt in his discussion of industrial society 40 years ago has become somewhat anachronistic. In any case, both eastern and western Europe belong to the same broad 'Western' civilization with its roots in the Christian tradition. The emergence of Japan as a major industrial economy makes it difficult to continue to equate industrial society with Western society. Even in the organization of work, Japan and other East Asian countries display characteristics that differ from those which prevail in the 'classical' types of industrial society described by Aron and his predecessors.

Industrial technology and industrial practices and norms of work are now widely prevalent throughout the world. They may be found in societies that cannot, strictly speaking, be called 'industrial societies'. The Indian economy has a large and expanding industrial sector but that has by no means completely displaced traditional agrarian ways of life and work. Not only are rural agricultural communities important demographically and economically, but there is strong

ideological support, particularly within the Gandhian tradition, for agrarian as against industrial ways of life.

In countries like India the contrast between industrial and agrarian ways of life can easily be observed even when they are closely interwoven as they increasingly tend to be. In certain settings work is organized primarily through rational impersonal rules, and the time and place of work are distinct from other types of activity. In other settings the organization of work is part of the organization of the household and the community, and there is no clear separation of the working day from other parts of the day, or the workplace from other places.

The Industrial Revolution brought about changes not only in the existential order of society, i.e. in the order of life as it is actually lived, but also in the normative order, i.e. in the ideals of life and in codes of conduct. In retrospect, and taking a long historical view, the two types of change appear to have moved in step with each other. Changes in the normative order were not simply a response to changes in material conditions; changes in those conditions were as often driven by new ideas, beliefs and values. All that we can say is that a kind of elective affinity becomes apparent when we take a sufficiently long view of the change.

The change in the normative order which accompanied the expansion of industrial capitalism was a slow and tortuous process that did not immediately become apparent to those who experienced it. What they experienced more keenly than the emergence of a new normative order, at least in the early phase of industrialization, was the disintegration of the old order. Industrial production was no doubt the source of a new kind of material wealth but it was also the source of much disorder and anomie. We do not get a very pretty picture of the cycle of work in the nineteenth century English factory from scientific writers such as Marx or from literary writers such as Dickens.

Conditions of work in the mid-nineteenth century English factory were inferior not only to what would be acceptable today but also to the working conditions generally prevalent in pre-industrial England. This became true throughout the West and in other countries elsewhere in the world to which the industrial mode of production gradually spread. The protection that individuals, including women and children, had enjoyed from the family, the community and the parish was gradually withdrawn or weakened. The weak and the vulnerable among the free-floating individuals suffered acutely at the hands of rapacious factory owners, managers, middle-men and profiteers. Community norms for the regulation of work lost their power to bind, and industrial norms were yet to be born and made effective.

The factory system established a new relationship between time and work, and between place and work. Work was something that had to be done at particular times and particular places, and those times and places were set apart exclusively for work. The factory system detached work to a large extent from the succession of natural events; any work could in principle be done in any season and at any time of the day or night. Work also came to be detached to some extent from established rhythms of social and ceremonial life. As it came to be increasingly regulated by the clock, the amount of work done – or not done – could be measured exactly.

There are many accounts of the working day in industrial England in the nineteenth century, but none more arresting or memorable than Marx's account in *Capital* (Marx, 1954, pp.222-286). Marx showed in vivid detail how the hours of work were stretched to the fullest extent possible, often without consideration of even the basic human needs of men, women and children. What strikes us as we read the accounts of the many eye-witnesses quoted in *Capital* is that there appears to have been no clear line of division between the normal and the pathological in the sphere of work in early industrial society. The foremost industrial society in the world had a long way to go before adopting labour standards that are now legally required even in what are called the less developed countries.

Legal limits on the hours of work were variable and flexible, and they were honoured more in the breach than in the observance. Bakers, potters, laundrymen and many others were made to work continuously for 12 hours a day and longer. The Ten Hours' Act which was adopted in 1848 was regarded as a very progressive measure. Factory inspectors regularly reported on how owners and managers added extra time to what the law allowed so as to squeeze the maximum amount of

work out of their labourers. Apprentices suffered more than full-fledged workers, and casual workers had practically no rights.

Women and children suffered the worst: not all women or all children, but those belonging to the labouring poor. They were made to work the longest hours and under the most oppressive physical conditions. Those conditions, which are now largely a memory in the advanced industrial countries, may be widely encountered in the countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America. What I wish to stress is that they are different from the conditions under which women and children worked in agrarian or tribal societies before the advent of industrial capitalism. The destabilization of norms and values that we see today in countries that are latecomers to industrialization was foreshadowed in what are now advanced societies in their early phase of economic growth.

b) Individuality, equality and universality

Taking a long-term view of the emergence of modern societies, the Industrial Revolution may be seen as a process of creative destruction. It left in disarray many of the institutions of the old social order and the moral foundations on which they rested. But it also sowed the seeds of a new institutional order with its own organizational form and its own moral basis. Individuality, equality and universality emerged as the fundamental principles of the new normative order. These values were not unknown to past societies, but they acquired a distinctive significance in the new social order, singly and in combination with each other. The core labour standards and recent ideas of decent work cannot be understood without taking their significance into account.

Past societies subordinated the individual to the community, morally and legally. This subordination was nowhere complete and it was less comprehensive in some societies than in others. The recognition in modern times of individuals as autonomous moral agents has had far-reaching consequences for their standing as workers and, more generally, as citizens (Marshall, 1977, pp.71-134). The rights of the worker, as of the citizen, are individual rights, and the modern idea of liberty is inconceivable without those rights. However, it should not be forgotten that detaching individuals from the family and the community also makes them highly vulnerable, particularly in a changing and uncertain environment.

The close association between individualism and equality has been pointed out by a succession of writers going back to the early part of the nineteenth century (Tocqueville, 1956, Dumont, 1977; see also Bêteille, 1986). If earlier societies were hierarchical or aristocratic, modern ones may be described as egalitarian or democratic, at least in their normative orientation. In democratic societies the rights of the citizen are not just individual rights, they are equal rights. Discrimination on grounds of gender, caste, ethnicity or race is contrary to the spirit of egalitarian societies whereas it was in conformity with the spirit of hierarchical ones. The most striking difference from the normative point of view between the modern societies that emerged in the wake of the Industrial Revolution and all pre-existing societies is the gradual adoption of the principle of equality of opportunity in work between men and women. This principle did not become established in a day or a decade, but there can be no doubt about its advance throughout the world in the last hundred years.

From the egalitarian point of view, the paradox of modern societies is that they value both equality and individual achievement (Bêteille n.d.: Appendix II). The stress on individual achievement and the demands of a dynamic economy put limits on the attainment of equality overall. In a competitive society that values equality of opportunity, there can be equality only before the competition but not after it. Untempered competition and obsessive concern for individual achievement tend to make the rewards of success extravagant and the penalties of failure harsh and severe. Hence modern societies strive to temper the meritocratic principle with the principle of redress so that benefits and burdens are socially allocated with some concern for the needs of the disadvantaged.

The principle of universality is at the core of the modern idea of citizenship and the institutions associated with it (Bêteille n.d.). It requires that certain basic rights and facilities be made available to all, irrespective not only of race, caste and gender, but also of ability and performance, or merit

and worth. No society can make everything that is valued by its individual members equally available to all, but certain things can and should be made available to each and every one. Universal elementary education, universal primary health care and universal adult franchise are goals within the reach of all modern societies.

As indicated earlier, the new normative order based on individuality, equality and universality took time to become established, and the world of industrial work in mid-nineteenth century Europe was marked by a considerable degree of anomie. In the twentieth century, elements of it became diffused throughout the world, slowly and very unevenly, along with the adoption of new work practices and new forms of work organization. The sphere of work in the countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America shows a pervasive conflict of norms and values today. New regulatory rules, broadly similar to those established in the advanced industrial societies, come into conflict with age-old values, attitudes and habits of mind that differ from one country to another.

The contemporary Indian case shows very nicely the ambiguities, contradictions and tensions inherent in transitional societies. At one end there are constitutional and legal measures that provide workers with the most comprehensive rights, and there are indeed enterprises, particularly in the public sector, where the work situation is far in advance of the situation in England, France or Germany at a corresponding phase of economic development. But this sector employs only a small part of the labour force. Beyond it, the conditions of work are highly variable, and work practices are often outside the reach of both the laws of the state and the customs of the community.

III. The meaning of work

Perhaps the most significant change brought about by the Industrial Revolution was in the concept of work itself. Work came to be differentiated from other types of activity and attempts were made, never wholly successfully, to give it an exact definition (Wallman, 1979; Schwimmer, 1980). These attempts were stimulated by the association of specific times and specific places with what came to be defined as work. The industrial mode of production and the system of remuneration tied to it required the work done to be measured, and that in turn called for a definition of what had to be measured. But like so many other things, work has turned out to be easier to measure than to define.

The change in the concept of work was driven to some extent by a change in technology. Technological innovation was continuous and on an unprecedented scale. Work was increasingly dominated by the requirements of machinery. Indeed the fabrication and maintenance of machinery became a large part of the new work that had to be done. Nineteenth-century writers never tired of dwelling upon the domination of machinery over men. In the mills and factories that began to dot the landscape, the pace and rhythm of work acquired a different character from what had prevailed before industrial technology began to create and define new boundaries for working place and working time.

Work not only became more clearly defined in terms of space and time, it also came to be socially organized in new ways. The new technology required much larger concentrations of workers and also called for a new division of labour. New towns and cities grew up in order to accommodate the vast concentrations of workers required by the mills and factories. One important feature of this concentration was that it was fed by migrant workers who moved across territorial, linguistic and cultural divisions. This movement of population led not only to the emergence of new social arrangements in the manufacturing and industrial towns but also to a considerable rearrangement of social relations in the rural areas which supplied workers to the urban centres.

The new economic order was marked by a continuous differentiation of occupations. Jobs became increasingly specialized and interconnected with each other in complex and dynamic patterns. This was the division of labour whose pathological forms attracted much attention throughout the nineteenth century. But the differentiation of occupations was an irreversible process and the division of labour was not pathological in itself. Indeed, writing at the end of the nineteenth century, the French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1984) emphasized its integrative

functions. He argued that the division of labour arising from the differentiation of occupations provided the basis of a new kind of social integration that was very different from all previous forms.

The distinction between manual and non-manual occupations remained, although it was to undergo change with the continuous changes in technology. Throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, “workers” meant primarily manual workers, those who received wages rather than salaries or fees and whose occupations called for little or no formal education. This has changed considerably in the advanced industrial societies, partly through changes in technology and partly through the spread of education among all social strata. Where changes in technology and the advance of education have come late or been slow, as in India, the plight of manual workers, particularly in what is called the informal sector, remains unenviable.

In all modern societies, occupation has become increasingly important in the definition of social identity, and this too is an aspect of the sharper definition of work in relation to other types of activity. While the distinction between manual and non-manual occupations remains, occupations have become greatly differentiated within each of the two main divisions, and there is a large and expanding grey area between them. Occupational differentiation goes hand-in-hand with occupational ranking. The social ranking of occupations has to some extent displaced earlier forms of hierarchy based on birth into more or less closed status groups. But older bases of identity and rank, such as those of race, ethnicity and gender, have by no means disappeared even from advanced industrial societies.

Changes in the conception and social organization of work have been diffused all over the world. But this diffusion has been highly uneven in both extent and effect. Not all societies opened themselves to the influence of industrialization at the same time or to the same extent. Among those that did open themselves to it there were differences in the initial social, cultural and political conditions. These conditions affected the ways in which work came to be perceived, organized and performed. New conceptions, habits and forms of work became interwoven with old conceptions, old habits and old forms in ways that were distinctive of each society in each phase of its development.

The process of differentiation referred to above was accompanied by the separation of work from the home and the local community, but this did not happen in the same way in every society. In earlier times work activities were regulated by the general social norms of family, kinship and community: work norms were embedded in those general norms. In the new setting, created specifically for work and often physically separated from household and community, work could no longer be regulated by those norms. It had to create its own regulatory rules and its own social standards. These rules and standards have evolved continuously in the last 150 years along with the evolution of the technical and organizational practices of work, and there is no reason to believe that this evolution has reached its terminus in the advanced industrial societies of the present. For one thing, the separation of work from home, which began in the West 200 years ago, now no longer appears to be an irreversible trend; whether a new basis will be created in the future for the reintegration of work with the community, it is too early to tell. If there is a reversal of the trends of the last 200 years, as there might be in at least some respects, then the labour standards that emerged in response to those trends may have to be re-examined afresh.

In the traditional economy of agriculture, crafts and services, children were socialized into work practices by adults in the home and in the local community. For the child, learning to work was part of the larger process of learning to lead an adult life as a householder and a member of the local community. The rules of work were not separated from the rules of life and they were enforced by largely the same set of people. Many of those rules might appear arbitrary and capricious in the perspective of an advanced industrial society; they discriminated among individuals in ways no longer considered acceptable, and they ignored distinctions now considered important. But they were rules nevertheless and they enjoyed the authority of immemorial tradition.

In pre-industrial societies the role of the family in regulating work cannot be too strongly emphasized. The family was not only the unit of consumption, it was also the unit of production. Work was differentiated both within the family and between families. Within the family it was differentiated primarily according to age and sex. Men and women had different tasks, and people of the same sex were expected to do the same kind of work if they were of the same family, whether

as adults or as children. This is quite different from the practice of modern societies where two brothers might work at quite different jobs and there is nothing to prevent husband and wife from competing for the same job.

The socialization of children, including their socialization into the practices and rules of work, was not left entirely to their parents; other relatives, of whom there were generally many in the local community, also played a part. Differentiation by sex was the general if not invariable pattern. Girls learnt their work from their mothers and other female relatives, and boys, as soon as they reached a certain age, from their fathers, uncles and older siblings. Girls and boys were initiated into productive work fairly early, girls usually earlier than boys. Even where women's work was rated inferior to men's, as it generally was, it was considered essential and indispensable. The convention of treating only what was done in the factory or office as work and what was done at home as something else was yet to be born.

One must be careful not to idealize the past and to suggest that men, women and children all led carefree and contented lives in arcadian rural communities. The lives of women were often full of toil and drudgery, and children died young from lack of care and inadequate nourishment. But one must also avoid demonizing the past. It is important above all to distinguish between traditional practices at the present time and those practices as they operated in accordance with their own rules, however difficult it may be to reconstruct the past in its wholeness.

The differentiation of occupations in pre-industrial societies was not based on age and sex alone. Just as within the family certain economic activities were open only to men and closed to women, so also certain occupations were open only to certain families and closed to all others for ritual reasons or reasons of status. This kind of specialization and exclusion might go very far indeed. The best example is provided by the Indian caste system in which there was a high degree of specialization in the pursuit of different crafts and services, and even of different agricultural occupations, such as the cultivation of vegetables, of flowers, of betel vines, and so on. The association between caste and occupation began to weaken about a hundred years ago, and today neither caste monopoly nor caste exclusion enjoys any legal sanction, although a certain amount of specialization by caste may be observed even in modern occupations today.

IV. Work and caste in India

In India, socialization into the practices and rules of work were not the responsibility of the family alone but also of the kindred, the subcaste and the local community. The traditional association between caste and occupation brings out very clearly the inseparability of work from other social activities. The potter, the carpenter and the oilpresser would be socialized into the traditions of his craft from early childhood and would retain the social identity of his caste even if he worked in agriculture or as a general labourer in later life. Even now it is not easy for a potter to acquire the social identity of a vegetable gardener simply by entering a new type of work. One can of course acquire a new social identity by moving into a 'caste-free' occupation, such as electrician, plumber or programmer, that has no traditional association with caste. The emergence of new 'caste-free' occupations has in fact led to a considerable weakening of the economic basis of caste.

While work and other activities were not easy to separate from each other, there was an elaborate gradation of activities in the caste system. As in all hierarchical societies, manual work was rated low and avoided by members of the superior social strata. Engagement in it led to a decline in social standing and, in some cases, to loss of caste. In agriculture, which was the principal occupation, ploughing was forbidden to members of the highest castes, but it was also forbidden to women irrespective of caste. Among the highest castes, women were forbidden to work in the fields and generally outside the home. At the other end of the scale, among the lowest castes, the most onerous tasks, such as weeding and transplanting, were mainly left to women.

Many types of necessary economic activity were considered not only demeaning but also defiling. All social activities, and not just those defined specifically as work, were hierarchically structured through the opposition of purity and pollution. Tanning, flaying and scavenging were among the activities regarded as most polluting, but even oilpressing and distilling were considered

unclean in a ritual sense. Scavenging was perhaps the most polluting of occupations and as such strictly avoided by the clean castes and made the obligation of the lowest castes. Today it is forbidden by law to coerce members of the scavenger caste to undertake their traditional tasks although most scavengers do in fact come from those castes.

The idea that certain forms of necessary economic activity are defiling, common among hierarchical societies of the past, is contrary to the modern conception of work. It cannot be too strongly emphasized that the view that necessary work, no matter how unpleasant, cannot be defiling is a modern idea which came into its own only in the twentieth century. It is part of a larger process that may be described as the secularization of work, a process which has by no means run its course in India or in every other country. The dignity of work was severely compromised by the very manner in which work came to be structured in the hierarchical societies of the past.

The hierarchical structuring of activities led not only to the long-standing devaluation of certain types of work but also to the long-standing subordination of certain types of worker. Because many types of work were considered onerous, degrading or defiling, those who could avoid such work, whether at home or outside, got others to do it for them. Many different forms of servitude developed in the course of time, and there is a tendency, still visible today, for servants themselves to delegate their more burdensome and onerous tasks to others who are below them in the social scale. The distinction between manual and non-manual work tends to be more strongly maintained in South Asian societies than elsewhere.

Among the many forms of servitude in India, the one that has received the most public attention in recent times is that of bonded labour. Needless to say, bonded labour is antithetical to the spirit of the new constitutional order, and it is forbidden by law. At the same time, evidence of its practice is brought to light from time to time by newspaper reporters and human rights activists, particularly from the remote rural districts. Evidence of the use of bonded labour, like evidence of the practice of untouchability, is difficult to establish conclusively for the simple reason that it will lead to legal action against the responsible parties; yet it is certain that neither the one nor the other has been completely eradicated.

In a country where gainful employment is not always easy to secure, the eradication of bonded labour does not necessarily act to the immediate advantage of the labourer. Sometimes it is the master who takes the initiative in getting rid of his servant in order to pursue new and more profitable forms of activity. A detailed case study in south Gujarat showed how a group of tribal bonded labourers lost both livelihood and social security when their erstwhile masters decided to shift to a new type of production where they found it more profitable to employ labourers for daily wages (Breman, 1974). Necessary social reform often hits the weak and the vulnerable very hard, and their condition, which was already bad, becomes worse.

V. Civilization and industrialization

I have argued that the Industrial Revolution had an impact on the world as a whole, but that it did not have the same impact on all parts of even the non-Western world. The non-Western world was not a clean slate when industrialization began to reach out from its centre of origin in the West. In fact, certain areas had civilizations that were older and in some ways more dense than the civilization of the countries where the Industrial Revolution began. China, India and the Arab world were not only very different from Western Europe 200 years ago, they were also very different from each other.

A very distinct kind of civilization developed on the Indian subcontinent over a period of more than 2000 years. However, distinctiveness never prevented it from incorporating elements of other civilizations with which it came into contact. Christianity came to India early, and the Syrian Christians of Kerala have pursued their distinctive way of life since antiquity. Although it came to the subcontinent somewhat later, Islam made a larger impact demographically, politically and culturally. Indian civilization, as I have noted earlier, has shown a strong tendency to retain old norms and values even after adopting new ones that are not wholly consistent with the former.

The Indian civilization, like the European civilization of medieval times, had a hierarchical structure. Hierarchical values were elaborated to a greater extent in Hinduism than in Christianity, and they had a more pervasive and a more lasting effect on social life in India than in Europe. They permeated most areas of life and acquired a distinct character by being expressed through the ritual idiom of purity and pollution. We have seen how they influenced the conception of work, its social gradation and its allocation to different groups of people.

Hierarchical values were upheld by both law and custom. The law has changed radically in the direction of equality but the bias of custom is still largely towards hierarchy. The law may prohibit discrimination on grounds of caste, creed and gender but it can do little to change the attitudes that lead people to treat some occupations as estimable and others as degrading. Technological and economic changes can and do make a difference in this respect. Many kinds of work that were considered degrading or defiling are simply made obsolete by technological innovation. There is a wide gulf between leather work in an economically backward village and in a modern mechanized shoe factory. While people from most castes would be loathe to do leather work with the traditional tools of the trade, even Brahmins now seek employment in factories making leather products with modern technology.

Compared to what has been written about the influence of religion on work, there is little systematic material on how work is affected by family, kinship and community. Yet civilizations differ not only in their predominant religious orientation but also in their social organization of everyday life. The place of family, kinship and community in South Asian societies is very different from their place in Western societies, whether of the present or the past. Moreover, the distinctive features of South Asian societies in this respect are to be found across the major divisions of religion.

There is a wide variation in family types, marriage patterns and rules of descent and inheritance. Such variation may be expected in an area with the size and population of the subcontinent, but it may be noted in even a limited geographical area such as a single district or group of villages. As noted by an anthropologist of an earlier generation: "The variety of family organizations is equally great. Polygamy and polyandry are both found. There are groups which are matrilineal, others which are patrilineal. The taboo on consanguine marriage changes from region to region and from caste to caste" (Karve, 1968, pp.4-5). And she was speaking only of the Hindus in India. To a large extent this variety still prevails although attempts have been made to introduce some uniformity in personal law.

Despite the very wide range of variation just referred to, family and kinship have a significant place in social life everywhere and among all communities. Relatives are numerous and the obligations of kinship are extensive and cannot easily be denied. The rule of endogamy acts against the formation of real ties of consanguinity between members of different castes; but it does not prevent the formation of fictive ties of kinship among them. The idiom of kinship is used extensively in interpersonal relations across caste and community throughout South Asia, particularly in the rural areas.

In contrast to the West, the nuclear unit of parents and unmarried children was and remains embedded in a wider family system. The ideal of the joint (extended) family was very strong, and even where the family is residentially nuclear, the 'sentiment of jointness' prevails (Desai, 1964). This means that the boundaries separating the nuclear unit from the wider system are highly porous. There is no strict separation, even in terminology, between brothers and sisters on the one hand and cousins on the other; or between parents, and uncles and aunts. Even in the modern urban setting, no household is fully secure from intrusion by cousins, uncles, aunts, nephews, nieces, grandparents and grandchildren. What was valued in the Indian system is not so much individual autonomy as embeddedness in family, kin group and community. Even today obligations to these generally take priority over the obligations to any formal organization and its impersonal rules.

Family, kinship and community not only created obligations, they gave protection and security to the individual. There were large differences in this respect among pre-industrial societies. In the Western system the obligations of family and kinship were rather narrowly defined, and the individual was allowed greater freedom and autonomy (Laslett, 1977; Macfarlane, 1978). In South

Asian societies, on the other hand, they played a larger part not only in the allocation of work but also in its regulation. Some have suggested that the individualism that was always given a certain place in the pre-modern kinship system of England and other Western countries played a positive role in the emergence of industrial capitalism there (Macfarlane, 1987). In South Asia and elsewhere a greater social adjustment has been required for accommodating the industrial system of work.

Where work becomes separated from the household and the community, the kinship system can no longer act effectively in the allocation and regulation of work. It is one thing for women and children to work in a domestic or community setting, but quite another for them to work in settings over which the family and the community have little effective control. Not only have new labour standards to be adopted, but new sanctions have to be created to ensure that those standards are properly enforced.

VI. The constitutional safeguards and the governance structures of India

The sections above have stressed the fact that pre-industrial societies had their own institutions, based on family, kinship and community, for maintaining certain standards in social relations at work. Those standards may not be the same as ours but they were generally accepted in the societies where they operated. With the adoption of a different kind of technology and a modern type of work organization, they came to be displaced by new standards in the advanced industrial societies. The main guarantors of the new standards are no longer the family and the community but the state and other statutory bodies. It is important to understand the specific historical conditions under which this displacement first came about.

There are still areas of economic life in India where family and community play an important part in the allocation and regulation of work, though no longer as extensively or as effectively as before. There are other areas where they have no legitimate role in the workplace. The state has assumed an increasingly important role in devising formal mechanisms for the regulation of work. These mechanisms have a very different orientation from the traditional institutions whose place they have to some extent taken. Also, the conditions under which they have been adopted in countries like India are somewhat different from those under which their prototypes emerged in the West.

When India adopted a new Constitution in 1950, the national economy was predominantly agricultural and rural, and work was still governed largely by traditional norms. The Constitution sought to make a clean break with the hierarchical institutions of the past. It stood for equality of opportunity and against invidious discrimination. But its provisions, though admirable from the viewpoint of a secular democratic republic based on impersonal rules, was greatly at variance with the economic and social arrangements that actually prevailed in much of the country which was agricultural and rural rather than industrial and urban.

Along with the adoption of a new Constitution, a determined attempt was made to transform the economic basis of society through planning and policy making aimed at growth and equity. One of the primary objectives in the early years of independence was to build up the industrial sector with a strong emphasis on heavy industry. It was generally agreed that the state rather than the market should be the driving force for change through a strong public sector in charge of the commanding heights of the economy. Agriculture too was to be modernized, but the modernization of agriculture, the planners and policy makers argued, required the expansion of industrial capacity.

The public sector was expected to play a leading part not only by spearheading economic growth but also by being a model employer. The Constitution of India provided a framework for new labour standards in its Directive Principles of State Policy. Article 39 provides for 'equal pay

for equal work for both men and women'; Article 42 for 'just and humane conditions of work'; and Article 43 for 'a living wage ... and conditions of work ensuring a decent standard of life'. In addition, India has a plethora of labour legislation aimed at protecting and promoting the rights of workers individually and collectively. These laws embody values that are very different from those by which the traditional arrangements of work in agriculture, crafts and services were sustained.

The conditions of work in public sector undertakings broadly conform with the constitutional directives. They satisfy the core labour standards of the ILO and go beyond them. Trade unions are active and often strong enough to bring the management to heel. This sector has no bonded labour or child labour; and there is equal pay for equal work. Not only is invidious discrimination forbidden, there are generous provisions for positive discrimination in favour of socially disadvantaged groups. Critics say that in its zeal to become a model employer, the public sector has created a pampered and wilful labour force that has contributed little to economic growth.

While labour legislation is forward-looking in India, the reach of the state and its agencies does not extend very far beyond the organized sector. The laws are the same everywhere, but the sanctions against their transgression are often weak. A public-sector undertaking such as the Bhilai Steel Plant, or a well-run private company such as the Tata Engineering and Locomotive Company is the exception rather than the rule. There is no lack of appreciation of beneficial labour standards among parliamentarians, judges and civil servants; but much of the economy is so organized that it is difficult if not impossible to enforce those standards.

In the foregoing discussion of work in India, I have pointed to three co-existing and inter-penetrating configurations. The first is characteristic of the well-regulated formal sector undertaking in which modern labour standards are acknowledged and generally observed; this does not cover a very large part of the labour force but its social and cultural significance cannot be ignored. The second configuration is characteristic of the Indian village with its economic basis in traditional agriculture, crafts and services; this is undergoing decline. The third and the most intriguing configuration is represented by the informal sector, characterized by a wide range of manufacturing, servicing, trading and other assorted activities of relatively recent growth; the normative environment here is at best ambiguous, with a large component of quasi-legal, extra-legal and illegal activities in which petty politicians and petty officials are complicit. No hard-and-fast lines can be drawn in reality between the three different kinds of work setting. At the same time, they differ not only in the technology and organization of work, but also in the perception, observance, evasion, enforcement and transgression of regulatory rules.

VII. Conclusion

The Indian experience of modernization shows how difficult it is to reshape a whole society or even to establish new institutions simply by creating new rules. It is not that good rules are of no value or that new rules never work in India. But they work only where the conditions necessary for their operation and enforcement have come into being. Experience has shown that, while the state can facilitate the emergence of those conditions, it can do so only within certain limits. Too much reliance on state action slows down the economy as it leads to corruption and inefficiency.

In an expanding economy, open, informal and flexible arrangements are bound to emerge outside the regulatory control of the state. Such arrangements cover a substantial part of the Indian labour force. Their sphere of operation merges on the one hand with the sphere regulated by traditional customs and on the other with that regulated by statutory rules. It is difficult to say how large this sphere of ambiguous rules and practices is, what its direction of growth is, or what shape it will take in the future.

Compared to 50 years ago, there is today a more realistic appraisal in India of what the state and its agencies can do to give direction to new types of economic activity and to control the social costs. There is greater appreciation now of the regulatory role that may be played by what is described widely, if somewhat vaguely, as civil society. A large number of non-governmental organizations, many with support from international agencies, have emerged in various spheres of

activity. There has also been a growth in public-interest litigation. These are relatively recent developments whose consequences cannot be fully foreseen. It is not easy to devise mechanisms that will control and regulate new economic activities without stifling or destroying new economic initiative.

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