Eroding citizenship: gender and labour in contemporary India
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CHAPTER 4

Gendered Labour Regimes Established in the Era of Regulation

The previous chapters have brought to light the substantial degree of differentiation both in the supply of labour and in the structure of the electronics industry. In Chapters 4 and 5, four co-existent gendered labour regimes are presented. I analyse their recruitment strategies, gendered forms of labour control and resistance to that control, and the construction of gendered work-identities as a result of the interplay between factors of structure and agency in the construction of the labour regimes. This chapter describes two gendered labour regimes established in the era of regulation.

Gendered Labour Regime 1: Market Despotism and the 

Bechari Woman

This regime is characteristic of tiny and small-scale factories that fall outside the purview of most labour legislation. In Okhla Industrial Estate, Delhi, special industrial complexes were built in the mid-seventies and eighties, and loans and other facilities provided to set up tiny and small-scale enterprises. These were lodged in three-storied complexes called flatted factories. They are registered with the Flatted Factory Association or with the Flatted Factory Entrepreneurs Association, but they are not covered by legal regulation since the total number employed is below ten. A central long dark corridor runs down the centre of each floor of the flatted factory complex, with 10-12 tiny manufacturing enterprises located on each side. A wide range of products are manufactured in these enterprises: automobile spare parts, air conditioners, stabilisers, relays, garments, television cabinets as well as electronic items such as cellular phones, electronic timers, electronic-relays, televisions, battery chargers, and printed circuit boards. The production unit consists of a room, often four metres by six metres, with poor ventilation and lighting. Some of the spare-part enterprises spill out onto the corridor, which is often blocked with motors, generators and tools, with oil and machine grease covering the floor. The air is thick with the smell of chemical fumes.

Entrepreneurs started these enterprises with loans ranging from fifty thousand rupees to one hundred thousand. Although a few of these entrepreneurs have professional training as engineers (a number are ex-employees of bigger
electronic companies), many do not have any technical qualifications at all. They usually come from trading backgrounds – sons of wholesale dealers and shopkeepers. The ease of getting loans and the fact that electronics was a key area were more important determinants in choosing to invest in this sector than any specific interest or specialisation in electronics itself.

These electronic enterprises produced television sets and television components. Those manufacturing television components such as printed circuit boards were the lowest link in a sub-contracting chain extending down from large electronics enterprises. Most of them were independent subcontractors rather than being dependent on one company. Enterprises combined regular supply to one or two large factories, and sale of goods directly in the wholesale market located in Bhagirathi Place and Lala Lajpat Rai Market in Delhi. Some enterprises sold to buyers located in other Indian cities and Nepal. An enterprise’s survival depended on extreme flexibility and was contingent on a quick shift in product items.

There was very little reinvestment in the enterprises. Sometimes machines with new functions required for latest developments in component assembly were added, but machines that automate the production process were not installed. When demand increased, owners preferred to set up other tiny enterprises or even upgrade into a small/medium-sized factory manufacturing different products rather than enhance the technology within the original enterprises. Totally dependent on market fluctuations and without a regularised sub-contracting link with the larger companies, the enterprises were extremely susceptible to shifts in demand. Profit margins could soar or slump within a space of a few months. The precariousness and instability of these enterprises in relation to the market determined the overall nature of the gendered labour regimes in this sector.

Suspicion and fear, internally as well as externally, dominated interactions and relationships. Owners operated with the constant fear of raids from tax departments, checks from municipal services and government inspectors, and visits from creditors claiming unpaid bills. A number of the owners were also involved in illegal activities or a socially unacceptable trade, for instance smuggling and supplying pornographic films alongside the production of cellular phones and electronic relays. Often a worker guarded the door, refusing entry to strangers or anyone holding a ‘briefcase’.

Internally, suspicion and distrust was reflected in the forms of recruitment and control over workers. Workers were recruited only on the basis of personal recommendations from relatives, friends and neighbours. Consequently there were a large number who were either direct kin or knew the others closely. However, the kin networks rarely crossed gender lines since the recruitment of men and women was from quite different segments of the labour market and reflected differences in their social status as well as the operation of the principle of particularism. Although the enterprises were formally supposed to employ
fewer than ten workers, there were often up to fifteen workers in each unit, including men, young boys and women.

Men employed in these enterprises were from Delhi, or were recent migrants from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. The workers from Delhi had some years of schooling, but apart from one case where the owner was an electronics engineer, very few of the men had any technical educational background. Often an older man trained as an electrician would be the only ‘technical’ person amongst the workers. Migrant workers also had low educational backgrounds; some were barely literate. They usually got their jobs through a contractor who personally knew the owner. Amongst the Biharis there were a few with a scheduled-caste background, while the men from Uttar Pradesh were predominantly from Other Backward Castes (OBC). There was rapid turnover and inter-unit mobility among the men workers, who sought better wages and working conditions in other enterprises. Sometimes they would pretend to go home on leave, try working in another enterprise and then return to the original.

Very few women were employed in these enterprises. The ratio of women to men rarely exceeded 1:3 among the employees. Women workers in these enterprises came primarily from Delhi-based poor households and typified the ‘distress entry’ worker. A large section of women workers in the sample were main earners, and a large proportion were divorcees or deserted. Although some of these women had finished secondary school, most of them were either only functionally literate or had completed a maximum of nine years of schooling. None of them had any other formal qualification. As explained in the previous chapter, these women came from extremely vulnerable households, with no other support systems. Their economic and social characteristics implied a complete dependence on wage work. There was therefore an in-built element of labour control in the social situation of the labour force employed in this particular gendered labour regime.

Manual labour process and arbitrary sexual division of labour

Although these enterprises manufactured a wide range of electronics products, the labour process was similar and based on simple, manual assembly of components. The production process was also not fragmented or specialised, with each worker often completing a full piece. For instance, one worker often assembled speakers or intercoms as a whole item. Some other products such as printed circuit boards had a division of labour: women did the assembly and men did the fitting and soldering. However, fragmentation of the labour process was not always accompanied by such a sexual division of labour. In some cases, women did the mounting and soldering and men did the testing. In others, women did the mounting and testing while men did the soldering. The only job which only men did was loading and packing, classified as ‘heavy work’ which only men could handle. The flexibility of the sexual division of labour was seen in the absence of job designations or skill classifications for both men and
women. All the workers were trained on the job, with the training period ranging from two weeks to four weeks at the most. There was no clear wage discrimination either, with both men and women production workers getting the same wage. This ranged between Rs. 1050 to Rs. 1400 a month, which is below the monthly minimum wage of Rs. 1495 for unskilled workers specified for Delhi. Wage differentials were sharpest between all production workers and the young boys who were paid between Rs. 300 to 600 a month. The person with the highest wage usually had a technical degree or some qualification, and was always a man. This person was not regarded as a worker, but rather had the status of technician or sometimes ‘supervisor’.

Direct, despotic labour control

Given that there was neither a fixed sexual division of labour nor variations in labour costs, what reason did owners have to employ women at all? In these enterprises the presence of women was not based on a perception of ‘nimble fingers’ or similar notions of women’s work, but rather was a strategy to consciously control men workers. At the same time, women workers were themselves controlled through mutual constructions of victimhood and vulnerability. This central feature of this GLR has a material as well as ideological function of differentiating and disciplining workers in tiny enterprises. The main reason a number of owners gave for employing women was their ‘calming influence’ on the men, their ‘natural’ docility and most importantly ‘trustworthiness’. As one owner stated:

These men are very crude and rough. They are also not from Delhi and often keep bad company. If there were only men in this small space we would have constant fights breaking out – in fact this is what used to happen when I started the unit. Once women came in the men are less rough – the women also help to diffuse fights since they do not join in and they report any disturbance to me. (Interview, May 1995)

Social distance between women and men who came primarily from a rural lower caste background was significant and consciously maintained. The social hierarchy within tiny enterprises placed women higher than men workers, with the lowest place occupied by young boys. Social distancing was sharpest with the ‘mundus’, the young boys who were constantly ordered (rather shouted at) to carry, lift things, bring tea, and run errands. They were treated by all workers with a mixture of contempt and rough affection. After work, the women immediately rushed home and therefore did not get a chance to associate with ‘bad elements’, which made them trustworthy. Owners were very aware of the limited options available for these women elsewhere in the labour market. This was epitomised in the constant use of the phrase ‘bechari’ (poor thing) in conjunction with the women. Owners often discussed the family circumstances of the women and implied that they were doing the women a favour by employing them.
Inside flatted factories
Work discipline was maintained by the direct supervision of the owner who sat in a small cabin behind a glass screen. Relations were personalised, with management practices of control shifting between shades of moderate to extreme despotism. There was no real intermediary between the owner and the workers. Owners came every day to the enterprise and spent at least a part of the day in the cabin, directly supervising the production process. They usually arrived after 11a.m. and left around 4 p.m., though in some enterprises the owner was present throughout the day. In their absence an older, trusted worker was put in charge and in some cases actually designated as a ‘supervisor’. Since personal trust along with a long service record determined the choice of the supervisor, in some enterprises it was older men and in others a woman who had worked for a number of years in the same enterprise. The ‘supervisor’s’ role was to maintain discipline and ensure there was no ‘garbar’ (trouble). He/she had no specific qualification or overall technical knowledge of the production process and rarely got paid for the supervisory function.

**Working conditions**

Given the absence of legal regulations, workers did not have formal contracts and none of them were permanent, although many had worked for over ten years in the same enterprise. They did not get provident fund, medical insurance, or maternity benefits. They could take 15 days casual leave in one year and one paid holiday a week, as well as a holiday on festivals and public holidays. The only other benefit was the minimum stipulated yearly bonus of 8.33 percent. However, this was not seen as a right and was suspended when demand went down. In an eight-hour work day, there was only one break of half an hour for lunch. The women usually ate inside the room since there was no canteen and the *dhabas* (tea-shops) were located at some distance from the flatted factory complex. In summer the small rooms were very hot and there were only rusty, creaking fans over the work area. The owner’s cabin was often air-conditioned. In one enterprise, the installation of a fridge in the cabin and access to cold water was seen as an act of great kindness by the owner and a sign of ‘good management’ in comparison with the neighbouring enterprises.

The three issues that women complained most about were wage cuts due to leave, delayed payment of wages and the bad conditions of the toilets. Workers were subject to the arbitrary whims and fancies of the owner’s moods. Wages were cut if workers were absent, and women usually had more deductions due to the pressure of domestic responsibilities. Coming from households that survived month to month, the delayed payment of wages, which was common in these enterprises, led to tremendous anxiety and constant insecurity. Though production quotas were fixed, non-completion was not fined but workers had to do overtime and finish. Overtime was, at the most, paid one-and-a-half times the wage. but that depended on whether there was a rush order or on the owner’s perception concerning the achievement of the target. The requirement of
overtime was often announced the same day, extending working time by two to three hours, which was beyond the legally stipulated period for women workers. Workers were unable to inform family members and there was no extra money given for transport when they returned home late at night.

Women workers spoke hesitantly of an issue that bothered them considerably, though they did not see this as a demand to be negotiated. Each floor of the flatted factory complex had separate toilets for men and women at one end of the corridor. The toilets were filthy and unusable. Men just went outside but the women did not go to the toilet at all during their working hours. This internalised form of bodily self-regulation is in a way part of the daily life of Indian women, since there are in any case hardly any public toilets for women in public spaces. All the women mentioned the bad state of the toilets, but said that they were used to it and had never made it an issue. The long-term health implications of bladder control have not been systematically investigated. Although the women complained of ‘gynaecological problems’, they do not see these as related to their working conditions. They spoke more openly of backache, weak eyesight, nausea and fainting in the summer due to the heat and cramped workspace.

The issue of wages, however, (low level, cuts and late payment) was one that evoked anger and resentment amongst all the workers. The only mechanism available was to confront the owner directly. This rarely led to a positive hearing. More often it meant drastic reprisals with further wage cuts, no overtime payment or dismissal. These overt, direct coercive forms of the disciplinary regime were buttressed with the use of the police as an external regulatory force. Recalcitrant workers were immediately dismissed, and to avoid any further trouble owners would accuse such workers of theft. Even without actual incidents, the threat of the police was always present since the local police officer (SHO) was usually in the pay of the owners and often dropped in for a chat. For migrant male workers who did not have ration cards or any other identity papers, confrontation with the police meant unending harassment and bribery. The need to use fear and threat to control such a small number of workers was both a consequence of the owner’s own insecurity and the illegality that pervaded many aspects of the enterprises.

The bechari woman: internalisation of control

It is this combination of direct, coercive, personalised, despotic discipline as well as the internalised self-regulation of women workers, which characterises the gendered labour regime in these enterprises. The extreme vulnerability of these women, combined with their social construction as victims, constituted a differentiating mechanism from the unruly, not fully reliable men workers and functioned as a form of control over both men and women.

Women’s socialised characteristics of bodily self-regulation, social restrictions on associating with strange men, plus domestic responsibilities
which limited their mobility (to the production unit and the home with only the bus journey as an interlude into public space) made these women an ideal docile and reliable workforce.

Although all the workers were in a vulnerable situation with complete dependence on their present job, men seemed able, at least intermittently, to challenge this dependence and look for other options. Women, however, were tied into total dependence and colluded with the construction of themselves as becharis. Rather than confront the owner on wage cuts, they often used their victim status as widows, main earners, mothers with small children, to get leave and exemption from too large deductions. The paternalism of the owner was tapped also to get loans and advances on their wages to cover unexpected expenses such as a rise in school fees or funeral or marriage costs. Owners did respond to these appeals, consistent with their own perception that they were actually helping these poor women. Financial assistance locked the workers and owners further into a relationship of loyalty and trust which was crucial to the functioning of these enterprises.

This loyalty-trust nexus however was not totally hegemonic. In spite of stressing that they had no choice but to accept the low wages, bad working conditions and the despotic disciplinary regime, even to be grateful for them, a number of women also expressed their frustration and awareness of exploitation. Shashi had worked for three years making printed circuit boards and was angry:

I strongly feel there should be a union to protect our rights. Who do we turn to here? Everyone is so scared.

In a number of these enterprises demand for their products had gone down and there was the threat of imminent closure. Poonam, who has worked for eleven years making intercoms, describes the situation:

You people are the first ones to take an interest in us. I feel the management loots us. The owner is always suspicious of us but neither does he remove us nor does he take new people nor does he increase our wage. We do not know how to get out of this situation.

The situation in these enterprises was indeed one that offered little hope. Faced with intense market competition in certain product items, these enterprises could only survive if they shifted production to other items. In some cases such as television components, the demand had gone up since larger factories started subcontracting work during the recession. Owners were aware that this was a temporary boom. Others started manufacturing black and white televisions for a low-income market but the demand was shifting towards colour televisions which required greater outlay than is possible in the present location. Workers were aware of the precariousness of their jobs but did not know what to do. A constant refrain of helplessness coloured their discussions:

‘Where is God when everything is so wrong?’

‘If everybody joins a union I would, but nothing seems to be happening.’
‘I do not know how to get out of this situation.’
‘I do not want to resign as I will be paid less. Better if the company makes a deal.’

At the most, what they hoped for was a settlement when the enterprise shut down – the money would provide a cushion while they looked for other jobs. Given the lack of legal regulation or unions in this sector plus the low levels of accumulation by owners, it was unlikely they would get anything in spite of many years of service.

Gendered Labour Regime 2: ‘Bloody Taylorism’ and Unionised Worker Identities

This gendered labour regime is based on a different stage of the labour process as well as a different structure of the workforce. It is characteristic of medium and large-sized enterprises established in the mid-sixties. These factories were faced with extreme competition in the nineties, the burden of an older production process as well as pressure of unionised, older workers. Given that they had been in existence for over 25 years, there were also shifts over that period in the nature of the regimes of control. These shifts are traced in the following section. A crucial mediating factor in this type of gendered labour regime is the unionisation of workers since the 1980s.

In this section the focus is on four factories belonging to different companies that share the same trajectory of growth and change. All four are located in Okhla Industrial Estate (OIE). The television factories started as small-scale enterprises manufacturing radios and then graduated to larger sized factories. Graduation was accompanied by diversification from audio items to black and white televisions and then to colour televisions in the mid-eighties. Weston Electronics is part of a larger company that had four plants manufacturing components, audio-video cassettes, black and white and colour televisions. The company started in 1967 with two plants in Delhi manufacturing components for the local market. It then expanded to other products for export, mainly to the Soviet Union. It employed around 500 workers in these two plants.

Jupiter Radios was part of the Texla electronics company, established in 1960 as a radio manufacturing small-scale enterprise. It employed 450 workers and had diversified into televisions, video-recorders and audio products, as well as washing machines. It catered to the local market as well as export to East Asia. Ahuja Radios, one of the oldest companies, started in 1958, manufacturing public address systems, amplifiers and transformers. It had three plants in OIE employing 250 workers. Products were for the local market as well as for export, mainly to the Middle East. Control and Switch Gear was established in 1968 to manufacture electronic relays and control panels. It supplied mainly to the government-owned Mahanagar Telephone Nigam Ltd., but also exported to Germany and Japan. It employed 150 workers officially.
All these enterprises were large in terms of employment size, and had benefited from the tax and excise duty concessions provided to small-scale industries and export enterprises. The concessions were available for five years and many of them followed the standard strategy adopted in Okhla Industrial Area to use these to the maximum through renaming and splitting plants into smaller ones. For instance, Weston and Clifton started as one plant named Shabnam Electronics, then after 5 years the same plant was renamed Kamal Electronics. A few years later, the plant was split and renamed Weston Electronics and Clifton.

All these companies are indigenous owned with some technical collaboration agreements with foreign companies. For instance, Control and Switch Gear had a technical agreement with the German company AVK-SEG Control Ltd and also supplied products to them. Established in the period of import substitution, they used primarily indigenously manufactured components. For television enterprises this changed in 1982 when it was possible to import semi-knocked-down kits (SKD) from East Asia. Although the enterprises grouped in this section manufacture somewhat different products, the labour process, social composition of the workforce and pattern of labour control were similar. The workers in these factories came from four different sections: hinterland migrants, Delhi-based industrial worker households, middle/lower-middle-class and poor households (described in Chapter 3). They were recruited mainly through informal channels. In the two Weston factories, managers asked men to bring their wives and daughters, and these factories have a large number of married couples working together. After the formation of the first unions in the mid-seventies, the union leader became an important contact person for new jobs and often waived the qualification of a secondary school certificate which had become a requirement since 1985. The educational background of women in these factories ranged from functional literacy to some women who were graduates. Men workers had similar educational backgrounds. However, there were more men with ITI diplomas than women.

**Semi-automatic labour process and distinct gender division of labour**

There were two patterns in the organisation of the labour process in these factories. In the television factories, large numbers of women sat in rows at semi-automated conveyor belts, assembling and soldering components from imported kits. In factories producing items such as electronic relays, batch production was the norm. It is in these two kinds of factories that a sharp sexual division of labour emerges along with the fragmentation and specialisation of tasks. Line and batch production were overseen by supervisors who moved constantly along the line and through the department. They kept a check on production quotas along classic Taylorist principles of control and discipline.
Chapter 4

Diagram 4.1 Batch production: Electronic relays

Relay assembly (women) ➔ Inspection (men) ➔ Meter assembly (men) ➔ Final checking (men & a few women)

Empty panels and components were carried by men to desks with two chairs on either side. Women sat at the desks inserting small ceramic and metallic pieces into the panels with a screwdriver. Two girls at each desk assembled one batch. These were inspected by men and passed on to the next department, where they were assembled by men into metres and checked. Men did the loading and packing of completed panels. Women on the panel assembly were considered unskilled, and their job was designated as ‘Helper’. Each worker had a Daily Production Record, which was filled in by the supervisor every evening before they stopped work. The few women who worked in the final checking section were considered skilled but did not have a specific designation and were seen as ‘all rounders’ (called 1st grade workers).

Conveyor belt mass production: Audios and televisions

In general, the production process in television factories was based on the printed circuit boards, which were either imported or manufactured locally in small and tiny enterprises. Although there were variations, the sexual division of labour tended to follow the pattern shown below.

Diagram 4.2 Conveyor belt mass production

Mounting (women) ➔ Assembly (women) ➔ Soldering (women) ➔ Checking (women & men) ➔ Packing (men)

Reflecting the older labour process of radio manufacture, workers in Weston were called Wire Girls/Wiremen. In Texla, there were a few specific designations such as Fitters, but most of the women were just called Helpers or Floor Assistants. In Weston, women workers had first started work on printed circuit boards (PCB) into which components were inserted, and the PCBs were pushed manually down the line. Earlier, men did the visual checking. Later this task was also given to women. A semi-automatic conveyor belt was introduced in the 1980s that led to a four-fold increase in production. Earlier, workers managed 80 to 100 sets a day, but now produced 400 per day. In all the
enterprises there was a sexual division of labour, with women generally doing assembly, soldering, and part checking and men doing checking, packing, loading, repair and machine maintenance. In some cases there were parallel rows with two lines – one line where women sat and inserted and soldered components, and another line where men trimmed and cut the wires. In general, however, women and men were spatially separated into different departments. In Control and Switch Gear for instance, women were in the Relay Department and men in the Panel Division.

The sexual division of labour was distinct, yet not rigid or static. For instance, with the introduction of colour televisions, the task of testing became more specialised. This was initially only done by young men, however in some factories such as Texla, a few girls were also doing the testing. For workers with long service records, the sexual division of labour was perceived more as a changing allocation of tasks rather than a division between ‘men’s work’ and ‘women’s work’. They had seen the sexual division of labour change over the years, with some jobs reallocated to women and others to men. In a statement reminiscent of housework, they would often say that apart from ‘loading and repair, women did and could do all the work’.

Gendered job hierarchies

There were different systems of wage payment in these factories, which were quite specific to this type of gendered labour regime. Basic wages were time rated and paid on a monthly basis. Piece rates were paid in some cases for overtime work and for work done on the night shift and holidays by contract labour. In addition, a number of incentive schemes were introduced to raise productivity. In Ahuja Radios, a combination of time rates and incentives were used. The basic wage was set at Rs. 30 for the minimum target, plus one rupee for each hour that pieces were made beyond the target. This was called a piece rate system, though it was in fact a combination of time and piece rates. In Control and Switch Gear for instance, production norms had been set at 200 pieces minimum and a maximum of 400-500 per day. Workers who made up to 480 pieces were given a ‘reward’ of Rs. 50 per month. This enterprise had earlier instituted a number of schemes such as Best Workman Award and Best Efficiency Award, as well as an Attendance scheme, but these had been withdrawn after a few years.

Wage differentials between men and women with similar designations were not sharp. Instead there were wide variations in wages across as well as within particular occupations. The following table on a sample of 105 Weston Electronics men and women workers in different occupations reveals these differences.
### Table 4.1 Weston workers: Designation and monthly wages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Designation</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wir e Girl / Wir e Man</td>
<td>1030</td>
<td>1280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helper</td>
<td>1027</td>
<td>1170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant Technician</td>
<td>1290</td>
<td>1415</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technician</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior Foreman</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant Engineer</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: 105 Weston workers, and 1994 union office records & records from Assistant Labour Commissioner’s office, Okhla Industrial Estate

Wage differentials between men and women in the same occupation are minute, a difference of less than a rupee in many cases. What emerges more clearly from the table is the *gendered job hierarchy*. There are very few women who are assistant technicians or junior engineers, and none in the senior categories such as engineer, technician, and foreman. The maximum wage for a production worker was Rs. 2500 a month in all the factories in this gendered labour regime, but not a single woman received that amount. The main difference between the take-home pay of men and women lay in the hours of overtime work. Women only worked on the general shift from 8.45 a.m. to 5.15 p.m., and did two hours of overtime daily in the period when production was high. Men who worked on the general shift often did four to five hours overtime daily. Some of them also worked on the night shift. In general however, these factories tended to employ male contract labour for the night shift and paid them piece-rate wages. Women also did overtime on Sundays from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m.

Overtime rates varied across the companies. In Texla, workers were paid a single daily wage rate. In Weston, Control and Switch Gear and Ahuja Radios, they were paid the legally entitled double daily wage rate. On Sundays, workers would be given money for conveyance plus a free cup of tea. In Control and Switch Gear, night-shift workers also got a meal allowance of Rs. 30 and Rs. 15 for tea. In the period between 1982 and 1993, overtime was compulsory. Overtime had been reduced in the last few years and is now irregular and voluntary in all the factories.

Non-wage benefits varied across the factories, except for the provision of Provident Fund and Employees State Insurance Scheme (ESI) benefits (which included maternity benefits) to workers who had a permanent status. Leave entitlements varied between 21 to 30 days annually. All the factories also gave 20 per cent bonus, although in some it was being reduced to 16 percent. In Texla, some workers who lived far away were provided with a conveyance allowance of Rs. 40. In Control and Switch Gear, workers also got a washing allowance of Rs. 25. The provision of uniforms was a longstanding demand made by workers. Only in Control and Switch Gear had these been provided,
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recently and after union pressure. There was no crèche in any of these enterprises and no subsidised canteen facilities.

Located in the main section of the Okhla Industrial Estate, the factories occupied an area between 1500 to 2500 square meters. Each factory was surrounded with high walls. The main gate and service entrance at the side or the back were guarded by uniformed security men. Some of the factories had up to four floors, each floor consisting of a long hall lit by tube lights. Having been in existence for over fifteen years, the internal surroundings looked dilapidated with stained walls, dirty toilets, rusted water coolers, and dust-laden fans creaking from the ceiling. In most of these factories, the owners had stopped investing in renovating the buildings. Control and Switch Gear was an exception. It had applied for the ISO 9001 status a few years earlier, and the whole factory had been spruced up. The rooms were cleaner with air conditioners installed, though the women said that these often did not function. Workers in all the factories complained of the congestion due to heat, dust, high noise levels and lack of cross ventilation. In the summer, there were many instances when women fainted.

In a ranking exercise listing the three most important problems faced by the workers, health problems emerged as the second most significant issue. The following table shows the results of this enquiry. Ranking was on a three-point scale in order of priority, with the lowest score being the most significant.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low wages</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harassment</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.2 Three most important problems: Ranked scores

Apart from the general environment, workers mentioned a number of production-related health hazards. Every worker mentioned eyestrain, and a number of them wore spectacles. Soldering the printed circuit boards let off fumes that made workers cough constantly. Asthma was common, and in Ahuja Radios a number of workers had tuberculosis. Sparks from soldering burned holes in saris. Women mentioned this as a major reason for their demand for uniforms. Apart from having to spend money on replacing damaged clothes, they could not wear nylon saris, which were easier to wash and did not require ironing. Women who used the cutting machines for wiring often cut their fingers if their attention wavered even slightly.

All the women mentioned fatigue, weakness, body aches and posture problems. Although no systematic study has been done on the relationship
between these symptoms and the production process, there does appear to be a connection. Women workers did not really get a chance to rest at all in the 8-10 hours of work. They had their tea during a fifteen-minute break, still sitting at the conveyor belt. The lunch break was for half an hour and women ate in groups, sitting on the floor in the same room. There was no canteen in any of the factories, and women in particular did not leave the room, let alone the factory premises, to get a breath of fresh air throughout the day. In some tasks such as chassis installing and final testing, workers had to stand for eight hours. In addition, given changes in the labour process, as well as the company’s strategy of reducing the workforce, the workload had increased for all the workers. As Aliya stated, ‘one person was doing the work of three seats’.

For women of course, work did not end at the factory – on an average the women interviewed did at least three hours housework daily. Unmarried women living with their mothers did less housework (up to two hours). It is not surprising then, that fatigue and weakness was mentioned by many of the women and not by a single man. A number of the women from Weston mentioned they had high blood pressure as well. However, in lieu of a systematic investigation it is difficult to say whether this is due to the pressures of double work or other physiological factors. There is growing evidence that the use of organic solvents in the electronics industry cause a range of health problems. Chemicals such as xylene, chloroform, trichloroethylene (TCE), freons, and methyl ethyl kelone (MEK) can lead to dermatitis, nausea, dizziness and headaches, liver and kidney damage and cancer.

Exposure to chemicals has also been known to affect the reproductive system. Studies of electronics industries have mentioned an increase in miscarriages and birth defects amongst children born to women workers from this industry.4 A few cases of miscarriage were mentioned, but again there is no clear evidence to link this to exposure to chemicals. One women worker from Weston who had a miscarriage felt that she lost her baby due to the tension of job loss and inability to eat healthy food since they had not received their wages, rather than due to the exposure to possible toxic chemicals. More visible effects were mentioned by other workers. For instance, the use of corrosive acids for washing the chassis in Ahuja Radios and Texla led to skin problems on the hands and feet of the men who did this work.

Hierarchical and technical labour control

The forms of labour control in this gendered labour regime are a combination of hierarchical and technical control as described by Edwards (1979:31). The supervisor and the foreman who are in charge of the whole department are key figures in implementing the disciplinary regime and ensuring fulfilment of production quotas. In some instances, fulfilment of quotas was built into the organisation of production. In Ahuja Radios, which makes audio speakers and amplifiers, production norm setting started in 1974, and management initiated a
Gendered Labour Regimes Established in the Era of Regulation

piece-rate system to increase the norms. In addition, automatic tools were added such as automatic screwdrivers and core files which raised the norms as a whole for the department. Other methods to increase production norms were more devious. During the high demand season, managers would make a direct appeal to workers for help in meeting the orders in time. As Jaswanti from Texla narrates:

...so workers went hungry and made 400 sets that day as against the norm of 250 a day. Then the GM came and said, ‘See, you can do it!’ Now the norm has been raised to 400 per day and piece-rate is offered for producing over that target.

The imposition of daily discipline was both crude and gendered. During periods of pressured production, women were not allowed to go to the toilet. If they did, the foreman would stand outside ‘making eyes’. Badthamizi and ‘nazrat theek nahin’ (lewd behaviour) were the two phrases used repeatedly by women to describe the foreman’s behaviour. Foremen often did not hesitate to move beyond embarrassing and harassing women to actual physical harassment and assault. It is in connection with the foremen that women spoke openly of sexual harassment – ‘chasing good-looking girls, pulling their plaits’. A number of cases of physical assault were mentioned. In Texla, the initiation of the union was triggered after the foreman struck an old woman worker. Although he tried later to bribe her and the witnesses, the newly formed union filed a case. This was subsequently withdrawn through the mediation of the management.

A resort to physical actions such as pushing and slapping was not restricted to foremen alone. A plant-level trade unionist described the women in his factory as ‘strong and militant and they did not hesitate to thapar maro (slap) anyone who annoyed them’. It was usually divorced and older married women who did this. However, the general demeanour of women, unmarried or married, in these factories was distinctly different from the women in the flatted factories. This demeanour also defies middle-class notions of docile and submissive women. Strong kinship ties amongst workers within the factory, and the presence of husbands and brothers/relatives who were union members seemed to be a factor in giving women the confidence to be bold. This differs from the tendency noted elsewhere where kinship ties within the factory acted only as a mechanism of control (Lee, 1998:124).

Workers who spoke out against the foreman’s actions and those who were members of the union were constantly harassed. Gender was a major mechanism used to humiliate them. A common method was to shift the woman to the male section or another department. Aliya, a 25-year-old Muslim woman who was a union leader, found the foreman’s constant ‘nagging’ and regulation offensive and unfair and spoke out against it.

I used to raise issues on my own. The foreman would object to the girls washing their hands saying that it was unnecessary. Once a few girls went to wash together and they were threatened, so they rushed back to their seats. I called out to them not to get scared – if washing hands was not allowed then the
management should tell us that in writing. Then we all got up and started walking towards the General Manager's office. The foreman ran to the intercom and informed the GM and told all of us that we would be sacked. The GM came down and appealed to us on a personal basis so we returned to work. A few days later a fight broke out between a boy and the foreman and he was sent out. We stopped work for four hours and said we would not work unless he returned. Again there was a compromise, but after a week I was transferred to the second floor where only men worked.

Placing women among men or men among women as punishment was a form of humiliation which used gendered cultural attributes. The women felt insecure amongst strange men, and the men felt 'unmanly' if they were sent to sit among the women'.

A common general form of punishment for arguing or defying the foreman, or for any act defined as 'in-discipline', consisted of sending workers out to sit at the gate in the blazing summer sun until they apologised and begged to be allowed to return to work. Punishment was more often given for links with the union rather than production process issues. A common refrain was 'the foremen treat us like animals'. Worker resentment to the despotic rule and aggressive behaviour of the foreman was amazingly consistent across enterprises of this type. Masculine authority appears to be essential to this function, since the foreman was always a man. While some factories still had a few women line supervisors, in many there was a shift from women to men supervisors on the grounds that the female supervisors were being too soft and were colluding with the women on the line.

Another axis of distinction, which functioned as a division, was regional differences between workers. The owner or manager's regional background was seen as a basis for preference in recruitment and promotion. In Weston, the division was between Sindhis and non-Sindhis; in Ahuja Radios, Punjabis and non-Punjabis; while in Jupiter Radios/Texta, the religious division between Sikh and non-Sikh employees was accentuated. These differences operated more at the higher levels rather than amongst the production workers, but there was a general feeling that if one came from the same region/background as the owner/manager, then one's position was more secure. The most clearly divisive regional difference was between migrant workers from Kerala and North Indians. Although these enterprises had started employing migrants from Kerala only from 1985 onwards, and they constituted only around 20 percent in some of these enterprises, the other workers saw them as a threat and resented their recruitment. Migrant workers did not join the union and were not party to the unspoken acts of resistance. As Jaswanti said in anger:

These women have ruined the company – they keep raising the production targets and then we have to keep up.

The Kerala migrants were seen as 'clever, liars and sexually promiscuous', and they did not associate with the North Indian workers. A more detailed
discussion on this division and the way it functioned as a form of control is provided in the next type of gendered labour regime, where migrant women constitute from 50 to 75 percent of the workforce. Their presence in the gendered labour regime under discussion here was a clear strategy by management to change the composition of the workforce towards more 'compliant and productive workers', as well as to institute a new mechanism of control.

Communal differences were not overtly significant since there were very few Muslim workers and only a few Christian workers from Kerala in these factories. However, in moments of conflict, communal identities were often mobilised in a subtle manner to try to create divisions. For example, Aliya Mukhtar, the Muslim woman union leader in Texla, took up the case of her sister who had asked for leave along with five other girls:

My sister and her friends had submitted an application for leave. After they returned to work they were called by the GM and told that they had taken leave without information. The girls refused to accept the GM’s letter stating they had violated the rules, and we took up the case with the union. At that time both my sister and I were threatened by the foreman and he went around saying, ‘How did these two manage to get into the factory?’ We knew he was referring to our being Muslim, since there are no other Muslim women in the factory. Luckily the union stuck to the point, the other workers supported us and soon the management stopped sending us letters.

A more structural aspect of communalism found in all the labour regimes was the fact that workers did not get a holiday on Id and Christmas, though occasions such as Diwali and Holi were given as holidays.

Worker resistance

Control and discipline in this type of gendered labour regime needed to be asserted and reasserted almost on a daily basis. As Sindhya Rawat, a 45-year-old Weston worker recalled:

To stop us talking, the foreman placed boys between us on the line, but we just laughed and talked over their heads...

Production targets set by the management were ignored and various mechanisms evolved to slow down the speed of the conveyor belt.

We did what we could. Sometimes we would slide a box at the corner which would slow the belt. No one said anything but automatically everyone slowed down. We removed the box after a while, waited till the foreman went out for tea and put it back again...

All the workers were aware of and used their legal entitlements. Women for instance would take leave immediately if they were sick or if they wanted to avoid a conflict or had domestic pressures. One of the first issues that J. Dey, a
woman union leader in Ahuja Radios, fought for was a stop to the ‘memos’ that were handed to women workers if they came even five minutes late to work:

I went straight to the manager and said that those who say 'yes sir, yes sir' roam around the whole day doing dadagiri (throwing their weight around) and you say nothing to them. But when it comes to the ladies who come from so far, whose child may be ill and she is ten minutes late, you immediately hand her a memo or send her out to sit in the sun. What kind of justice is this?

Worker resistance to daily discipline, in spite of the swift and severe forms of punishment, came from three crucial factors: long labour histories in the same company; the knowledge that they had a union which would defend them; and security of housing. As argued in Chapter 2, the mere existence of labour legislation and mediating institutions of the state in regulating industrial relations was not enough. Labour rights were not just given by the management – they were demanded and struggled for by the workers. It is the process of unionisation that led to the construction of a more moderate despotic regime and simultaneously a process whereby workers became aware of their rights. Subsidised housing provided by the state for workers also involved a process of struggle.

Long labour histories and the forging of a worker identity

Workers in these factories had long years of service ranging from ten, fifteen to even thirty years. They had seen the transition as the company grew from a small-scale enterprise to a large one, and they had experienced the changes in the labour process as new technology and new products were introduced. The shift from manual to semi-automatic technology was experienced as a loss of control over the pace of work and workers evolved different methods to regain some element of autonomy. However, such resistance to technical control cannot be seen in Braverman’s terms of craft-based resistance to de-skilling. The workers did not come from a craft background, nor did they possess specialised skills which were lost with the introduction of new technology.

The labour process in the electronics factories was already a fragmented and specialised one. At the same time, over the years, workers had developed capacities and a steady work rhythm within which they fulfilled production quotas. There was a sense of pride also in the fact that they had been able to learn quickly to adapt to new technology and they perceived these changes as a process of skilling rather than de-skilling. Given familiarity with the production process, even as their productivity increased, they also sought to re-impose a work rhythm that they knew they could handle. Significantly, management schemes for raising production quotas always met with resistance. Even indirect methods often failed. In Texla, the raising of the quota to 400 sets after tricking the workers into producing them, rebounded on the management since soon the godown got filled with 10,000 sets that could not be sold! After this incident,
production quotas became a joke, with workers’ ridiculing and mocking managers whenever they tried to raise the quota again.

In sharp contrast to women in flatted factories and small enterprises, these women had a strongly developed sense of being workers, both in a work-related and a labour rights sense. Many of them had moved from being Wire Girls to Senior Wire Girls, others were fighting for a designation that recognised their skills, for instance from helpers/floor assistants to cabinet fitters or fitter’s assistant. A few had undergone further training. Having seen the flexibility in the sexual division of labour over the years and also often having shifted from one job to another, most of these women workers had an experiential knowledge of the whole production process.

Jaswanti, a floor assistant/helper in Texla, 35 years old with fifteen years of service, spoke with great pride about her work:

> When we had manual fitting, the standard production was 100 sets but I used to make 150-175 sets. Since I managed ‘advance work’, I used to be asked to do other jobs. I used to carry transformers in a basket down three floors. I work as hard as two boys together. Helpers are being sent all over the factory. Often orders change suddenly and we have to produce a certain model overtime. I know all the jobs. I have done cabinet fitting, board soldering, and contrast bracket fitting. And I have worked on televisions, transformers, tuners...

This perception of being ‘all rounders’ and good at their work was accompanied by an awareness and use of their rights as workers. Unionised women workers tended to use their legal entitlements in a different way from men, given the double burden of household responsibilities and factory work. Only women put in leave applications to look after a sick child or family member. As mentioned earlier they took leave when they themselves felt unwell, since they knew that there was no one to look after them or the household if they were unwell. On the other hand, men tended to continue work until they fell very ill. Gothoskar reported a similar difference between unionised men and women in the pharmaceuticals industry. Unionised women also tended to sometimes take time off just to recover from the exhaustion of handling two jobs: home and factory. She quotes a woman worker who points to the differences between men and women in their response to time discipline within the factory: ‘...men roam about, chat, talk about investments and do all sorts of things. Once we are here, we belong to the company: that is also why we feel more tired...' (Gothoskar, 1997b: 47).

These women workers have been able to combine their identities: as workers and as women. The stability that came from a permanent job status motivated many women workers to ask for more training to improve their skills and to ask for higher designations. The assertion of a woman worker identity is reflected in their demands as well as their use of legal entitlements. Such an assertion has only been possible due to the process of unionisation in these enterprises.
Chapter 4

Process of unionisation

All these factories had unions, formed through the mid-eighties to implement labour rights and benefit entitlements. In the initial period between 1975 and 1985, the first unions were established, often set up by the management itself. These unions were called thaila (pocket) unions. The term ‘thaila’ was a loaded one, and had a double meaning: that it was a pro-management union and was run by union leaders who filled their own pockets. These pocket unions tended to make ad hoc settlements with management every two years in which at most, a salary increase of Rs. 100 to 150 would be given. There was no charter of demands or negotiations on any issue, given the mutual understanding between the managers and the union leaders. Factory inspectors were paid off in the manager’s office, and very few cases were filed in the Labour Office. Until the mid-1980s, workers in these factories did not get minimum wages. There was no daily attendance register or appointment letters, and no provision of provident fund or ESI benefits.

In almost all the factories a shift occurred from 1985 onwards, with either new unions being formed or the old leadership being displaced by a more militant leadership. Most of these new unions were also affiliated to central trade union organisations. In Weston, the first union was started in 1975, but the leaders were bought off after a strike settlement. In 1986 a union affiliated to the Indian Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU) linked to a far left political party was formed. One of the first issues the union addressed was the renaming of factories. Each change in name meant the service records of workers were broken and they were re-employed in the ‘new’ enterprise. This strategy also allowed the company to modify the composition of the workforce. Workers were circulated between the different enterprises as the need arose. Sandhya, a senior wire girl now, recalls how:

In those days girls and women were loaded into tempos (vans) and sent off between Weston and Clifton. Each day we did not know which unit we would be working in...

After the newly formed union took up this issue, most of the workers were made permanent, although the company continued to maintain a quarter of the workforce as casual labour. The absolute flexibility of the company had been checked and at the time of research there were around 300 workers who were permanent, with long service records, recipients of most of the legally specified benefits. The union continued with a series of struggles for dearness allowance, increase in bonus, change of designations after three years of service, and payment of minimum wages for higher skill levels.

In Texla/Jupiter Radios, a young militant RSS cadre supplanted the old leadership and his union was recognised by the Bhartiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS), linked to the Bharatiya Janata Party. Through 1986-1987, the union launched a struggle to regularise employment. The company used to employ daily wage workers and kept no record of workers on the roll. The union
approached the local Labour Office and inspectors were sent to check the irregularities of employment as well as non-implementation of other legal benefits. The management panicked and hid the daily wage workers inside the huge television carton boxes kept for delivery in the store at the back of the factory. The union leader led the factory inspector to the carton boxes. Management was fined and the workers were made permanent, a daily attendance register was started and other benefits were implemented.

The other important issue was implementation of minimum wages. This was difficult since in some cases such as Texla, the management had circumvented the issue by designating all the workers as floor assistants and helpers. In others, old designations of wire-girl and wire-man remained, even though the enterprises had now shifted to production of televisions where the designation ‘operator’ was applicable. In Texla, the union put forward a proposal for wage determination to be based on seniority, i.e. length of service. As a result of the settlement, the workers got wages even above the minimum wage and the union did not get caught on the tricky discussion of who was a skilled and semi-skilled worker. The settlement also included increments of Rs. 10 per year with a maximum limit of Rs 230. This resulted in the management finally agreeing to promote a section of workers to a higher designation, since they were now anyway getting a higher pay. This strategy of ‘ek tir se do shikar’ (one arrow, two targets) was a major victory for the union and consolidated its position.

Similar union pressure on a series of demands led to the implementation of labour legislation in Weston and Ahuja Radios. In Weston, however, minimum wages were only paid to the unskilled and semi-skilled workers. That issue remained contentious till the 1990s. In Ahuja Radios, the old leadership was voted out and a woman worker was made general secretary of the union. For the first time since the factory started, a charter of demands was presented to management. After a long struggle, certain demands were conceded, but in this case the woman leader was hounded out of office and her job. Nevertheless, she continues to fight 47 cases for Ahuja workers in the labour court.

Apart from the standard procedure of presenting a charter of demands and negotiating, unions also adopted direct action. This was resorted to particularly on the issue of bonus. Moral pressure and shaming techniques were used. For instance, in Texla, workers of the whole factory refused to eat lunch till the bonus was raised. In other companies there were strikes extending up to two weeks until management agreed to revise the bonus payment. In some cases the shift from pocket union to militant unionism has not occurred. In these cases the implementation of labour legislation was uneven. In Control and Switch Gear, for instance, 75 % of the workforce had been converted to contract labour and only union members got benefits. The union was an internal one and had absolute power over the workers. Non-members were harassed and spied upon. More than the foremen, workers in this factory spoke with fear about the union leader. For example, 26-year-old Praveen’s job was terminated on the grounds of unauthorised leave. The management had ‘misplaced’ her leave application.
When she approached the union leader he had propositioned her. Her refusal led to false accusations ('evidence' provided by a migrant woman from Kerala), providing additional grounds for her termination. Praveen was afraid to go back to the factory to claim her wages, and implied that she would be sexually harassed if she entered the industrial area.

The process of unionisation had resulted in a high degree of awareness of legal rights amongst the workers, even in cases where they have been implemented unevenly. Stories about incidents such as the hiding of workers in carton boxes, and tool-down hartals (strikes) for bonus revisions, have become part of the folklore of this section of workers in the electronics industry. They were retold to new recruits, though these were few. The intervention of the union had a significant impact and led to a shift in the nature of the gendered labour regime in these enterprises, from despotic control to moderate paternalist despotism. In the fifteen to twenty years of union pressure, management in these enterprises had developed a conciliatory attitude towards the unions. While nothing was given without a demand, there was an acceptance of the union and of the need to negotiate. Until the 1990s, an implicit social contract had emerged with mutual recognition of union and managerial interests.

**Economic security: housing struggle**

Many workers in these factories had a level of economic security based on house ownership. This was usually a two-room flat, and in some cases a single room shared by a large family. The figure below shows the distribution of women workers who lived in, owned or rented accommodation, as well as those living in jhuggis (illegal squatter settlements). Although women living in jhuggis said they owned their homes, these were usually in illegal squatter settlements such as the slum in Gautam Nagar opposite the All India Medical Institute. These settlements could be demolished at any time.

**Table 4.3  House ownership – GLR 2**

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<tr>
<td>Owned</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rented</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>Jhuggi</td>
<td>8</td>
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GLR 2 sample of 40 workers

A number of workers from industrial worker households lived in Girinagar, a workers' colony located opposite the Okhla Industrial Estate. Workers who had joined the newly set up factories in Okhla Industrial Estate in 1958-68 had launched a major struggle for a workers' colony in the area. The government built three-story flats in Girinagar opposite the industrial estate and workers from Okhla were allotted the flats. Initially, employers sought to restrict the allotment by making it conditional on an employment slip from the company. D.K. Pandey
started the first union in Okhla, which was affiliated to the AITUC, which led the housing struggle. He describes how they countered this attempt to turn the workers' right to housing into company housing.

I told the workers to place their belongings in the flats and quietly put locks on all the doors one night. We then got allotment chits from the municipality and the workers moved in. The employers kept protesting but the flats had already been taken over by workers – many were employed in the bigger factories, but a large number were also working in small enterprises and workshops which would never have given them an employment chit. (Interview with D.K. Pandey, union leader, 1996)

A nominal sum of Rs. 15 was paid each month, and over time the allotment slip became an ownership deed. A number of women workers from industrial worker households had husbands who had been involved in this struggle, and this ensured their own roof over their heads, even if their husbands were dead or unemployed now. Men workers in the electronics industry who were now settled migrants had played a major part in this struggle. A large number still lived in the Girinagar flats allotted to them years ago.

**Concluding Remarks: Company Ideology:**

**Bloody Taylorism/Despotic Paternalism/Hegemony?**

In the schema presented by Burawoy, the transition from despotic to hegemonic factory regimes is based on the severing of the ties which make workers dependent on the employer for the reproduction of their labour power. Two forms of state intervention – social insurance legislation and labour legislation – create conditions whereby management cannot impose an arbitrary despotism. This marks the transition to a hegemonic regime, and the move from coercion to consent. As elaborated in Chapter 3, there is no social insurance legislation in India which enables workers to reproduce their labour power independent of wage employment. The second form of state intervention does exist in India. There is an array of advanced labour legislation giving workers rights, and a whole procedural machinery to regulate relations between management and labour. However, the existence of these rights on paper does not in itself lead to a hegemonic regime, except in the public sector. It is the activation of these rights through unionisation and pressure on employers and the state which leads to the construction of a less despotic regime. In this gendered labour regime, we can see the transition from ‘Bloody Taylorism’ to a more moderated control regime. Unionisation and a series of struggles to implement labour laws did provide a check to the arbitrariness and coercion of the earlier period. However, the control regime remains a form of despotism. This is seen particularly in the power exercised by the foreman.
Workers' housing: Girinagar
Even as coercive methods continue to be deployed and workers continue to oppose them, there is another dimension to company ideology that reflects an element of consent. Both mechanisms of coercion and consent operated simultaneously. This was reflected in the general perception that workers had of themselves as being part of the company. Having worked for over 15 years, most of the workers could give a ‘history’ of the formation and changes in the company, the styles of managers, and the transformation of the work process. They spoke with pride of the growth and expansion of the factories. A whole mythology had been constructed around the owner, whom the workers saw only on rare occasions. Jaswanti’s version:

The company started 30 years ago. The owner used to sell tomatoes on a cart at that time. His son was a radio engineer. They bought land here which later became an industrial area. First started a radio unit then set up a television unit and kept expanding. Rana Singh (the owner) used to walk for hours selling tomatoes – he drinks from our glass – his son Surrinder Singh was a devta (god)…

Similar mythologies combining fact and fiction, and creating a sense of commonality between workers and the owner, were presented by workers in other companies also. In all the stories, the owners were considerate, kind, and approachable. The displacement of the owner from direct relations with the workers, and the exercise of power through proxy, left a space where the owners only intervened on rare occasions. In such cases workers felt a fair settlement was usually agreed upon. The idea of belonging to a company was also actively fostered by management through company picnics, joint festival celebrations, and yatras (tours), often organised by the union. These all created a feeling of being ‘company workers’. A sociological study of Okhla Industrial Estate done in the nineteen sixties by well-known sociologist M.N. Srinivas noted that:

Employers are accessible to their workers and find time to listen to their personal difficulties and problems. They advance loans to their workers to meet expenses on wedding, funeral and other contingencies. Workers in turn view their employer as both mother and father (ma-baap) and the entrepreneur generally responds to this attitude. Such a relationship is a close and personal one. However, when the workers assert their rights through trade union or other means, the entrepreneurs see a threat not only to their own interests but also to the close bonds that they would like to maintain on a patron-client basis. (Srinivas, 1965:84)

During my research in the 1990s on enterprises which were established in the same period as Srinivas’ study, the metaphor of the ‘family’ was used more in connection with relations between workers: ‘We are all like brothers and sisters here’. In Weston, though, the family trope referred to the many married couples working together in the enterprises. However, the allegiance to the company was also evident in spite of a strongly developed sense of workers’ rights amongst the workers. These were two facets of the same coin. Demands could be made
because workers had proved their commitment. This ideology began to be fractured in the 1990s. These companies faced a recession with the loss of their export market in Soviet Union and Eastern Europe and competition with the liberalisation of the economy. A variety of managerial strategies of restructuring in the face of competition have been initiated in these factories, and there is a return to the despotic gendered labour regime prevalent in the early period.

Notes

1 In this case the owner did not mention that the enterprise had started functioning before the completion of the flatted factories, and was located in a shed with an asbestos roof. The tension could well have been the result of the excruciating heat rather than the ‘natural tendency of men to fight’!

2 Karen Hossfeld (1990) describes a similar situation in Silicon Valley. Immigrant workers pretended not to understand English or instructions at times, thereby fitting into the ethnic stereotypes created by management. The strategy of ‘using their logic against them’ was not consciously articulated, but it allowed women some respite from work discipline.

3 Studies on women workers in semi-conductor export factories in Southeast Asia have pointed out that most women have to wear glasses after three years. A number were forced to leave their jobs due to bad eyesight before the age of 30 (Grossman, 1979:11; Lim, 1978). In semi-conductor production, women have to look through microscopes throughout the day. This leads to quick deterioration of vision. Although microscopes were not used in television and audio production, within four to five years workers found their eyesight getting worse.

4 The best known case is of the Mallory children in Mexico. A group of 24 children had a common birth defect. It was discovered that all their mothers worked during their pregnancy in an electronic firm manufacturing capacitors in the maquiladora. The women’s work involved the use of chemicals in assembling printed circuit boards.