
The Spirit of Labour

Labour. Work. Employment.

Those of us who maintain that the human being is at the centre of our discourse need to re-visit the significance of these terms.

Barely thirty years ago one could convince a youth that labour created 'surplus value', and that this value was 'appropriated' by the feudal lord or the owners of a business or enterprise - capitalists.

But now, at a time when some kinds of work, even those entailing extreme drudgery, acquire esteem mainly in terms of the money brought into one's life; when every youth's dream, or rather imperative, is to make a pile of money here and now; and where the labour put into a product or service to enhance its value is discounted; - so now, assertions of the importance of labour, right to employment, conditions of work, and security of employment sound archaic, unreal and even vacuous.

Hence, whether it is the issue of maintaining high interest rates for the Employees Provident Fund, or of Guaranteeing Employment or Security of Employment, we seem to have diluted, if not totally abdicated, our earlier positions on these issues in the face of an overwhelming neo-liberal onslaught.

In this context, guaranteeing employment, as opposed to just a dole, is a vital necessity. But we cannot leave it at that. It is just a starting point. In times like these we need to take the discourse of labour, work and employment beyond the narrow economic confines, to the realm of human initiative, occupation, personal fulfillment, and social engagement.

There are traditions in India that dwell on these issues, and there are modern conceptions of labour, employment and work, some of these very Indian – not the least being Gandhi’s perspective.

Ela Bhatt and Renana Jhabvala probe these concepts of work and employment, largely inspired by the prolonged work in SEWA, and take the issue beyond survival, to social, fulfilling arenas of work and employment in decentralized economic activity, and extended to cooperative economic systems.

Venu Madhav Govindu and Deepak Malghan revisit the very contemporary notions of one of Gandhi’s close follower – J C Kumarappa.

The Stanford Encyclopedia on feminist perspectives and **Jonathan Power** on women in the Scandinavian Model provide further insights into work and social, economic and political relationships. ▶



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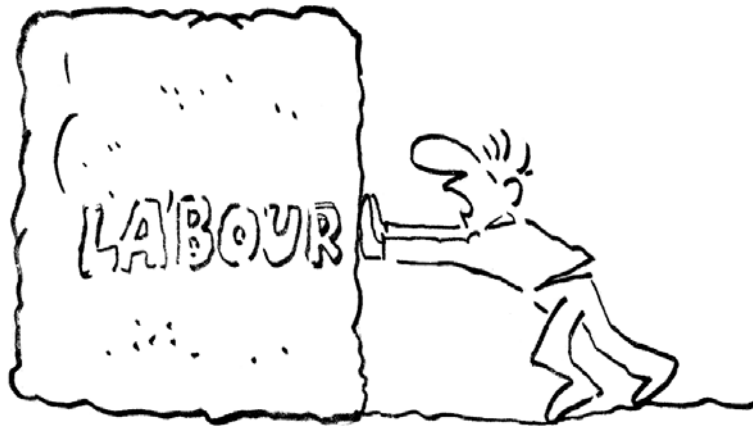
The Idea of Work

Ela Bhatt, Renana Jhabvala

The laws and policies that women face are based on attitudes and theories about work, which are far from the reality on the ground. Work is seen as labour, or as jobs where there is an 'employment relationship'. Only a certain type of work is productive and worthy of investment and credit, most work is 'unproductive'.

Definitions of Work

Mainstream economics uses the terms 'labour' and 'employment' for work. Although there are alternative theories of economics, most notably the Marxian approach, today neo-classical theories have come to dominate the thinking on economics in most countries.



"Labouring has always been identified with onerous activity. It is derived from the Latin (labor), implying toil, distress and trouble. Labor are meant to do heavy, onerous activity... is derived from the Latin 'trepateiure', meaning to torture with a nasty instrument. And the Greek

word for labour 'panos', signified pain and effort, and has the same root as the word for poverty, penia" [Standing 2002:243].

Employment is a somewhat broader concept than labour, and is used in different ways. It is mainly used to determine the number of people earning an income engaged in production for the market.

Employment became an important measure when 'full-employment' become one of the main goals of policies and responsibilities of governments.

In a more philosophical vein, based on European thought, Hannah Arendt gives a somewhat different interpretation to the idea of work, by making a distinction between labour, work and action. 'Labour' is the



activity which maintains and sustains the biological processes of life. 'Work' begins with the distinction between man and animal, between biology and the 'man-made'. Labour insures not only individual survival, but the life of the species. "Work and its product, the human artefact, bestow a measure of permanence and durability upon the futility of mortal life and the fleeting character of human time. Action, insofar as it engages in founding and preserving political bodies, creates the conditions for remembrance, that is, for history" [Arendt 1970:8].

Bhagvat Gita. Here the definition of work is very broad and includes all man's interactions with 'Prakriti' or nature. Prakriti is the functioning of

the world. Work includes the maintenance of the body as well as actions that are required for its maintenance. These include the actual functioning of the body – eating, sleeping and other bodily functions; the work or labour required to obtain the materials - such as food, required for these functions; as well as the actions of the social being – thinking, feeling and the interactions with others. The distinction is not between the social and the natural, but between Prakriti and the Self or soul.

Holistic Ways of Looking at Work: An Indian Perspective

Anthropologists discuss different ways in which cultures view themselves. Louis Dumont defines two ways of self-definition by cultures – individualism and holism. In an individualistic society a person defines himself independent of relationships and based on 'impersonal' elements such as abstract rights, attributes desires, preferences and even professional occupations. In holistic societies an individual defines himself in relation to society as a whole and sees himself as the nexus of a web of relationships.

In the modern economy the idea of work is purely individualistic. The worker is one who enters the market and exchanges her work for money because the only way she can meet her basic needs is as a consumer. The person whose identity is that of a worker and a consumer in a market-dominated society, acquires a certain identity and a relationship with her work. The worth of her work is the worth of the income she receives. Often her work may be physically hard, as is generally the case with labour. Often, she may feel bad about her work because she does not feel part of the results or she feels exploited. In these cases she attempts to do as little work as possible for the income she receives. And she compensates the unpleasantness by consuming 'leisure'.



In a country like India, attitudes of people towards their work are determined by an interplay of cultures and economic forces. The modern economy brings about a mindset of competition, individualism and a drive towards ever-expanding consumerism. On the other hand, cultural and traditional ways of thinking are often in a different direction.

Work and Social Systems

In India, social systems have always been more or less synonymous with the caste system, and social relations were defined by relations within castes and between castes. Although women's roles were well defined and lead to a certain amount of security, there were definite inequalities within the relationship, which often lead to a downgrading of women's work and position.

Although descriptions of the caste system generally identify four major castes, in practice there are thousands of them, all identified with a particular work. The people and their communities identified themselves with their work. They assumed their names from their occupational work. They married amongst their own occupational community. Their social systems were organised around their work. Their occupation was the basis on which they built their lives, culture, communities and institutions. In so many ways, it was their primary means of interaction and participation in society.

Work with the Community

Work occupies the better part of the day for most people. Partly through actually doing work and partly through learning from others, a worker develops his skills, and a person with more and superior skills is better respected in the community. When people value themselves and their work they feel a pride in themselves and a dignity about what they do. Work is often done with other people and is seen as a group activity. Working together is a way of sharing and relating to others.

Good work is that which is done not only for oneself but for others. Of course, one has to do work in order to live and satisfy one's needs. But those needs should be kept to the minimum. Furthermore, non-attachment requires that one should not be attached to, desirous of, the fruits of one's work.

Different Forms of Work, Better Ways of Working

Here we would like to try and define some of the elements which constitute better work. That is work which gives self-respect and dignity to the worker, in which the worker and her work are integrated as part of a larger community, even of a larger cosmos, and work which, while fulfilling the needs of the individual, is in many ways 'unselfish' or selfless.

The question that then arises is what should the structures of production and distribution be in order to have better work. This question cannot be approached in the abstract, in an idealised or distant past or future society, but must be placed in the context of the structures and relationships and the economy that exists today. The main features of such an economy would be to build structures that place the needs of the most vulnerable at the centre, that have more co-operative and decentralised methods of production and distribution.

The Most Vulnerable at the Centre

The first principle of a society that provides better work is to ensure that the poorest and the most vulnerable are provided with their basic needs. We are arguing not only for individual sympathy for the weak and disadvantaged, but for a social system which systematically focuses on the vulnerable and where the social structures, and more especially the economic structures and work structures, are designed to meet the

needs of the most vulnerable groups. **In India, a coherent concept of a 'good' society was developed during the era of the freedom struggle. This concept of Swaraj or self-governance was seen not merely as a political system managed by and for Indians, but as the basis for a better society. "The word Swaraj is a sacred word, a Vedic word, meaning self-rule and self-restraint" [M K Gandhi 1962 edition: 3]. And this concept would be the basis of a better society – If Swaraj was not meant to civilise us and to purify and stabilise our civilisation it would be worth nothing. The very essence of civilisation is that we give a paramount place to morality in all our affairs public and private" [ibid: 5].**

In SEWA we have seen that working for others, and especially working for the most vulnerable creates a force and energy that builds a movement.

Although the importance of focusing on poverty and the poor is emphasised in macro-economic policy it is generally not seen as the driving principle of economic life. In fact the poor are seen as marginal to economic life as a whole and to be taken care of through special schemes and safety nets. We are proposing that the economic structure be such that deprivation cannot exist. That is, every person must get his or her minimum needs. It requires a moral society to focus on the poorest. But it also requires structures which would identify these poorest and which would then have a system of social production where the minimum needs are satisfied. This leads us into our next criteria for a structure for better work – decentralised forms of production.

Economic Decentralisation

Arguing for economic decentralisation is a difficult task. Although it is accepted today that political decentralisation is required for a vibrant and active democracy, centralisation of production, of skills and of ownership of resources is seen as leading to a more efficient economy. Here we would like to put forward some arguments to suggest the need for more decentralisation of production and distribution of goods and services as well as decentralisation of ownership of resources.

Our first argument for economic decentralisation follows from the last point of focusing on the most vulnerable. Identification of the most

vulnerable is a major exercise, where a number of criteria have to be accepted and the people fitting those criteria to be identified. Reaching the poorest is a major administrative exercise if conducted centrally. A more efficient administrative system would be one where food, clothing and other minimum requirements are distributed locally. It would be even more efficient if much of the required needs are locally produced and only a certain amount imported. This does not argue that local areas are unconnected with mainstream markets, but merely that a certain minimum amount of produce needs to be grown and distributed locally. New technologies and inputs could boost this local production and linking with the market would encourage production of surplus as well as import of products which cannot be produced locally.

The second argument is related to justice and equality. Within most countries and also across nations, the distribution and ownership of wealth tends to be concentrated in certain areas. Generally the wealthier areas attract more resources and the poorer areas lose them.



Economic decentralisation is one way (although not necessarily the only way) of distribution of resources. The third argument is connected with 'holistic work'. We have seen that in many societies and especially among women, work is satisfying and creative if it is part of the individual, community and social life. Decentralised production and services for local use mean that part of the production can be for own use and part for exchange, (as we saw at sewa in the case of embroidery workers). Furthermore, this type of production is linked to local cultures and local designs and leads to far greater control of

people over what they should produce, and how it is to be used. It has been found that where local communities have a greater control over these resources, they preserve and regenerate the resource.

Economic decentralisation would lead to two separate trends, both of which would be beneficial to women. First, it would strengthen local markets and local skills and make the markets more accessible to women. Second, it would raise the value of non-monetary work, as work acquires a more holistic meaning and comes to include work done for maintenance of a larger society, including all forms of community and service work.

Economic decentralisation is often criticised on the grounds that it shuts local communities off from the skills, knowledge, resources and opportunities available outside the community, and makes them inward turning. **What is being argued here is not a cutting off from larger opportunities but a redressal of the balance. Just as political decentralisation does not mean that national and state governments disappear when local government is empowered, so also local production can and should link into larger systems of production, local markets can and do link into national and international ones and local ownership of resources links into larger systems of ownership.**

Co-operative Economic Systems

People work for the physical and social maintenance of themselves, their families and their communities, and it is necessary that they do such work, if life is to go on. However, an 'unselfish attitude' requires firstly, that along with maintenance of individual selves, there should also be a constant awareness of maintenance of the cosmos as part of the work; and secondly, the self should not be 'attached' to the results of the work. This attitude towards work requires a constant awareness of others, of working for and serving a larger community; at the same time a minimising of one's own needs and desires.

Co-operative forms of work are also more likely to be adopted by the poor or by those who have less resources. Co-operation is one way of pooling resources and hence increasing control. It is also a way of increasing the bargaining power of those who are weak. It can be seen as the best form to meet minimum needs of every individual. Unselfish work is often questioned as an unrealistic concept, especially where



maximising of individual utility is the basis underlining modern day economics.

However, there is a rich literature on altruistic behaviour of individuals where unselfish goals are part of maximising individual utility, and some literature which goes beyond maximising behaviour of the individual into 'tuism' where the relationships with others are an end in themselves and, as Zamagni has argued, not just a means for individual satisfaction.

Co-operative forms of work are also often questioned because the dominant mode today is of individuals interacting with the market and often competing. Is co-operation really feasible, and if it was, why do we not see it working today? In fact, if one examines the reality, cooperative forms of production exist today far more than is realised. The European Union's social economy is estimated to consist of 900,000 enterprises and represents 10 per cent of GDP and employment. Formal registered cooperatives too exist worldwide. Ranging from small-scale to multi-million dollar businesses across the globe, co-operatives are estimated to employ more than 100 million women and men and have more than 800 million individual members. They operate mainly in agricultural marketing and supply, finance, wholesale and retailing, health care, housing and insurance, but are venturing into new fields such as information and communication technology, tourism and cultural industries. Co-operative enterprises, organisations and/ groups are abundant in the informal economy, especially in developing countries, although so far there has been no attempt to measure these.

Our experience in SEWA has shown that co-operative economic organisations are not only feasible for poor women but that they bring about better work in a number of different ways. First, organisation gives women who are the most vulnerable a new identity through their work,

an identity where they are respected because of their work, and the contribution of their work is acknowledged by society and by their own families. Second, cooperation allows them to build an enterprise and reach markets directly instead of being at the mercy of traders and others who exploit their lack of access to markets. Third, they are able to pool their resources – their capital, their knowledge and their skills. Fourth, they are able to avail of government schemes and programmes, which is difficult for them to do individually. Finally, their coming together into a viable organisation increases their voice and bargaining power in society and in the market. ▶

Building a Creative Freedom: J C Kumarappa and His Economic Philosophy

Venu Madhav Govindu, Deepak Malghan

Kumarappa's deep rooted concern for individual autonomy is best seen in his writings on the nature of work. Some four decades before "good work" became a slogan of the appropriate technology movement, Kumarappa called for a philosophical understanding of the fundamental nature of work that was independent of the form of economic or social organisation. For Kumarappa, this started with the rejection of the conception of work as mere drudgery, a characterisation he traced to the Judeo-Christian tradition where work is seen as a "curse from god":

'By the sweat of thy brow shall thou eat bread' was the punishment meted out to Adam for his disobedience. Since then man has been trying hard to circumvent this curse. He wants to eat bread but does not want to sweat.

For Kumarappa, work has "two important components" – the "creative element which makes for the development and happiness of the individual", and "toil or drudgery". If the "real purpose of work" is to "develop man's higher faculties", both the creative and drudgery parts are equally important and separating them was akin to separating fat from milk – a healthy body needs not just the fat but also the nutrients in the whey. More significantly, this separation of drudgery from the creative aspect of work is one of the fundamental sources of violence. To the extent that toil is characterised as a necessary evil, coercion and thus violence that follows become inevitable. For Kumarappa, the "strong have always attempted to divide work and allocate the heavy part to the worker and retain to themselves the higher and the more pleasant part". Indeed, this violence at the individual level also operates at a much larger level and punctuates the rise and fall of entire civilisations:



[T]he ancient empires of Babylon, Egypt, Greece and Rome worked [by] shifting the unpleasant part of activity, by which pleasure can be had, on to the captives made into slaves. By depriving masses of men of their freedom such empires flourished for a while and disappeared.

Kumarappa clearly recognised the impact economic organisation had on the political structure obtained in a society: “Large-scale industries in economics is the anti-thesis of democracy in politics”. He went on to suggest that one of the motivating powers of the imperial project was the coercive division of labour, which none of the dominant forms of economic and social organisation had been able to address. An average worker is reduced to “gun-fodder” for the machine under a capitalistic organisation-based on large centralised industries, or a “cogwheel in a machine” under communism. Thus, while the economic structure largely determined the choices available to individuals, for Kumarappa, a non-violent social organisation had to base itself on freedom and autonomy for every individual. However, he went on to qualify that we may not “entirely ban [the] profit motive nor advocate complete decentralisation”. What we want to find is a mean between capitalism and communism”. While he critiqued coercive methods, Kumarappa was also no naive advocate of a cooperative basis for large-scale social organisation.

While it may be granted that group activity has a contribution to make within a limited community, it is open to serious doubt whether such activity is possible on a national scale for any length of time. A few idealists may get together and run an Ashram or other philanthropic institutions on the basis of service. But whether such principles can be applied in the present stage of varied and varying civilisations on a world basis may be questioned. ▶

Feminist Perspectives on Class and Work

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

A good place to situate the start of theoretical debates about women, class and work is in the intersection with Marxism and Feminism. Such debates were shaped not only by academic inquiries but as questions about the relation between women's oppression and liberation and the class politics of the left, trade union and feminist movements in the late 19th and 20th centuries, particularly in the U.S., Britain and Europe. It will also be necessary to consider various philosophical approaches to the concept of work, the way that women's work and household activities are subsumed or not under this category, how the specific features of this work may or may not connect to different "ways of knowing" and different approaches to ethics, and the debate between essentialist and social constructionist approaches to differences between the sexes as a base for the sexual division of labor in most known human societies.

The relation of women as a social group to the analysis of economic class has spurred political debates within both Marxist and Feminist circles as to whether women's movements challenging male domination can assume a common set of women's interests across race, ethnicity, and class. If there are no such interests, on what can a viable women's movement be based, and how can it evade promoting primarily the interests of white middle class and wealthy women? To the extent to which women do organize themselves as a political group cutting across traditional class lines, under what conditions are they a conservative influence as opposed to a progressive force for social change?

If poor and working class women's issues are different than middle and upper class women's issues, how can middle class women's movements be trusted to address them? In addition to these questions, there is a set of issues related to cross-cultural comparative studies of women, work and relative power in different societies, as well as analyses of how women's work is connected to processes of globalisation.

Marxism as a philosophy of human nature stresses the centrality of work in the creation of human nature itself and human self-understanding. Both the changing historical relations between human work and nature,

and the relations of humans to each other in the production and distribution of goods to meet material needs construct human nature differently in different historical periods: nomadic humans are different than agrarian or industrial humans. Marxism as a philosophy of history and social change highlights the social relations of work in different economic modes of production in its analysis of social inequalities and exploitation, including relations of domination such as racism and sexism

The rise of capitalism, in separating the family household from commodity production, further solidifies this control of men over women in the family, with the latter becoming economic dependents of the former in the male breadwinner / female housewife nuclear family form. Importantly, capitalism also creates the possibility of women's liberation from family-based patriarchy by creating possibilities for women to work in wage labor and become economically independent of husbands and fathers.

With a different historical twist, Hartmann argues that a historical bargain was cemented between capitalist and working class male patriarchy to shore up patriarchal privileges that were being weakened by the entrance of women into wage labor in the 19th century by the creation of the "family wage" to allow men sufficient wages to support a non-wage-earning wife and children at home (1981a). While Ferguson and Folbre (1981) agree that there is no inevitable fit between capitalism and patriarchy, they argue that there are conflicts, and that the family wage bargain has broken down at present. Indeed, both Ferguson and Smart (1984) argue that welfare state capitalism and the persistent sexual division of wage labor in which work coded as women's is paid less than men's with less job security are ways that a "public patriarchy" has replaced different systems of family patriarchy that were operating in early and pre-capitalist societies.

Thus, the new "marriage" of patriarchal capitalism operates to relegate women to unpaid or lesser-paid caring labor, whether in the household or in wage labor, thus keeping women by and large unequal to men. This is especially notable in the rise of poor single-mother-headed families. However, as it forces more and more women into wage labor, women are given opportunities for some independence from men and the possibility to challenge male dominance and sex segregation in all

spheres of social life. Examples are the rise of the first and second wave women's movements and consequent gains in civil rights for women.

Realizing the importance of this disjuncture between economic class and sex class for women, Maxine Molyneux (1984) argues in a often cited article that there are no "women's interests" in the abstract that can unify women in political struggle. Instead, she theorizes that women have both "practical gender interests" and "strategic gender interests." Practical gender interests are those that women develop because of the sexual division of labor, which makes them responsible for the nurturant work of sustaining the physical and psychological well-being of children, partners and relatives through caring labor. Such practical gender interests, because they tie a woman's conception of her own interests as a woman to those of her family, support women's popular movements for food, water, child and health care, even defense against state violence, which ally them with the economic class interests of their family. Strategic gender interests, on the contrary, may ally women across otherwise divided economic class interests, since they are those, like rights against physical male violence and reproductive rights, which women have as a sex class to eliminate male domination.

Molyneux used her distinctions between practical and strategic gender interests to distinguish between the popular women's movement in Nicaragua based on demands for economic justice for workers and farmers against the owning classes, demands such as education, health and maternity care, clean water, food and housing, and the feminist movement which emphasized the fight for legal abortion, fathers' obligation to pay child support to single mothers, and rights against rape and domestic violence. She and others have used this distinction between practical and strategic gender interests to characterize the tension between popular women's movements and feminist movements in Latin America. Postmodernists, on the other hand, emphasize on intersectional differences, that commonalities in women's gendered work can create a cross-class base for demanding a collective political voice for women: a transnational feminism which creates a demand for women's political representation, developing the platform of women's human rights as women and as workers. Nonetheless, the tension between women's economic class-based interests or needs and their visionary/strategic gender interests or needs is always present, and must therefore always be negotiated concretely by popular movements for social justice involving women's issues.

Theoretical and empirical debates about the relation of women to class and work, and the implications of these relations for theories of male domination and women's oppression as well as for other systems of social domination, continue to be important sources of theories and investigations of gender identities, roles and powers in the field of women and gender studies, as well as in history, sociology, anthropology and economics. They also have important implications for epistemology, metaphysics and political theory in the discipline of philosophy, and consequently other disciplines in humanities and the social sciences. ▶