

A day in the life of the plantation workers: understanding working day and its limits through a reading of Capital Vol. I

Supurna Banerjee

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Introduction

‘What is a working day? What is the length of time during which capital may consume the labour-power whose daily value it buys! How far may the working-day be extended beyond the working-time necessary for the reproduction on labour-power itself?’
(Marx, Capital Vol-I; 2010: 252¹)

These questions raised by Marx are central in understanding how work is itself constructed. Control over the workday has been a central tenet of capitalism. Capitalist enterprises across age and place have extracted the maximum possible surplus labour from the workers to maximise their profits. Roediger and Foner (1989) held that as early as 1830s employers realised power over when to work goes hand in hand with control over how to work. Slavery, for example, became possible as the employer could exercise control over the entire day in the slave’s life i.e. the entire day was workday.

Marx argued that capital had not invented surplus labour. But in the capitalist mode of production it was no longer a question of obtaining labour for just the production of a certain quantity of useful products, it was now a question of production of surplus labour itself (Marx, 2010: 226). Labour power is unique among all commodities precisely because of the specific use-value which this commodity possesses of not just being a source of value but in fact of more value than it has itself (Marx, 2010: 193). Therefore outside the necessary labour through which the worker can maintain themselves, there is surplus labour which produces profit for the capitalist.

¹This is a facsimile reproduction of Karl Marx’s Capital (1887) published by Progress Publishers: Moscow. To keep the accuracy of the page numbers the 2010 edition has been cited.

The crux of working day is control over labour time. With the development of industrial capitalism time became commodified (Thompson, 1967). Time was no longer abstract but a concrete component which was broken into its components through measurements of hours, minutes and seconds. The indiscriminate lengthening of the working day made possible through use of machines led to a reaction on the part of the society which in turn led to the fixing of hours of working day by law. Circumscribed by the legal limits of the working day capitalists now needed to strategically develop means of intensification of labour. In India the regulation of workday has been a major theme of labour law which specify that a regular workday cannot exceed 9 hours and a work-week 48 hours for an adult worker. The regulatory arrangements of workday are however shaped by local contexts. This paper examines the notion of workday in the specific context of labour in tea plantations in India.

Methodology

The paper is based on ethnography and oral narratives in two tea plantations in Dooars, Kaalka and Daahliabetween 2010-12. The tea plantations had various sites of production such as the gardens and the factory. The paper concentrates on the labour processes in the gardens. The bulk of the workers in the gardens, especially engaged in unskilled tasks like plucking, were women. It is their accounts and perceptions which form the core of this paper.

The notion of work includes both unpaid domestic work as well as paid work in the plantations or elsewhere. For the purpose of this paper, the idea of work and workday is examined with a focus on paid labour only bringing in unpaid work as far as is relevant in this context. While this remains a limitation of the paper, it also allows us to explore the theoretical framework devised by Marx.

Setting the Context

Marx in his analysis of capitalism holds that labour power i.e. the capacity to work is converted to sufficient labour through the process of coercion. These conditions for the creation of the capitalist enterprise could be seen in the making of the plantation labour in the colonial idea, the norms of which continue to operate though often in modified ways in the present scenario. The first condition is that the workers had no means of livelihood other than the sale of their labour power for wages. The historical accounts of the formation of plantation labour in the tea plantations of colonial India (e.g. Bhowmik, 1981; Behal, 2014) show that two-thirds of labour force here was recruited from the tribal population of Chotanagpur Plateau. The loss of their lands at the hands of the *dikus* (moneylenders), increased impoverishment and drought meant that these people had limited option outside the sale of their labour power. This was the catchment area from which the tea plantations drew their labour supply.

The unique feature of the labour arrangement of the plantations was that the workers lived within the plantations. Through control of housing, provisions, company store, education and religion the planters were able to extend their control over every aspect of the worker's lives, binding community to factory through non-market as well as market ties. The company state, as Buroway (1985:92) calls it went beyond market despotism to intervene coercively in the very reproduction of labour power. The examination of the practices around workday in the tea plantations illustrates establishment of the company state as a patriarchal order. The patriarchal regime not only directly shaped production it also sought to normalise and legitimise it through ideas of skill, naturalisation and the like which were at the core of the workday formation.

The lack of any other means of earning livelihood and availability of reserve army of labour meant that the colonial planters and the management could extract the maximum

surplus labour out of these workers without any fear of sanction. The accounts document how the coercive measures undertaken by the planters to maximise the surplus labour would include beating and flogging of the workers for not fulfilling their daily quota of work (Behal, 2014: 114). Using the trope of the 'lazy natives' records of planters illustrate how they are required to toil for hours on an end without any rest (Barkar, 1884: 138). The trick was the ambiguity maintained around what actually constituted the workday in the plantations.

The account of eighty year old Nirala who had worked in Daahlia all her life illustrates how the looseness of the workday operated in the everyday of the workers.

“During my father’s time we saw how they had to toil from dawn to dusk. There was no rest and no break. If the *sahib* felt more leaves were required they had to continue to pluck forgoing their lunch or *chai* (tea). It was only the setting sun and darkness which brought them some relief. But even then some had duties at the manager’s bungalow.”

The marking of the workday from 'dusk to dawn' allowed a task orientation which could be varied to the advantage of the planter. The beginning of the post-colonial era with establishment of a democratic regime, however, signified that such arbitrary notions of workday could no longer operate. Legislations such as the Factory's Act 1948, Minimum Wages Act 1948, Plantation Labour Act 1951 fixed the maximum workhours constituting a workday and also a minimum wages. These incursions were to curb the capitalists' unlimited ability to coerce the labour force for surplus labour. The codification of the working day into hours curtailed the ambiguity of time. Time therefore became a commodified quantity (Thompson, 1967). It now required the employment of more subtle mechanisms for the manipulation of the workers' lives in the plantation society to ensure that such measures of social security does not hinder the capitalists' quest for profit.

Regulating workday

In Daahlia a full workday in the gardens started at 7:30 and the first weighing was held at 9:00, and then the next weighing was at 11:30 following which the women had lunch break for an hour and a half and had to resume work at 1. Then at 2:30 the next weighing was done and finally at 4:00 with the final weighing the women went home. In Kaalka the women were only given an hour's break in between from 12:00-1:00. They finished their work one hour early at 3:00pm. In January the workdays were much shorter i.e. the workers' had half-day work which ended at 1:30 pm. There was no plucking during this period but mainly maintenance work of pruning, sickling etc. The women were mainly engaged in this task. The work of growing saplings in the nursery and the work of spraying pesticides operated in two shifts. The first shift was from 7:30-11:30 and the next from 11:30-4:30. While different workers were assigned for the nursery shifts, in the case of spraying work the same set of workers could be assigned or could volunteer for the second shift in lieu of overtime or double payment. Both of these tasks were mainly done by the men. The work in the factory was also in eight hour long shifts. Each day had three shifts. Each worker had to work on each shift for a week before being changed to the next shift. All the workers in the factories of these two plantations were men.

The workday is essentially a mode of disciplining the workers. Exercising power over when to work goes hand in hand with power over how to work. A whole regime of supervision through various modes ranging from superintendence to wage upholds the sanctity of the workday. These modes of control were legitimised through mapping them onto legitimised understanding of identity norms (especially gender norms). One of the obvious modes through which this plays out is supervision.

Supervisory regimes

The labour cannot be left to their devices and it is the responsibility of the capitalist to ensure the full utilisation of the labour power. The role of supervision becomes a significant strategy in this regard. Buroway (1985:32) explains how the labour process works in a way to conceal the existence of surplus labour. He argues that the relations in production are dislocated from the relations of production such that one takes place within the workspace and the other outside it. In the site of production the workers interact only with each other and with the managers who too are employed against a wage. The capitalist i.e. the plantation owner in this case is invisible. The invisibility but ubiquity of their authority is legitimised and communicated through the supervision regime. The hierarchy between the workers toiling in the plantations and the management is multi-tiered. Chatterjee (2003:53) provides an insight into how the plantations' hierarchy is shaped on gender and class basis with the planter at the head of the pyramid and the women at the base.

The immediate supervisors over the garden workers, who were primarily women, were the *sardars* responsible for the immediate section they were assigned to. The *sardars* were headed by a *chaprasi*, who assigned them work. The *chaprasi* had to report to a *bagaanbabu* whocommunicated with the management through the assistant managers and decided on the sections to be plucked and the task. The multiple tiers of this hierarchy are significant in gender and ethnic terms too. The chain of command operates in definite gendered terms from the manager who is a male and usually non-tribal through layers of surveillance to the tribal and Nepali women situated at the bottom (Banerjee, 2017).

The presence of multiple stages of supervision exists to discipline the workers such that they regulate every minute of the workday to ensure maximum productivity.

All of us found shade under the trees not wanting to get drenched in the downpour. The *sardar*, however, refused to let the women stand. The gentle coaxing leading to no result,

he then took to threatening the women. He told them that he will complain to the management if they do not resume work at once. While some women refused to resume plucking in that rainfall, others slowly returned to work cursing him. (Daahlia, fieldnotes)

The *sardar* functioned as a disciplinary mechanism ensuring no wastage of time. The multiple tiers of supervision meant that the *sardar* was also under the supervision of their superiors. Marx's theory of alienation illustrates how in the modern industrial settings the workers lose control over their lives by losing control over their work and work-place. This loss of control is further embedded through the supervision regimes. Moreover the specific framing of the hierarchy in gender and ethnic terms also sought to legitimise the disciplining.

Men are often better at disciplining. They have more authority, you know. Though we joke with the *sardar*, he has his authority (Poonam, Kaalka). (Banerjee, 2017: 130)

It will, however, be seen later that the supervisory regimes often did not work as planned and there were instances of co-option and cooperation between ranks. This will be dealt with in the last section.

Constructing workday through defining skill

The workday in the plantations was not just about when to work or how to work but also determined the value of work. The value of labour power like all other commodities is determined by the working time necessary for its production, establishing a direct connection between duration of workday and intensity of work which goes on to construct skill quotient of the job (Marx, 2010). Wage was not delinked from the workday but intrinsically connected. The notion of skill in the plantations is constructed on the balance between the length of the workday and wage paid. The relation was, however, inverse—the shorter duration tasks were considered skilled. Jobs like preparing saplings for the nursery, spraying were considered high intensity work which lasted for shorter durations. These were skilled

job with higher payment mostly performed by the men. Conversely long hours coinciding with monotonous labour intensive work such as plucking were unskilled and low paid. These were mainly performed by women.

This division of labour on the basis of skill and intensity of job clearly coincided with a gender division of labour. The systematic separation of mental and manual labour here is constructed on gendering of the labouring bodies. I have argued elsewhere (Banerjee, 2017) that the physiology of the labouring body is used to normalize the division of labour. Further these discourses serve to not just normalize work practices but also the very ways in which the workdays are structured.

Women are naturally suited to the work of plucking. They have delicate fingers to pick the leaves without damaging the bushes. Also you see the women-folk are patient and can do this sort of job. It is a boring job and long work hours. (Lachmi, Kaalka)

Framing the women as patient (and also naturally dextrous) constructs plucking as labour naturally suited to feminine tendencies, justifying its low wages. Holding women to be persevering normalises the assignment of longer work hours to them which is designed to allow for greater production of tea leaves. Their position in the hierarchy is a product of their long work hours and natural labour. The workday thus not only determined one's access to job status but also was the core to gendered labour practices in the plantations.

Incentives

The months from March to August/September are the full season for plucking of tea leaves. During this period plucking is the primary activity in the plantations. The workers have to pluck a minimum quantity of tea-leaves each workday, which is called task or *thika*. If she fails to meet this requirement she will get half of her daily wage. In those cases where the women plucked more than the *thika* she receives a *doubli* or overtime at the rate of 50 p for

every kilogram upto 5 kilogram and Re. 1 thereafter². 1 kg of the cheapest variety of CTC tea that is produced in these plantations yield a price of Rs. 160 in the market³. Generally 4 kilograms of green unprocessed tea is required to produce 1 kilogram of finished tea⁴. On an average every woman picks between 22-24 kilos as *doubli* which fetches them a payment of Rs. 19.50-21.50 as against the price of their finished products at Rs. 880-960. Even by factoring in of the cost of electricity and factory personnel it is quite evident that the incentive is barely pittance. It forms a useful mechanism in the hands of management, however, to legitimize the extraction of absolute surplus labour from the workforce.

The section was buzzing with movement. The women's hands plucked from the tea bushes with a speed that showed no sign of declining. The chatter was more desolate and it was clear that the minds of the women were on the task at hand. The usual leisurely pace of the breaks was also absent. Most of the women did not go home for their lunches as they would usually do. Rather gobbling up their *roti* they went back to work. The urgency was palpable. (Daahlia, fieldnotes)

There is certain cleverness in this system of devising the overtime along with the *thika*. The task was set at a level which was fulfilled by most of the women on most of the workdays. Incentivizing the additional amount of leaves plucked enabled the management to extract the maximum possible labour from the women without having to set a common minimum upper limit.

Every woman has different capability to pluck so the *thika* allows for this. Also if the plucking for the whole season would just be based on task, they will get lethargic and

²This is information from fieldwork conducted in 2012. The actual amount have increased with the increase in wages at present.

³Business Standard January 12, 2013. http://www.business-standard.com/article/markets/branded-tea-producers-to-raise-prices-by-rs-20-40-a-kg-109051500015_1.html. Accessed on 28.09.2017

⁴ 4 k of green tea= 1 k of finished tea. Price of 1 kilo of green tea= 160/4=Rs. 40. https://www.dethlefsen-balk.de/ENU/10733/The_Tea_Harvest.html Accessed on 28.09.2017. Also revealed through conversations with managers of tea plantations and ITA personnel.

lazy. Here after meeting the task if someone wants to slack it is up to them. It is a worker friendly system, if you ask me. (Manager, Daahlia)

Though the management uses the notion of choice of the workers and fairness to legitimize this system of *thika*, they are the ones who come out the gainer in this transaction. Given the paltry wages and rising expenses the women hardly had the choice to not try to maximize their income. Moreover by incentivizing the upper limit of each individual woman's capacity they can maximize the surplus labour that can be drawn out on a single workday. The idea of incentives also reduces scope of cooperation among the women which might have led to strategies undermining the *doubli* system. This is nowhere as obvious as in the erstwhile recognition given by the company to the best pluckers of the season.

'When we worked there used to be a competition between the pluckers. The highest plucker for every month plus the one for the whole season was given prize by the manager himself. It was great fun. I won many times. Once I won a shawl. It was intense. Everybody wanted to win'. (Nirala, Daahlia).

The competition and the subsequent prize provided a further incentive. The spirit of the competition also meant that the workers were not just trying to maximize their own income but in fact pluck more than the others in the section.

The use of incentives to maximise surplus labour and hence production and profit was only one of the many strategies used to control the workday. The management also employed deception in increasing the workday and by extension surplus value.

Incursions into breaks

The stealing of workers' leisure has been a strategy much employed by capitalists. As per the provisions of the Factories Act, 1948⁵ a rest interval of at least half an hour should be provided, in such a way that no period of work shall exceed 5-1/2 hours. Marx notes in

⁵<http://labour.gov.in/sites/default/files/TheFactoriesAct1948.pdf> Accessed on 10.10.2015

Capital Vol I (2010:224) that the time during which the worker works is the time that the capitalist consumes the labour power that they purchased while the time of leisure is the workers' own time. The aim of maximising surplus labour then of necessity (for the capitalist) must intrude into the leisure time.

To get some respite from the harsh sun we find a shade in between the bushes. The women take off the shirts they wear on top of their saris and lay out the food. There is a general sense of peace as we sit chatting and eating the food. This was not to last for long. After about ten minutes the sound of the weighing van making its way into the section can be heard. Groaning and cursing the women gobble the food and put their shirts back on to go back to weight the leaves plucked so far. Anita remarks angrily, 'These cheapsters will not even allow us our rightful rest period. They can very well bring this in for weighing after the break, but no the idiots will have to come now! It is the same story every day.' (Kaalka, fieldnotes)

The leaves plucked in each segment of the workday were weighed and taken away to the factory. This was supposed to be done *before* the tea-break, lunch-break and end of work and not during the break. The management, however, undertook this tactic of delaying the weighing van to capitalise on the active labour of women during the work-hours and put all the non-productive parts of the task such as weighing during their leisure time. In Daahlia there were two weighing vans supposed to cover fifteen sections in total and in Kaalka one van for seven sections. The vans were also instructed by the management to leave at the very last moment so as to ensure that time of plucking is maximised. This resulted into the women losing at least ten to fifteen minutes of their leisure in performing tasks subsumed as unpaid elements into their paid work.

The utilisation of time in excess of the workday can also be seen in the weighing van coming late for the last weighing thus adding another 5-10 minutes to the individual

workdays. Such routinized periods of chronic and obligatory waiting personify liminality of labour (Purser, 2012:12). The subsuming of non-productive activities into the break periods of workday also constituted in the earlier practices where instead of the weighing vans the women themselves had to take the leaves to the factories. Usha, an eighty four year old, reminisces about this practice during her working life in Daahlia.

‘Now things are so easy here. When we used to work we there was no van which will come to take the leaves from our sections. We had to trudge to the factory ourselves carrying those heavy bags on our heads. Not once but twice on a day. In the factory there was so much chaos, everyone wanted theirs to be weighed first. Of course can you imagine all these women had to get back home and had to soon start cooking and cleaning their children, the quicker they finished the more time they will have to sit quietly before starting the home-‘shift’. But those were difficult times. On days when we had work at the other end of the gardens, it was dark before we could get home.’

This practice enabled the management to accrue profit through multiple means. They were able to relegate the essential but non-productive aspects of the work of plucking outside the active working hours without having to pay any wages for this. Additionally by getting the women to physically drop off their produce to the factory the company also saved on the cost of maintaining a vehicle for this. Based on the study of the reports of Factory Inspectors in English factories, Marx in *Capital Vol I* illustrates how by starting work a few minutes early and finishing it a few minutes late, by lessening the duration of breaks by few minutes, surplus time is amassed by the owner which is not recognised as overtime and remains that unpaid labour against which the capitalist draws profit. Likewise these ‘small thefts’ of capital from the workers’ break times can be designated after Marx (2010: 233) as ‘petty pilfering of minutes’. The worker here is nothing but personified labour

time and it is the mission of the planter to extract from them the largest quantity of surplus labour.

As is evident from Marx's study of many factories, this process of extraction of surplus labour through 'nibbling-cribbling at meal times' (2010:233) is a typical feature of any capitalist enterprise. The uniqueness of the tea plantations, however, remains in its labour arrangement where the workers live and work in the same physical space providing the possibilities of blurring the physical and temporal distinction between work and leisure.

Managing the worker's life: maximising the workday

Marx (2010:223) observes that the working day is curtailed by some minimum restrictions such as the physical bounds of labour power. In order to dispense their labour effectively the worker needs minimum hours of rest, nourishment and the like. But the physical and social bounds are of an elastic nature. The nature of exchange of commodities itself impose no limit to surplus-labour or to the workday. The limits are enacted by laws requiring, as we saw in the above section, various types of manipulation by the capitalist.

Besides the various strategies aimed to reduce duration of break periods during the workday, the non-work aspects of the workers' lives also became a domain for this exercise. The workers lived with their families within the perimeter of the plantations with housing provided by the company along with water and till recently electricity. This enabled the management to extend their area of control over the workers' lives through subtle mechanisms. The practices were framed in such a way that the everyday of the worker would automatically allow for the maximum capitalisation of their labour power.

The blaring of the factory bell at 5:00 a.m. signalled it was already time to wake up and prepare for the day. For those wishing to sleep on beyond this bell there was also a final waking bell at 6:00 (this sounded thrice signalling that the absolute upper limit for sleeping). The next bell is at 7:20 followed by one at 7:30 signalling the start of the

workday. Thereafter the sounding of the bell coincides with the shifts of the plucking section. After 4:30 the next bell sounds at 9:00 pm signalling the end of the day. (Daahlia)

Total institutions as identified by Goffman (1961) are marked by characteristics built on the physical institutions themselves—locked doors, high walls, barbed wire etc. The totalizing effects of an institution can, however, be more subtle and manipulative as the quote above suggests. It is not my contention here that tea plantations function as total institutions (at least not in the present times though this could be true of the colonial period) rather what is interesting is to see how it has adapted (or maybe continued) features of total institution to maximise the efficiency of the workday.

The factory gong sounding at regular intervals ensures a shift of the workers' day from task orientation to time orientation. Carrying out different activities in the day through a perception of task orientation would mean social intercourse and labour are mingled such that there is no great conflict between labouring and passing the time of the day (Thompson, 1967:60). Time-budget as a feature of capitalist enterprises is based on the notion of spending of time rather than passage of time. In the tea plantations this notion was further extended to also shape the everyday of the workers.

I ask Puja how they can tolerate these bells sounding constantly. She says that they are used to them. 'You know how we, women, can while away time chatting not keeping an eye on the time. What will happen is that in this we might get late in finishing the work, needing to stay up late. Waking up will be difficult the next day. This either makes you late or else you will be too tired to work well. The 9 pm bell actually helps us in managing our housework and be energetic next day. What is the point in wasting time in gossip?' (Daahlia)

What can be done! The gongs and work are all that we have in life. But it is a good thing if you ask me. We women are always alert about finishing work, going to sleep etc. but the men, they spend the whole evening sitting at someone's place, drinking, chatting, watching TV. This is like a warning bell—like go and sleep now. When we were small it was not just the bell, the lights (electricity) would also go off. It was very annoying. Those who studied specially complained a lot. Now most people have private lines so lights (electricity) are in our control. (Saili, Kaalka)

The extracts suggest that there does not seem to be any overt resentment by the workers of these gongs signifying times for definite activities. Puja's reflections seem to show a successful normalisation of the very intention of the gongs—the division of the day into plantation work, housework and replenishment of labour power for the next day's work. Thompson (1967:79) notes that from the discovery of time to the present the rhythms of women's unpaid domestic labour are not wholly attuned to the measurement of the clock. While unregulated by the same formal notions of time which defines the workday of the woman, the idea of the bell is to prevent this from eating into the productivity of the workday as is evident in the excerpt by Puja. While not concerned with budgeting time it certainly serves the purpose of rationing time in ways which maximises the productivity of the workday.

It is evident that through control of time outside work the capitalist system of the plantation is able to ensure maximum possibilities of surplus labour. While the time outside the workday cannot be regulated by the management with the precision of minutes and hours the fulfilment of the aim of maximisation of profit necessitated some control over the workers' time without making this evident. The bell to signify different points of the day or even the control of electricity as a particular stark mechanism of achieving the same disciplining, seeks to do exactly that. It ensures that other aspects of the workers'

lives are managed in such a way that they do not intrude into the workday. The argument I am trying to make here is not that the plantations are necessarily total institutions in the same sense as Goffman's. Rather they incorporate some of the elements of total institutions for the single purpose of maximising profit. Throughout Capital Vol I Marx argues how capitalism was not just about production of commodities but simultaneously production of social relations and ideas about such relations. The internalisation of the practices that seek to order the workers' lives to orient it towards maximisation of workday is an expression of such production of ideas.

Negotiating workday

As the length of the workday is itself one of the principal repressive factors imposed upon the workers, there has been much struggle for its reduction. The issue of the working hours is intimately connected with the workers' desire to have some control over the fruits of their labour and their lives and work. The regulation of the workday is a result of long periods of class struggle. The workday in India is fixed at eight hours by the law. The struggle by the labour unions is to increase the value of labour power within those hours i.e. the increase of wages. 2011-12 saw a movement for increase of wages in the tea plantations of Dooars. This was a demand by all the trade unions in the region.

We are asking for an increase of our cash wages. The money we get is pittance and also the other subsistence that the company is supposed to give us by law⁶ is not given... Is there no value for our time? We spend much of our day in the garden plucking leaves and what do we get in return? Rs 66? Is our effort and time only worth that little?

(Madeeha, Daahlia)

⁶The Plantation Labour Act 1951 made it mandatory for the employers to provide certain welfare measures like ration, educational facilities for children and crèches for toddlers, hospital facilities for plantations engaging more than thousand workers, recreational facilities and prescribed drinking water and sanitation in the workers' houses. For more details see <http://labour.gov.in/sites/default/files/ThePlantationLabourAct1951.pdf> Accessed 10.09.2009

Madeeha's argument echoed by many other workers show a clear relation between time, effort and money. Wages are the payment they receive not only for selling their labour but also their time. The low wages devalue their labour which is a product of both their effort and time. The struggle for better wages therefore in essence is a struggle for better value for their time and effort.

Resistance to manipulation by the capitalist for maximisation of profit does not, however always take place in clear conflicts as the wage movement. The workdays in practice are not rules set from above. It is also shaped by manipulation of the workers through strategies designed to minimise the surplus labour the management seeks to extract.

Manipulating surplus labour

Buroway's (1981:131) concept of 'making out' illustrates the strategies engaged in by the workers to minimize their labour without getting into trouble for it. The jointly regulated upper limit on the amount of work to be handed in from the shop floor protected the workers, to some extent, from maximisation of their exploitation (Buroway, 1981).

The workers tried to vary the workday to their advantage. During the season time of *thika* and hence *doubli* the women hardly sat down to take rest. They came early, before the start of their workday in order to get the best lines of bushes commonly known as *mela* and even in the break they hurriedly ate and resumed work. The rationale was simple, the more they plucked the more *doubli* they got. This mode of work, however, changed during the off season where the women used their work time for leisure or pursuit of other activities.

At this time it is just *time pass*. We get money for coming to work (Victoria, Daahlia).

The women utilised the workday to their maximum advantage. The intention was not to critique the management's exploitative policies but to devise ways to work those to ensure their

least inconvenience (Banerjee, 2017: 146). This takes place in different forms like lazing, bringing housework to the plantation or simply slipping away before end of work.

There was almost half an hour to go before the work for the day will be over. But the women in my group are not working now. Binita stands and keeps a watch while we all sit round her between the tea bushes munching on the flowers of the tea-bushes. I say 'So tomorrow is Sunday. A day of relaxation finally after a long week of hard work.' Sita (laughs): 'Relaxation on Sunday? No it is the day we have to work the hardest. All the pending housework, children irritating you for cooking them a nice lunch, washing clothes, grocery there is no end to work on Sunday'. Binita chimes in: 'The work of plucking is easy. We can chat and gossip while doing it. But at home no. Once you wash clothes, then run to clean the house. No chance of relaxation.' Sheila says, 'actually we have to find leisure in work. This sitting together and chatting this is our leisure. We get depressed when Sunday is here.' (Fieldnotes, Daahlia)

'Finding leisure in work' not only allowed them to steal some time for themselves but also in fact resist the surplus labour accrued by the company to some extent. As opposed to the company extracting unpaid labour from the worker, in these instances the company was actually paying them for an hour in which they did not work. The commodification of time implicit in surplus labour is reversed by the women in such cases through practices which obfuscate the strict boundaries between labour and 'time pass'.

The women also used strategies to support each other.

Aparna had a stomach ache. She found a shade and lay there. The other women in her group⁷ were plucking. I go to her and ask her why she is not going home. She said she does not want to waste a leave. Rather she can lay here and rest. 'At home there will be

⁷The women working in each section of the plantation worked in small work-groups of 4-5 women. For more details see S. Banerjee (2017). *Activism and Agency in India: Nurturing Resistance in the Tea Plantations*. Oxon: Routledge Edinburgh South Asia series.

something or other to do'. Confused I ask her how will she manage during the weighing as she has not plucked any leaves. She smiles and points to her group mates, 'They are plucking the leaves and if we weigh together it will be fine.' 'So they will pluck your share too?' I ask. She says, 'Not really. At this time leaves are less and there is no *thika*, so if all of them pluck about 5 kgs extra it will be fine. I can always say I could not pluck too much as I was not feeling well. The *sardar* will understand.' (fieldnotes, Kaalka)

The co-operation between the women ensures that Aparna does not lose a day's wage. Interestingly much like the women in the above extract Aparna also cites a preference for resting in the workspace rather than going home where housework awaits. Apart from blurring the boundaries between workday and leisure there is an implicit ambiguity of the workplace. The strategies collectively taken by the women allow them to find relaxation in the place of work, even if for a short while. The home in contrast was perceived during these moments as the site of unpaid work.

As is evident in Aparna's words, for this system to work the understanding of the *sardar* is important. The women need to co-opt the *sardars* into their system. Co-option of the *sardars* takes place through various forms of bargaining, promising the *sardar* to work hard and make up the next day, appeal to him and at times by simply not listening to him. The relation of the women with the *sardars* was a mix of resistance and accommodation and sometimes even collaboration.

The *sardar* seeing the women resting repeatedly asks them to get back to work. They do not pay any heed to him. Instead of listening to him the women ask him not to stand there. They tell him that if the *sahib* comes and sees him there, he will say that in spite of you being present the women are sitting and not working. He will reprimand the *sardar* even more. It is better for him to go and stand a little further off warning them when he sees the

sahib coming. Much to my surprise the *sardar*, grumbling, goes off to do exactly that (Kaalka, field-notes). (Banerjee, 146-47)

While the *sardar* had the option of disciplining the women by reporting them to his superiors but that will also imply antagonising the women with whom he had to work everyday. It was possible that he realised that the costs of doing this will be greater than the benefits. Rather cooperation with them gave him a position to bargain whereby he can call upon favours later i.e. if they needed to stay back for extra time to pluck leaves during the season. The outcome of this instance was very different from a similar occasion cited above. The primary reason for that was while the earlier extract was from the peak seasonal period, this was during the off season.

Apart from slacking sometimes the women brought in some housework to the garden so that they could finish that off and access some leisure time.

Nalini took out a whole bag of the flowers of the tea-bushes and started separating out the bitter parts. She explained to me that this will be used the next day for cooking breakfast for the family. By doing this labour intensive part of the work now she can wake up a little late and just fry these for tiffin. 'In this cold I hate getting up early in the morning to do these and then wash them with cold water. I can do all that tonight and just fry them for tomorrow. Even if I save fifteen minutes, that's fifteen extra minutes of sleep.' (Kaalka, fieldnotes)

Nalini here did not just manipulate the boundaries between paid work and unpaid housework but also between the durations allotted to these in their days. This manipulation allowed some to access leisure during work, for others it allowed them to finish parts of their housework such that they were able to get more rest or watch television in the evening. In order to get the maximum productivity the capitalist looks to limit the pursuit of leisure activities of the workers. The strategies the worker used in such cases resisted and often reversed, to some extent, this agenda of capitalism.

While most women used slacking as a means of access to leisure, some even used it to pursue other gainful activities.

Silvina used to sell garlands made of coloured papers for additional income. On many of the days during the off-season she would bring these papers and work on making the flowers sitting in the plantation. She explained to me in the morning half of the workday I pluck quite a bit extra but keep that aside in a smaller bag. In the second half I don't work on plucking but just finish this work. In these winter months there are lots of Christian weddings and I don't want to turn away orders. After all how can you survive in the paltry wages that plucking fetches us?' (Daahlia)

Silvina used the workday to buttress her income. Not only did she get paid for time not spent on the job but in fact used that time to engage in other money-making activities. Similarly Archana recounted how she used to study while at work.

I passed my class ten with a lot of difficulty. My father had left us when my sister was just a baby. My mother used to be ill a lot and I took over much of the housework. There was just no time to study at home. I had just started working in the plantation at that time. My mother's friends advised me to bring my books to work. They said, 'you study sitting here and we will pluck extra for you' Many days passed like this I used to pluck in the morning and then read. The *sardars* were also very kind. No one told on me. (Kaalka, fieldnotes)

The stories and experiences of the women show that slacking, using the time for other work all of this happened with an implicit cooperation between the workers and their immediate supervisors. It worked as a system whereby one or more women in each group kept guard to ensure that the *chaprasi* or *munshi* did not catch them off guard. While these strategies and negotiations enabled the women to shape the workday to their convenience to some extent, it must be noted in comparison to what the company managed to extract from them in terms of surplus value these were minuscule acts of agency.

Negotiating work negotiating identity

Marx in his chapter on Working Day talks about how women and children were often used by the capitalists as pliant and cheap labour. The ways in which the working day operated for them can be understood slightly differently from that of adult male workers (Marx, 2010: 250-51). The idea of the workday, however, has primarily been looked through the lens of class. Looking at the workday as it operates in the tea plantations show that the framing of the workday can be much more complicated. The multiple intersections of gender, caste, religion often provides entry points through which the workday is framed and can be negotiated.

Jahanara says “During Eid(s) there is no holiday in the plantation. But for us, the Muslim workers there are special leaves. At that time we get three half days and two days leave. No wage is deducted for this.” (Kaalka)

The number of Muslim workers was negligible among the total workforce in Kaalka. Therefore they were able to negotiate leave days based on their minority status. The assistant manager of Kaalka explained to me when I ask him about this practice.

‘There are very few Muslim workers so it does not make sense to make their festivals company holidays. At the same time you know how denying them their holidays will ignite a fire. We have to make sure that they do not feel persecuted because they are the minority in the plantations.’

My conversations with the Muslim workers suggested that they were also aware of the bargaining potential in their minority status and the sense that the company will not want to project itself as antagonistic to its minority workers. This allowed the workers to often negotiate extra days of leave during the festival season or leave early from work without being penalised for it.

Similar variations were also seen in Daahlia. These tweaking of the workdays were made possible through negotiations which were based on the recognition of the worker's identities as intersections of religion, ethnicity, gender along with class. Unlike in the strategies of deception in the section above, this was not about establishing unity but playing out difference.

Bhai dooj is an important festival of us Nepalis. While it is holiday for all we get another extra day off after *Bhai Dooj*. This is not really a part of the rules but we negotiated with the management. We told him if you do not give us a leave it will be your loss, we will not come anyway. He had to relent finally. Even the Adivasi people do the same for *Holi*. While we get two days of holiday during that time, they get an extra day off most years. (Madeeha, Daahlia)

As Madeeha reveals these holidays were not a part of the formal company leaves that the workers were entitled to. Rather these were more of conventions established through negotiations. It might be possible that in these cases that the managers realise that a major workforce would anyway be absent on that day and therefore gains from refusing to accede to their demands might be futile. These special leaves enabled the manager to demonstrate benevolence, the price of which he could claim later.

No the holidays during Holi are not really official leaves but we allow them the extra day. After drinking the whole night who will come to work? Or even if they do what work they will do will cause us more damage. Actually this practice works really well. It is not just about treating the workers as slaves. The British are no longer here. Giving in to their smaller demands at times helps you win their loyalty which is reflected in the quality of their work. (Manager, Daahlia)

The management seemed to make a simple cost benefit analysis in granting these requests. The 'loyalty' that he talked about was not in terms of affect but could be concretely understood in terms of 'quality of work'.

We have already seen how the workday is used for gendering labour practices. But women workers also negotiated workday through other means. The lactating mothers and the pregnant women were given lighter work and the timings of their workday were shorter than the other workers. The break times for the lactating mothers coincided with feeding times of their babies. There was thus certain fluidity about breaks. These negotiations on the registers of identities showed that the workday can become a conduit through which such multiplicities can be accommodated. The workday was thus not monolithic or singular but often changing and multiple.

Conclusion

The workday is central to the ways in which labour is constructed in the tea plantations. Through subtle manipulations of both work and non-work aspect of the workers' lives, the company seeks to extract maximum gain from the labour. But the control over workday is constantly being negotiated and challenged by the workers themselves. The workdays in practice are not rules set from above, passively obeyed by the workers but rather a complex web of negotiation and strategizing by both sides. The workday is, however, is not constant. The tracing of inter-generational experiences illustrate how the precise ways in which the workday played out has varied through time and space. The legislations around workday denote a boundary established by law between the sphere of work and leisure. But such clear-cut divisions do not exist in reality. The negotiations carried out on multiple registers show that a workday is central to how work practices are shaped, wages are calculated and in fact to the very notion of work itself.

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