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417

GLOBALISATION LIVED LOCALLY: NEW FORMS OF CONTROL, CONFLICT AND RESPONSE AMONG LABOUR IN KERALA, EXAMINED THROUGH A LABOUR GEOGRAPHY LENS

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ABSTRACT

With the support of the labour geography framework, this study tries to analyse how the economic geography of capitalism is shaped by the spatial practices of labour. We look into a model, not upon a global scale but at a very local scale of organisation and show how organising locally can, in fact, be an effective strategy during confrontation with social actors organised at the global and other extra-local scales. The study raises the need for going against the grain by questioning global stereotypes with regard to expected economic responses to globalisation. The position I seek to hold is that labour has been actively involved in the very process of globalisation itself and the expansion of capital in general. In this paper I take up this particular thread of argument and empirically show how it is important and relevant in the globalisation literature. I deal specifically with one region – Kerala – and particularly the processes in its labour markets, taking the case of apparel workers in two units in an export promoting industrial park in Kerala.

Keywords: Globalisation, Kerala, Labour Geography, Local-Global Tensions, Space-Place Conflicts.

JEL Classification: J01, J51, J52, J81

Introduction

Though a world economy has existed since at least the sixteenth century (Wallerstein, 1979), in recent years there has been a rapid acceleration in processes of globalisation with increasing globally integrated production chains, international trade, investment and capital flows, leading to the fading of boundaries, to change in industrial organisation and even in forms of competition (Storper, 1997). It is claimed that 'Fordism' or mass production is dead and that we are in the era of small establishments – what is termed a Post-Fordist[1] (Amin, 1994) production process and flexible specialisation. The structure of world trade is changing and firms have become trans-national and have set up linked production across numerous countries. The notion of production chains[2] has thus become popular. Even international trade in commodities, which used to be of the arm's length variety, is now often carried out in contractual transactions, integrated to global value chains (Sayeed and Balakrishnan, 2005).

In the stable, mass production markets that dominated the economy prior to the 1970s, firms competed primarily by improving their productivity, decreasing their costs or trying to expand their market

1 This involves splitting production process into simple, routine tasks that could be either carried out by unskilled workers or through the use of specialised machinery.

2 In which a string of firms are linked in producing a complex product.

share within existing markets (Benner, 2002). With the development of an information economy, the ability of firms to effectively adapt to changing market conditions, identifying and capitalising on new opportunities, and successfully responding to new challenges has gained importance for not just competitive advantage but economic survival.

Globalisation has increased the perceived significance of all forms of costs of production because the growing integration of economies means that production and capital can shift more easily to where production and distribution costs are lower (Standing, 1989; Bagchi et al., 2005). In this context low labour cost, along with flexibility in labour use, has become a key source of competitive advantage for firms. As external competition intensifies, the domestic industry has come under great pressure to restructure itself, to become more competitive and to adopt flexible policies with regard to production and labour. With a view to increasing global competitiveness, investors are moving more towards countries that either have low labour costs, or are shifting to informal employment arrangements.

These changes bring an entirely different upshot on the workers across world. The greater international mobility of capital relative to labour puts workers from a given location at an immediate disadvantage, both in terms of bargaining power with owners of capital (whose threat to move gains greater credibility) and with respect to the State (Milberg 2004). Thus the removal of domestic entry barriers and movement of capital to areas of cheap labour have caused intensification of domestic competition in many developing countries[3]. Competition between poor countries is based on whose labour is cheaper. This has been accentuated with potential investors citing the *lack* of flexibility in hiring and laying-off workers as a concern, while targeting a developing country in which to invest (Neethi, 2008)

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3 Those with surplus labour supply, with labour being a major factor of production.

When competition becomes the motive force, one way of responding to price competition among suppliers is to reduce wages and environmental standards in a 'race to the bottom'. This in turn requires the ambit of labour organisation to extend beyond the conventional factory or industry union to include producers in the non-factory and informal sector. Thus, flexibility in labour use has become one of the key sources of competitive advantage for firms in the age of globalisation. A 'flexible labour market' implies the relaxation of rigid rules and regulations governing employment and job condition of the labour. Thus in the changing labour market structure, labour market flexibility has assumed a lot of significance, though it has become equally controversial.

Another aspect is labour as an agency of social progress. Optimism in this ability of labour has been replaced by pessimism that sees little prospect of workers acting on their own behalf. Numerous authors describe at least some degree of disempowerment, and notice falling union densities and levels of industrial action, weakening links between unions and democratic parties and diminishing influence on government policies (Gray, 1998; Strange, 1998; and Ross, 2000). Hirst and Thomson (1999) describe how, according to mainstream theories, both national governments and organised labour are powerless when faced with international marketisation, neoliberal deregulation and global economic integration.

None of these studies seem to question or problematise the claims of a causal link between global economic change and negative outcome for labour. None of them attempt to challenge the exclusion of workers as effective social actors.

Accounts of global restructuring and their negative implications for workers might then be seen primarily as political and ideological phenomena, naturalising capitalism, making it necessary and inevitable, or legitimising change and new forms of globalisation (Kelly, 1997;

Leyshon, 1997). This is further echoed in Castells (2000), who says that "while capital is networked, labour remains 'switched off'". It closes its collective identity, becomes increasingly individualised in its capacities, in its working conditions and in its interests and projects. But RoyChowdhury (2008) gives a different picture of the same issue by stating that the decline of the political significance of industrial conflicts is not quite the result of structural changes in management-labour relations (as commonly thought) in these times of globalisation. It is more a consequence of the lack of an appropriate agency and politics among the working classes, despite their increasing incompatibilities with globalising capitalism.

These studies show that writings on globalisation, with the exception of studies of international labour migration, usually portray the emergence of the global economy as capital's creation, the logical outcome of the explanatory nature of capital, and the new economic and political reality to which labour must respond (Herod, 2001). Our study argues that such a view is problematic for two interconnected reasons. Firstly, by doing so the literature shows the tendency to portray workers as structurally defenceless in the face of hypermobile, rapidly restructuring and globally organised capital, in a way they seem to be the bearers of global economic restructuring, not as active participants in the process. Secondly, and more relevant for our study, when talking about globalisation the literature often fails to portray that there are multiple varieties of this process; it doesn't come in a single flavour.

Thus, recognising labour's role in processes of globalisation and opening up the black box of 'the global economy' allows us to understand that there are more and different strands to the process of globalisation (Jonas A, 1996) than those we are currently witnessing.

We now come to the conception of workers' position in the capitalist landscape. It is interesting to note that labour's role in making the economic geography of capitalism has been overlooked by both

traditional neoclassical economic geographers and, ironically, by many Marxists also. Both these approaches conceived of workers primarily from the view point of how capital (in the form of transnational corporations, firms, etc.), and to a lesser degree the State, makes investment decisions based on differences between workers located in particular places (Herod, 1997). Much of the radical political economy literature, claiming a different politics from neoliberalism, has espoused a parallel theoretical position towards globalisation, concerning the power of global capital to restructure places frequently being taken as given. In turn, a sense of despondency and defeatism has often pervaded much of the analyses of the position of workers in the global economy. Many commentators appear to have accepted that it is relatively pointless for local social actors to struggle against what are portrayed as the omnipotent and inevitable forces of global capitalism[4]. The only logical response, so it is claimed, is that workers and community activists must develop global campaigns to match the global reach of the transnational corporations and global capital more generally (Herod, 2003).

At this juncture, it may be conceptually and politically elusive to propose that if workers can't develop transnational connections, they had might as well relinquish the struggle at any other scale, particularly the local. This paper argues that despite all the similarities in the operation of globalised capital over different regions of the underdeveloped world, local balances between capital and labour may not be derived from generalisations easily and local responses might not often all be interpreted as outliers or deviations.

In essence, what we seek to do in this study is to argue for a much more active conceptualisation of workers as engaged in the uneven

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4 It is argued by many that the contemporary political, economic, cultural and social process such as globalisation together with myriad others like them are rescaling the people 's everyday lives across the planet in complex and contradictory ways (Herod,2003). The two extremes of the scaled lives are indicated by the geographical binary - global and local.

development of capitalism. Though workers' activities are sometimes seen as modifying forces, the older approach essentially places capital at centre-stage both empirically and theoretically as the focus of research whilst banishing workers to the fringes of the discipline (Collins, 2003). It is here that the labour geography framework comes of relevance. With the support of this broader framework of 'labour geography', this study tries to analyse how the economic geography of capitalism is shaped by greater analysis of the social and spatial practices of workers. It is necessary here to make a distinction between the 'geography of labour' and 'labour geography'. Following Herod (2001), while the 'geography of labour' incorporates labour as rather peripheral to explanations of the geography of capitalism, 'labour geography' focuses principally on the activities of working class people and an attempt to understand the geography of capitalism from their perspective.

Though the binary of global = space and local = place has been challenged (Massey 2004), in their attempt to reveal the tension between global and local (between space and place) geographers and other social scientists have on occasion argued that capitalist firms relate to their sites of operation through a calculus of profitability, seeing them as one-dimensional locations for realising certain purposes. Cumbers et al. (2008) has suggested that corporations relate to locality as space, which workers develop by filling up with the institutions of daily life.

Hence the analytical task ahead is to examine how the tensions between the global and local are played out differentially across space and place. Following Baynon and Hudson (1993), we have conceptualised 'space' as the domain across which capital is constantly searching in pursuit of greater profits, while 'place' refers to the meaningful situation established by labour. Peck (1996) provokes even further that neoliberal policies, by privileging the agendas of capitalist firms, represent an attempt to reduce place to space.

With this in mind, we look into a model, not upon a global scale of organising workers but by a very local scale of organisation. We deal specifically with one region – Kerala – and one facet of its economy: processes in its labour markets. Through a comparative framework, we explore two different, simultaneously complementary, stages of Kerala's labour market.

First, we contrast the degree to which rural and urban wage earning classes in Kerala have been politically and economically incorporated, to the disorganised and largely excluded condition of the depressed classes in the rest of India. Such divergent outcomes within the same nation-state and its democratic institutions and within the same national economy and its largely underdeveloped capitalist structure, point to the significance of *local histories* of state-society engagements. Kerala's departure from the national pattern has resulted from specific patterns of class formation and the institutional linkages that emerged from repeated cycles of class-based contestation and state intervention (Heller, 1999).

Second, we discuss the so called *realisation* phase. As much as Kerala bears witness to the developmental impact of an organised working class, it also underscores the limitations of labour militancy and redistributive strategies of developmnt in a dependent sub-national capitalist economy. It was then realised, both by the government and the people, that redistributive strategies had reached their limits and, by the early 1980s, class struggle and redistributive demands were no longer at the centre of Kerala's politics (Heller, 1999). Solutions to Kerala's crises often focused on neoliberal economic development and an *opening up* of the economy in a vein akin to the labour-intensive growth advocated in the Washington consensus (Louise Waite, 2001). It is this depiction of disavowal of labour politics in Kerala that sets the stage for this study.

Reiterating a conceptual difference mentioned earlier, studies on the *geography of labour* (such as Peet, 1983) tend to be more descriptive

of labour, focus upon patterns of labour across the landscape, and lend themselves more easily to quantitative analysis. Those focusing upon *labour geography* (Herod, 1997) tend towards a more active incorporation of labour, look for causality rather than pattern in explanation, more frequently use case studies of particular situations, and use qualitative type research methodologies.

Keeping this in mind, this paper addresses the case of apparel workers in two units in an export promoting industrial park in Kerala, and examines how local labour activists- garment workers of this Park organise around a very local set of concerns and form their own union to confront successfully the 'global forces' of the contemporary global economy.

Though in this study we look at labour response only at a broader level by examining local and global conflicts, we are aware that certain parameters within the local (including family and community, among others) also control labour and response. There are also other ambivalent agencies like local government, religious bodies, etc., which mobilise capital and labour for their own distinct ends. Sometimes, the activities of these agencies indirectly restrict capital's attempts to reduce place to space (an instance of this will be featured later). But despite recognising these agencies and highlighting their roles, and considering that their inclusion would do much greater justice to the labour geography framework, elaboration on them would fall outside the boundary of this study, and is hence not attempted in this paper.

Also, the goal here is not generalisation from one case to the population, but to expand and analyse a theory (Yin, 2003) or framework – labour geography. The case does not represent a 'sample' to be generalised across industrial parks in Kerala, but rather an application of labour geography to understand the new forms of control, conflict, and response among labour in Kerala.

The study first draws insights from Burawoy's 'factory regime', and on glancing at Kerala's local labour market, introduces the case. We then move on to details on data collection, method of empirical study and general working conditions within the firms, and eventually bring in interesting revelations during study. Following this, it looks at the labour response and further striking features and trends, before summing up the study.

Burawoy's (1985) framework on factory regimes[5] divides capitalist factory regimes into two generic types: the despotic (based on coercive work), and the hegemonic (based on consenting work). With the mobility of global capital from advanced countries, Burawoy postulates that despotic factory regimes could be imposed in peripheral states, particularly in export processing zones, where there is interplay between world capital and cheap labour. Further, globalisation has made Burawoy's postulate more prevalent in 'peripheral' manufacturing. However, in global production, both states and firms have developed new strategies and interventions which are constructing more complex work organisation and labour control than Burawoy imagined. While Burawoy implied, with the concept of despotic factory regimes, that the interplay was between global capital and local/cheap labour; in the case featured in this paper, it is the *local capital* – behind the cheap labour catering to the needs of the global market – that imposes a control over local labour. Hence, when we deal with the despotic nature of the capital, the distinction between local and global is rather puzzling since local capital makes use of the space created by the free mobility of global capital, imposing more or less similar control strategies over local cheap labour.

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5 "Factory regime," according to Burawoy, refers to "the overall political form of production, including both the political effects of the labour process and the political apparatuses of production."

Though not the focus of study, it is imperative that we digress from the issue at hand for a moment to look briefly at local labour markets in Kerala, and women. With social development overtaking economic growth, Kerala happens to be a paradox with, on the one hand social development in the state being universally acclaimed as a 'model' for poor states, and, on the other hand, acute unemployment and low labour force participation (Gulati, 1975; Mathew 1985; Devi, 1996 and 2002). Female labour force participation rates in Kerala have been among the lowest in India despite high education among women (Eapen, 1992), with currently a marked increase in casualisation of the female labour force. Women in general occupy low-paid/low-status jobs, and as a result gender disparity in earnings remains quite significant (Eapen, 1994 and 2001; Mitra and Singh, 2006 and 2007). This bias results greatly from their limited mobility (Eapen, 1994; Mathew 1985; Kumar, 1994), i.e., the decision and extent of participation is influenced greatly by family and society. Even the uneducated have strong job preferences based on proximity to home, prestige, class consciousness, social status and the resulting inter-linkages in the social hierarchy (Kumar, 1994; Devi, 2002).

In India women's activities in trade unions (or the lack of it) have not received much attention within mainstream historical or social science (Lindberg, 2001). When mentioned at all, the focus seems to be on their low level of trade union activity, allegedly due to apathy, a lack of interest (Menon, 1992), or a general submissiveness explained in terms of 'Oriental docility' (Standing, 1989; and Chakravarty, 2007). Though Chakravarty does not fully support the docility argument, she brings forward the idea that mainstream trade unions prioritise the interests of permanent male workers, the fallout of which is the submissive behaviour of women workers in export-manufacturing, and hence their low trade-union activity. In Kerala labour movements too, we can see women workers played a secondary role compared to their male counterparts, though exceptions exist. Labouring women have failed to be identified as 'true' workers and 'true' radical members of the labour

movement, not only by society at large but by themselves as well (Lindberg, 2001). In Lindberg's own words, "their experiences as workers and central family breadwinners did not result in 'working-class' becoming their dominant identity. They have developed a politicised class identity, but a peripheral one. They have experienced the status of a 'temporary guest' in the labour movement, the steady victim of labour law violations and ultimately unemployment".

So, in sum, we see that, firstly, the phenomenon of local capital using the space created by freely mobile global capital and imposing control over local labour extends earlier research such as that of Burawoy and calls for a study exploring ground-level evidence of this. Secondly, female work-participation, even given that in the present it is tinted with casualisation and social factors (in the background of the already little research on the gender angle in the workers' rights agitations), necessitates such a ground-level study in the Kerala context more than ever.

Additionally, this is an interesting case since we see an informal labour structure and work exhibiting an informal nature, existing within an organised workspace backed by the State. With these motivations, we begin our case study on the two units within this Park.

Introducing the Case

In order to enhance export potential, many state governments in India established export promotion industrial parks. Of specific interest to this study is one such prominent industrial park in Kerala, from which we take, as mentioned earlier, the case of apparel workers in two units within the Park.

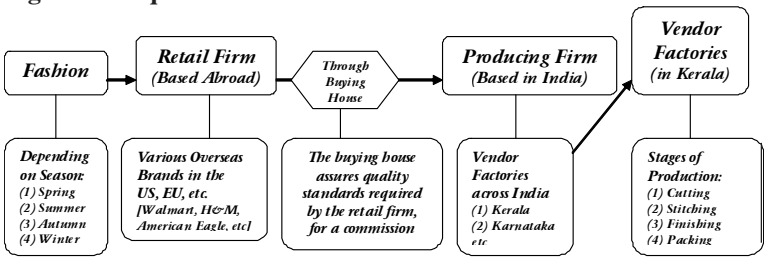
In the apparel industry, changes in fashion are the first in the sequence of design and production. The exporting apparel firms work according to the changes in the fashion, which change every season – spring, summer, autumn, and winter. The apparel firms get hardly three

months to make the goods, stock them and sell them off, since fashions change every three months as the seasons change. Bigger apparel firms source a substantial portion of their output through 'contract manufacturing', whereby they contract production to local small producers. Designs and other requirements are supplied to producers in low-wage regions, assuring quality control to wholesalers and retailers in the metropolitan region (Vijayabaskar, 2002).

Of the two firms under study, one was originally owned by a proprietor who belonged to the same area and who was locally known, while the other was owned by a business group owning businesses all over India. But over the recent past, both were taken over by a large group that owned businesses even across national borders. These two firms were vendor factories for this group, based in Mumbai, which caters only to buyers in the export market.

The *Buyer* (the retail firm) and the *Vendor* (who acquires the order) are the major players in the apparel production chain under study. Buyers have their own compliances and give different calibres – Green, Yellow and Red – to their vendors. Yellow (80% quality satisfaction) is the basic minimum standard which an apparel vendor firm has to maintain to sustain the order from the buyer. The head office of the vendor gets all the details from the buyer regarding the apparel product; including details on style, fabric, measurement and package. The vendors hand over this information to their factories, engaged in the actual manufacturing of the apparel products. The buyers, depending on their size, may or may not have their own *Buying Houses* (mediators between the buyer and the vendor, whose main function is to look into matters like quality assurance on behalf of the buyer). Every six months there is a renewal of the order, and if the vendor cannot maintain with the quality standards and compliances of the buyer, they lose the contract with the buyer. The sequence of production under study is given in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Sequence of Production



Source: from fieldwork

The firms under study mainly deal with buyers like Wal-Mart, besides H&M, Van Heusen, American Eagle, Arrow, etc. Products mainly include shirts, ladies tops and bottoms. The raw materials for the production, mainly the fabric, thread, button etc are sourced largely from India, or in some instances imported from abroad according to the requirement of the buyer. Almost the entire production is for export to the United States, Europe and the Middle East. Sometimes though, the rejected items are usually sold in the local domestic markets after their brand names have been removed.

To catch the tide of the global apparel industry's interest in developing economies as potential hubs for good quality low wage manufacturing, the State agency involved with the Park uninhibitedly advertised itself, projecting a picture of its employees as 'highly skilled', 'cheap', 'with the shortest learning curve', 'disciplined', and its industrial relations as 'cordial'. This illustration of its workforce and labour relations would be rather disagreeable to the point of view of the average worker in these units. Our study elaborates on the worm's eye view within the two units under study where this disagreement was voiced out.

Data Collection Approach

This study is based on fieldwork done in broadly two phases: June-July and October-December 2008. One visit was also made in April 2009. While the broader visits were the interviews of workers, the last one visit to the field was to interview the management. Information presented in this

paper was collected mainly through recorded interviews of the respondents who were interviewed mostly individually. While interviewing the workers, respondents were sometimes grouped, assuming that responding in a group gave each one encouragement to answer more elaborately.

Since entry into the Park is restricted, interviews were conducted outside the Park and outside working hours. In addition to three focus group discussions, I visited major 'labour pockets' situated around a major urban area, which had been identified during course of the interviews. I was a passive participant in their union membership campaigns, as well as on one public occasion informing them of the academic and historical relevance of their campaign. These opportunities helped me to build further contacts and establish enough rapport to conduct even a few telephone interviews as well as interviews of their family and close community members. This was additionally helpful since access to the workers is easiest through telephone given their long hours of work during the week; also, interviews with family and close community helped strengthen conceptual ideas.

The first few sets of interviews were conducted only of worker groups in an informal setting. Later, I interviewed them in their residences to also witness living conditions and circumstances. The final set of interviews was conducted in their family and community areas to seek more information on their socio-economic background, as well as to facilitate interviews of family and kin. In this manner, the interview stages unfolded the workers' conditions from their workplace, to their residence, and finally to their socio-economic background.

Questions were mainly open ended, not relying on structured questionnaires, to bring forth a more relaxed response from respondents (Schmitz, 1982)[6], which can even provide useful information that structured questions might have overlooked.

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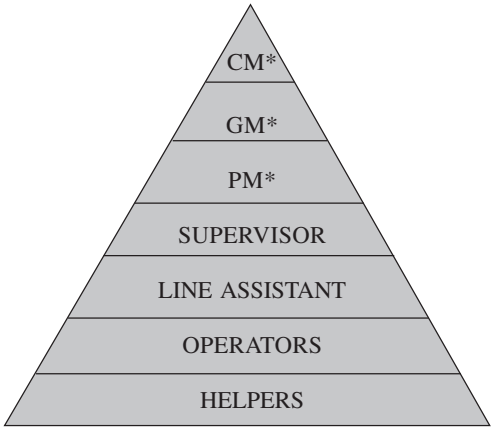
6 Schmitz, H. (1982) 'Growth Constraints on Small-Scale Manufacturing in Developing Countries: A Critical Review', World Development, 10(6): 429–450

Working Conditions and Labour Controls in the Firms

A major chunk of the workers are recruited primarily from surrounding peripheral semi-urban and rural areas, their families being mainly engaged in fishing and coir-yarn making. Some also hail from nearby districts. To secure an adequate labour supply at low pay levels these firms exploit workers' labour market dependence by recruiting mainly young, less educated and poor women (McKay 2004), who in turn respond positively to the employment offers given the desire for some to be financially non-dependent on their families or support their kin.[7]

The apparel units under study consist of three major sections; cutting, stitching and finishing. Each section has its own strict hierarchical employment structure. Figure 2 shows the hierarchical order under the stitching unit.

Figure 2. Hierarchical employment structure under the stitching unit



* CM - Chief Manager, GM - General Manager, PM - Production Manager
Source: from fieldwork

7 It is rather interesting to note that during the recruitment, besides other identification, the workers are required to bring a group photograph of themselves with their *family* as well

While the cutting and finishing units are further segregated into different sections, the stitching unit put the workers into different batches of around 50 workers. Each batch has a supervisor and line assistants. In these firms, more than 80% of the workers are shop-floor workers consisting of operators and helpers, organised along the assembly line. In this paper, we focus on this section of workers. The gender division of the work is also interesting, in that the floor workers are mainly women while the upper half of this hierarchy is fully under male staff. These two units in total consist of around 4000 female floor workers ranging from 18 to 40 in age.

Workers normally work six, and often seven, days a week. Working hours start at 8.30 am and end at 5.15 pm, with a fifteen minute break in the morning at 10am and a thirty minute break in the afternoon beginning 12:30 pm. Even a five minute delay will require workers to get special permission to enter into the workspace. A delay exceeding five minutes will result in a fifteen minute wage cut. Once inside the Park gate, exit even during free time is not permitted, except with special permission, which is a long procedure convincing the Batch Supervisor, the Production Manager, and the General Manager, whose permission note has to be produced at the gate. While the supervisory staff is given a tea break before 5:15pm, floor workers are made to work continuously till the end of the day. A, an operator, says:

> "…once we enter into the [Park] compound we are like slaves, with no control over ourselves from 8.30 am to 5.15 pm. It is just like a jail. Every morning we come into this jail, and once we enter, we have no idea what is going on outside…"

Production is based on the piecework but wages are not. There are line assistants to check the hourly efficiency of each worker in a batch, as well as the efficiency of each batch too, marked in the scoreboard. Total production of that unit per day is calculated. Therefore, each worker

in a batch is required to be consistent throughout the day with the efficiency she began with in the morning. Yet, their wages are not based on efficiency, and are fixed wages offered at the time of recruitment. B and C, two other operators, say, respectively:

> "…sometimes in the morning we will be able to give a good efficiency, but later we are tired and may not be able to meet the initial target, for which we face severe rebuke. So, we even work during the morning [fifteen minute] intervals to meet our target…and for fifteen minutes during our thirty minute lunch break. Yet, we prefer [working even through break time] than being reprimanded…"

> "…we are rebuked whenever we can't meet the target…but at the same time if we exceed our target, not even a good word! Often they forget we are human beings, and they treat us only as machines…"

For the operators, remuneration varies from Rs. 2100 to Rs. 2175 per month, with an attendance bonus of Rs. 100. Hence, an operator working the entire month without taking any leave is entitled to get a maximum of Rs. 2275. But no one reported to have received more than Rs. 2000 per month, from which Rs. 250 is deducted every month for company-arranged transport, and additionally for gratuity, ESI[8](Employees' State Insurance), and PF[9] (Provident Fund). As a result,

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8 Employees' State Insurance (ESI): The promulgation of Employees' State Insurance Act, 1948 envisaged an integrated need based social insurance scheme that would protect the interest of workers in contingencies such as sickness, maternity, temporary or permanent physical disablement, death due to employment injury resulting in loss of wages or earning capacity. The Act also guarantees reasonably good medical care to workers and their immediate dependants (http://esic.nic.in/act.htm accessed on 3rd August).

9 Provident Fund (PF) : It is a compulsory contributory pension and insurance scheme.

the maximum net amount they earn is less than Rs. 1700 (or, in other words, merely Rs. 60 per day). Even after five full years of experience, some workers receive only Rs. 2645 per month. Also, the first six months are considered 'training period'. But while actual training lasts only for a month, remuneration is credited only five months later, despite being in the batch and contributing to production for these five months after training. D, another operator, says:

> "…even if we don't take any leave we are supposed to receive Rs. 1700 per month, but we never get that amount. Our salaries are somehow reduced on the pretext of being fifteen minutes late or having an extended lunch break on some arbitrary day. If we try to argue, we are rebuked even more…"

Workers are paid on the 7th of every month, though there are many instances of delay. Experiences on the salary day are also intimidating. According to E,

> "…they pay us on the 7th of every month, on which day they make us work more, alleging that workers are prompt in receiving money but are lax in working, completely disregarding the fact that we are paid for our work effort and drudgery…"

During working hours workers are asked to wear cap and mask. Discipline in the shop floor is often harsh; once the work starts it is forbidden to talk or even look at each other. Closed-circuit cameras observe their every movement. They are sometimes forced to give explanations for even using the bathroom too long, which in some occasions is rather humiliating. Not more than ten minutes are allowed for rest in case of a headache or fatigue, and helpers and ironing staff are made to stand all day. F, a helper, says:

> "…the ironing job is so horrible that we can't sit even for five minutes. Because of the heat, girls sometimes faint, and at the end of the day our feet are swollen…"

Getting a day's leave is also no easy task. Workers have to submit the leave application early enough to get permission. Even after returning from an emergency, they are obliged to explain to the Production Manager and sometimes even the General Manager, only after which they are allowed to get back to work. Working overtime is not uncommon during urgent production tasks.

The management and control of workers' time and space beyond the shop floor is helpful in maintaining flexible production and labour power (Xue, 2008), which is quite evident in the case of those who are staying in the hostel. The living condition in the hostel (provided and managed by the Park) was reported to be below average, and residents have to get special permission from the company whenever they want to go out or take leave. Permission to leave the hostels is required even during emergencies. Departure from the hostel without permission results in the residents even being evicted from the hostel. Many instances were shared:

> "…a girl was informed that her uncle had passed away, but the warden didn't give her permission to go and she had to go to the company for permission. By the time she got permission it was already too late. Moreover she was given only two days leave…"

> "…another girl's own father passed away and her brother came to the company to take her home, but he was not allowed to enter inside the gate. This resulted in a big fight with the security guard at the gate, with the administrative staff paying no heed…"

In all, once inside the Park compound the workers are made to forget what leisure is, except for the fifteen minute break in the morning and the thirty minute lunch break. G, an operator, complains:

> "…even if we finish before time we are not allowed to take rest. If they see us sitting idle after meeting the target, we are asked to help others. They just don't like to see us resting…"

Some Interesting Revelations

It is not at all surprising that the attrition rate in these units is quite high. Smaller firms have greater difficulty in securing a labour supply. However, these factories rely more on changing their hiring policy rather than improving working conditions to recruit enough workers, because they are at the bottom of the production chain, and, as a result, their profits mainly come from minimising production cost, especially labour costs (Xue 2008). The management has created certain survival strategies that include giving monetary incentives to those who bring a new worker to the company, usually at Rs. 100 per worker. Instances of workers shifting from one firm to another within the Park are also common. If workers are in need of money, say on occasions like marriage, they resign from one unit so as to obtain monetary benefits, later only to join another firm within the Park.

Another interesting thing is that 'skill formation' is completely absent in the case of these workers, because right from the beginning they are trained to do only one type of work. A worker who is trained to stitch a collar has no skill for any other work, hence she may be an expert in collar stitching, but not even a novice in producing any other part of a shirt!

Also, a 'native-place network' often played an important role in worker recruitment. For instance my discussions with the family members revealed:

> "…we are sending our daughter to this company because in this area our religious committee had taken a decision against sending our girls for work especially to far away places. But in this case though the wages are less and the work schedule is hectic, they are 'safe'. All the girls from this region travel together by the van (though they have to pay for that, we don't mind), which is arranged by the company…"

During one incident, local people in the community stopped the van which came late due to overtime in the evening, resulting in stopping the practice of compulsory evening overtime. This can be interpreted as one instance where agencies within the local influenced labour response, combating capital's inclination to reduce place to space. This incident resulted in the company making an effort to put the workers hailing from the same places in different batches to prevent any similar incidents, and any solidarity in general.

Signs of Labour Response

This section deals with a confrontation that altered existing capital-labour relations within the two firms under study. The confrontation, though having its foundations in long-standing grievances among the working staff, turned into a nine-day episode as a result of an issue surrounding the timing of payment.

A salary increase is due during April or May every year, in accordance with the rules, but this did not materialise in the April of 2008. On approaching supervisors, workers were informed that the increase would be distributed by June. But matters worsened when the increment did not materialise, despite the firm adding in even Sunday as a working, salaried, day. Workers complained of being made to work all week, over and above the management's unconcerned attitude for over three months – in total amounting to an erosion of workers' legal rights.

Following this, workers met their Production Manager who did not treat the matter as worthy of any significance and asked the workers either to return to their respective work places, or else leave the company. This choice – either quietly working or entirely leaving – was at this juncture taken up seriously by the workers, who took it upon themselves to protest against the salary-increase delay by threatening to quit *en masse* until the salary increase was actually made.

Upon realising that the workers could not be toyed around with this time, the management decided to reveal a major internal change that had occurred without the knowledge of the workers. The firms in question had been taken over by a 'giant' in the garment sector, who by virtue of having markets all over the world, had tugged the firms into a large apparel production chain. Despite the management and workforce composition remaining untouched, the ownership had changed as much as to render the management 'helpless' in matters concerning wages. In addition, the new owners were not in favour of this salary hike. Workers treated this matter as a grave offence:

> "… without informing us, they sold us too, along with our company…"

This piece of information on the internal change fuelled the fire, giving workers enough reason and justification to encourage even their counterparts in the other acquired firm to join them in a strike. Thus nearly 2000 to 3000 women workers participated in a strike, which persisted for nine days. The few discussions between the firm and the workers did not prove successful; the workers still remaining firm on their decision on salary increase. While the company made it clear that workers could think about a salary hike upon first getting back to work, experience in 2003[10] had taught workers to comply with the company's

10 One worker reported that the company, while witnessing a strike in 2003, had promised that a salary increase would eventually come if work resumed. The increase never came, allowing a common feeling of betrayal to spread among the workers.

clarification if and only if their salary increase was materialised and made legal.

> "…we were not going to fall for the same trick once more…so we were quite stern on our stand…."

Meanwhile, the company adopted various control measures that included police protection for shipment. At a later stage, workers were even threatened with the possibility of the company being locked forever. Yet, these measures did not change workers' stand. On the contrary, workers even strengthened their position by accepting support from various political and non-political organisations, local leaders of various political parties, *Panchayat*[11] members, *Kudumbasree*[12] members, and so on.

In the later stages, the issue reached right up to the District Labour Officer (DLO) of Trivandrum District, who was presented a fourteen point demand by the workers, covering salary hikes, code of conduct towards workers, illegal working days, compulsory overtime, etc. When the meeting with the DLO failed, the issue was then being sent to the Regional Joint Labour Commissioner (RJLC). This final negotiation was not a failure, though it was not a complete success either.

Discussions with the RJLC concluded with the decision that, except for the hike in the salary, the management was to seriously consider and act upon all other demands from the workers. With regard to the salary hike, a discussion between the management and the workers was imminent, in order for a quick solution. This time, however, the management relented on the issue of salary increase, and the workers

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11 Gram Panchayat are local governments at the village or small town level in India. The Gram Panchayat is the foundation of the Panchayat System.

12 Kudumbasree is a poverty eradication project officially launched by the Government of Kerala with the active support of the Central Government agencies for wiping out absolute poverty from the State.

accordingly withdrew their strike. The nine-day strike thus succeeded, besides other amendments, in an agreement increasing workers' wages, doing away with compulsory overtime, increasing overtime wages, and eliminating a salary-cut on *hartal* days. In general, treatment towards workers improved relatively. More importantly, it led towards the formation of the apparel workers' forum[13], possible mainly due to the fact that workers *interacted* in solidarity on this issue; a phenomenon generally frowned upon by firms with workplaces such as these.

Kerala's Labour Struggle in a New Form

This confrontation reveals the new challenges facing labour as a factor of production due to the strategies adopted by capital to sustain the game of competition. This may break the assumptions and preconceptions of capital-labour relations in Kerala. This section focuses on the striking revelations experienced from the field.

Distinctions from the stereotype – a break from the past

The Basics: Labour unions were central to the implementation of Kerala's model of development. Kerala's informal sector is typical of other Indian states with agriculture-worker dominance; but its specialty is in the existence of state-specific informal sectors like toddy tapping, coir, cashew etc., wherein a high degree of unionisation and mobilisation is noteworthy (Kannan, 1998). This can be considered as the broad base of the labour movement in Kerala. Recognising the power of the unions and its ability in destabilisation, the state has responded by actively intervening in the informal sector through a series of direct regulatory and informal reforms along with broader welfare measures (Heller, 1999). This process of unionisation has continued over the decades and is inextricably tied to Kerala's political process.

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13 The terms workers' forum and workers' association are used interchangeably throughout this paper.

It is here that we make a departure from what was mentioned earlier. The new form of workers' organisation as we see in our case study barely resembles the traditional trade unionism based on 'class struggle' and having the 'capitalist system' as its target. In the case studied here, workers were unaware of seemingly simple information like for whom they were working . Workers' knowledge of the company's workforce and relations extend only up to the Supervisors and the Production Managers, i.e., those with whom they are in regular and proximate contact. There is literally an invisible screen which obstructs their view of what goes on beyond their immediate working environments. The response was similar on enquiring on details like the strength of the company, for which the answer was a vague "many". Workers seemed to be unconscious about the fact that the very awareness of these details is important and crucial, sometimes even dismissing these as "unimportant details we need not know".

This is quite a contrast from the traditional scenario where workers were at times aware of wage legislation and prevailing wages even in industries besides their own (Heller, 1999). These are starting points to show how, although knowledge on labour relations and consciousness of the workers on their placement within the production system was formerly fundamental; this awareness is now not featuring even at a basic level during labour confrontations.

'We have no politics': The formation of workers' associations cannot be equated with the proletarian struggle usually synonymous to the Kerala experience, since unlike earlier, the formation now is spontaneously sparked and carries on for the very existence and survival of the workers. Moreover, worker associations, such as the one encountered in this case study, do not claim a direct political support – a general trend among most workers' associations. Kerala's politics, specifically the dominance of a communist ideology in the mid 20th century, attracted the attention of a number of political scientists who treated it as a laboratory of

communist politics within the broader liberal-parliamentary framework of India (Jeffrey, 2003). But in the case seen here with largely rural, less educated, and economically less endowed women workers, political backing seems to be kept at a distance.

> '…we have no politics…ours is an independent workers' association … we don't want our association to be known as a 'trade union' which is why we call this as a 'workers' forum'…"

This case hence shows a new course in the working class history of Kerala, deviating from the long established path of 'multiple political parties and multiple trade unions' (Heller, 1999). Indeed, their claims of having 'no politics' often hinges upon their grievance that a politically strong group did not help them when in need. This is parallel to Devika (2007), who opines that threats of depoliticisation and the attendant growth of public cynicism about all forms of politics are widely emerging in Kerala.

Mentors: The women workers' association (or 'forum') is equally open to seeking help and advice from *men* who appear to have considerable influence in political parties. These mediators are men of influence both in the civic community and in political parties. Association leaders argued that the presence of a well-educated, well-connected man was necessary to talk to the company on behalf of the workers and also to secure state welfare benefits.

But the most interesting thing in this 'help seeking' is that the leaders of the association stress the fact that only the personality and support of the individual and not his political-party connections are what were sought after during times of confrontation. During an interview, a secretary of the association told quite distinctively that 'sir' was only guiding them, without imposing or mixing his political ideology and connections. Their trust in him was un-diminishing, mainly

on this account. They sought his help only as a mediator between the company, the State and themselves and not as a political trump card. Affiliation with him did not automatically extend to affiliation to his political party, or for that matter any political party. Independence of their 'forum' from any sort of mainstream political support was a virtue the workers wanted to sustain.

New face of labour control measures: Along with the above interesting dimensions from the side of the workers, we can see equally interesting transformations in the labour control strategies from the side of the firm, starting right from the recruitment of labour.

In some areas, allowing young girls to work outside the house is a decision taken collectively by the community, rather than a choice given to the individual. The community's decision favoured the girls working for the firm largely due to the convenience of transport provided by the firm. Also, the support of the local governing body and religious bodies were used to win the faith of the community, who, as we have seen, would favour the girls working if placated enough with such incentives. The *Grama Panchayat* in this case gave wide propaganda on the vacancy in the company besides other benefits of working there, even going to the extent of allowing the firm's interviews to be conducted on the *Panchayat* office's premises[14].

Another interesting strategy to suppress the strike was to offer high posts to rather than punishing, those who were active in the strike. On interviewing two shop-floor workers who were very active in the strike, I was told that they had been approached by the company with an offer of promotion to the supervisor level, even overlooking other more worthy and senior staff who would ordinarily get the promotion. This

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14 This became an issue for the firm to look into during the days of the strike. It was found that workers of the same Grama Panchayat were familiar, allowing for easier cohesion. One measure to counter this was to increase heterogeneity in residences and the workspace, to make cohesion due to familiarity a little more difficult.

was an active effort from the side of the company to keep leaders away from other workers, by promoting them to positions which did not allow frequent interaction with floor workers.

During the association's membership campaign, the distinction in behaviour towards workers and leaders was noticeable. Towards the leaders the firm was always soft and not on the offensive, even giving special offers and promotions as seen above. On the other hand, the firm was rather harsh towards not-so-active members of the association, using measures that included inculcating a sense of fear of: deprivation of company benefits, closure of company, resignation of leaders, and so on. One firm even announced that joining the workers' association was 'against the company', since the motive of this association was allegedly to close down the company.

> '…think whether you need the company or your association…'

More dramatic events happened on the day of the inauguration of the workers' association. Both firms declared this day a working day, in addition to spreading rumours of a bomb in the inauguration hall! Though these had reduced the attendance, more than two hundred workers attended the function. When asked about the 'bomb' rumours, I was told, rather sarcastically, that it would be better to suffer the explosion than succumb to a continuance of the firm's suffocating environment.

Conclusion

Though a bulk of this paper has dealt with the intricacies of the case, it has to be understood that this entire case and the path that it has followed rests upon, and is overarched by, the conceptual matrix of 'scale', one of geography's core concepts. There has been much attention paid to how transnational corporations have 'gone global', how institutions of governance have become supra-national and how labour

unions have sought to globalise their operations to match with those of an increasingly globalised capital. The flip side of the same argument is that it is not how the world is subjected to globalisation (and the global capital economy) but how we are subjected to the discourse of globalisation and the identities (and narratives) it indicates to us (Gibson-Graham 2002). Massey, taking a step further, says that all the local places are not subjected to globalisation. Nonetheless, the local identities created through globalisation vary substantially, hence calling the need for taking care of local discourses. This paper took up this particular thread of argument into the labour market and empirically showed how the local agencies 'engage in' and 'respond to' the process of globalisation, and how this is important and relevant in the globalisation literature. Here global and local have been represented as part of the binary of scale, which represents not locations but *processes*.

Drawing insights from labour geography, this study sought to show how organising locally can, in fact, be an effective strategy for use in case of confrontation with social actors who are organised at the global and other extra-local scales. The study raises the need for going against the grain by questioning global stereotypes with regard to expected economic responses to globalisation. Hence, contrary to the 'globalisation thesis' - which posits that mobility of capital has been freed from the constraints of locations and localities - this study, along with other work in economic geography contends that the expansion of capital through *space* remains in a tension-ridden and unstable relationship with locality or *place*.

The aim of this paper is not to convince that labour is in any way 'successful' in 'conquering the overarching power of capital'. Nor does it seek to push forward the argument that labour as an entity is becoming 'stronger' in opposition to capital. The paper only aims to recognise and appreciate the varying types of responses from the side of labour at the local level, and the paths that these responses trace.

In line with this, the position this paper seeks to hold is the assertion that labour has been actively involved in the very process of globalisation itself. Although it would seem a simple proposition to suggest that working class people and their organisations affect the ways in which the landscapes of capitalism are made, until recently, there has been little work, even within economic geography, addressing this issue. This paper contributes in this direction.

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