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Labor, Hunger, and Struggle

Through labor, a teleological positing is realized within material being, as the rise of a new objectivity. The first consequence of this is that labor becomes the model for any social practice.


With the rise of mass politics in 1920s India, political action came to be recast around questions of labor and hunger. These were questions that resided in the everyday, yet they lent themselves, apparently seamlessly, to politicization—under the sign of “struggle,” a common but warlike disposition incited by, it was believed, experiences of everyday hardship. Contrary to expectations, however, this did not mean that the political simply returned to its rightful place, to everyday life. Rather, political action came to be staged as a way of alternately reiterating and suspending quotidian life—so, too, with work and the striking of work, eating and fasting.

Both Gandhi and the communists brought the question of labor to the fore. While this is a well-known fact and a logical corollary to the entry of the working classes into national politics, its implications are not always fully worked out. I propose in this chapter that the modern imagination of politics as action was made possible by the twentieth-century production of a homology between the practice of labor and the practice of politics. In a sense, *karma* as desireless activity transmuted into *karma* as productive or creative activity—a mutation made easy by the fact that the same term, *karma* and its vernacular
derivatives *kam* and *kaj* lexically meant both. Not accidentally, political activists came to be called “workers” or *karmis*. This recasting of political action after the image of labor, however, stumbled on an irresolvable split in the concept of labor itself—between the sui generis understanding of labor as innate transformative drive and the figuration of the laborer as common subject—returning us once more to the persistent question: Is the political to be understood in terms of the subject of politics, regardless of his or her actions, or in terms of the nature of action, regardless of who performs it?

### Labor as Such

Gandhi talked of labor as a generic substance since his days in South Africa. In 1910, discussing his Phoenix and Tolstoy farm experiments, Gandhi said that daily manual labor helped one overcome moral and practical errors brought on by too much thinking: “The body is like an ox or donkey and should therefore be made to carry a load.” Gandhi was criticizing the intellectualism of middle-class politics in India, implying that “intellectual labor”—a term communists used routinely—was an oxymoron. To Gandhi labor was by definition manual and menial and was part of the problematic of human corporeality. The modern-day hegemony of scientific knowledge and the consequent social privilege of the intelligentsia had resulted in a general deprecation of labor worldwide. Labor, therefore, needed to be reinstated as concept and practice. Further, modernity both indulged and instrumentalized the human body. To remedy this civilizational pathology and regain moral value and political efficacy for the body, humans must self-consciously engage in agricultural and artisanal labor as well as in fasting, celibacy, and other bodily disciplines. After all, unlike other species that grazed on what nature offered, humans were meant to labor for food, clothing, and shelter. Anyone who consumed without putting in proportionate labor was thus a thief. The crux of social inequality lay in the simple fact that some people lived off the labor of others. Clearly, at stake for Gandhi was not so much the working classes as the non–working classes, whose members had to be returned to their share of socially necessary labor as part of the nation-building process.

To Gandhi the political valence of labor derived from its moral aspect, which encompassed its economic, social, and aesthetic dimensions. This comes through in his choice of the *charkha* as a political symbol. Gandhi believed that spinning could help all classes identify with the common Indian artisan. Spinning was also sound economics because it gave supplementary employment to peasants in the lean season. It also denoted a move forward from the earlier
Swadeshi days, when leaders called for a boycott of British textiles without attending to the question of indigenous productivity. Further, the charkha symbolized resistance to capital-intensive production, which deindustrialized traditional societies and deskilled human labor. The charkha also inspired national pride in India’s premium handloom tradition. Additionally, in Bhakti and Sufi metaphysics, the charkha worked as a poetic metaphor and a philosophical concept and was a symbol dear to Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs. Also, spinning was an act of clean labor (unlike sweeping and scavenging), involved less physical hardship than farming and factory work, and could be done privately, making possible its quiet insertion into the domestic routine of nonlaboring classes. Above all, spinning made possible thinking and contemplation in the very act of labor, producing patience, discipline, and nonviolence in political actors. No wonder Gandhi sought to make Indian National Congress membership conditional on the labor of spinning yarn. In the 1934 Congress session, Gandhi proposed that the four-anna subscription be replaced by “labor franchise”; that is, every member would annually contribute a certain length of yarn to Congress as a membership fee. In his opinion, this was the closest one could get to universal adult franchise in colonial times, that is, franchise for all those who labored for the country and thereby deserved the vote.6

If Gandhi pitched labor as a moral question, communists pitched it as an economic question. From the 1920s, Marx’s labor theory of value was explicated in simple Bengali in various communist periodicals.7 Labor was the mode by which each individual contributed to and received from society.8 Labor was the only force that could generate value by itself. Because labor time was the basic unit for calculating the value of all goods and services, the working classes were the primary driver of politics. Society did not realize this generative potential of labor and therefore oppressed workers.9 And so on.

And yet, despite their formal obeisance to economic theory, communists seemed to deploy the concept of labor more widely in aesthetic terms. In communist fiction, poetry, and song, labor was directly figured as a metaphor for political action. Thus, Ansar, the hero of Kazi Nazrul Islam’s novel Mrityukhuda (Hunger for death/Death by hunger), on being arrested by the police, exhorts the assembled crowd to use the tools of labor as “weapons” of transformation:

“How can I say you have no weapons? Coachman, you have your whip to tame wild horses. Can you not tame humans? Mason, you build majestic palaces with your tools . . . can you not build heaven on earth for the exploited? My sweeper, scavenger brothers, you make yourselves untouchable by breathing the toxic air and give us life by purifying the atmosphere. Can
you not use your brooms to sweep away the filth and poison in our minds? My peasant brother, your plow makes the earth bloom, can you not make fertile the sterile hearts of inhuman humans?”

To Nazrul, as for his compatriots, labor was a force of both resistance and creation. It held exploiters at bay just as it built the world anew. Hemanga Biswas’s “Harvest Song” went:

O peasant brother, whet your sickle
   Whet your sickle sharp
Cut the golden crop at harvest time
If the looters come cut them up too
   Whet your sickle sharp.

His “Song of the Railway Workers” described working with boilers and engines as driving the nation toward freedom.

This seamless move from labor to political action must not be read as simply a duplication of Soviet-style “productivism,” though the ideal of indigenous productivity did have a nationalist charge of its own. Rather, for communists, the equation between labor and action derived from an aesthetics of the body, such that the body’s comportment and mobilization came to be imagined as continuous between labor and politics. This becomes evident if we look closely at visual images of the time. As an illustration, I present here some well-known photographs of Gandhi at work and walking, alongside the leftist photographer Sunil Janah’s images of laboring and marching bodies.

In the photographs, note Gandhi’s deployment of his body in labor—his emaciation, solitude, repose, even contemplativeness, in the midst of work and politics. He is still and self-contained at work. In the Dandi march, he is alone and self-absorbed even in a crowd, walking with eyes downcast. In the communist images, on the other hand, muscles ripple through skeletal frames. There is a choreographed mobility to the bodies, a collective surging forward. The tools of labor—charkha, broom, and spade for Gandhi; sickle, rope, and plowshare for the communist subject—are wielded differently. The loincloth and the stick are, however, common, telling us perhaps that we are seeing a contest between Gandhi and the communists over the same political body. Contra the disembodied self of revolutionary nishkama karma, we have here in the name of the mass political a “kinetics” of the body that shares a common stance across the everyday act of labor and the forceful act of politics, though the body’s stance is differently designed for Gandhi and the communists. I should add here that Janah’s images are not entirely idiosyncratic. I might have used other images,
such as by the painters Chittaprasad or Somenath Hore, whose sketches of laboring and political bodies were routinely published in the communist periodicals *People's Age* and *People's War* and evoked the same kinesis that Janah’s images display.

That labor was salient because of its aesthetic aspect was confirmed by the greatest Indian aesthetician of the time. Tagore, even as he disputed Gandhi’s valorization of labor for its own sake, spoke of labor in ways not dissimilar to the communists. As he said in his 1923 preface to the inaugural issue of *Sanhati* (Solidarity), a periodical covering trade union movements in Bengal, labor was the force that drove the world. In his poem “Ora Kaaj Kore” (They work), Tagore contrasted the ceaseless labor of commoners in field and factory to the ephemeral actions of kings and merchants who “traversed the sky” without leaving a trace on the horizon of everyday life.

Tagore disputed Gandhi’s choice of the *charkha* as universal symbol of labor and politics. Laziness, Tagore wrote in 1921, was not just when “man fatten[ed] on another’s toil” but also when he fell into mindless “drift.” Freedom called for innovation, not routine labor. If freedom was the end, then spinning at the wheel could never be a means to achieve it. The Gandhian motto “Spin and weave, spin and weave” smacked of the “narrow life [of] the [bee]hive.” It led to “self-atrophy,” as did work in European military camps and factories: “The charkha in its proper place can do no harm . . . [but in the wrong place] thread can only be spun at the cost of a great deal of the mind itself.” Tagore was uneasy with Gandhi’s moral rendering of labor. He felt that the rhetoric of purity and impurity with respect to national and foreign products overlapped with the traditional language of caste. “The contagion of untouchability” now threatened to spread from society to economics and politics, he said. When Gandhi argued that the classical terms *karma* and *yajna* (ritual sacrifice) actually connoted the basic act of human labor and that “to a people famishing and idle, the only acceptable form in which God can dare appear is work,” Tagore retorted that Hindu scriptures prescribed rigid duties to each caste, made labor into drudgery, and killed the “mind of man who is a doer, whose work is creation.” Traditional conceptions of caste labor created an “abject state of passivity” in the very midst of work.

To Tagore, the wheel—the weaver’s wheel, the potter’s wheel—was beautiful because it was laborsaving rather than labor-inducing, and helped make time for human creativity. The nation, Tagore argued, was a work of art and not “heaps of thread, and piles of cloth.” Labor did have an economic logic, but this logic was useful only when it helped enhance labor’s aesthetic poten-
tial. Hence Tagore emphasized arts and crafts and the cooperative movement (like Gandhi, he was a critic of modern mechanized labor). After all, he argued, poverty was a complex condition of impoverishment that needed both economic and aesthetic redress. Spinning, Tagore added, was an individualistic act of labor. Even when masses of people simultaneously worked at the charkha, they all chose to be alone and hence sans political potential. Labor became political only when it brought people, Hindus and Muslims, together in cooperation, in a way that neither religion nor morality could.

Though antagonists in the field of literary and aesthetic theory, Tagore and the communists thus shared the understanding that labor was really about the aesthesis of everyday life, displaying in their discourses a counterintuitive coming together of the economic and the aesthetic, the productive and the creative. Hemanga Biswas put it in literal terms. In his study of popular musical genres and their organic connection to art-house music, Biswas stated that melody and rhythm emerged out of the patterning and cadence of labor, out of the coordinated and resonant movements of bodies in the act of working the field, rowing the boat, wielding the tool. Labor made dance and music possible, and dance and music in turn made possible the political march, the demonstration, the rally. Biswas’s own songs were meant to capture this kinesis of bodies in coordinated action, in work as in politics. Gandhi, for his part, admitted that the imagination of labor as aesthesis was opposed to his moral rendering of labor. To him, labor was necessity (for the poor) and sacrifice (for the prince). Labor indexed the ultimate nonduality of the world, where rich and poor were but the same body racked by hunger and need. In contrast to the poet’s world of novelties and wonders, in his own world of “old and worn-out things,” he said, economics was ethics and just that.

In conventional rendering, labor becomes political through its suspension, through the striking of labor. Thus it is the withdrawal of necessary labor, rather than labor itself, that becomes action. The preceding discussion, however, tells us that while the strike did become a popular mode of political action in modern India, the salience of labor went beyond merely asserting the power of labor to either maintain or disrupt the logic of the everyday. Labor became a model for political action. But for labor to become a modular form of (mass) political action, it had to simultaneously index the political and the everyday. Gandhi, the communists, and Tagore tried to ensure this by supplementing labor with ethics, economics, and aesthetics, respectively. These so-called non-political imperatives thus appeared necessary to augment the common and unremarkable act of labor politically. And yet, in the final instance, neither ethics
nor economics nor aesthetics seemed to suffice, as the extrapolitical and extra-discursive aspect of bodily kinesis came to be invoked to make plausible the labor/action homology.

**Labor and Hunger**

Hunger brings out the perplexed question of everyday life with even greater clarity. In a manner of speaking, hunger is the opposite of labor. If labor denotes the dynamics of the body in creative and productive action, hunger is that vital imperative that calls for labor, in a primordial need to feed the body—though it is also potentially that which drains the body of the capacity to labor. Hunger, like labor, became a mode of political action in the age of mass politics by way of the hunger strike, which drew political charge not only from the fact that it entailed a suspension of the daily activity of eating but also from exactly the opposite fact that not getting to eat was a daily experience of the laboring classes. Like labor, hunger thus held in tenuous suspension, at the precise moment of the political, the everyday and the exceptional, the ordinary and the extraordinary. I offer as illustration two iconic political images of hunger from twentieth-century India—a photograph of Gandhi on a fast and Zainul Abedin’s sketch of a hungry, passive body in the “man-made” Bengal famine of 1943.

For Gandhi, fasting was a regular everyday practice as well as an exceptional political act. His ashram routine consisted of study, penance, charity, practices of sensory restraint, fasting, vegetarianism, labor, celibacy, and silence. This was his vision of an ethical everyday, counterpoised to the pathologies of the modern everyday, which made the body indolent, indulgent, and dependent on external props such as machines and medicine. The suspension of eating, among other disciplines, was thus a way of bringing back reflexivity into everyday habits. Fasting for Gandhi clearly was not a stand-alone act. It had to be accompanied, he insisted, by the rigorous spiritual practice of satyagraha, truth and nonanger.

Gandhi distinguished fasting from the hunger strike. Passive resistance and the hunger strike, he said, were “weapons of the weak”—strategic political acts when the other side had clinching force at its disposal. But the satyagrahi fast was never “passive.” It entailed “intense activity” and superordinate force. Also, satyagraha was not a purely political or exceptional act. It arose out of practices of quotidian living: “Father and son, man and wife are perpetually resorting to satyagraha, one towards the other.” It was a way of facing up to injustice not by retribution but by love, suffering, and moral exposure of the
other. Inaugurating the Rowlatt Satyagraha in 1919 with a day’s fast, Gandhi explained: “I have regarded this movement as a purely religious movement and fast is an ancient institution amongst us. You will not mistake it for a hunger strike.”33 In Gandhi’s formulation, the satyagrahi fast uniquely straddled the two registers of routine discipline and exceptional protest/regret. Thus Gandhi’s June 1913 fast was in penance for some students and teachers misbehaving at the Phoenix Farm, his May–June 1914 fast an atonement for a young boy’s breaching of his vow against gluttony, his June 1915 fast was against lying by some ashram boys, his September 1915 fast was against ashram members resisting an untouchable family’s entry into the community, and so on. Gandhi also fasted in public protest—in 1913 against the three-pound tax on Indians in South Africa, in 1918 in support of the Ahmedabad textile mill workers’ strike, in 1919 to launch the Rowlatt Satyagraha, in 1921 against riots in Bombay, in 1922 against mob violence at Chauri Chaura, in 1924 for Hindu-Muslim unity, in 1932 against separate electorates for untouchables, in 1933 demanding the right to do scavenging work in prison, in 1934 for self-purification, and so on and on, in 1939, 1940, 1941, 1943, 1944, 1946, 1947, and finally, in 1948, against post-Partition Hindu-Muslim riots.

But even though the satyagrahi fast was derived from practices of common life, it was not, Gandhi paradoxically insisted, an appropriate mode of mass action.34 One had to earn the right to fast, he said as he exhorted others not to join him in fasting. Gandhi claimed that through his everyday practices of fasting, he had “reduced [the fast] to a science.” Fasting as political action, in other words, required a virtuosity, honed through practices of a reformed everyday life.35 Not just the masses but even other national leaders must desist from following his example because fasting was an extraordinarily forceful political act and dangerously close to psychological coercion unless morally perfected.36

Significantly, Gandhi’s first political fast in India was in the context of the 1918 Ahmedabad mill workers’ strike for a 30 percent wage hike. Gandhi saw the workers’ demand as fair. But the burden of his communication to workers was to insist that a labor strike did not entail a cessation of labor. Workers must give up their social prejudices, take on whatever manual or menial jobs they could get, and continue to earn their living without awaiting resolution or relief. Striking must not cause idleness.37 Despite Gandhi’s exhortations, some workers, under threat of starvation, returned to work at lower pay. It was then that Gandhi started his fast—not against mill owners but against workers “break[ing] their pledge out of fear.”38 Gandhi claimed that his fast was not a hunger strike. It was to demonstrate to workers that satyagraha entailed suffering and to persuade them to join him in menial work. Hunger, he implied, was
fair punishment for those who refused to take up “degraded” labor because of caste prejudice. Gandhi thus fasted less to show solidarity with workers in their own condition of starvation and more to reinforce his argument about the universality of labor across all professions. To Gandhi, thus the strike and the fast, the labor question and the hunger question, were conjoined.

The question of hunger acquired great intensity in Bengal and India in the 1940s. Consider the young communist poet Sukanta Bhattacharya’s (1926–47) iconic lines from “He Mahajiban” (O great life):

proyojon nei kobitar snigdhota,
kobita tomay aajke dilam chhuti,
kshudhar rajye prithibi godyomoy,
purnima chaand jeno jholsano ruti.

No need here for the mellowness of poetry,
Poetry, I give you leave today,
In the kingdom of hunger, the world turns to prose,
And the full moon is like a charred bread.

Colonial Bengal had a long history of famines—from the famous 1770 famine that wiped out a third of the population (and generated debates on land and property among British officials, leading to the famous Permanent Settlement) to the wartime famine of 1943 that was crucial to the consolidation of both communist politics and communist realist aesthetics in the region. (Incidentally, famine in Bengali is manvantar or “change of epochs.”) The 1943 famine killed more than three million people in Bengal, and the Calcutta streets became littered with dead bodies and crowded with destitute people from the countryside. But the food crisis did not end with the end of the famine. Food scarcity, price increases, hoarding, black marketing, starvation deaths, and even suicides became everyday facts for the next few decades. Communists set up “food committees,” smoked out black marketers, looted food from hoarders and redistributed it, and agitated for price control, a fair public distribution system, laws against speculation, and, above all, the confiscation of surplus land from landlords and its redistribution among poorer peasants. Communists scoffed at Gandhian satyagrahis and their ritualized fasts and “hunger processions.” Death by hunger was very different from death by sacrifice, they said. It was slow, unspectacular, and without honor. It was not even counted statistically, blamed as it often was on poor health and unsanitary habits. In the face of mass starvation, communists argued, fasting as political action had lost moral authority. Incidentally, 1946 and 1947 were also years of intense
Hindu-Muslim bloodletting, another kind of macabre dance of death that Ben-
gal witnessed right after the famine. It was at this time that Gandhi held his
iconic fast in Noakhali in East Bengal—a place reporting many deaths from
starvation at the time. Clearly, starvation and fasting carried on side by side,
each claiming a greater degree of political visibility and political efficacy.

Communists’ 1940s food activism later resulted in militant food move-
ments in Bengal—first in 1959 and then in 1966—transforming communists
from being fringe radicals to being the dominant political force in the region
for decades to come. Writing of the consequences of hunger, the Bengal pro-
vincial committee of the Communist Party explicitly stated that the food crisis
must be understood above all as a crisis of labor: “It is not merely that thousands
are dying of hunger today. . . . The food crisis is destroying the invaluable labor
potential of Bengal. If we cannot save labor, then soon our land will lay fallow
and unworked, the food crisis will herald an unprecedented labor crisis.”

Subhas Mukhopadhyay (1919–2003), journalist, poet, and Communist
Party member, put together the questions of labor and hunger in his politi-
cal prose. In 1973, Subhas—until then known for his reportage and poetry—
wrote his first novel, Hungras. This novel commemorated the 1949 hunger
strike by communist prisoners that stretched for forty-seven long days. Sub-
has borrowed the title from the peasants of Midnapur, who called hunger
strike hungras in their local lingo. Incidentally, Subhas dedicated the novel to
Satyajit Ray, whose acclaimed Oscar-winning film Pather Panchali (Song of the
road), based on the eponymous novel by Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay (1929),
depicted poignant scenes of hunger and want in the Bengal countryside—a
mother scrounging for food for her children, empty utensils in the kitchen,
a daughter being humiliated for stealing fruit, a doddering old aunt drooling
over scraps and crumbs.

Hungras is written in the narrative voice of two political prisoners—Auro-
bindo, a middle-class writer, who nurses a guilty love for Tagore’s “idealistic
poetry, and Badshah, a Muslim factory worker. Both are in jail for being com-
munists and there participate in a hunger strike. Tellingly, there is hardly any-
thing in the novel about the specific cause and context of the hunger strike,
which here appears as the default mode of politically inhabiting the prison, a
way of resuming vicarious control over the incarcerated body. Unlike Gandhi,
the communist protagonist writes candidly about his experience of unendur-
able hunger: “Today is the fourth day of our hunger strike. No four days and
three nights. My counting’s gone haywire! Usually it is only in the first seventy-
two hours that you feel the pangs. But this time it is the reverse. Hunger in-
tensifies each day. I keep gulping water. And licking at salt. I try holding down
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hunger. But the pangs return.”48 Aurobindo had been told not to speak of food during a hunger strike—“Hunger strike is war and you are a soldier!” But he envies those who can brave humiliation and break their fast. Aurobindo records his hungry days in a journal. There is war in jail—teargassing, shooting, throwing stones, sloganeering, deaths, and arbitrary occasions of force-feeding by the authorities. Aurobindo secretly waits for these occasions of force-feeding, but the prison officials know when not to oblige. In marked contrast to Gandhi’s take on the spiritual merits of the fast, Aurobindo writes: “I don’t care about the spirit. I am happy with my body. The form, essence, sound, feel and flavor of this world—I sense these with my body. My senses protect me from impending threats. . . . there is nothing more I love than this body.”49 Aurobindo tries reading *Das Kapital* but finds his hunger too distracting. He cannot play chess either, for intelligence fails on an empty stomach. Instead, Aurobindo passes time by holding a daily *karkhana* (factory) with Badshah. Badshah narrates his life story, which Aurobindo records for a future novel.

Badshah talks of his boyhood. He left home to work in a ship factory. Working at the blazing furnace was like staring death in the face, he said. He spent his life moving from one job to another. When he joined a bone factory, he lost social status for having befriended untouchable Chamars. He began his political career with the Muslim League. He rooted for Mohammedan Sporting, the football club favored by Muslims, and avidly followed news from Egypt and Turkey. But then he came into contact with the Revolutionary Socialist Party and later the Communist Party and became a trade unionist. He also became obsessed with *jatra* (popular theater). Badshah secretly wonders if his middle-class comrade, who has never known starvation, can actually last through a hunger strike. But he also complains that the middle classes have it easy because they have smaller bellies. It is tougher for workers who are used to eating heartily after a hard day’s labor.50 Aurobindo wonders why, if the poor are already used to starving, a hunger strike is difficult for them.51 Unlike in the Gandhian paradigm, here the struggle seems to be over who can fast rather than who is entitled to fast.

Not surprisingly, much of the conversation between Aurobindo and Badshah revolves around the question of labor. Badshah describes in detail the nitty-gritty of various kinds of factory work. He misses his welding machine. “My welding machine and your pen are similar,” he says, “except that you can keep your tool always with you, even in sleep, and your machine does not emit sparks, blind you.”52 The trade union and the party are tools too, Badshah adds, making the labor/politics homology explicit:
My welding machine is not my only tool. The party, the union—these are machines too. Machines can do good but also evil, depending on how they are wielded. You need a lot of skill.

Dad’s problem was that he knew only one machine—his tool of labor. He left it behind in the factory. But my hands are never empty. I hold in my fist this other machine that drives humans, the party. There is a great high in this work, comrade.53

“There is pride in labor,” Badshah states happily. “You know the world needs you.”54 Aurobindo envies Badshah. Workers know how to marry “will to purpose,” he muses. Hard work focuses, channels the mind! Aurobindo wonders whether writing is also not a form of labor. If labor is what fills a lack—the emptiness in the belly—then literature must be labor too, for it also fills a void, “making happen, making real, what is not yet there.”55 Unlike Gandhi, who simply defines labor as that which is not study, the communist seeks to turn labor into a metacategory, subsuming all forms of human activity, including thought, under it.

**Laborer and Labor**

The question of labor, however, was not the same as the question of the laborer. Even though communists came to designate workers of the world by catchall terms such as *proletariat*, *mazdoor* (in Hindi/Urdu), and *sarvahara* (“one who has lost all” in Bengali), early communist writing in India focused less on labor and more on laborers as embodied and socially identifiable subjects. Thus the essay “Dharmaghater Siksha” (Lesson of the strike; 1921) mentioned the coolie, wage-worker, peasant, fisherman, boatman, sailor, and palanquin bearer.56 Another simply referred to working people by their caste names: Hadi, Muchi, Dom. The essay “Chhotor Aparadh” (Crimes of small people; 1923) invoked peasants, oil pressers, jute growers, utensil makers, washermen, and barbers.57 An essay from 1924 claimed that in early Islam, spiritual leaders (*alims*) were cultivators, masons, carpenters, tailors, and weavers and lived by “working their hands.”58 Clearly, there was no single term such as *labor* to designate working people. Some used the colonial term *coolie*, and others simply used the ancient *dharma­shastric* name Shudra to denote the servile classes. Evidently, before labor could emerge as a universal category, a great diversity of peoples engaged in different kinds of work had to be first recognized and accounted for. Manik Bandopadhyay’s novel *Padma Nadir Majhi* (1936), a highly textured narrative about the boatmen of eastern Bengal, which later became a Marxist classic, starts with a
long description of the activities of sailing boats, catching fish, and selling the fish in wholesale markets on the riverside.\textsuperscript{59} The narrative detailing of empirical work practices that concretized particular laboring communities thus conceptually preceded their recasting as abstract and generic labor.

Gandhi contrasted labor not only with thought but also with work, that is, diverse occupations with differential skills and social value. When he argued that one should not abandon one’s traditional vocation even if lowly, when he did sweeping and cleaning to symbolize the “dignity of labor,” when he made spinning the center of his nationalism, he was doing precisely this—namely, denying the difference between work and work, by reifying the thing called labor as such.\textsuperscript{60} In his address to the striking mill hands of Ahmedabad in 1918, Gandhi argued against modern-day specialization, which prevented workers from moving between different kinds of work.\textsuperscript{61}

Ambedkar argued strongly against this articulation of labor as a generic activity. He challenged both Gandhi’s moral rendering and the Marxists’ economic rendering of labor, and he did this precisely by bringing to center stage the question of the laborer. Ambedkar disputed the modern opinion that caste was a local variant of the universal division of labor—a formulation that allowed one to talk of labor as an abstract category across a social hierarchy of callings, such as study, war, production, commerce, and servile work. The caste system, he argued, was a division not of labor but of laborers.\textsuperscript{62} Writing in 1935, Gandhian and anthropologist Nirmal Kumar Bose argued along similar lines. He said that in India, adivasis or “first peoples” traditionally engaged in a great variety of occupations, from cultivation to craft to hunting. Hinduism integrated them into mainstream society by turning them into castes and assigned them fixed vocations, freezing their social and economic destiny for all time to come. Bose was one of those who used the name Shudra to denote working classes as a whole.\textsuperscript{63}

In 1929, Ambedkar refused support to the striking Ahmedabad Mill-Workers’ Union. Untouchables were not allowed to work in cotton mills because touchable workers refused to associate with them.\textsuperscript{64} Thus, even when they gave up untouchable work for mainstream factory work, untouchables continued to carry on their person the trace of degraded labor. Labor was thus clearly inalienable from the laborer, and so it was erroneous to talk of labor as a universal category and workers as a universal class. In India, Ambedkar argued, the caste system prevented the rise of labor as a reckonable concept. Caste destroyed labor power, created a disconnect between labor and aptitude, “devitalized” laborers, and prevented their political mobilization. It enclosed groups of workers into impermeable compartments, preventing them from coming together.
in equality and solidarity. Caste enclosures also prevented mobility between occupations, which might have encouraged the experience of labor as a common activity across vocations. There was also in the caste system an unbreachable division between one kind of work and another. Some forms of labor were stigmatized as untouchable and provoked evasion in the worker and aversion in others.65

Yet Ambedkar established a labor party of his own in 1936. His Independent Labour Party campaigned for state-sponsored industrialization, fair labor laws, workers’ education, abolition of the jagirdari and khot systems that kept low-caste individuals tied to servile labor in rural areas, and the inclusion of untouchables at all levels of industrial work. He was criticized by communists for breaking up the unity of the workers’ movement, and his party fared badly in the 1937 provincial elections. Soon after, he gave up on the idea of a labor party and set up the Scheduled Castes Federation. His experiment with labor qua labor thus seemed to have failed.

Stating that the homo economicus was nowhere to be found in the world, including in the capitalist West, Ambedkar criticized both nationalists and communists for their economism. They expected workers to participate in trade unions as labor, that is, as a purely economic subject, but in the national movement as a potential citizen, that is, as a socially and culturally unmarked political subject. They refused to set up a labor party, which would have turned labor from an economic into a political force, or acknowledge that the politicization of labor could never just be a class activity. Labor in India, Ambedkar added, had to fight not just capitalism but also Brahminism. For if capitalism was the exploitation of labor, Brahminism was the degradation of laborers. Both elites and workers were under the spell of Brahminism. “I say that it is the primary concern of the laboring class to bring about a reconstruction of society,” Ambedkar said, in an implicit critique of the Gandhian version of “social reconstruction” based on an absolutist imagination of the dignity of labor.66

Though Ambedkar is known predominantly as a theorist and critic of caste, the labor question (and his engagement with Gandhi and the communists on the same) was critical to the development of his thought. While his experiments with a labor party might have been partly pragmatic—an effort at widening his political base beyond untouchables in the absence of universal franchise or separate electorates for Depressed Classes67—they cannot be read only as strategic. By cast(e)ing the labor question, Ambedkar showed the difficulty—even the impossibility—of glossing the everyday activity of labor as political action, despite contemporary efforts at universalizing labor through its recasting as economic necessity, aesthetic creativity, or moral value. As Ambedkar poi-
gnantly argued, labor as pure and universal action was always already haunted by the shadow of the laborer as a particular subject.

**Labor and Struggle**

This brings us to *struggle*, the other term that came to stand in for both the everyday fact of labor and political action in the twentieth century. Gandhi’s propagation of nonviolence and his unceasing criticism not only of revolutionaries and communists but also of the disorderly masses have caused the “violence question” to appear determining of modern Indian politics. This ethical focus on violence per se, however, takes away from what was at the time a more widely debated question—that of struggle and force. Violence, of course, is one form that struggle can take. But a conceptual collapse of struggle and violence prevents us from grasping the full complexity of the question of action as it emerged in twentieth-century politics—involving issues of labor, hunger, and war with respect to the ontology of common life.

Gandhi recognized the centrality of struggle in human life. His practices of fasting and celibacy were nothing if not struggles with the desires and cravings of the self as much as against the temptations of modern society. Gandhi also acknowledged with empathy the everyday struggles of people against poverty and hunger. His theory of capitalist trusteeship—the principle that the rich held their wealth not as owners but as trustees of the public—was, however, geared toward a sublation of the question of struggle.68 Equally, by saying that enlightened politics required that erstwhile masters learn to serve the servile classes, Gandhi transformed labor—especially untouchable labor—into a principle of *seva* (public service).69 It was by inverting struggle into service that Gandhi elaborated his framework of nonviolence, turning labor from being an acutely agonistic everyday experience to being a moral discipline. To communists, on the other hand, the laboring body was political not because it was moral but because it could turn, seamlessly and quickly, into a retributive and forceful body by virtue of its inherent kinesis.

Zainul Abedin’s sketches of man and beast in heavy, physical labor, are titled *Struggle*. In his essay on *sanhati* (solidarity), quoted earlier, Tagore described working people of the world as *vahan*—draft animals who dragged and drove the world forward—reiterating the image of power and struggle in the sketches that follow.70

Communists in Bengal wrote profusely in order to establish struggle as a valid mode of political action for the masses. In more didactic writings, struggle was posited as the way in which the philosophical principle of dialectics
translated into common experience. Conflict and contradiction were critical
to the movement of not only thought but also life, as Jagajjit Sarkar explained
in a 1931 essay—whence our experience of the world as a set of antinomies: life/
death, light/darkness, rich/poor.71 Many of these essays on struggle and dialec-
tics illustrate the novel ways in which dialectics were concretized and popular-
ized in vernacular Marxist traditions. More relevant for us, however, are writ-
ings that sought to establish struggle as an everyday fact of life. Human labor,
after all, was a struggle against the vagaries of nature, scarcity, hunger, and
ultimately the appropriation of fruits of labor by those who did not labor.72 In
other words, struggle was a priori constitutive of the act and experience of labor
and not a cultivated skill. The task was simply to politicize this commonplace
fact of struggle.

The catch, however, lay in what exactly politicization meant. At one level,
struggle could too easily shade into war. The metaphor of war, we know, was cen-
tral to modern political imagination. We have already mentioned Aurobindo’s
staging of the Kurukshetra War as representative of those moments in life when
dharma or existing codes of social and moral conduct came into crisis. Commu-
nist discourse, unsurprisingly, was also full of idioms of war. Subhas Mukho-
padhyay published his first volume of poems in 1940 and named it Padatik, after
the figure of the foot soldier. Even Gandhi described satyagraha as a “battle” for
truth—dharmayuddha.73 And Ambedkar incessantly talked of “class war.”

What work does the metaphor of war do in these debates around labor
and politics? War, incidentally, did not always signify a moment of exception,
a decisionist and founding moment of sovereign violence à la Carl Schmitt.
Even Aurobindo, who might be read as suggesting this by virtue of his crisis-
of-dharma thesis, insisted that ordinary life itself was full of warlike moments.
Ambedkar, like the communists, also argued that the everyday life of the op-
pressed was unceasing class war. War was therefore a permanent condition
of being rather than a momentous political event. This “normalizing” of war
might not seem surprising with regard to the communists, given Marx’s fa-
mous formulation that “all human history is a history of class struggle.” It is,
however, worth staying a bit longer with Ambedkar.

In his comparative text “Buddha or Karl Marx,” Ambedkar argued that
while Marx’s theses on the economic determination of history and the inevi-
tability of socialism were no longer valid, his theses regarding private property
and class war were still indisputable. Even the Buddha, epitome of nonviolence,
who said that possession was at the heart of avarice and instructed the monk
to practice nonpossession, acknowledged the eternal reality of class conflict
based on private property.74 In his “Philosophy of Hinduism,” Ambedkar ar-
Ambedkar argued that the study of war was a useful meditation on the nature of action. In a review of Bertrand Russell’s *Principles of Social Reconstruction*, he said that though Russell’s was a thesis against war, it must not be read—as Indians were prone to do, under the influence of the dogma of nonviolence—as a pacifist or quietist text. Russell argued, according to Ambedkar, that many of the constituent elements of war—adventure, contingency, contest, solidarity, resistance and its overcoming—were essential to human action. Elsewhere, Ambedkar added that the Buddha was not an absolutist regarding nonviolence in the way that Mahavira, the founder of Jainism (and perhaps by implication Gandhi), was. He even argued that Hinduism was able to impose the grossly unjust caste system on people because it had perfected the strategy of preventing “direct action” by Shudras, by prohibiting castes other than Kshatriyas from carrying arms. Like the denial of knowledge, the denial of arms to the poor was crucial to the institution of inequality. Thus, despite his trenchant critique of the fratricidal violence of the Mahabharata, Ambedkar insisted that struggle, indeed armed struggle, was a valid mode of political action for the oppressed.

Gandhi’s theory of nonviolent action was based on his famous means-end thesis. Gandhi argued that the righteousness of an end did not justify the violence of the means. Means had to be morally accounted for on their own terms. Ambedkar gave a profound twist to this means-end problematic. He argued that Shudras in India were unable to act politically because they themselves were the means of other people’s actions. Hindu lawbooks defined Shudras and untouchables as those who were meant to serve other castes. Servitude denied them autonomy of labor and freedom of action. The oppressed—like slaves of Plato’s time—were instrumentalized by others. Clearly, if Gandhi referenced war as grounds for his means-end thesis, Ambedkar referenced labor as a counterpoint in order to rethink the very same means-end problematic.

War and labor inflect the means-end problematic in very different ways. It is not just that war is a means of destruction and labor a means of produc-
tion. Rather, war and labor entail differently configured means-end relationships. In war (as in sports), despite stable rules of engagement, contingency, innovation, and improvisation decide the end. It is because of this shifting and unpredictable nature of actions—surprise and chance elements as they are often called—that, in war, the means always already remains under dispute. The means of war turns into a gray gambit zone beyond the domain of plan, strategy, decision, and even tactics. The end of war—victory or validation—therefore stands apart, somewhat autonomously, from the means of war, in the sense of being causally underdetermined by the means. Thus, in evaluating the conduct of war, the question of morality tends to supersede that of efficacy. In labor, however, the efficacy of the means is of supreme concern. In labor, questions of skill, competence, plan, and experience become technical and poetic, in the archaic senses of the terms. Labor oriented toward the production or creation of an end product involves a combination of innovative artfulness (poiesis) and appropriate technicality (techne) in the acts of making or doing. The product of labor is thus the manifest form of the means of labor. In labor, unlike in war, the question of the rightness of means thus cannot be displaced entirely into the moral realm. Political action in colonial India appeared suspended between these two distinct connotations of the means-end problematic, mobilized, respectively, by Gandhi and Ambedkar. It is this ambiguity that is captured by the term struggle. Struggle is a mode of action that draws on both war and labor but in the end is neither. It embodies an in-between moment, framed by the moral-social, on the one hand, and the technical-aesthetic, on the other.

Ambedkar disagreed with the Gandhian proposition that the end did not justify the means. If the end did not justify the means, what else did, he wondered, after his mentor, John Dewey. Ambedkar stated:

Buddha would have probably admitted that it is only the end which could justify the means. What else could? And he would have said that if the end justified violence, violence was a legitimate means for the end in view. He certainly would not have exempted property owners from force if force was the only means for that end. . . .

As to Dictatorship the Buddha would have none of it.

Ambedkar was criticizing communists not for their espousal of violence as Gandhi did but for another reason altogether. The communists saw the state as their primary means of action. Ambedkar not only objected to the idea of the “dictatorship of the proletariat,” but he also questioned the communist promise that once the task of the state was done, it would automatically “wither away” like a redundant and obsolete tool. Communists, Ambedkar ar-
gued, failed to offer any alternative means of political action in the absence of the state. Will politics itself disappear in a perfectly equal society? he asked.84

Dictatorship, perhaps, was also a veiled reference to Gandhi and his attempts at the strict regulation of mass political action. Ambedkar implied that Gandhi turned the means question into a fetish. Hinduism did precisely that, he added. It prescribed a plethora of rules and rituals, which were in effect the means for instituting a structure of “graded inequality” across classes. But instead of admitting these rules as mere means to an end, Hinduism represented them as ends in themselves. “These customs are essentially of the nature of means, though they are represented as ideals. . . . One might safely say that idealization of means is necessary and in this particular case was perhaps motivated to endow them with greater efficacy.”85 By dissimulating the means as ends—that is, through their idealization and absolutization—Hinduism not only “sacralized” social order but also sacralized “economic relationships between workman and workman.” “Nowhere has society consecrated its occupations—the way of getting a living. Economic activity has always remained outside the sanctity of religion. . . . The Hindus are the only people in the world whose economic order—the relation of workman to workman—is consecrated by religion and made sacred, eternal and inviolate.”86 Thus, particular forms of labor in India—in actuality the means of production—were made into ends in themselves and therefore turned into absolute caste destiny for laborers.

It was here that Ambedkar’s famous distinction between rules and principles came into play. Rules were prescriptive; they decreed and regulated action. Principles, however, did not engender action by themselves. They were materialized in action via diverse acts of interpretation.87 Rules produced compliant and obedient bodies; principles produced autonomous and imaginative agency. Rules were of the status of mere means—they could be rendered into religious law as did Hinduism, but that did not change their true nature. Principles, on the other hand, were ends that called for a creative fashioning of appropriate means according to the contingencies of time and place. Hinduism was a religion of rules, Buddhism of principles. They enjoined different modes and mechanisms of action.

The open-endedness of means was critical to Ambedkar. Actors do not always have full control over means, he said: “For a means once employed liberates many ends—a fact scarcely recognized—and not the only one we wish it to produce.”88 Even though, in practical terms, we put absolute value on a single end, we must remain alert to the other potential results that might follow from our action. We must remain wary that other ends unleashed in the course of an action are not sacrificed to one singular end (so therefore freedom must not
be sacrificed at the altar of equality and vice versa). The analogy with labor is evident. Labor intended toward one product creates multiple by-products of no less value than the product itself. The force, contingency, and unpredictability of means, as epitomized in war, is thus mitigated in Ambedkar by the image of the many-pronged productivity of means, as epitomized in labor. (Note that Ambedkar is not talking here of unintended consequences as much as of the infinite and unregulated potentiality of action as such.)

We return to labor once more. Ambedkar dwelled on the Buddhist precept of “nonpossession” and critiqued the institution of private property. However, in response to the Gandhian criticism that modernity promoted acquisitive and possessive instincts, Ambedkar argued that the notion of ownership must be differently understood with regard to haves and have-nots. For the laboring classes, ownership was about the right to the fruits of one’s own labor (mark the contrast with the nishkama karma notion), while for the capitalist, ownership was about the expropriation of fruits of other people’s labor. Referring to industrial disputes in modern times, Ambedkar argued that labor was prone to greater militancy, even violent action, not because workers lacked civility but because they lacked ownership over their own labor. The only way to mitigate violence, then, was to return to the working classes ownership over labor and the products of labor. For labor undertaken with a sense of ownership and responsibility was an ideal combination of creative and possessive human instincts. Ambedkar quoted the Buddha’s advice to his disciple Anathapindika—that believers must be encouraged to “acquire wealth justly and lawfully through industry and to delight in gifts and sharing.” In this idealized ancient yet postcapitalist form, labor was indeed model human action—unlike in an unequal society, where labor became a subsidiary instrument, merely a means, toward other people’s property and accumulation.

Conclusion

In the tradition of European political theory, Hannah Arendt and Karl Marx proposed two distinct ways in which to think the politics of labor. Arendt saw labor, the moment of private necessity rather than collective freedom, as the opposite of public political action. Conversely, Marx saw labor as potentially the freest of political agencies because it was productive, futural, and without stakes in the capitalist present. Instead of following either Arendt or Marx, however, I offer here a rereading of the history of labor in order to interrogate the assumed self-evidence of the modern concept of political action. After all, in and by itself, action means nothing in a world where, we now know,
nothing is inactive, even matter. The significance of action as we know it today derives from a fairly recent conceptual collapsing of action with politics. *Action*—otherwise an empty and unremarkable term—in order to become sui generis political had to be qualified as alternatively sacrifice, labor, and war, and made to simultaneously index politics and life. The term *struggle* was meant to subsume all three moments of *karma*, labor, and war without becoming identical to any of them. The twentieth-century global symbol of the sickle—tool of labor, weapon of war, crescent moon of poetry—embodied this projected multivalence of struggle as productive, creative, everyday, and, if need be, spectacularly violent action.
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