A new map of Indian industrial society: 
the cartographer all at sea.

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ABSTRACT

What do liberalization, globalization, microelectronics & flexible labour markets mean for industrial workers & their families? We need home-made maps, which people use to understand their society, & observers’ maps. Observers superimposed class on home-made caste maps.

Now industrial employment is on everyone’s map, including rural people. Until recently, everyone hoped to climb a mountain, with well-paid secure employment at the top. A job was property. Now the most valuable property is knowledge & contacts. There are two mountains, one offering security (especially in the public sector) at the top, the other greater rewards. Most people inhabit the lower slopes.

Do workers see a trend towards polarization, into upwardly-mobile workers & those with little chance? If so, are they right? Where are the barriers to mobility (on their maps, & on ours)? Should we be more optimistic, or more pessimistic, than they are?
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He had bought a large map representing the sea,
Without the least vestige of land:
And the crew were much pleased when they found it to be
A map they could all understand.

‘What’s the good of Mercator’s North Pole and Equators,
Tropics, Zones, and Meridian Lines?’
So the Bellman would cry: and the crew would reply
‘They are merely conventional signs!

‘Other maps are such shapes, with their islands and capes!
But we’ve got our brave Captain to thank’
(So the crew would protest) ‘that he’s bought us the best —
A perfect and absolute blank!’

Lewis Carroll, The hunting of the Snark.

1. Introduction.

Our maps of Indian industrial society are not blank, but they are rapidly going out of date. You
need up-to-date maps to navigate safely: to plan ahead, to know what to expect and where the
dangers are, and to act.

The landscape is changing, eroded by processes loosely described as globalization,
liberalization and labour flexibility, and the impact of new markets and technologies. What do these
changes mean for industrial workers, their families, and other people in the new industrial society?
And (changing metaphors) if the rules of the game are changing, will there be new winners and
losers, or the same old faces?

The evidence is not yet in; the results have not worked through — as they have in the Asian
‘Tigers’ — or they have not been reported: compare South Africa, so soon after the collapse of
apartheid, or post-Soviet Russia. Yet there is already wide discussion and speculation about these
things’ impact on employment, on the organization of work &c. I will take the discussion further,
to ask how some of the people caught up in these developments see their new situation, and

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whether they are right. I cannot yet provide accurate maps of the new industrial (even post-industrial) society which is coming into being, only procedures for map-making: hypotheses to test, and questions to answer, about how the situation of different groups may be changing, and how people see their situation.

2. Two kinds of flexibility

First some definitions, because words like liberalization, globalization and flexibility are used rather loosely. By any measure, the extent of liberalization in India is modest when compared with Britain, America or even China. ‘Globalization’ is imprecise.

Everyone seems to agree that labour flexibility is the key to competitiveness and job creation; but there agreement ends, because ‘flexibility’ has at least two meanings:

Flexibility ... can take the form of ‘active versatility’ or ‘passive pliability’ (Semlinger 1990): that is, it can consist of the ability to exploit market niches and quickly respond to orders, based on a skilled and polyvalent labour force; or it can also mean simply to submit to outside pressures from customers, and to accept cutbacks, and to pass on the flexibility requirements of the market to the workforce in a coercive manner through expanding and retrenching production volume, forcing wage concessions, making ‘flexible’ use of short-time and casual employment, etc. (Sengenberger & Pyke 1992:14)

Leborgne and Lipietz (1991:42) make a similar distinction between ‘offensive’ and ‘defensive’ flexibility. As international competition became fiercer, some countries and industries have followed one strategy, some the other. Sengenberger and Pyke call these strategies the ‘low road’ and the ‘high road’ to industrial restructuring.

The ‘low road’ ... consists of seeking competitiveness through low labour cost, and a deregulated labour market environment. It is believed that cost-cutting will boost productivity and profits, and create new employment. Institutions and rules aimed at regulating competition are seen as mere straightjackets, and should be kept to a minimum...

The principal alternative ... is the ‘high road’ of constructive competition, based on efficiency enhancement and innovation ... through economic gains that make wage gains and improvements in social conditions feasible, as well as safeguarding workers’ rights and providing adequate standards of social protection. (Sengenberger & Pyke 1992:12-3)

At one end we have industrial systems where labour is regarded as a resource to be invested in, rather than a cost to be minimized: as in many German and Japanese firms, or the industrial districts of north-central Italy. At the other end (or near it) post-Reagan America and post-Thatcher Britain. There are strong arguments on both sides, and defensible positions in between (see the recent [1997] Blair-Jospin debate about flexibility in Europe). The rhetoric of flexible labour markets and flexible specialization implies a bright future of flexible work and employability for everyone, and there are enough examples to suggest the ‘high road’ may be an option.

But these are rich countries with educated populations. Some say poor countries have only
one choice, which is low-road flexibility: maximize the comparative advantage of a work force prepared to work for low wages, without security or protected working conditions; low-paid jobs for the many, rather than high pay for a few and unemployment for many more. Here India is often contrasted unfavourably (not least by Indians) with other developing countries, which have weaker unions and little legal protection for workers’ rights.

The high road means harnessing the inevitable flexibility to serve the interests of most if not all workers: their needs for security, a good wage, and some satisfaction in their work. But in practice the high road may be open to some workers — those with the right skills, or living in the right places, or of the right sex — but not to others.

Whatever the arguments for and against it, the trend in India over the past few years has been towards passive, defensive, low-road flexibility; with exceptions in some companies, areas, and social groups. Workers who thought they had secure jobs find they no longer have them. Those who hoped to get a secure job find that less and less such jobs exist, but there are new kinds of work to be had. The majority, who never had or expected a secure job, keep looking for the best deal they can get. Meanwhile, technological change and global markets create new opportunities for well-paid interesting careers. Some gain, others lose.

3. Observers’ maps & home-made maps

How has the new flexibility affected different kinds of people — entrepreneurs, managers, permanently employed skilled workers, unskilled or casual workers, workers in large and small firms, industrial workers and farmers, castes and religions and language groups, men and women? This paper is mainly about industrial workers, how they see their own situation and act in it. Should we see their situation as they do, or differently?

We need two kinds of map. First, the home-made maps which different sorts of people — rich and poor, educated and uneducated, men and women — use to understand their own society — significant groups, cleavages, opportunities and constraints — and to make decisions.

Secondly, observers’ maps, made not just by piecing together home-made maps but by adding a critical commentary: comparing one group’s home-made map with another, seeing how far these explain behaviour, and drawing on knowledge of economics, technology, other societies, future trends, demography and so forth, which may not be available to the people themselves. Observers include social anthropologists, sociologists, economists and journalists. Most are Indians, but some (like me) are foreigners.

In other words, we need to relate the inside (the people’s view, as far as we can find it out) to the outside (what we observe, including things they are not aware of, e.g. how a new technology works, or what is happening in the world economy), without reducing and distorting the people’s own experience or explaining it away, for example by assuming that people’s class or sex entirely determines their world view.

This is why the Marxian notion of ‘false consciousness’ is dangerous. Clearly people’s view of their world is biased by material interests and clouded by ignorance; but to assume that our view is objective, while theirs is merely subjective and ideological, can lead too easily to circular or
unfalsifiable arguments (like the Freudian view that if people deny infantile sexuality, this only shows they are repressing uncomfortable memories, so the theory must be true: some religions argue in the same way). Our view of their view should be critical but not deterministic. If an argument is deterministic, it must be wrong.

Observers’ maps, then, take account of home-made maps but go beyond them, because they also use knowledge which may not be available to the people. But especially in modern conditions, home-made maps are affected by observers’ maps, as people lose their sociological innocence: what is written about them — by sociologists, historians, journalists or novelists — quickly becomes part of popular culture, religion and politics.

Social maps, unlike ordinary maps, show time and values. People understand and tell their life stories — their situation and prospects in relation to past experience; a job as part of a career, a line leading somewhere. Both home-made and observers’ maps show the future: guesses about what is likely to happen. Industrial workers, would-be workers and their families need such maps to plan ahead, to guess the likely results of particular decisions (to move to the city, learn a skill, have another baby), to know whom to trust, whether to unite with others or go it alone, whom to respect and how to be respected. Moreover home-made maps always, and observers’ maps often, imply or conceal value judgments: about justice and injustice, exploitation and rights.

We need to investigate current home-made maps and update observers’ maps. Here are some suggestions as to how to go about it, and some disjointed bits of territory we should find space for in our maps. Sociological curiosity is a respectable motive; but there is also a practical payoff from all this map-making, for Indians who have to make decisions affecting employment, prosperity and welfare. They are moving into new territory marked with unfamiliar names like ‘liberalization’ and ‘globalization’, with out-of-date maps to guide them. What can be done to make life better for the mass of Indian women and men? A good map would help.

4. Caste maps & class maps

In older home-made and observers’ maps of Indian society, caste dominates the landscape. This is above all a caste society, with non-Hindus divided into caste-like groups. Wiser (1936) pieced together the home-made maps of dominant castes throughout India to make his observer’s map of the jajmāni system, a web of moral and economic relationships between interdependent castes. In principle (i.e. according to these home-made maps) ‘Each [caste] serves the others. Each in turn is master. Each in turn is servant’ (ibid., xxxi), though on Wiser’s observer’s map the relation is not always ‘symmetrical’ or fair. Gandhi hoped to restore the system of hereditary specialization to its original purity, without exploitation: the home-made map was all right, but people were not following it as they should.

Dumont (1970) made the most thoroughgoing attempt to unite local home-made maps of caste society in a grand synthesis, an all-India observer’s map of an interdependent society, with a value system which subordinates economics to religious duty. Hierarchy runs all the way down, between and within castes. For good measure, he drew a contrasting map of a formally equalitarian but stratified western society; and yet another map of a racist society which, lacking a sense of hierarchy, tries to square the reality of exploitation with a perverted equalitarianism — all (white) men are equal, all (black) men are equal, but equality stops at the ‘racial’ boundary.
In principle, castes should not compete. Of course they always did — demographic and technical change saw to that — but their competition was decently covered up by the fiction that everyone was following his father’s trade, if not his great-grandfather’s, and by an escape clause which allowed any caste to engage in agriculture or trade with few restrictions (Pocock 1962, Holmström 1984:34).

The meanings and practical consequences of caste have always been elastic, but castes now compete openly. Interdependence is dead. Hierarchy becomes naked inequality. ‘There is a shift from the caste system to individual castes... Castes exist but, it would appear, the caste system has ceased to be.’ (Pocock 1957:290. This was written about Indians in East Africa, but is now just as true of India itself.)

Traditional home-made maps of Indian society, then, are caste-based. Observers’ maps superimposed class on traditional caste maps. This led to debate about how far the people had ideas of class as distinct from caste. Leach looks back to a Golden Age of caste, before colonialism, overpopulation, class exploitation and “liberal” legislation. In a true caste system

members of the high-status ‘dominant caste’ ... must compete among themselves for the services of individual members of the lower ‘castes’. In a class system, social status and economic security go together — the higher the greater; in contrast, in a caste society, status and security are polarized... The low castes suffer economically not because they are low castes but because present conditions have turned them into an unemployed working-class. (Leach 1962:6)

In other words, Leach thinks a caste map would have been adequate two hundred years ago — a good account of reality — but now you need a class map too.

Caste maps were home-made models, the way most Indians understood their society. Many observers’ maps are class maps, especially if the observers are Marxists. For Meillassoux (1973:108) caste is and always was ‘no more than an ideological screen which hid social reality by scattering social divisions along the whole length of a formal hierarchy, and submerging exploitative relations among them’, the jajmāni system ‘only a relationship of clientship affecting a relatively weak portion of the population’ (ibid., p.99).

But class — in the Marxian sense of groups of people who share a similar relation to the means of production — also figures on the people’s home-made maps, when relations of wealth and power are explicitly recognised as something separate from caste. Béteille argues convincingly that this recognition is not something new, or merely an outsider’s category for understanding traditional Indian society.

5. God made the country, and man made the town.’ (Cowper)

Another feature looms large on observers’ and home-made maps of Indian society: a feature which can easily, if misleadingly, be read from ordinary geographical maps too. This is the line between rural-agricultural India (equated with the ‘real’ or traditional India) and urban-industrial India.

This line is an optical illusion: neither villagers nor city dwellers live in closed social worlds
with totally different life styles, and they never did. For centuries, even millennia, India has been a city-centred society, where many or most villages could be seen as extensions or imperfect copies of the city, economically, politically and ideologically. Agriculture is an industry like any other, though it has special requirements (plenty of space) and features (dependence on the weather). It can be organized in many ways, involving very diverse relations of production.

I need not labour the point — the traditional/modern dichotomy has taken enough beatings already (e.g. Pocock 1960) — yet the old stereotypes linger on because there is some truth in them. People continue to think in terms of ‘westernization’ or modernity, a whole package of imported institutions and values and life styles, especially in cities, which challenge the traditional, mainly rural, society. The idea is naïve but not absurd; and it helped observers as well as the people themselves to make sense of the changes which came first with colonialism and then the new kind of industrialization, with powered machinery.

There is excellent historical work on early Indian industrialization, and the conversion of rural migrants into factory workers. The first impact of industrialism on Indian society was through the big factories, especially cotton and jute mills, also coal mines and railway workshops. These brought Indian industry to a plateau where it remained, with relatively slow growth, from 1911 (Tata Iron & Steel Co. at Jamshedpur) until the public-sector-led push for growth after Independence. This was followed by an expansion of Fordist mass production in some enclaves, a protected and subsidized ‘small-scale sector’, much larger ‘informal sector’ feeding the ‘formal’ one, and the slow growth of a diversified innovative industrial economy — slow, that is, in comparison with India’s eastern neighbours. This period came to an end — or did it? — with ‘Mannohanomics’, the reforms introduced by Finance Minister Manmohan Singh around 1990, and the beginnings of a transformation of Indian industry by globalization, liberalization and microelectronics.

What impact have these successive stages of industrialization had on Indian society, especially on the lives and prospects of different kinds of workers? And how do workers see their own situation? Are their home-made maps, the ways they divide up the social world, culturally specific to India, or typical of ‘neophyte proletarians’ anywhere, now and in the past?

According to a distinguished historian of Indian labour, Indian industrial development is ‘part of the very broad movement which had its origins in Western Europe’ (Morris 1983:553):

group tensions and conflicts in Indian industry take on the characteristics of Western industrialization and do not require any analysis specifically developed to suit the requirements of a distinctively Indian situation... The group tensions which will confront Indian industry ... will remind [the scholar] very much of those which affected other regions in early periods of economic development. (Morris 1965:160, quoted in Chandavarkar 1994:12)

Yet as Chandavarkar (1994) has shown, industrialization and rural-urban migration have perpetuated or reinforced many of the supposed ‘pre-industrial’ characteristics and values of the work force. Cleavages, tensions and conflicts in the new industrial society continue a process of constantly redrawing boundaries, making and unmaking alliances — between castes, classes, sects and factions — which has gone on in the ‘pre-industrial’ society for as far back as we have records.
This is the normal effect of industrialization in most countries. ‘Pre-industrial’ societies are not as static, conservative or conflict-free as they appear with nostalgic hindsight; nor should we assume that when you have seen one pre-industrial society, you have seen them all. Yet people still use old maps of Indian industrial society, which show a mainly rural, traditional and static ‘pre-industrial’ society hit by the impact of industrialism: peasants became proletarians, implying a sharper contrast between ‘pre-industrial’ and proletarian ways than may be justified.

Now there are no neophytes left, or very few. The possibility of industrial employment is on everyone’s map, including rural people, except perhaps in the most remote places. Both men and women know about it, have friends with experience of industrial work and/or living in industrial cities, and must consider the possibility for themselves. As Ernest Gellner wrote (1964:133), ‘Industrialization, like sex but more genuinely so, is rather special the first time’. We are all born neophytes and virgins: there is always a first job and a first time. But Indian rural society, as distinct from the individuals who compose it, lost its virginity long ago.

The contrast between ‘industrial’ and ‘preindustrial’ ways now has even less meaning than before. ‘Traditional’ rural society is alive and well, because sophisticated urban people, and the mass media, take care to keep it alive, or reinvent it. In some places a ‘traditional’ rural life can only be kept going by remittances from the cities (Parry 1979:45) or from abroad (as in Kerala). Does this sound familiar? Our maps of western society mark out a large space for traditional ways, especially rural ways: tradition becomes ‘heritage’, a theme park. Something similar is happening in India now. Rural-urban migration continues, but the image of the migrant as industrial neophyte is out of date, or fast becoming so.

6. The and the mountain: desperately seeking security

Since the first wave of industrialization, Indian society has gone through not one but two profound transformations: first the Nehruvian and Post-Nehruvian era of steady industrialization with indicative planning, protection, Permit-Licence Raj and a leading role for the public sector; and now, liberalization, Manmohanomics and computers.

In two books (South Indian factory workers, 1976, and Industry and inequality, 1984) I drew maps of both kinds, showing the prominent features of the new industrial society that was coming into being in the Nehruvian and Post-Nehruvian era, as I saw the situation (an observer’s map) and as workers in various situations saw it (home-made maps). These maps need updating in the new situation.

I argued (Holmström 1976) that many Indians saw their society as divided into two groups: people inside a citadel of secure ‘organized sector’ employment, and outsiders trying to scale the walls. This was their home-made map.

Since industrial workers, would-be workers and their families believed there was a citadel, they devoted their efforts to climbing over the wall as young as possible, if possible with help from friends already inside; then to staying in the citadel at all costs — never leaving a job except for an equally safe one — and helping selected relatives and friends over the wall (i.e. finding them jobs). Safety first, then income. The consequences of falling out of the citadel, into the bottomless pit of
unemployment, were terrifying.

Caste figured on this map in three ways. Caste connexions enabled some people to find jobs in the citadel: not only the highest castes, because historical accidents, as well as caste reservations in education and the public sector, created middle- or lower-caste enclaves inside the citadel (like Bombay foundry workers: Holmström 1984:215) which could perpetuate themselves for years, even generations. Education gave some castes a headstart, even without these contacts. And people believed caste counted even when it did not.

The home-made maps of workers inside the citadel, or those hoping to get in, show not only what is but what ought to be. The difference between castes is an obvious fact; their inequality is another fact, but no longer something most people care to defend in public:

The ideology of inequality, presumably the hallmark of Hindu civilization, to a large extent seems to have lost social legitimacy... Claims for domination and superiority from above are not easily conceded nowadays and may even be actively resisted by those at the bottom of society. (Breman 1996:262-3)

‘Merit’ gives you a moral claim to a job; it is ‘a mixture of innate qualities like "intelligence" and acquired ones like education or the skills presently in demand on the labour market, but it always implies some element of achievement, as opposed to influence, connexions or luck’ (Holmström 1984:210-1). Caste counts — you should look after your own kind — but even Brahmans no longer claim that high castes deserve high status or rewards. Dalits or ex-Untouchables may deserve jobs because of past discrimination: they are a special case (or not, depending on your point of view). The only others who deserve jobs because of their birth are relatives of dead or retired employees, since the job is like heritable property. Of course not everyone inside the citadel shares the same map or the same values.

The citadel also figured on observers’ maps — the maps in the heads of politicians, planners and academics — leading to the view that those inside the citadel were privileged at the expense of those outside. The practical and political conclusion was that the protection given to ‘formal’ or ‘organized sector’ workers, by labour legislation and strong unions, should be removed to give outsiders a chance.

Later, like a good Popperite, I falsified my own hypothesis (Holmström 1984). I suggested that the division was less clearcut: Indian society was like a mountain, with various slopes, plateaux, and paths up and down. A simple dualistic model was misleading, because the security of the citadel was often an illusion; and because the same family or household often includes people inside and outside the citadel, especially now that more women work for wages: in the past, only women at the top (like doctors and lawyers) and the bottom (field or building labourers) did so. I tried to refute the politically-loaded argument that ‘organized sector’ workers were privileged at the expense of those outside, and that making organized sector workers worse off would make the others better off.

Breman (1996) adapted this map. He sees many hills rising out of a plain of poverty:

Instead of speaking about one long extended slope, as Holmström does, I am inclined to
argue that the landscape of labour has the appearance of a vast plain broken by many larger and smaller hills. These hills are zones of industrial activities whose top is made up of workplaces that are related to, or which even completely satisfy, the criteria ... characteristic of formal sector employment, while from lower down attempts are made to gain access to the secure but fenced-off positions. Seen from this point of view, the social complexity cannot be reduced to a unilinear labour hierarchy... Employers in every branch of business encircle themselves with a fairly small core of permanent workers through whom a reserve of casual workers can be drawn in and dismissed, in accordance with the need of the moment. Great mobility and fluidity prevail at the foot of the hills. (Breman 1996:225)

This is an observer’s map: how Breman believes the labour market works; and he implies it is also the way many Indians — correctly — see their chances. People on the lower slopes use any tie or pull they may have — kinship, caste, language, friendship or bribery — to break into one of the more fortunate groups. Each group tries to achieve a monopoly of some source of income, to keep out non-members, and to encroach on the territory claimed by other groups:

The tendency to fence-off a particular field of employment has to be seen as an attempt to monopolize certain occupational roles or activities for social equals in a situation of extreme scarcity. Conversely, attempts are made to penetrate another sphere of work — by establishing a bridgehead and by using various mechanisms and channels to facilitate access from another environment. (Breman 1985:56)

The frequently heard view, that small-scale and non-institutionalized activities are capable of almost unlimited expansion and that newcomers can set themselves up as self-employed with almost no money or without too much trouble and with few tools, because those already present obligingly make room for them, is a dangerous and misplaced romanticization of the hard fight for existence at the bottom of the urban economy. (Ibid., 59)

Breman thinks the labour market, at every level from high-paid jobs to casual labour, is more fragmented, more divided into fenced-off domains, than I allowed for in my simpler models of the citadel (one big wall to climb) or the mountain (one summit, many ways up).

The citadel, the mountain, and Breman’s many hills are observers’ maps — the situation as we saw it — and also a rough approximation to many people’s home-made maps — how they saw their own situation. My earlier map of the citadel — you are either in or out — partly explained people’s thoughts and actions, especially those inside the citadel or with a chance of getting in, and it is still some workers’ home-made map, especially in big firms and the public sector. But even they can see the citadel walls are crumbling. The public sector job for life is no longer as safe as it was. New slopes, barriers and mini-citadels are coming into being.
7. After Nehru: the end of security

The Nehruvian settlement was remarkably static over a long period, so books written in the early 1970s did not go out of date for twenty years. The economy grew, new technologies arrived, yet the structure of employment remained much the same. But as every driver knows, there comes a time when you have to throw away old maps and buy new ones. Indian workers have had to do so already, to find their way around the new liberal landscape: or more prosaically, to make a living. Observers’ maps need updating too.

The work force is fragmented into many layers and kinds of people (the permanently employed in safe jobs, casual or contract workers, large firms or small, well or badly paid, giving orders or obeying them). These divisions do not straightforwardly reflect the older hierarchies of caste or education, but all kinds of subtleties with local and sectoral variations, dependent on market forces, historical accidents, and political pull.

Under the Nehruvian settlement, the safest part of the citadel was the public sector, but a permanent job in a big private firm was almost as secure and much better paid. The unions saw to that. The big firms were fiefdoms dependent on the state, sheltered from competition by tariff protection, import quotas and licensing. Other fiefdoms were the smaller firms, sheltered from competition by the same policies, by the list of products reserved for ‘small-scale industries’, and by government help and subsidies; the farmers’ lobby; and cottage industries. There were border skirmishes between fiefdoms, but few major territorial gains.

Some of these fiefdoms, like the farmers’ lobby, are likely to survive the first shock of liberalization. Small-scale industries clamour for continued protection but are unlikely to get it. Many small firms cannot survive in the newly competitive markets. Their products are out of date, badly made and expensive. Yet there are two reasons to hope that many small and medium enterprises — though not a protected ‘small-scale sector’ — can ride out the storm. One is that firms which collapse will be replaced by new innovative ones with higher quality standards, creating more employment rather than less (which is not much consolation if you are too old, in the wrong place or with the wrong skills to find a new job). The other reason for hope is that small firms can improve their products, their bargaining power as suppliers to large firms, and their independent marketing networks, by joint action and forming consortia, usually on a local scale: rather as small firms have done with spectacular success in north-central Italy: a development known as ‘flexible specialization’. Whatever happens, this will leave a large mass of poorly-educated unskilled people, some from rural areas, others city-born, with only the prospect of low-paid casual work, unless and until the Indian economy experiences growth on a Chinese scale.

Large firms, including the newly reinforced transnationals, offer good pay and prospects but no longer the virtual job-for-life which workers came to expect: even a job beyond the grave, if the job could be passed on to your son. The Japanese job-for-life was also confined to the biggest firms, and is now under threat. The Indian system differed in that workers and their employers expected anyone would move to a better job inside the citadel if he — or more rarely she — could get it. But those days are over: older workers are particularly hard hit when they come to see this.
The citadel is still there, but it has shrunk to encompass little more than the public sector. Public sector enterprises too are attempting to downsize, improve efficiency and shed excess labour, but they are too vulnerable to union and political pressure to do so quickly. What is left is the hard core of the public sector, especially the bureaucracy.

In the past, when public sector factories were at their peak and grossly overstaffed, recruitment to them depended on a mixture of technical or meritocratic criteria and political ones, by which I mean not just the selection of people with political connexions but also those whose moral right to a job was guaranteed by law and policy. These were the Scheduled Castes and Tribes, now called Dalits (or a small élite from their number), later reinforced by the OBCs (‘Other Backward Classes’: in practice, castes with the political pull to scramble on to the bandwagon) and others who could claim victim status or other deserving status. A job was property, and these people — were widely perceived to have some special moral entitlement to jobs, if only to assuage high-caste guilt for past oppression: the backlash against reservations came later.

Now the ‘secure but fenced-off positions’ are almost confined to the public sector, and becoming even scarcer with the gradual running down or privatization of public sector enterprises. Of the few new public sector jobs, a high proportion will go to those with victim status. Those who would earlier have got into the public sector on ‘merit’ must look elsewhere.

Compare the current, and hugely successful, Chinese policy of making the economy competitive in world markets. India’s citadel corresponds to what the Chinese call the ‘iron rice bowl’, secure jobs with fringe benefits like housing in the older public sector enterprises. As part of the new policy of ‘breaking the iron rice bowl’, workers are being encouraged to ‘jump into the sea’ — the much better paid, but insecure, market economy (Christiansen & Fóti 1996:218-9). Some publicly-owned work units are cut adrift to fend for themselves in the market: this is ‘jumping into the sea in a boat.’ Some workers are ‘pushed into the sea’. There is no more room in the boat, no more rice in the bowl. The process has been less painful than it might have been because the gradual running down of the state-owned sector has been planned and phased, but mainly because of the fast growth of the market economy, the ‘sea’ on this home-made map.

In India, all that will be left of the citadel is the public sector. Those inside the public sector see it as a morally justified hierarchy, a refuge against crude market forces and globalization which are wreaking such havoc elsewhere (many Russians seem to take the same view, and look back with nostalgia to Soviet days). Certain kinds of people are entitled to a place in it, leaving little room for others. Some outside the public sector share this view: for example, those who see reserved jobs in the public sector as a lifeline to their caste. Others regard the public sector as a racket. Yet the market — especially a job market where rewards depend on qualifications, performance, future promise, and the supply and demand for particular skills — lacks moral legitimacy except among those who expect to do well from it. It is just not right that however hard you work, however long you perfect your skill, changing fashions and global market forces may leave you stranded.

In the new job market, what counts is knowledge, contacts and networks. The nature of skill has changed, from a trade learnt once (in a training institute, an apprenticeship, or on the job) and gradually improved over a lifetime, to the habit of continually solving new problems, building on a portfolio of skills already acquired. Some kinds of knowledge are bankable; others less so, especially if you are too old to learn new tricks or to find another job easily. Which kinds of
knowledge count, who has them already, how are they acquired and who has the chance to acquire them?

There was one mountain, with wealth, security and status at the top. Now there are two. Let us call these ‘Twin Peaks’ after a recent TV serial. One offers security and, for many people, better incomes than they could expect elsewhere. This is what is left of the citadel, redefined as the public sector. Castes and pressure groups compete for the few permanent jobs that are left.

The other mountain offers richer rewards at the top, and for people with skills in great demand. The slopes are steep but there are many ways up (and down). Opportunities to get rich are separated from security: jobs are flexible, both in the sense that workers must constantly adapt their skills, and in the sense that they have much less job security. Employers resist any attempt to give workers greater legal or de facto job security:

In case your own union raises a demand for the abolition of contract labour and employment of direct workmen, resist it to the last, lobby with the authorities and concerned advisory board, particularly the representatives of the employers on the board with a view to persuading them not to recommend abolition of contract labour in the concerned processes/work etc., which are carried on, on a regular basis. (‘Guidelines on contract labour’ in a trade association’s annual Directory).

However it is not inevitable that these two kinds of flexibility — flexible skills, and numerical flexibility of the work force — must go together. More of one sometimes means less of the other, as when employers offer job security in exchange for multi-skilling. High-road flexibility does not mean a job for life, but it does mean freedom from fear of arbitrary dismissal, some shelter against short-term market forces, some minimum level of justified trust between workers and employers even where there are also conflicts: a new moral economy. In India as elsewhere, some workers are fortunate to find jobs in firms like these, where they are constantly solving new problems, working together in large or small firms which draw out their talents and ingenuity (see Holmström 1998b for cases). But these are a lucky minority, the valuable core work force which can be expanded by taking on skilled and unskilled workers on short-term contracts.

One consequence of the new insecurity is to weaken the unions, whose membership is depleted on two sides. Managements employ non-union temporary labour where they can (‘the most exploited people are those who need trade unionism the most’; Ramaswamy 1989:14), while promoting some of the remaining permanent workers to less secure junior management posts: ‘Management would prefer to expand the casual, temporary, contract and similar other forms of labour at one end, and the managerial force at the other, at the expense of the permanent blue collar force’ (Ramaswamy 1988:4). And workers are now buying shares in their own or other companies: instead of owning their jobs (as in the past) they own a small part of the company.

Some workers build up a portfolio of marketable skills, getting into a position where they can easily find new jobs which are both well-paid and interesting. Another way to climb this mountain is to trade autonomy, control over one’s work, for a boring but well-paid job on an assembly line: Heuzé (1990) calls this ‘indigenous Fordism’. Such workers face ‘a fairly distinctive and widely-
faced dilemma of working-class occupational life:... having to choose between work which offers variety, scope for initiative and relative autonomy and work which, for any skill level, affords the highest going rate of economic return’ (Goldthorpe et al. 1971:64). At least this is better than the only choice facing many others, especially women: work which is neither interesting, nor well-paid, nor secure. Skill does not guarantee interesting work, though it increases the chance of it.

Until the 1980s, technology and skills changed slowly in India.

I am told that Hindustan Motors bought the British design for the Ambassador car around 1956. So did Toyota. Hindustan Motors still make the same car with a few changes (according to my informant, they used the original dies until these wore out). Have you seen the latest Toyotas?

If you learned a trade in a government Industrial Training Institute, and/or an apprenticeship with a good company, you had an excellent chance of a permanent job in the citadel, doing more or less what you had been trained to do as a young man (more rarely, a young woman), with ample time to get used to any new machinery. You had to get into the citadel young, or lose your chance for ever. There was skilled work to be had in smaller firms, but their machines were out of date, so you were unlikely to move into a big firm later.

Technological change speeded up in the 1980s, especially with the coming of microelectronic technologies like CNCs (computer numerically controlled machine tools) and CAD (computer-aided design). Large firms had the resources and foreign contacts to adopt these first. Yet the new trends to decentralized production gave some smaller firms a chance to leapfrog the big ones, developing new products and finding innovative solutions to customers’ problems, with relatively cheap equipment like PCs, second-hand CNCs, or retrofitted CNCs (conventional machine tools with computer controls added later).

It is probably easier to learn a marketable skill than it was a few years ago, because formal training in an institute or apprenticeship is a wasting asset unless constantly updated, not necessarily on the latest most expensive equipment but rather by exposure to new problems. This gives workers who missed their chance of formal training a chance to catch up.

Bangalore has a large pool of men (almost always men) with diverse engineering skills. They may or may not have been formally trained in an Industrial Training Institute or similar institution, but they have years of experience on a variety of conventional machine tools. These men work in small firms at low wages because they failed to break into a large firm early enough in their careers. If such an experienced worker can interpret engineering drawings, and read enough English to understand the standardized commands on a CNC’s video screen, it is not hard for him to learn to convert the drawing or blueprint into numerical commands, to load, start and watch over the machine, and to discuss design changes with technicians or engineers... For much of the time, he can be trusted to work by himself, and to solve minor problems as they arise. His only training on CNCs usually consists of standing beside a skilled man and talking to the engineers.

[In a firm with 40 workers] A worker ... sets a CNC turning centre (or lathe) to make a small part for a domestic appliance. He has trouble getting started, because the machine
will not repeat the sequences correctly. He makes several trial runs; the quality control engineer measures each piece to ensure that it is within the required tolerance, and the worker uses the keypad to make fine adjustments to the controls. Finally they get it right. The operator has only to see that the steel rod is in place for cutting, shut the door of the turning centre for safety, wait for two or three minutes, and take out the finished piece. (Holmström 1998b:188-9)

[In the same factory] I spent half an hour sitting beside a young man who was designing machine parts, using CAD. Since he had experience of engineering drawing but not computers, he had learnt CAD from a book and his employer’s brother-in-law, who taught him in the evenings and on Sundays. (Ibid, p.208)

Some firms, large and small, take formal or informal retraining more seriously than others. The unions, with exceptions like the BEL Employees’ Union in Bangalore, take little interest in training and retraining.

Another way in which the gap between large and small firms is narrowing is in their attitude to quality and finish, which used to be poor in large firms but worse in small ones.

Indian customers now want products which are not only functional but attractively designed, with a smooth elegant finish: something that used to be dismissed as merely cosmetic, important only when a product was for export...

[A firm] doing sheet metal work buys blue paint from two suppliers. I saw the owner explaining to a worker the importance of using paint from only one supplier on each box, since the two shades of blue were similar but not quite the same. No weld marks should be visible on the outside — until recently this did not matter to Indian customers. (Holmström 1998b:192)

A small firm does not need expensive machinery or a highly educated work force to teach workers to take these things more seriously.

This opening up of second and third chances to workers who failed to get into the big firms young still affects a relatively small part of the population: those with an adequate general education, with basic maths and science. Some knowledge of English — more common outside the Hindi belt — is an advantage though not essential: workers pick it up at work and, increasingly, from television. Information technology has opened many more jobs to women: not just the boring assembly-line work but jobs where women work alongside men and learn the same skills. If the proportion who succeed is still small, remember that 1 per cent of India’s population is roughly the population of Belgium, Portugal or Greece. India already has a vast critical mass of skilled, partly skilled or trainable workers.
8. Putting old knowledge to new uses

Besides this formal learning of skills, workers from diverse backgrounds have an implicit knowledge of trades or ways to get by in the world, passed on in families and working groups, built up over a lifetime of working experience and social contacts. Traditional craft skills are updated and adapted. Another increasingly valuable source of new knowledge about work is the Indian diaspora: many workers, especially in regions like Punjab, Kerala and Mumbai, have relatives working abroad or have done so themselves.

There is evidence that a significant part of Indian industry is following a path already trodden by north-central Italy, by the ‘Asian Tigers’ and now by China: marrying traditional skills to the latest technologies, improvising and innovating with available resources, and giving new chances to a growing fraction of the work force. This does not mean all these societies are converging towards an identikit picture of a modernizing high-tech society, though it is clear that limited convergence is happening, for several reasons. The requirements of new technology, and efficient profitable management in a global economy, impose pressures and limits. People know how others live in more affluent countries, and want some of the same things for themselves; with a countervailing stress on maintaining cultural distinctiveness, as a kind of designer identity with international cachet (BJP yuppies are a case in point). A religious or language or regional identity is ideologically more acceptable than old-fashioned caste, though that too has its sophisticated defenders.

Nehru’s dream of modernity now looks old-fashioned. We have got beyond the notion of a ‘traditional’ culture replaced by a universal model. The cultural specificities of other societies — the sort of things which were once supposed to be obstacles on the great highway to modernization — are now seen as advantages. It started with Japan, where a tradition of quasi-feudal loyalty to an organization, rather than rugged protestant individualism, appeared to be an advantage rather than a hindrance to rapid industrialization: at least until recently. In ‘Asian Tigers’ like Taiwan and South Korea, a confucian culture which had been regarded as an immovable block to development suddenly seemed more like a secret weapon, now that latter-day ‘confucians’ are in the fast lane overtaking everyone else (McVey 1992). Or take the Indian diaspora in Britain and elsewhere. Their secret weapon — like that of the Jews before them — may be the family: not a sufficient condition for their success, or even a necessary one, but a great help. These perceptions of some cultural secret weapon may be exaggerated, one-sided, or simply wrong — fashions in explanation limp along behind reality — but they leave ‘modernity’ an empty shell.

Consider some other possible weapons in India’s armoury. A traditional interest in mathematics and logic, especially but not only among Brahmans, was associated with philosophy and metaphysical speculation. India gave the world ‘Arabic’ numerals and algebra. This tradition is now very bankable, as India bids to become the world’s chief exporter of custom-designed software, while Indians abroad make their contribution too. With hindsight it looks obvious: all you need is a logical mind and a PC. The widespread use of English gives India the edge over competitors like China. India’s dominance of the software market may not last, in this fiercely competitive and unpredictable market. The tiny Republic of Ireland is a leading contender, and India will lose one lucrative market after 2000 when the ‘Y2K problem’ or Millennium Bug will be history. But mathematics and logic, and the experience gained in software design, are likely to be
remain in demand.

What other surprises are in store for us, as whole classes get the education and confidence to confront the new worlds of information technology and technologies yet unborn? The emphasis has shifted from the job you hold — related to the particular skill you have learned — to portable skills, flexibility, something to build on opportunistically. Clearly literacy and mass education are preconditions for developing these skills: once people have some education they can go anywhere, tackle anything. What other old skills will turn out to be bankable?

One skill is language. India has always been a polyglot country: now it is even more so — the ability to speak four languages, and even to read four scripts, is not looked upon as an extraordinary intellectual achievement (as in English-speaking countries) but as something anyone has to do every day to get by, especially the two thirds of the population who live outside the Hindi belt. Like it or not, the international language of technology (especially computers), trade and entertainment is English, which is widely spoken in India and spreading all the time: not only because of the accident of colonial history, but because Indians already had the great advantage of living in a polyglot country, which makes learning any new language easier. This tradition or habit of multilingualism is another bankable asset, which can be cashed in by adding English to one’s portfolio of Tamil, Kannada, Hindi and whatever. Television encourages the relentless march of the language. Knowledge of English is important in finding a job and building a career, in commerce and services, reading technical instructions and manuals, and using any kind of microelectronic equipment. If you know English you are in business, metaphorically and often literally.

Another asset which may prove bankable in future is the importance which has always been attached to seeing. Consider the impact of television on this intensely visual culture, which has always given a central place to religious images, the use of colour, and popular designs like rangoli or the Tamil kolam. To have darshan — a view of a god’s image, a holy person or an auspicious sight like a newly married couple — confers a blessing. Video has become an essential part of rites of passage. Again with hindsight, India is a country made for TV (‘Doordarshan’!). Is the old visual culture another bankable asset, a property which could be developed? And if so, which castes, groups or professions are sitting on this valuable property? Of course there is the Indian film industry, a big employer and exporter. The boom in ‘ethnic’ textiles and designs, destined for western markets or fashionable South Delhi, draws on the skills of traditional weavers and craftspeople, who get a relatively small part of the profits. What about other less obvious spin-offs?

9. New maps for old

I propose a new observer’s map, which is not too different from the home-made maps in the minds of many industrial workers and would-be workers: the way they see their own situation and chances. These maps of society take account of present facts (e.g. Indian software and ‘ethnic’ crafts are booming) and likely futures (which skills and assets may prove valuable).

When we fill in the gaps, this map will show the situation and life chances of different groups, and the barriers to movement between these groups: people with flexible bankable skills; the less skilled with a good chance of acquiring such a skill or building on some undeveloped advantage — even with little formal education, since people are ingenious and learn fast; and a great mass with little chance except unskilled work if they can get it.
Some studies (including mine) have concentrated on skilled workers, or those with some education and a chance of learning a skill, in places like Bangalore and Mumbai. One topic which is now getting more attention is that of working women, ranging from professionals in banking or engineering, through repetitive work on assembly lines or data processing, to heavy labour in building sites or quarries.

Jan Breman (1994) has mapped the world of ‘wage hunters and gatherers’, usually but not always uneducated, with little chance of a living wage and no security. They look for what they can salvage on the margins of the industrial economy (literally, in the case of ragpickers and recyclers). Taking up my metaphors of the mountain and citadel, Breman says these people inhabit the broad-based foot of the slope, the bottom zones in which a very large proportion of the total working population is to be found. From this milieu of a complete or almost complete lack of assets..., only a rather small portion succeeds in finding and climbing the path that leads straight to the top of the slope, to the protected citadel of employment. The massive underclass lacks the equipment necessary to undertake such an uphill march. But those who try to fight their way up even a small part of the slope encounter all sorts of obstacles that prevent them from reaching their target or ensure that they do so only temporarily. The larger proportion have to stay at the bottom and have no choice but to go out hunting and gathering a wage. (Breman 1996:225)

There are wide gaps between those at the top, middle and bottom of the labour market, and little sign that these gaps are likely to close soon. Some birth communities, like Brahmans, have an obvious headstart in a meritocratic job market, even without discrimination in their favour, because of their long tradition of education, mathematics &c. Job reservation for Dalits and other traditionally deprived groups — or at least an educated minority among them — mainly affects the shrinking public sector, which is almost all that remains of the citadel. Outside the public sector the job market is fairly meritocratic, but lack of education prevents many from getting a foot on the meritocratic ladder.

The ‘Asian Tigers’ have achieved not only equality of opportunity but relative equality of outcome, no more deep poverty. Wealth really has trickled down to the masses. But the Tigers started their industrialization with the benefit of universal literacy or at least widespread education, and their governments continued to put massive resources into education. One lesson from the Tigers is that widespread or universal general education, rather than technical training, is a key to economic growth in modern conditions.

India has a well-educated English-speaking class which is vast in absolute numbers, but still a minority in a population which is still largely illiterate or half-educated, except in pockets like Kerala. Here India may resemble countries like Indonesia and China, which started industrializing without tigerish levels of mass education but are catching up fast. In India, either the uneducated will find less and less openings, so some classes and/or regions will fall further behind the affluent minority; or the economic growth created by the new technologies — will provide many more unskilled jobs in manufacturing and services, poorly paid but better than nothing, while economic growth generates resources to educate the next generation.
10. Future prospects: optimists & pessimists

Now match their view of the future to ours, home-made maps to observers’ maps. ‘They’ could mean very different kinds of people: the very poor and excluded Jan Breman writes about; skilled workers with career prospects; temporary workers learning skills wherever they can; their wives and daughters, as earners or dependents. ‘We’, the observers, are a mixed bunch, some Indian, some foreign, and our views too are coloured by value judgments. Bearing these provisos in mind, we can make a matrix: their pessimism, our pessimism; their pessimism, our optimism; their optimism, our pessimism; and optimism all round.

They may think their situation will remain the same or get worse and we agree: universal gloom. Life is a zero-sum: if some get more, others must get less. Or we may think they are mistaken: their chances are better than they think, economic growth will trickle down, the trickle will turn into a flood, a rising tide will lift all boats (to mix aquatic metaphors), though they do not yet understand how this can happen. To complete the matrix: they may think things will get better while we gloomily disagree; or we may agree with them — their optimism is justified.

Some people, like skilled workers in permanent employment, are on to a good thing. Life is likely to get very much better for them in the near future, and better still for their children; and they know it. Optimism all round.

Is Indian society going to become more and more polarized, between upwardly-mobile people like this and the sort of uneducated vulnerable workers Jan Breman writes about? Breman writes about people who not only lead miserable lives but expect no improvement, and he clearly thinks they are right. I hope he is wrong but fear he could be right.

Vijay Joshi and I.M. Little are more optimistic:

We are confident that the reforms so far undertaken, and the further reforms we advocate, will increase the demand for unskilled labour — and most of the poor in India are unskilled workers, or dependent on them... There is no doubt that exports are and will be more labour intensive than import substitutes... The structural reforms underway since 1991, albeit still very incomplete, favour the poor by beginning to remove the pervasive bias that exists against the employment of unskilled labour. (Joshi & Little 1996:220-1)

In other words, follow China. But this bright prospect is not yet on most Indian workers’ maps. It is my impression that the unskilled are more likely to see the labour market as polarized — divided into watertight compartments, the few with a good chance and the many without. Observers' optimism, home-made pessimism.

The converse is home-made optimism, observers’ pessimism. Of course individuals have unrealistic ambitions, but are large groups likely to be disappointed (for example, skilled workers who expect better things in the new industrial climate)? Is liberalization a cruel hoax, which will end in tears as India limps far behind the Tigers and China? There have been other false dawns, for example in the early 1970s (Garibi hatao! ‘End poverty!’) until the oil crisis, or Rajiv’s honeymoon with computers and industrial modernization on credit. This time, with better policies, flexible
technologies and luck, India may have embarked on a course of sustained growth in incomes and employment which eluded it before. Wait and see: I am moderately optimistic.

To focus more closely on the strategies various kinds of workers pursue to achieve high incomes and security: a job can no longer be regarded as property, let alone heritable property. The security of the citadel has gone, except to some extent in the shrinking public sector. This comes as a shock to older workers in the ‘organized sector’ citadel, but it makes little difference to the majority who never had security.

Indian society is still far from meritocratic, but more so than before, and there is a wider choice of paths up and down. We should not exaggerate the extent to which knowledge replaces property and connexions as a key to getting on, but there has been a shift. The new importance of knowledge gives some advantages to women, at least those with some education: for example, in electronic engineering, software and other computer skills.

Skills — or rather, those skills which are currently in demand — give you some security, as long as those skills remain in demand, or you are in a position to get new experience on new equipment and add to the skills you already have. Without marketable skills, you are more vulnerable, unless you have found your way into what remains of the citadel. India is unlikely to move towards the Japanese job for life (and the Japanese themselves appear to be moving away from it). The outlook for the mass of the uneducated or poorly educated remains bleak, in the absence of a Kerala-style programme of mass education, and/or a massive growth of labour-intensive production for export.

Those with a chance of rising face a choice between attempting Mount Security (the citadel) and Mount Opportunity, which offers a more limited kind of security, but only if you reach the higher slopes. Breman’s ‘wage hunters and gatherers’ remain on the plain of poverty. Whether they have a chance of rising higher depends on whether Breman is right, or Joshi and Little.

This is my observer’s map: I am not sure to what extent the Twin Peaks appear on the home-made maps of industrial workers and their families. Do they see security and high income as alternatives, now or in the near future; or as parts of a single package which goes with a good job, where you can have your cake (security) and eat it (as income)? Or do they choose to attempt one peak or the other? And whether they do so or not, would they be well advised to make such a choice?

The evidence from odd conversations, rather than systematic research, and from reading, suggests most people are not aware of having such a choice at all: it is more a matter of seizing any chance — of security and/or high pay — when it occurs. Some feel confident enough to leave a relatively safe job for a better paid one, or to set up their own business.

One optimistic scenario is this: a new pattern of interdependence among small and medium enterprises, having some features of flexible specialization, creates a new kind of work force, differing both from the permanently employed workers in the large companies and from vulnerable exploited ‘informal sector’ workers. Local clusters of interdependent firms, exploring new markets and improvising solutions to technical problems, create conditions in which where workers without formal training or influential contacts can acquire a portfolio of skills, to the point where they can
easily move from job to job or perhaps start their own business.

Larger firms try to adapt Japanese methods of production and, to a lesser extent, Japanese attitudes to labour: a worldwide trend which Kaplinsky and Posthuma (1994) call ‘easternization’. ‘Managers … preach the gospel of kaizen (Japanese for "continuous improvement")… A few take it seriously, and make bold experiments in management; for others it is fashionable rhetoric’ (Holmström 1998b:194). On these high slopes of the mountain, security may be separated from high pay, but employees have a good deal of security, both because Japanese-style management cannot work without a core work force who feel secure, and because marketable skills make a secure job with one firm unnecessary: they will want to move on anyway.

Pay differentials widen as workers, as well as managers and professionals, are affected by the international labour market: emigration to the Gulf, and sometimes to countries like Canada. As the line between ‘workers’ and ‘managers’ is eroded, more comparisons are made with the wages abroad.

Except for workers with permanent jobs in such firms, which genuinely invest in a work force and try to keep it, security is out of reach for more and more people except those inside the public sector (and even there, how secure will their jobs be in the long run?).

Most men, and even more women, never got into the citadel, but they believed it existed. Many thought they had a chance of getting in somehow — by learning a skill in small workshops, by pull and influence, or by reservations. Now the citadel has shrunk, a place inside it is visibly less secure than it used to be, and competition for the few available places shrinks increasingly to those who can benefit from reservations.

I maintain that Twin Peaks is a good map: Mount Security is what is left of the citadel, the job for life. Mount Opportunity offers higher pay but much less security, except near the very top. This map gives a better picture of the real situation and probabilities than previous maps, like the citadel, the mountain, and Breman’s many hills; but I doubt whether many industrial workers see it like this. They are more likely to think the new chances only benefit the already well off and well educated, including the older skilled working class which has been around since Nehru’s day. The rate of change is slow: the advantages of flexibility have not yet worked through. If there is flexibility, it is low-road defensive flexibility. Too many workers see the low road stretching before them, and do not like what they see. They feel excluded from the new glittering future.

Offensive high-road flexibility is an option for relatively few, but their number is likely to grow. Defensive flexibility and the new job insecurity have hit many more. The majority outside, looking for whatever casual work they can get, remain more or less where they were. For a real change, we must wait a little longer.

Notes

1. These are recent events; but when Chou En-Lai was asked what were the consequences of the French Revolution, he replied ‘It is too soon to tell.’
2. Several writers discuss the chances of achieving some kind of high-road flexibility in a recent collection, Cadène & Holmström (eds), 1998, Decentralized
production in India.

3. My term ‘home-made maps’ is based roughly on Lévi-Strauss’ (1963:282) ‘home-made’ models, or the ‘folk models’ which Holy and Stuchlik (1981:9 ff.) distinguish from anthropologists’ models. Kenneth Pike calls them emic and etic models, by analogy with phonemic and phonetic descriptions of language. ‘Emic analyses ... stress the subjective meanings shared by a social group and their culturally specific model of experience, while etic analysis refers to the development and application of models derived from the analyst’s theoretical and formal categories.’ (Seymour-Smith 1986:92).

4. ‘There are several reasons why social anthropologists studying Indian society at the grass roots (as many like to believe) have bypassed problems of this nature [about class]. The most plausible methodological justification offered is that the problems of social anthropology are best studied in terms of native categories – by following the grain of the society, as it were – and that categories of the class type, not being native categories in the Indian context, cannot be handled in this fashion... [Yet] There is a whole range of Bengali terms ... and their counterparts in other Indian languages which are directly relevant to the analysis of what sociologists understand by class. These are not merely terms imported into the countryside by party theoreticians, but constitute categories used by the villagers themselves to define a significant part of their social universe, to identify themselves and others and to act in a variety of contexts on the basis of these identities.’ (Béteille 1970:138; and see Béteille 1969.)


7. See Holmström 1993, 1998a; and on the barriers to achieving trust between entrepreneurs, Holmström 1997.

8. For recent examples from Bangalore, and a discussion of the extent and limits of this kind of innovation in small and medium enterprises, see Holmström 1998b.

9. Compare the -- possibly apocryphal -- toast at the annual dinner of the Mathematical Society of London: ‘To pure mathematics, and may it never be of any use to anyone!’

10. What happens to the videos after the wedding, or other rite of passage? How long are they kept? Who watches them, on what occasions and with what feelings? A topic for a thesis, surely.

11. Many blanks in the map have been filled in by the contributors to Travailler en Inde/The context of work in India (Heuzé (ed.) 1992); but most of the articles are in French, which relatively few Indians can read.
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