Introduction

To talk of workers and their politics in India today is both necessary and, in light of the positions in recent social and political theory, also difficult. The wide-ranging changes in Indian political economy over the past three decades have transformed the world of work, and have created new categories of workers. The Indian workforce is now far more differentiated, mobile, informalised and precarious than in the 1970s. Working-class politics in India, which has traditionally been associated with corporatist-clientelist formations of unions, political parties and states, have also changed correspondingly: not only has there been an explosion in the number of self-proclaimed ‘independent’ unions, but also of unions in new sectors, and, significant for our purposes, of groups that claim rights based in part on their self-definition as ‘workers’ but that have few of the attributes of the paradigmatic working class. These movements have argued that they are oppressed and exploited, and have made demands for a full agenda of rights, some of them familiar as idioms of claim-making, and some new and novel constructions of rights, articulated for the first time by them. These exciting changes have happened at a time when the two frameworks associated with the production of theory of such social groups, subaltern studies (SS) and forms of class-analysis claiming to be Marxist, carry with them assumptions and support political
projects that seem neither appropriate nor adequate to explain this rise of new workers and their movements.

The historiography of working-class politics in India stands at an interesting crossroads. One the one hand, votaries of class-analysis, explicitly invoking 'classical' Marxism, rue the decline of class-analysis in the study of Indian politics, and blame it on the rise of 'culturalist' approaches, in turn rooting their ascendency in the specific dynamics of the American academy. They call for a 'return' to class-analysis.1 On the other hand, postcolonial theorists and subaltern-studies scholars, argue that the transition from Fordism to Postfordism – or more accurately its vernacularised Indian form – and the subsequent erosion of the stability of factory-work as the basis of producing workers as classes signals the need to abandon 'class' as an analytic category altogether.

This chapter argues that the ontology of work in contemporary India requires a move well beyond the apparatus both of 'classical Marxism' and of canonical subaltern-studies. It draws on new workers' movements in India to show the limits of both of these approaches and identifies some points in the current intersections between Marxian analysis, postcolonial/subaltern theory and the emergent social categories to argue for a more expansive and fluid framework for analysing the politics of new workers in India. Particularly, it takes the conditions produced by neoliberalism, the transnational circulation of discourses, and the forging of contingent and indeterminate solidarities as the basis for sketching out new directions in thinking about work, workers and working-class politics.

The chapter is structured in the following ways. In the next section, I sketch out the issues in contention between orthodox class-analytic Marxism and canonical subaltern-studies, and identify some salient limits they have in describing the politics of their chief protagonists, workers and subalterns respectively. I then describe some contemporary movements to workers/subalterns in India to illustrate a) how non-proletarians appropriate the language of class, b) the problem of becoming workers in political-fields dominated discourses of cultural/racial supremacy; and c) the refusal to become proletarian. On this basis I illustrate my critique of orthodox class-analytic Marxism and canonical subaltern-studies. Finally, I want to sketch out some pathways out of what I believe is an impasse in theorising the working subaltern in contemporary India.

The working class in contention

Even though subaltern-studies as a historiographical project claimed a rootedness in the broader Marxist tradition, it also marked its disagreements with that

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1. Herring and Agrawala 2006; Chibber 2006a, 2006b; Fernandes and Heller 2006.