

August 14, 2023

## Lean Manufacturing, Straitened Labour

By: Faiz Ullah

*An oral history of the struggles of Maruti workers comes at a crucial time where the larger labour movement finds itself defending hard-won rights.*

The struggle of the workers at Maruti Suzuki India Limited’s Manesar plant has been one of the most significant instances of labour action in contemporary India. For a short while, during its peak in 2011–12, it was successful in making labour rights a public issue. The autonomy, spontaneity, and tenaciousness demonstrated by the Maruti workers propelled working class concerns into everyday conversations.

Today, one knows so much about the Maruti workers’ struggle because the workers managed to turn a localised workplace issue into a broader battle of ideas. It was much more than an economic struggle for better working conditions and higher wages. The workers did demand their economic rights, but also demanded respect and recognition. They raised their voices as citizens against inequality, discrimination, and denial of their fundamental rights that includes the right to association. Their struggle, it must be remembered, shaped up around the basic demand to form an independent union at the Manesar factory.

|| The workers did demand their economic rights, but also demanded respect and recognition.

There are several accounts of the struggle that have focused on its genesis within the larger context of contemporary state-capital-labour relations. There also exists a body of work that has critically engaged with the violence of 18 July 2012, where a human resource manager died, and scores of workers were seriously injured. The brutal police crackdown and the criminal trial that followed have also been analysed in detail.

Anjali Deshpande and Nandita Haksar’s new book, *Japanese Management, Indian Resistance: The Struggles of Maruti Suzuki Workers*, is the latest addition to the growing corpus of work around the Maruti management-labour conflict. The book, best described as a work of oral history, comes at a crucial time where the larger labour movement finds itself defending its hard-won rights against yet another round of [neoliberal onslaught](#) in the form of sweeping reforms.

|| The book allows one to hear workers’ articulation of their experiences of industrial work; relationships with fellow workers, family, and employers.

Deshpande and Haksar talk to several Maruti workers a decade after their struggle ground to an abrupt end and put together a raw and immediate account of how it shaped their individual and collective lives. The book allows one to hear workers’ articulation of their experiences of industrial work; relationships with fellow workers, family, and employers; their view of the State and its various institutions; and the fast-changing world around them.

It will be hard for anyone who cares about social and economic justice to read the testimonies of the Maruti workers and not feel that instead of reforms there is an urgent need for democratic regulation. In terms of its approach and concerns, the book reminded one of Studs Terkel’s 1974 *Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do* and Ruth Milkman’s 1997 *Farewell to the Factory: Auto Workers in the Late Twentieth Century*.

### The costs of lean production

Maruti saw a sharp spike in demand for cars in 2010 after the effects of the global economic slowdown subsided in India. MM Singh, Managing Executive Officer (Production), dubbed ‘[The Accelerator](#)’ by a glossy business magazine, shortened the Manesar assembly line and increased the number of tasks each worker had to perform. This boosted the installed capacity of Manesar factory to 350,000 from 250,000 – a sharp increase of 40%. This kind of approach to intensify work by squeezing minutes and seconds out of an already relentless production system was not new at Maruti.

|| The predominant lean production regime championed by Japanese automobile companies has long been notorious for being “hard, dirty, and dangerous”

As R.C. Bhargava, the chairman of Maruti, noted with barely concealed excitement in his [memoirs](#): “SMC [Suzuki Motor Corporation] brought to Maruti the concept that cost reduction was a continuous process, and that it was always possible to make improvements and reduce costs. Despite the lowest cost manufacturers in world, Japanese companies continued to reduce costs every year. [Osamu] Suzuki once told me that they were now wringing water out of dry towel. In India the towel was dripping!”

This relentless wringing of the workforce is baked into modern production processes. The predominant lean production regime championed by Japanese automobile companies has long been notorious for being “hard, dirty, and dangerous” (Berggren 1993). Maruti continues to top the list of automobile companies when it comes to [workplace accidents](#). A large number of these accidents involved workers losing fingers or use of their hands. Workers in other parts of the world as well as in India continue to find it insensitive and demeaning (JCB and Pratap 2012, Mathew and Burgess 2018). Much of employment is precarious in nature and barely pays a living wage.

Part of this sense of power and impunity on the part of automobile manufacturers comes from India’s liberal accommodation of private capital and part, especially in the case of Japanese companies, because of the size of the investments and the nature of relations. Japan has been one of the largest foreign investors in the Indian economy for several decades now.

Having said that, it is increasingly hard to ascribe a national identity to certain production processes, management practices, or capital. Similarly, there is very little that makes resistance to such forces a uniquely local phenomenon. The challenge is global – as companies continue to exploit national and regional differences in wages and regulation – and so is the resistance as evidenced by pervasive sense of discontent around the world. Other than the industrial sector, large sections of service sector and platform workers are fast organising to democratically reclaim control over their lives and labour. Much of this is either globally coordinated or workers simply learning from the experiences of their counterparts in other countries.

### **Narrating a struggle**

The Maruti workers’ experience as well of countless others tells us though that as soon as the workers begin to organise, what are essentially issues of industrial relations are immediately dubbed as law-and-order problems by the managements and helpfully securitised by the State. Political regimes with differing ideologies have displayed equal appetite for continued liberalisation and violence.

|| There is plenty of scaremongering around rising union militancy, but employers’ militancy is given a pass.

While labour strikes are condemned, aggressive and violent union-busting by the managements is not. There is plenty of scaremongering around rising union militancy, but employers’ militancy is given a pass. If one were to look at the mainstream media reportage of the 2011–12 management-labour conflict, it is the workers who are portrayed as [unreasonable and violent](#). On the contrary, the Maruti management, widely recognised as [highhanded and militant](#), will come across as helpless and benign. Because one is living through silly times, it bears explaining that the term militancy in labour relations is an index of aggressiveness in workers’ or managements’ actions. The opposite of militancy is moderation.

With large advertising budgets, MSIL has been able to craft and hold on to its image as the producer of ‘global’ and ‘affordable’ cars that fulfilled the needs and aspirations of the growing middle-classes in fast liberalising India. Its brand building ambitions were most apparent in the aftermath of the workers’ struggle when it got the top film studio to [produce a comedy film](#) in 2013, titled Mere Dad ki Maruti, without either party explicitly declaring it as an advertiser-funded project.

|| The workers and their allies documented the management excesses and shared them via WhatsApp and Facebook.

Deshpande and Haksar point out that obtaining media coverage of their cause was of great importance to the Maruti workers. It is to the workers’ credit that they quickly gave up on the mainstream media and took it upon themselves to shape their own narrative. The workers and their allies documented the management excesses and shared them via WhatsApp and Facebook among a loose collective of activists, independent journalists, and concerned citizens.

These scrappy strategies, though sporadically effective, proved to be no match for the Maruti management’s public relations juggernaut. However, they did get the protesting workers’ some much-needed visibility. Glimpses of workers’ media production or creative expression would have nuanced the book’s focus on resistance. The following poem by a retrenched Maruti worker, for instance, became very popular during the struggle on the social media:

*Har taraf kaala hi kaala qanoon dikhaai dega  
Tum bhale ho ki bure kaun safaai dega  
Saikdon log mare, qaatil hi maseeha bana  
Kal ko sadkon pa baha khoon gawaahi dega*

Everywhere, only the black law is visible  
Whether you are good or bad, who will clarify?  
Hundreds of people died, the murderer has become a Messiah  
The blood flowing on the roads will testify

Some of the narratives that one found fresh and interesting in the book are around the oppressive and enduring caste and class relations in their personal and professional lives. These are articulated in terms of experiences of discrimination and humiliation and lack of land ownership respectively. Addressing the connections and contradictions between social and economic justice should be high on the agenda of the contemporary labour movement.

### Behind the scenes

Where the book makes the most significant contribution is recognising the role of women in the workers’ struggle. Reproduction of labour rests firmly on care work. For every worker to go out and work hard, come back, and go again the next day, there are many others who have to bear the burden of domestic work and everything else that comes along with it. Much of this work – cooking, cleaning, childcare, etc - is done by women and none of it is paid for by the employers. Very little of it provisioned for by the state.

For every worker to go out and work hard, come back, and go again the next day, there are many others who have to bear the burden of domestic work and everything else that comes along with it.

When companies like Maruti do not provide the workers humane working conditions or living wages, the exploitation extends to the labour of the non-waged members of the workers’ household, including women and children. While the book does not make this point explicitly, it comes through quite palpably in the authors’ interviews with women associated with the workers’ struggle.

The book is brimming with a lot of such material. However much of it is laid out without much context or analysis that may help readers make sense of it. While the narratives have been edited and organised thematically, the authors do not quite work on them to draw out insights.

While the book starts with providing a helpful context in the form of a timeline of the events beginning 1971, it is somewhat concerning to note that it chooses to open, and hence frames the larger narrative, with the “Death of a Manager”, the title of the first chapter. In making this narrative choice, it comes to approximate mainstream journalistic tendency to frame the workers’ struggle within the limiting context of the violence of 18 July 2012. Without doubt it provides for a dramatic opening, or lede if you will, but it ends up according a lower priority to the pervasive, structural, and even real violence that workers are subjected to in their day to day lives. While no one has ever condoned the death of the HR manager – the workers actually remember him with much fondness in the book – such framing unwittingly creates a hierarchy of worthy and unworthy victims. Linear narratives, even if less interesting, do have their own merits, including conveying a clear sense of history.

A critical and comprehensive introduction or conclusion would not have been out of place in the book given that it comes almost a decade after the workers’ struggle. However, it is an important book that does not reduce the workers to an abstraction or a statistic and foregrounds their strident voices.

*Faiz Ullah is an assistant professor at the School of Media and Cultural Studies, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai.*

### References:

Bhargava, R.C., with Seetha (2010). *The Maruti Story : How A Public Sector Company Put India On Wheels*. New Delhi, Harper Collins.

Berggren, Christian (1993). ‘Lean Production - The End of History?’. *Work, Employment & Society* 7, no. 2: 163–88.

JCB , Annavajhula and Surendra Pratap. 2012. ‘Worker Voices in an Auto Production Chain: Notes from the Pits of a Low Road – I’. *Economic and Political Weekly* 47, no 33: 46-59.

Matthew, Sagi K. and John Burgess. 2018. ‘Lean Production, ‘Izzat’ and Industrial Conflict in the Indian Auto Sector: A Case Study’. *Relations Industrielles/Industrial Relations*. 73, no. 3: 541-65.