

Book Review - Japanese Management, Indian Resistance: The Struggles of the Maruti Suzuki Workers

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This book can be taken as the finale-addition to a lot of writing that labour researchers in India and abroad have already done over the last decade on the capital-labour conflict in the Maruti-Suzuki and other auto-factories in Delhi NCR.

It is well-said that the automobile industry drives the Indian economy and the car made by Maruti-Suzuki is the much sought-after-spectacle of middle-class consumption in India. But, in this book, the reader is challenged to look at the “shiny Maruti car models and the technology which goes into their making” from the perspective of the workers who work in the Maruti-Suzuki factories, which challenges the perception of Maruti-Suzuki as a “runaway success story” in the timeline from June 1971 to 2022.

Deshpande, as an investigative journalist and a social activist, and Haksar as a human rights lawyer — the authors of the book — have drawn the reader’s attention to the emergence of the reality of “profits trumping workers’ rights” in new India — a reality that is not openly discussed in the managerial perspectives of industry and labour.

The disenfranchised factory voices that the authors had interacted with, vividly portray the unbelievable downside of Japanese or lean management in India in terms of employment precarity, overwork and deathly dangers, arbitrary dismissals, false framing of criminal cases

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and life imprisonment without a fair trial meted out to the workers and their leaders. The public at large does not know the struggles faced by the workers against this injustice and indignity, as these struggles have rarely been highlighted on public platforms or social media. Indian cinema has contributed in this regard, but it's not enough.

There are two points of departure from which I can distinctly appreciate the value of this book for economic and managerial education. First, students of economics are taught allocative efficiency as market efficiency with the implicit assumption that each firm is productively efficient. But how work organisation, labour staffing arrangements, skills and training, compensation, and labour-management relations are orchestrated inside the factories in converting inputs into optimal outputs is not revealed to them. Management students too are taught conflict-free Human Resource Management which only covers up the unending adversarial industrial relations with periods of deceptive lull before the inevitable storm observed more often than not in industrial landscapes. Students may not know or probably are not taught that sometimes, firms and management running those firms are super-Taylorist scientific management of deskilling labour, defeating unions, and intensifying work. They may not know what possible demeaning incentives can actually be given to the workers by employers in the global automobile industry as against what they are supposed to offer for obtaining commitment maximizing labour relations. They may not know that there is unresolvable incompatibility between employers and employees in terms of contradictory goals. The book, thus, throws light on the dark side of inside dynamics of the firms that Bose and Sinha (2012a and 2012b) and JCB and Pratap (2012) had, for example, already reviewed and documented well.

Second, the book reiterates the importance of labour rights as human rights and highlights how the management at the top is not serious about achieving the Sustainable Development Goal No. 8, which is about promoting economic growth with the 'decent work' in terms of the core labour standards of the International Labour Organisation.

To conclude, the book is a very good case study material to discuss the proposition that the capital-labour conflict can never be resolved within the framework of capitalist economic system dominated by the corporations, which is diametrically opposite to the managerial

theorisation that a “mutual gains system” in the workplace will help business attain a world-class, sustainable competitive advantage and, at the same time, secure more rewarding employment for workers (Kochan and Osterman, 1994). That the industrial world can be replete with mutual gains enterprises that are responsive to all their stakeholders with a flexible high performance work system coupled with job security, high wages, profit sharing and employee involvement, is indeed a myth. Thus, it becomes crucial for the management students to read this book for understanding the importance of inclusivity as one of the strategies for better management and better managerial skills at the grass root level for the growth of an organization. This book also gives a task to economic theorists to model in various complexities in the production relations that can be influenced by behavioural discourse of workers-management ties. This book motivates to unlearn old ways of managing workers in factories and opens up a plethora of new ideas and opportunities for young corporate leaders to explore, with an aim of maximizing profits, with inclusivity.

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