



# Operationalising Labour Process in context of SEZs in India

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*Abstract:* In order to understand the meaning of work with changed management strategies in SEZs in context of labour as per Marxian framework, we espoused labour process debates. In case of India, there are an impressive array of scholars who have analysed SEZs with respect to labour. On the contrary, there are a few studies on SEZs focusing on the 'labour process', which was a concept pioneered by Karl Marx and later re-established by various other scholars after a century in today's context. In this study we endeavour to present labour process in neoliberal regime in context of SEZs and additionally we have dealt with conceptual framework and have operationalized the concepts of labour process in the SEZ. This study gives a brief background on the changing meaning of work, which clearly shows as to how progression in society and meaning of work has travelled simultaneously (where technology and management strategies plays an important role). Furthermore, it dwells on the Marxian framework of Labour Process Theory (LPT) followed by Braverman where we have given a brief account of LPT after Marx and how Braverman resurrected Labour Process theory after 100 years. Later we elaborated LPT beyond Braverman and the upcoming new paradigm. There is plethora of literature on LPT that have evolved after Marx. We are not delving into reviewing the entire body of literature rather we have analysed some relevant issues in this area to develop our conceptual understanding of Labour Process for this study. In the last section, we have attempted to operationalise the conceptual framework of LPT for our study and explained as to how a researcher can operationalize such concepts on the field.

**Keywords:** Labour process, Special economic zones, Development and labour.

## Background-

India after independence followed the path through industrialisation for which it adopted Import Substitution Industrialisation (ISI) as a strategy for development. Under the ISI regime, India was the first amongst the Asian countries to establish Export Processing Zones (EPZs) in 1965. The modalities to achieve the objectives of EPZs became inefficacious due to lack of well-structured policies and thus to catalyse this strategy, EPZs were converted into Special Economic Zones (SEZs) for multi-reasons, *inter alia* – to generate employment, increase exports, attract Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), increase other economic activities, etc. To analyse SEZ, this study has used the political economy framework and methods to analyse 'labour' in SEZs which is the most vital amongst the other factors of production for surplus appropriation as per Marxian political economy. To further understand the meaning of work in today's context this research operationalized concepts espoused from the theory of labour process. Labour process in SEZs has been conceptualised and operationalised with 'Political Economy' framework to test the proposition, where Zone's institutional Structure and its benevolence(y), which focuses on the structure of Production (SOP), Relation of Production (ROP) and Worker's Identity and Consciousness (WIC).

## Methodology-

This study has incorporated political economy framework to analyse 'labour' in SEZs. The factors like land, labour and capital in every stream of thought and ideology believe that these factors are means of progress and growth and amongst these, in the era of 'developmentalism' labour is the only factor of production which is a subject or object of any development policy. To study 'labour' in industrialisation under capitalist mode of production theories of Marx is one of the most scientific analyses, as it explains how a labour is exploited by extracting 'absolute and relative surplus' to incur profit. As the society progressed with new inventions and explorations, meaning of work has changed which has travelled simultaneously with the changing production process and relation of production. In order to explore the proposition of 'institutional benevolence' we need to look into 'Labour Process' debates.

## Meaning of work- Labour Process

Growing complexities of society have changed the meaning of work (Magdoff, 2006. p. 3). The documented narratives on the 'study of work' dates back from late 18<sup>th</sup> century till date collected from the works of *inter alia*- Adam Smith (1776), Charles Babbage (1832), Andrew Ure (1835), Marx (1844), Braverman (1974), Burawoy (1979), Littler (1982) and so on. With evolution of human from hunting to cattle-breeding, spinning to weaving, metal-working, pottery and navigation, with improved trade and industry and their art and sciences and how with every improved complicated operation (technology) labour became different and more diversified (Engels 1876: 354-364). The 'study of work' dates back to the 'Industrial Revolution' that ascended in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century through the seminal works of Adam Smith (1776), Charles Babbage (1832) & Andrew Ure (1835). Adam Smith in his celebrated work: *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776) succoured 'division of labour' in factory as an enhancement which corroborates greater skills and dexterity through his famous example of pin manufacture. Smith explains division of labour in pin manufacture factory:

*"One man draws out the wire, another straightens it, a third cuts it, a fourth points it, . . . and the important business of making a pin is, in this manner, divided into about eighteen distinct operations which, in some manufactories, are all performed by distinct hand (Smith, 1776. p. 8-9)."*

Though a half century later, 'classical liberal theorists of management' - Charles Babbage (1832) and Ure (1835) sharply contradicted Smith's view on 'division of labour' for enhancing skills (Foster, 1998. p. xv). Charles Babbage in *On the Economy of Machinery and Manufactures* (1832) states that 'dividing the work into different process which further requires specific skill for the job' this kind of 'de-skilling' has led to 'cheapening labour power' by breaking up into simplest elements (ibid. p. xvi). Later, transition from 'Manufacture to Machinofacture' marked a move from formal subordination to real subordination, which augmented control over work by machinery, which further exploited and dehumanized as well as deskilled labours. Mass Production and strict management strategies reinforced Taylor's 'Scientific Management' which further reinforced division of labour, delegated responsibility and was an extension of real subordination of the labour process (Braverman 1974). With significant innovation and mechanization, there was a shift from 'Taylorism' (Taylorism as a new production method was advocated by Frederick Winslow Taylor. Taylorism as a method where management has the monopoly over knowledge, it controls each step of labour process) to 'Fordism' (Fordism/assembly-line was another production method introduced by Henry Ford in 1920s. Ford's idea of 'assembly-line' revolutionized mass-production in automotive industry) which redesigned workplace for better productivity, accuracy and standardization in work.

The next section, elaborates on the concepts of 'labour process' in 'capitalist mode of production' and the transition in production process from co-operation to factory system extending from Karl Marx to Braverman. Furthermore, a brief account of how the concept of 'labour process' has changed in the present with the changing 'production process' which has further changed the 'production relation'.

## Labour Process Theory (LPT): Karl Marx

The foundation of Labour Process analysis is laid in the works of Karl Marx while understanding the 'production process' in capitalist mode of production. Before delving into the analysis of LPT we need to understand as to what is labour? Marx, said:

*“Labour is, first of all, a process between man and nature, a process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature. He sets in motion the natural forces which belong to his own body, his arms, legs, head and hands, in order to appropriate the materials of nature in a form adapted to his own needs. Through this movement he acts upon external nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature”* (Marx, 1977:283).

Hence the elementary factors of the labour-process are:

1. The personal activity of man, i.e., work itself,
2. the subject of that work, and
3. Its instruments. (*ibid*: 284).

### ❖ Labour process under capitalist mode of production

Under the capitalist production process there are two distinctive features, firstly, under capitalism commodity production prevails and secondly, the labour power becomes a commodity. Thus, the sole motive of the capitalist is: 'how to get more profit' (Leontiev, 1935). Under the capitalist production process, to gather profits, Marx distinguishes two forms of 'subsumption' of labour namely- 'formal subsumption' and 'real subsumption'. 'Formal subsumption' of labour to capital are drawn by extending the length of the working day beyond socially-necessary labour time which gives 'absolute-surplus value.' And 'real subsumption' of labour under capital are done through large-scale industry with its production based on machinery which gives 'relative-surplus value' (Leontiev, 1935). The continuous introduction of machinery for 'real subsumption', Craig Littler (1982) explains as to how the production process transfigures from simple co-operation to manufacture to modern industry or machinofacture, depicted from the table 1:

*Table 1: Development of the Capitalist labour process*

	<b>Simple cooperation</b>	<b>Manufacture</b>	<b>Modern industry or machinofacture</b>
<b>Technology</b>	Not machine-based work. Traditional handicraft production	Not machine-based, but the erosion and fracturing of traditional handicrafts	Machine-based
<b>Division of labour</b>	No systematic division of labour within the workshop	Detailed division of labour	Detailed division of labour related to a machine process
<b>Mode of control</b>	Formal Subordination	Formal Subordination	Formal plus real subordination
<b>Dominant mode of extracting surplus value</b>	Absolute surplus value	Absolute surplus value	Relative surplus value
<b>Working-class divisions</b>	Skill hierarchies plus barriers between crafts	Skill hierarchies plus barriers between crafts	Mechanization breaks down skill divisions and produces a mass of unskilled labour

*Source: Littler, 1982: 23*

The transition shown in the table 1 above from simple cooperation to machinofacture has its consequence: from improved organization of work based on 'scientific management' to transferring skills or passing over to the machines and together it undermines resistance from labour to capital and resulting into forming a new structure of capitalist control (Littler, 1982). Thus, labour process is a condition, common to all forms: animate

and inanimate, where the process requires deliberation on the social relations between different human participants related to each other in the process. Under the capitalist labour process, the work is directed, supervised and controlled by the capitalist and the product produced are also owned by the capitalists and not by the labour who are the actual producer of the product. Thus, the labour process is simply a hierarchical managerial and economic process between things the capitalist has purchased- hence the product produced in the process belongs to the capitalists (Mohun, 1991).

### Labour process beyond Marx

After Marx's writings on the subject there was little succeeding analysis of the capitalist production process by Marxist for about 100 years (Mohun, 1991). Much of the early works in LPT was written within a broad Marxist framework. Braverman (1974) played a crucial role in stripping the veil and resurrected Marx's analysis. He explores the '*degradation of work in the twentieth century*.' He argued that during the twentieth century, capitalist embraced scientific management/ modern work and he underlines contradiction. According to Braverman:

*“Modern work as a result of Scientific-technical revolution and automation requires ever higher levels of education, training, the greater exercise of intelligence and mental effort in general thus, separating- mental from manual labour. At the same time, a mounting dissatisfaction with the conditions of industrial and office labour appears to contradict this view...work has become increasingly subdivided into petty operations that fail to sustain the interest or engage the capacities of humans with current levels of education; that these petty operations demand less skill and training; and the modern trend of work by it “mindlessness” and “bureaucratization” is “alienating” ever larger sections of the working population (Braverman, 1998: 3).”*

He further argued that the central objective of the Capitalist management was to deskill workers based on Taylor's 'Scientific management' (1911) which states that- by simplifying and making standard procedure of the production process by managers would ensure production of sufficient output by the workers (Eds. Hauptmeier and Vidal, 2014). The second theme of Taylorism was control, which was the central concept of all management systems. This was the dominant approach for management of work under capitalism. Conceptual control over production shifted to capitalists, undermining workers' resistance based on work skill and knowledge. This shows that labour has been impoverished before the aims of capitalist production could be met (Spencer, 2000; Tinker, 2002). Braverman's main concern was to show the necessary tendencies leading to the degradation of work under capitalism. His revolutionary goal was to reconstitute production as a process under the control of labour and he argued on surplus value production depending on the erosion of labour's control over the labour process (Spencer, 2000; Smith, 2015). Though many scholars criticized Braverman on various 'elements. Braverman romanticized craftwork and ignores reality; he neglected certain themes- the essence of 'subjectivity' (Meikins, 1994; Knights & Willmott, 1990); 'managerial strategy' (Littler, 1982; Friedman 1977; Spencer 2000; Adler 2004; Thompson & O' Doherty, 2008) which resulted into splitting up of the future direction of research. Thus, the nature of work and organization can only be understood through labour process. The capitalist production process with division of labour and technological advancement leads to surplus appropriation but sometimes it's the management which decides this (surplus) to a greater extent (Krishnaswami, 1989).

### Managerial control strategy: Beyond Braverman and New Paradigm

Later, the advocates of the second wave of the Labour Process Theory (LPT) were- Friedman (1977), Richard Edwards (1979), Burawoy (1979) and Littler (1982), who based their analysis on the question of control. The Management Strategy of Braverman was based on the principles of 'Taylorism'. Thus, the advocates of the labour process theorists adhered that Taylorian scientific management was not the only strategy for exercising managerial authority (Friedman, 1977). Although the writers broadly dealt LPT with Marxist framework they differed in many ways from Braverman's analysis. The table 2 shows as to how the concept of LPT shaped beyond Braverman by numerous theorists.

Table 2: Labour Process beyond Braverman

Thinkers	Management Strategy
Friedman (1977)	'Responsible Autonomy'; 'Direct Control'
Richard Edwards (1979)	From simple, technical to bureaucratization
Burawoy (1979)	Workers participation and choices; "games"
Littler (1982)	Bureaucratization and legitimation
New paradigms (global competition)	Flexible specialization; Regulation theory; lean production, Total Quality Management (TQM), Just-in-Time (JIT) etc.

Source: Compiled from multi-sources

Friedman argued, strategies that managers adopt to maintain managerial authority are – 'responsible autonomy' and 'direct control'. Thus, categories of activities that the managers adopt to maintain managerial authority include- task organization, control structure, lateral relation and labour-market relation (1990). Richard Edwards postulated trend in 'control strategies' from simple/ direct control (owners directly supervise work) to technical control (through machines) and to bureaucratic control (1979). It was Friedman and Edwards who identified the changing 'managerial control strategies' depending on workers' resistance (Kitay, nd). Burawoy in his seminal work *Manufacturing Consent* in 1979 underlined the concept of 'Consent', where workers participate and make 'choices'. These strategies divert the attention of workers from production activities and allow the managers to appropriate surplus. Burawoy developed well known concept of 'games' in favour of the employers, moving from despotic control to consensus (Smith, 2015). Littler's analysis on labour process was based on critical aspects of weber. Arguments on control was based on weber's concepts of bureaucracy and legitimation (1982).

With the new pattern of global-competition, workplace dynamics has changed which has further altered the control strategy by the management, viewed in the next section-

#### ❖ New Paradigms

The table shows, the 'new paradigms' under global competition includes- flexible specialization, regulation theory, post-Fordism, lean production (increased productivity and reduced cost) and the new production concepts in this new decade. The 'new paradigms' did not reckon to the idea that Braverman and LPT were wrong, rather it's outmoded. The different managerial initiatives like TQM which offers interdependent workplace with reduced hierarchy, which reduces the difference between capital i.e.; management agent and labour and make an alliance of self-interest (Smith & Thompson, 1998). The 'new paradigms' with new skills and new control strategy somewhere echoes some themes of Braverman where Wickens (1992) admits that lean production recollects many elements of Taylorism and the shadow of scientific management continues to cascade its effects on the modern-day work organization (*ibid*). In this 'new paradigm' there are newer mechanism adopted for the strategy of 'control' by the management professionals such as- financial targets, deadlines, surveillance by peer group, behavioural norms, attendance and productivity. These are some of the strategic regulations and control imposed by the managers of the company (Wickens, 1992).

In the era of market competition, managerial initiatives are taken for cost reduction which are strategically done by 'outsourcing' and 'offshoring'. Adler (2007) describes that capitalist relation of production has two dimensions- 'capital relation' and 'wage relation'. Under 'capital relation', ownership of resources is dispersed amongst firms which compete each other as commodity producers in the market. And under 'wage relation', it's a class of non-owners who lacks access to the means of production and thus sells their labour power in the labour market. The managerial initiatives adopted under the 'capital relation' and 'wage relation' to reduce costs are out rightly done through various strategies listed in the table 3:

Table 3: Managerial initiatives

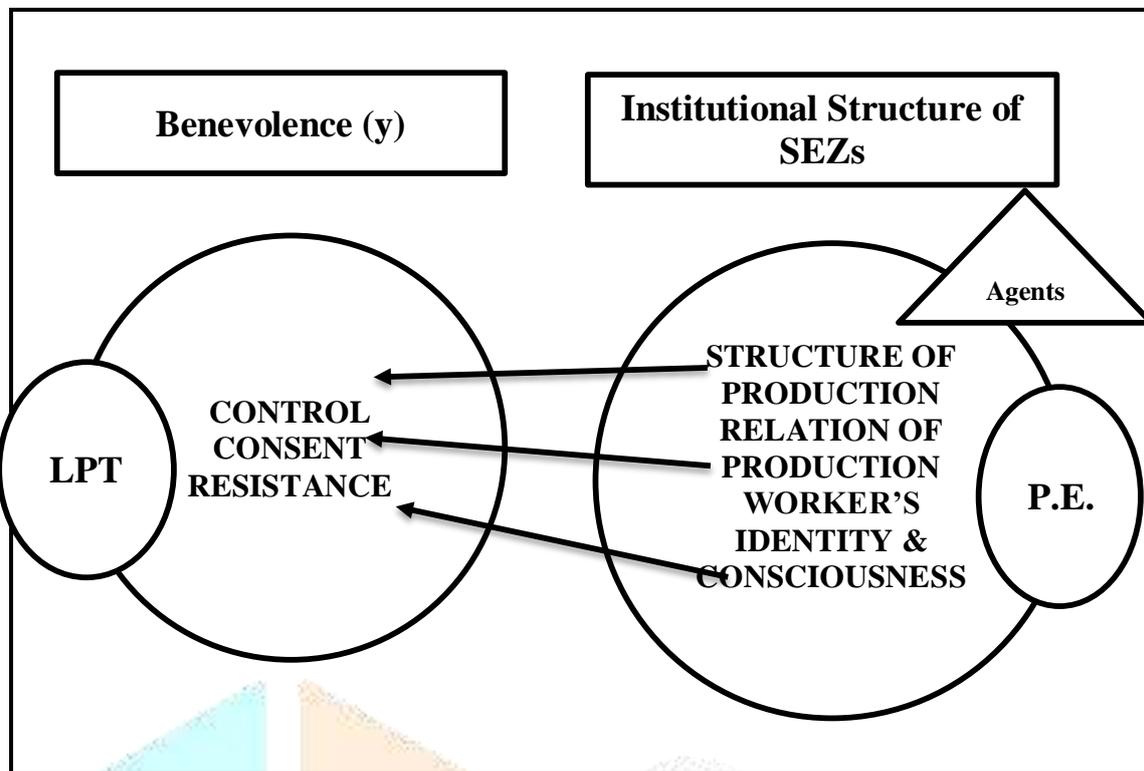
Capital Relation	Wage Relation
Downward wage pressure	Closer-supervision
Work intensification	Financial incentives
Work reorganization	Work reorganization
Technology change	Technological innovation
Relocation	Normative control
Align owners and workers financial interests	-----

Source: Adler, 2004

As it is evident from the table 2 that the progress of LPT explores and traced as to how the concept of 'Labour Process' has transformed with improved production process from Marx onwards. As we discussed about LPT, we moved from traditional theory of Marx to Braverman and later Burawoy, Edwards, Friedman and Littler emphasizing the changing forms of managerial strategies like- 'deskilling', 'control-resistance' from conflict between management and labours and 'consent' arising from various activities where the labour believes that s/he is the game changer or have choice. Today, with the new pattern of global-competition, workplace dynamics has changed which had further altered managerial strategies like TQM; flexible specialization; etc. which echoes some themes of Braverman and Taylorism. The next section will explain as how we conceptualized LPT and operationalized its various concepts for our study of Special Economic Zones focusing on its labour.

### Conceptual Framework and Operationalizing LPT

In order to reduce the elements of subjectivity and increase the viability of our study we operationalized abstract concepts espoused from the theory of labour process best suited to explore our hypothesis. In diagram 1, we contrived a conceptual framework, which is illustrated as:



*Diagram 1: Conceptual Framework of LPT*

*Source: Author's construct*

Diagram 1, elucidates the conceptual framework of the study. We espoused Labour Process Theory (LPT) in order to explore our proposition stating- Institutional Structure of SEZs is benevolent for labour. To study 'Institutional Structure' of the Zone we embraced 'Political Economy' framework to understand Zone's Structure of Production (SOP), Relation of Production (ROP) and Worker's Consciousness and Identity (WCI). And to study the essence of benevolence(y) between management and labours has been explored with respect to Control, Consent and Resistance. Together, the analysis clearly questions the benevolence(y) between management and labour in the institutional structure of the Zone. In this study, we have shown how these concepts can be operationalized on the field with its various variables and indicators.

### ❖ Operationalization of the Concepts

The table 4, shows in order to study benevolence(y) between management and labour in the institutional structure of SEZs we adopted a few concepts from LPT for this study and its variables and its suggestive indicators.

Table 4: Determined concepts, variables and indicating indicators for benevolence(y)

Concepts	Variables	Indicators
Control	Structure of production	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Production system, training, skill-enhancement</li> <li>• Cost reduction through Technology used (relative surplus)</li> <li>• Segmentation of workforce (division of labour), working hours (overtime-absolute surplus)</li> </ul>
Consent	Relation of production	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Details of employment: Nature, assessment, working hours and conditions, wages, leave, social security</li> <li>• Labour's inspection, criteria of monitoring, labour cost and management, assess performance</li> </ul>
Resistance	Workers' identity and consciousness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unionism, dispute resolution, grievance redressal committee</li> </ul>

Source: Author's construct

We further operationalized the concepts used in the conceptual framework as under:

- Benevolence(y):** This term has been defined in the Management theory differently as, *“the willingness to assume that the other person will act honestly or having good intentions, prioritizing the client and paying attention to their needs or evaluation of the intentions attributed to the partner”* (Viot & Noailles 2018: 2). In our study benevolence(y) is defined to explore/ probe into employee relationship management between managers and workers in the institutional framework of SEZs through the indicators of control, consent and resistance.
- Institutional Structure:** By the three-tier Institutional Structure of SEZs we mean as to how the agents of management department (Development Commissioners, Managers, Supervisors and Contractors) in the zones are conforming to their responsibilities with respect to the zones' Structure of Production (hours, breaks, assessment etc.), Relation of Production (salary incentives, competition etc.) and Worker's Consciousness and Identity (Grievance Redressal Committee).
- Control:** By control we mean how the management controls workers in SEZs through its Structure of Production (SOP) like- working hours, Overtime (OT), tea breaks, audits, assessments, attendance etc. The dimensions and indicators to define/ explain control at workplace is exhibited by getting OT as per government norms. Using dimensions of SOP and its indicators as a control mechanism to the workers of SEZs and to show how SOP facilitates control mechanism in the Zone and makes it malevolent or less benevolent.
- Consent:** This mechanism of management creates the environment where the workers believe s/he makes the actual choice whereas the choices are also controlled by the management. The workers are made to believe that they are the game changer or workers have choices but alternately they don't. The dimensions and indicators of consent in the workplace shown by Method to talk and resolve in dispute resolution where management creates a dilemmatic environment for labours like salary incentives or competitions or games amongst each other or complaint box where they are made to believe that they are being heard.

- e) Resistance: The tool of resistance in the structure of management claimed by Zones can be done through grievance Redressal committees that labours can voice their concern or assert their issues to the inspecting agency for any dispute resolution.

## Conclusion-

The meaning of labour and study of work has changed as the society progressed with evolving production system. Industrial Revolution and its significant inventions continuously shaped and reshaped the concepts of division of labour and added new concepts of Fordism, Taylorism/ Scientific Management and assembly line in the production process. Labour process theories came into light while studying production process by Karl Marx which further gained importance to understand work and organisation focusing on its elementary factors such as personal activity of man, i.e., work itself, the subject and its instruments. Marx decoded the profit-making route under capitalist mode of production based on formal subsumption and real subsumption. The labour process requires deliberation on the social relations between different human participants related to each other in the production process. Marx and beyond Braverman to study capital and wage relations, hierarchical system of management and production process labour process has been widely used. To study Labour process in SEZs conceptualisation and operationalisation was outlined with 'Political Economy' framework to understand Zone's institutional Structure and its benevolence(y) focusing on the structure of Production (SOP), Relation of Production (ROP) and Worker's Consciousness and Identity (WCI). And to study the essence of benevolence(y) between management and labours with respect to Control, Consent and Resistance various indicators were identified.

**NOTE: This paper is part of my PhD thesis, where I operationalised the concept of labour process on ground to measure benevolence of institutional structure of the zones towards labour.**

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