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Work and the Jungle: Precarity, Hope and Labour Reform in an Indian City

In the Tata company town of Jamshedpur, local discourses have traditionally defined the city against the shortcomings of the ‘jungle’ which surrounds it. Founded in 1907, the Tata Steel works ostensibly brought prosperity and security to the forested and underdeveloped region where it was sited. In the decades that followed, the civic identity of the securely employed Tata labour force likewise distinguished itself from the poverty, corruption and violence that were believed to be endemic to surrounding areas.

Based on ethnographic research among Tata industrial employees and their families, this paper considers how the mass casualisation of the Tata labour force in the previous 10 years relates to changes in the popular ‘jungle’ discourse in Jamshedpur. In the current context of declining wages, a scarcity of company housing and a widespread assumption of criminality in local trade unions and corporate capitalism, the ‘jungle’ would seem to press more closely to working class Tata neighbourhoods than in former years. Through a focus on the importance of urban exceptionalism to the civic identity of the Tata working class, this paper suggests how popular critical discourses on the local political economy continue to be mediated by a belief in the efficacy of local industrial employment.