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Satyagraha and employee relations: Lessons from a multinational automobile transplant in India

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# *Satyagraha* and employee relations

*Satyagraha*  
and employee  
relations

## Lessons from a multinational automobile transplant in India

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to analyse the role of non-violent protest (*satyagraha*) in a multinational automobile plant in India that has suffered from considerable employee relations problems.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper employs a case study of a Japanese-owned company using data obtained from 30 personal interviews and from internet media sources.

**Findings** – It is found that workers initially pursued their protests through *satyagraha*-style methods before taking on a more violent posture when company management refused to accept any notion of jointly seeking a new harmony. The reasons for these developments are explored.

**Practical implications** – The paper has implications for the manner in which scholars and practitioners view the respective roles, significance, and management of *satyagraha* and non-*satyagraha* protest in Indian companies.

**Originality/value** – The importance of *satyagraha* in Indian employee relations is under-researched in comparison with other factors, and is especially significant for culturally-unaware multinational companies in successfully understanding and managing protest in the workplace context.

**Keywords** India, Employees relations, Multinational companies, Automobile industry, Protest, *Satyagraha*, Toyota

**Paper type** Research paper

Lean production methods have become ubiquitous across the global automobile manufacturing industry. Lean production focuses on eliminating waste from all aspects of the enterprise. Anything that does not produce value is classified as waste (Womack *et al.*, 1990). Opposition to lean production is widespread in the critical literature, often condemned as an inhuman device that sacrifices human considerations for commercial gain (Stewart *et al.*, 2009). A popular analogy is to equate “lean” with “mean” and “management by stress” (Parker and Slaughter, 1988a). The anti-lean literature concentrates its analysis on the de-humanising and exploitative dynamics of the system that sacrifices dignity and safety in an endless search for more from less (Parker and Slaughter, 1988b; Babson, 1995; Elger and Smith, 1994; Stewart *et al.*, 2009). A number of researchers have published ethnographic accounts of the realities for workers within lean factories in the automobile industry, for example, Toyota (Kamata, 1982; Mehri, 2005), Subaru-Isuzu (Graham, 1995), Mazda (Fucini and Fucini, 1990), Vauxhall-GM and Rover-BMW (Stewart *et al.*, 2009), and GM-Suzuki CAMI (Rinehart *et al.*, 1997). These studies have all occurred within developed industrial nations (USA, Canada, UK, and Japan). However, the literature is far less rich in connection with opposition to lean systems in the automobile industry in developing nations. In this paper we analyse the role of opposition to lean production in a multinational vehicle producer in India.



India is a heterogeneous country with diverse religions, cultural values, and languages often varying between different states and regions (Tripathi, 1990; Sen, 2005; Das, 2000). This diversity can complicate employee relations for multinational companies wishing to establish operations within the country (Sinha, 2004; Bagla, 2008). Numerous studies have pointed to the complexity of factors that influence human resource management and employee relations in the country (Budhwar, 2003; Bjorkman and Budhwar, 2007; Ramaswamy and Schiphorst, 2000). One aspect of Indian society that outsiders often find difficult to grasp relates to the notion of protest. Protest lies at the heart of Indian history and culture and can take on a bewildering variety of forms (Bayley, 1962). But, arguably the form of protest that has most captured the imagination of scholars relates to the Gandhian philosophy of *satyagraha*. *Satyagraha* espouses that “non-violence is a power that can transform adversaries into friends and resolve issues of injustice and oppression” (newworldencyclopedia.org, n.d.). More fully, the word translates as “Truth-force” or “the force that is generated through adherence to Truth” (mkgandhi.org, n.d.). *Satyagraha* was extensively followed as a form of protest against British colonialism in the period after 1920. The British left India in 1947 and Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated in 1948 but there is evidence that his mantra of non-violent protest still enjoys popularity in modern-day India. For example, as recently as April 2011 the influential Indian social activist and Gandhi adherent, Anna Hazare, commenced a *satyagraha*-style fast-until-death in protest against the government’s refusal to allow a greater public role in the Anti-Corruption Bill. This quickly developed into a mass movement (Jha, 2011). Within days the government acceded to all his demands.

Although *satyagraha* has been well analysed in the literature in relation to such topics as political studies, social change, and philosophy it is noticeable that its role in regard to employee relations, especially in regard to multinational companies, remains under-researched. This represents a significant gap in the literature. The purpose of this paper is to analyse the role of *satyagraha* in a multinational automobile plant in India that has suffered from considerable employee relations problems. We employ a case study of Toyota Kirloskar Motors (TKM) because of the momentous impact of industrial unrest during the early years of this company’s operation. Toyota Motors entered India in 1997 as a joint venture with the Kirloskar group of manufacturing companies with the name TKM and started producing motor vehicles in late 1999 at its Bidadi plant near Bangalore. This gives us an opportunity to study the chronological nature of protest at the plant and make a welcome addition to the literature on this company. The academic literature is fragmented and analytically thin, comprising only a few descriptive case studies (Majumdar, 2006b; Mikkilineni, 2006; Ray and Roy, 2006), book chapters (Das and George, 2006), and other scattered references (Sinha, 2004; Mooij, 2005).

It seems remarkable that the legacy of *satyagraha* is still strong in India despite the momentous events that have occurred in the country since independence, most notably the era of state-sponsored socialism (1948-1991) and the more recent impact of capitalist-inspired globalisation (since 1991). Other competitive philosophies in India have been in direct contrast with *satyagraha*, such as the propagation of violence as the only way to attain freedom by Subhash Chandra Bose, the rise of extreme Hindu nationalism, and the impact of communist-inspired political parties and trade unions. We offer two potential explanations for this. The first lies in the all-encompassing nature of Indian thought: “a unique feature of Hinduism has been its ability to incorporate a wide variety of different beliefs” (Kumar and Sethi, 2005, p. 56). Scholars

have noted that over thousands of years Indian culture has exhibited the ability to absorb fresh ideas without allowing itself to be dominated by any one of them. Kumar and Sethi (2005, p. 56) note that “the primary focus of Hindu thought has been on incorporating new developments instead of trying to refute them”. These authors cite the work of Doniger (2001) who writes “it is axiomatic that no religious idea in India ever dies or is superseded – it is merely combined with the new ideas that arise in response to it”.

The second potential explanation lies in the Indian mindset for improvised solutions. *Jugaad* is a Hindi word that refers to an improvised solution to a pressing need. It is predicated on the notion of going outside a system or process to solve a problem. Within this context, *jugaad* literally means an arrangement or to “work around” something. It implies alternatives, substitutes, make-dos, good-enoughs, and plan Bs, etc., an alphabet soup of options that work (Jana, 2009). It possesses the characteristics of being an innovative solution to the problem at hand which provides an answer to an immediate dilemma. *Jugaad* thrives within a context of scarce resources, necessity, and personal survival, where more often than not things fail to work, and where systems and processes are poorly designed and executed. To get things done people must learn how to reconnoitre around these barriers (Chadha, 2009). The concept has a class component to it. *Jugaad* are things that poor people do to survive in an environment where they have to make the most of the resources they do have: a tribute to native inventiveness, ingenuity, cleverness, and lateral thinking. Such an environment makes inventers and innovators out of ordinary people.

The paper is structured as follows. In the next two sections we analyse the respective roles of *satyagraha* and non-*satyagraha* as forms of protest. This is followed by an explanation of our methodology and an analysis of our case study at TKM. We conclude the paper with a discussion and conclusion of our findings.

### ***Satyagraha* as a form of protest**

In this section we examine the Gandhian philosophy of *satyagraha* and analyse the strict limits within which it is confined. In terms of etymology the word is a portmanteau of the Sanskrit words *satya* (truth) and *agraha* (to grasp, hold firmly, insist on) (wikipedia.org, n.d.).

According to Gandhi (1920) “I discovered in the earliest stages that pursuit of truth did not admit of violence being inflicted on one’s opponent but that he must be weaned from error by patience and compassion”. The object is to “convert, not to coerce, the wrong-doer” (Gandhi, 1939/1999). *Satyagraha* does not foresee the destruction of an enemy but rather the conversion of an enemy: “the goal is to win hearts [...] it seeks to liquidate antagonisms but not the antagonists themselves” (satyagraha1.com, n.d.). Since the aim is to conquer through conversion “in the end there is neither defeat nor victory but rather a new harmony” (britannica.com, n.d.). *Satyagraha* does not seek to “end or destroy the relationship with the antagonist, but instead seeks to transform or purify it to a higher level” (newworldencyclopedia.org, n.d.). The achievement of such a new harmony creates a lasting peace rather than a short-term peace because all parties have come to recognise and respect the truth. The oppressor is able to live on but this time in a situation of cooperation, mutual acceptance, and lasting relationship.

The truth does not always reside on the side of the non-wrong-doer. Gandhi believed that truth could be found in the opponent’s camp as well and hence should be respected (Wintle, 2002). Sometimes concessions have to be made. Cooperation and negotiation

are vital ingredients in the process of finding a new harmony. Everything possible must be done to keep open the path to the oppressor “lest the opponent become alienated and access to their portion of the truth become lost” (dfong.com, n.d.). For Gandhi, *satyagraha* was not a mere act of protest aimed at securing short-term victories but more an introspective act characterised by fasting and soul-searching in pursuit of truth. Non-violence is an inviolate component of *satyagraha*. It is contradictory to attempt to use violence to achieve peace. Justice cannot be obtained through unjust means in the sense that violent and coercive means merely embed that injustice. In this regard we can note the existence of three basic concepts that form the essence of *satyagraha*: *sat* (openness, honesty, and fairness), *ahimsa* (refusal to inflict injury on others), and *tapasya* (willingness for self-sacrifice).

When conducting *satyagraha* campaigns, Gandhi laid down a number of principles and rules as part of a code of discipline for non-violent protest. These include harbour no anger; suffer the anger of the opponent; refuse to retaliate to the assault of the opponent; do not submit to any order given in anger; refrain from cursing or swearing; do not insult the opponent; do not directly coerce or physically obstruct anyone; do not destroy property; do not be secretive; do not resist arrest; if taken prisoner behave in an exemplary manner; there must be no impatience, no barbarity, no insolence, no undue pressure, and no intolerance (Gandhi, 1930/1999; Prabhu and Rao, 1967).

Gandhi practiced two types of *satyagraha* in his campaigns: civil disobedience and non-cooperation (Shepard, 2000). Civil disobedience means breaking a law and courting arrest. However, only unjust laws were to be broken. Flouting all laws was forbidden. By “refusing to submit to the wrong or cooperate with it in any way” the oppressed person reveals his portion of the truth (britannica.com, n.d.). When breaking an unjust law Gandhi stressed the “civil” aspect of the disobedience in the sense that the protest had to be civilised and polite. Breaking the law was not the essence of the protest. Going to prison was the object (Shepard, 2002). He wanted to make a statement about how deeply he cared about the issue at hand. Rarely did such actions have direct impact on the oppressor himself. Instead they operated through their indirect effects on multiple audiences who would eventually bring unbearable public pressure upon the wrong-doer and institute a change of heart.

Non-cooperation meant refusing to cooperate with the oppressor and according to Shepard (2002) encompassed such actions as strikes, economic boycotts, and tax refusals. Again such actions were performed in a civil manner but possessed a dynamic of their own. Oppressors obtain their power from the willingness of people to obey. But if people refuse such obedience and show willingness to suffer in their self-sacrifice then the oppressor loses his power.

### **The elements of *satyagraha*: *pradarshana*, *dharna*, and *hartal***

In this section we examine the three components of *satyagraha* as defined by Gandhi – *pradarshana*, *dharna*, and *hartal* – and analyse the role played by each of these in the pursuit of non-violent protest:

- (1) *Pradarshana* is a public demonstration involving a collective expression of emotions. These can be either negative (e.g. labour protests) or positive (e.g. celebrations such as weddings or religious festivals). *Pradarshanas* can take place in various ways such as meetings, rallies, marches, and processions. Their function is twofold. First, they act as an awareness mechanism. They communicate the displeasure of people to perceived oppressors, bringing their

grievances to the attention of those concerned. Second, they act as a mass mobilisation attempt or a collective show of strength by the group affected by a decision or action. This process acts to test the willingness (Kelly, 1998) and “secure concerted and collective responses” from supporters (Salamon, 2000, p. 115). In both these aspects they attempt to seek attention from both oppressors and potential supporters. Quite often a *pradarshana* occurs at the site of a protest (such as an industrial organisation) or culminates at the locus of official power (such as a government department) (Gadgil and Guha, 2007).

When Gandhi returned from South Africa to lead the Indian freedom movement he initiated *pradarshanas* as a way to mobilise the people and protest against colonial oppression. Gandhi insisted that these *pradarshanas* should be peaceful and whenever peace was breached by the participants he called off such demonstrations (Tiberg, 2009). *Pradarshanas* have ever since been a common way of peaceful protest in India in respect to all aspects of society, whether political, religious, or industrial. The *Times of India* (2010) recently reported that opposition parties within the Karnataka Assembly protested against alleged illegal mining and corruption by undertaking a 310 kilometre *padayatra* (a journey or pilgrimage by foot) from Bangalore to the site of one of the alleged illegal mines. Supporters wore white Gandhi hats and waved the tricolour.

- (2) *Dharna* is a method of seeking justice by sitting at the door of a wrongdoer, traditionally a debtor, and fasting until justice is obtained (thefreedictionary.com, n.d.). It can be conducted either by an individual, a group, or a community. Etymologically the word derives from the Sanskrit word *dhri* which means “holding out” (Hardiman, 2003, p. 44). It is inherently a peaceful demonstration. Fasting was regarded as an effective tool in line with the Hindu faith which believes that if the fasting person dies then his spirit will continue to torment and cause afflictions to the unbending opponent (Bondurant, 1998). Hence, whenever someone resorts to fasting this is looked upon with anxiety and attempts are immediately made to dissuade the person from fasting either by accepting all demands or initiating dialogue towards resolution.

During the colonial and post-Independence era *dharna* has evolved as a sit-in strike or demonstration to show solidarity for a cause as well as seek the attention of higher authorities. *Dharna* is also a means of drawing sympathy to the cause from external audiences (Sharma, 2008). Thus it acts as a bi-pronged tool where public support for the cause is gained and the authorities are morally persuaded to resolve the grievance. The *dharna* is still extremely popular in India and is practiced by all sectors of society. Recently an all-night *dharna* was held by opposition parties within the Karnataka Assembly to protest alleged illegal mining and corruption. The opposition members wore yellow miners’ helmets as a symbol of protest (*Times of India*, 2010)

- (3) *Hartal* is an expression of protest by stopping work. This is also an ancient form of protest in India. During the Mughal rule in India the artisans (goldsmiths, silversmiths, etc.) resorted to *hartal* against the fiscal exploitation of the rulers by closing their shops and quitting the place on masse (Habib, 1995). Gandhi also used *hartal* as a weapon during the independence movement. He called a nationwide *hartal* on 6 April 1919 to protest the Rowlatt Act of the British government to control revolutionary activities, by shutting down shops and businesses, stopping work, and fasting for a day (Brown,

1972). This form of general strike (also called *bandh*) is still popular in modern India. A *bandh* can be ordered by a community, a political party, or a trade union where people stay in their homes, shops, and workplaces are closed, and public transport does not operate. Being a collective society, when unrest is felt in one sector of society in India it can quickly spread and acquire a broader dimension across domains not directly related to the focus of the original unrest. In this sense, *hartal* has become a common feature of industrial relations in India. Trade unions often call for stoppages of work of varying lengths, anything from a lightning strike (lasting for only an hour or two) to an indefinite strike (lasting for an unspecified period). The involvement of external trade unions affiliated to political parties helps to give the factory *hartal* a broader dimension. Outside officials possess political power which can bring more pressure to bear on company managements and government authorities. This external influence often has the effect of spreading specific industrial disputes into the wider community (Ramaswamy, 1974).

### **Non-satyagraha as a form of protest**

We have argued that the three concepts of *pradarshana*, *dharna*, and *hartal* are crucial components of the overall philosophy of *satyagraha*, but Gandhi laid down strict rules of discipline for how *satyagraha* should be performed. As soon as a *pradarshana*, *dharna*, or *hartal* turned violent it would be rejected by Gandhi. An example of this concerns the practice of *dharna*. In the pre-Gandhian period a *dharna* comprised of sitting at the doorstep of a debtor and fasting. However, when fasting failed to evoke any satisfactory response from the oppressor the person would then resort to self-infliction of wounds in order to escalate the protest (Spodek, 1971). Later, when Gandhi adopted the practice of *dharna* and absorbed it within *satyagraha*, he took fasting and hunger strikes (*bhook hartal*) to be the essence of self-sacrifice and abolished any resort to self-infliction of wounds. Thus, in the strict sense, *satyagraha* moves beyond its intended domain as soon as any of the disciplinary rules surrounding its operation are breached, for example, resorting to violence, breaking all laws not just unjust laws, showing anger, swearing at or insulting the oppressor, deliberately obstructing pathways or premises, retaliation, destroying property, and so on. Hence, during any *pradarshana*, *dharna*, or *hartal*, as soon as the event starts to involve deliberate obstruction, burning effigies, shouting insulting slogans, imprisoning officials in their place of work (*gherao*), throwing stones, sabotage, looting, rioting, burning, damaging or destroying property, self-wounding, or self-immolation, then it moves beyond the domain of *satyagraha*.

### **Methodology**

The authors have undertaken three separate field trips to Bangalore to gather data conducting 30 separate interviews in the process: eight with business journalists, four with external union officials, three with internal shop stewards, eight with senior managers, two with middle managers, three with training personnel, and one each with a maintenance worker, and an Indian academic. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. At the end of each field trip the interviews were analysed for important themes which formed the basis for our next round of interviews in subsequent trips. We also performed an internet search for significant events occurring at the plant during the period since 1999. These were downloaded, arranged

in chronological order, and analysed for important themes. This data were used to inform our interview questions and add density to our data.

The three shop stewards we interviewed had previously been rank-and-file workers at TKM and had been at the forefront of on-going worker opposition in the plant. All of them had served various periods of suspension from their employment because of their agitation for union recognition. In particular they enjoyed almost cult status amongst the workforce for their leading roles in occupying the factory in 2006 and threatening to commit suicide by igniting the LPG cylinders. After the recognition of the Toyota Kirloskar Motor Employees Union (TKMEU) in 2007 these three individuals were elected by the workforce to the three most senior union roles within the plant – general secretary, president, and vice president. In addition, our four interviews with external union officials took the form of two interviews in 2009 and two interviews in 2010 with the general secretary and assistant general secretary of Centre for Indian Trade Unions (CITU). This is the external union federation that the workers in the plant turned to for assistance when their demands for union recognition were first aired in 2001. CITU is a Marxist-oriented grouping of trade unions. These two officials subsequently played major roles in the worker campaign against the TKM management between 2001 and 2006. Consequently, although only eight of our 30 interviews were conducted with workers, shop stewards, or external union officials, these individuals in total played the most significant leadership roles in the worker movement and were well qualified to impart detailed information and to act as the spokespeople for the mass of the workers themselves.

### **Opposition to lean production at Toyota India**

At the time of its establishment TKM was one of the lowest automated Toyota plants in the world. Construction started in 1997 on a greenfield site in the township of Bidadi, 40 kilometres outside Bangalore in southern India. The manufacturing workforce was comprised almost entirely of young, inexperienced males who possessed a two-year diploma from a technical institute but (importantly) with no prior industry “baggage”, so that the workforce could be groomed into Toyota methods more easily (interview with shop steward). Annual production targets were initially very modest, of the order of 20,000 vehicles using a single-shift system, but Toyota harboured ambitious plans to make India the hub of its global market share vision which aimed to capture 15 per cent of world production by 2010. The first motor vehicle (called the Qualis) rolled off the production line in January 2000. The vehicle sold strongly in the opening months, exceeding expectations. In response TKM management introduced a two-shift system in May 2000. A four-hour gap separated the two shifts and this was often filled with mandatory overtime, invariably arranged with short notice. The Deputy Managing Director of TKM stated “we want to do more work in lesser time” (Murali, 2000). Simultaneously the TPS system was being rolled out in the factory. Just-in-time, kaizen, teamwork, standardised work, and 5S (sort, straighten, shine, standardise, and sustain) were the first techniques to be introduced into the plant. Initially these had some success as the young workers were keen to learn and make a good impression (interview with maintenance worker). By November 2000 the inventory build-up at the plant was equivalent to only one-day’s production. Vehicle output in 2000 reached almost 22,000 units, about 3 per cent of total Indian market share.

However, all these developments put pressure on the young and inexperienced workforce, with significant adverse consequences. During the first year of production several factors emerged that challenged industrial harmony in the plant. The pace,



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discipline, and intensity of work was far greater than was considered normal within the Indian context. But this situation was aggravated by a sense of job insecurity. Workers had to wait three years before gaining permanent status in the plant. Additionally, TKM would not recognise any external trade union despite India's long history of unionism. This was compounded by the feeling of disrespect that workers felt from their Japanese trainers and managers. Local journalists informed us of incidents of trainers shouting at workers, ridiculing their eating habits, and forcing skilled (male) workers to perform menial tasks such as mopping the floors around their workspace. The way in which workers were treated by management became a serious issue:

[...] a worker can have satisfaction because of the treatment from the employer and how he is looked after. That matters. That's the big problem with Toyota [...] the burning issue is the treatment of the workers, that is the problem here (interview with external union official).

In June 2001 TKM experienced its first industrial unrest. Tensions had been simmering at the plant since April when the management unilaterally announced a pay rise of 300 rupees per month (about US\$10). According to union sources the workers boycotted lunch as a protest (interview with external union official). In response management forced the workers out of the factory and declared that the action taken by workers amounted to a strike. Approximately 25 leaders of the action were called in by management for questioning and were subsequently "targeted" (Das and George, 2006, p. 293). Workers then commenced a sit-in. The leader of the lunch boycott had his employment terminated on the grounds of unsatisfactory work performance. Workers went out on strike in consequence. Management attempted to form a company trade union with limited powers. Instead workers formed their own trade union, TKMEU, and registered this union with the government, although Toyota refused to recognise it. Several activists within this union were dismissed or suspended on the grounds of poor performance in terms of the performance appraisal system.

In 2002 another strike of 52 days duration was declared in protest against compulsory overtime and further suspensions of union members and officials. The strike was labelled illegal by TKM management who defended their actions that workers were only suspended following indiscipline, misbehaviour, or poor performance in terms of the appraisal system. Workers organising a gate meeting were arrested. The first half of 2004 experienced continuous industrial unrest. The issues were again compulsory overtime, refusal to recognise the trade union, further suspension of union officials, and unilateral wage increases without negotiation. Workers reacted by refusing to work compulsory overtime, boycotted lunch, refused to perform warm-up exercises, not attending morning meetings, and wearing black badges as a symbolic form of protest. The trade union decided to affiliate with the CITU, widely regarded as a militant union federation with Marxist leanings. From here onwards we observe a hybridised form of employee relations combining the Gandhian philosophy of *satyagraha* and the Marxist philosophy of class struggle. In early 2005 the TKMEU filed a demand for conciliation with the District Labour Court. However, company management refused to sit in conciliation with authorised union representatives. In consequence, the union mounted a large-scale community campaign throughout Bangalore. With the *satyagraha* mode still not abandoned the workers with the active support of CITU extended *pradarshana* to the streets of Bangalore, now turning it into an anti-capitalist and anti-multinational corporation protest. From this time onwards more proactive unrest with frequent violence would be witnessed.

In May 2005 the company announced another unilateral wage increase. In consequence the union held a secret ballot and served a notice of strike action to occur in 14 day's time. The company threatened to move the factory to north India unless the industrial climate improved. Unrest spread to the local townships with accusations that workers were threatened and assaulted by local "goons" (politically inspired ruffians). The year 2006 witnessed a dramatic escalation in the intensity of industrial unrest. The trigger was the release of a company inquiry which upheld the dismissal and suspension of workers during the previous years. Strike action immediately ensued and workers occupied the factory. Management declared the strike illegal in the absence of the normal 14-day notice. A lockout was declared on safety grounds. Workers inside the factory started to indulge in "violence and destruction" (ICMR, 2006). Management claimed "workers threatened to commit suicide by entering the LPG zone" (business-standard.com, 2006). According to the company, striking workers were threatening to blow up LPG gas cylinders on the premises. A senior manager sent a provocative message to the workers offering to send over to them a box of matches so that they could carry out their threat (interview with senior manager). Workers were also accused of obstructing the outward movement of manufactured vehicles, illegally stopping production, damaging a security car, and assaulting non-union members (ICMR, 2006). A large police contingent gathered at the factory and food, water, and toilet facilities were denied.

The Labour Commissioner arranged an immediate conciliation meeting between the TKMEU and company management. However, management did not turn up for the meeting claiming that workers were in a "violent and agitated mood" (ICMR, 2006). Hundreds of workers had gathered outside the premises of the Labour Commissioner in a ritual display of *dharna*. Management had claimed that they were "scared" to attend the meeting because of this show of solidarity (business-standard.com, 2006). When the conciliation meeting did get underway a few days later management refused to sit down with external union officials in attendance. The commissioner was forced to meet with each of the parties separately. The commissioner recommended that the dismissal of workers should be set aside on condition that the strike and lockout were both lifted. The union agreed but management refused, whereupon the commissioner handed the matter over to the state government to resolve. In a sudden development, TKM management lifted the lockout and the government banned the strike, forcing workers back to work. Protesting workers assembled in a park opposite the State Department of Labour. Police dispersed the crowd and arrested several workers and external union organisers including the assistant general secretary of CITU. This prompted spontaneous union agitation at several other factories belonging to other companies. Gate meetings were held and demands made for the arrested workers to be released, which they were later that day on bail. Subsequently, a further 27 workers were suspended because of acts of vandalism during the unrest. Union members commenced a rolling hunger strike. Union federations from around the world pledged their support for the Toyota workers and community campaigns continued.

In a dramatic development during 2007 TKM management agreed to recognise the TKMEU as the bargaining agent and allow elections for the union office bearers. Workers who had been on suspension for many years were elected to senior positions. The general secretary of CITU played a major role in smoothing the passage to recognition by agreeing to move into the background if this would facilitate the recognition of the union. As a result, TKMEU now negotiates with TKM management on crucial aspects of workplace relations which previously caused unrest, especially

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work intensification associated with line speed-ups and manning levels (interview with shop steward). Importantly, union agreement now has to be reached about takt times. Whenever line speed is increased the manning level has to be increased accordingly so as to maintain a constant ratio of workers on the line. This major concession away from a pure lean system has resulted in the TKM plant being dubbed the Toyota Indian Production System (TIPS). Although external CITU officials play no official role within the company, TKM management is prepared to tolerate the fact that TKMEU office bearers take advice and instructions from CITU outside the plant.

### Discussion and conclusion

The analysis above reveals our primary finding that workers at TKM initially pursued their protests through *satyagraha*-style methods, which eventually took on a more violent posture when TKM management refused to accept any notion of jointly seeking a new harmony. Within a short period of time thereafter the company decided to reverse its stance by recognising the trade union and reinstating suspended workers. Below we analyse this finding under three headings: first, the initial thwarting of *satyagraha* and the reasons for this; second, resorting to non-*satyagraha* methods; and third, reconciling the juxtaposition of *satyagraha* and non-*satyagraha* methods in the generation of a new harmony.

#### (1) *The initial thwarting of satyagraha*

Toyota workers commenced their initial industrial action independently in the sense that they were not affiliated to any trade union. Their initial protests were well matched to the principles of *satyagraha*. When TKM workers boycotted lunch in June 2001 as a protest against a unilaterally imposed wage increase their action was a typical example of *satyagraha*. Their intention was to raise the awareness of management by bringing their grievance to public attention – an act of communication. Since truth may also lie in the opponent's camp the expectation is that both parties would cooperate and negotiate to find a new harmony. This did not happen. TKM management appeared unable to differentiate between *satyagraha* and non-*satyagraha* protest. The protest lay outside the company's discourse. The lunch boycott was interpreted as disrespectful and disloyal to the notion of the family. Company management declared the action to be a strike, forced the workers from the factory, and then proceeded to discipline the alleged ringleaders. This over-reaction stemmed from a serious cultural misunderstanding and its implications proved to be far reaching. Workers responded by conducting a sit-in (another key element of *satyagraha*), in this case involving a mixture of *dharna* and *pradarshana*. Again the intention would have been to send a further message to TKM management expressing their displeasure in the hope that a joint seeking of the truth would ensue to reach a new harmony. But again this did not happen. Management terminated the employment of the leader of the lunch boycott on the grounds of unsatisfactory work performance. Workers went on strike, another example of *satyagraha*, this time in the form of a *hartal* – an expression of protest by stopping work. Management responded by trying to form a company trade union, but workers responded by establishing their own trade union. Management refused to recognise this union and dismissed several activists on the grounds of poor performance.

*Satyagraha*-style protests continued from 2001 until 2005 (before degenerating thereafter) involving a variety of actions including strikes, gate meetings, refusing to work compulsory overtime, boycotting lunch, refusing to perform warm-up exercises,

not attending morning meetings, and wearing black badges. Invariably the company reaction was to suspend and dismiss troublemakers.

When we analyse this sequence of events which occurred over a short period of time in mid-2001 we can unearth a typical example of cross-cultural misunderstandings playing out in the form of disastrous employee relations. The emphasis in Toyota company culture lies in harmonious unitarist relations (Liker, 2004). The concepts of the Toyota Way and the Toyota Production System represent a paradigm of one-best-way which TKM management expected employees to accept and practice without protest. Not to do so represented disloyalty. By the time Toyota established its operations in India in 1999 it had already enjoyed considerable success in spreading its philosophy to many nations across the globe, including the prestigious US market. With success comes hubris and we would suggest that Toyota entered into India with a certain degree of arrogance.

The notion of an alternative way to the paradigm of the one-best-way was unthinkable – far removed from the TKM dominant logic. *Satyagraha* stresses a joint seeking of the truth to reach a new harmony. But the problem for TKM was that it believed it already represented the truth and the existence of any new harmony arrived at through a joint mission of truth seeking was an unimaginable notion that was not understood or appreciated. This sense of superiority was revealed in 2005 by a visiting Japanese management guru, Kenichi Ohmae, whilst attending a seminar in Mumbai. He was reported in the Indian media as making comments to the effect that Indians are not good at manufacturing:

Indians are not good at manufacturing. Even if they do what we tell them to do, they always need to understand why they are doing it that way [...] in manufacturing when you have a *successful formula* what you look for is implementation right? Indians always ask these fundamental questions (Sangameshwaran, 2005, italics added).

This reference to a “successful formula” indicates the belief by TKM and other Japanese managements in the superiority of their manufacturing principles and practices and their expectation that it should be followed without question. Accordingly they made very little attempt to understand Indian culture and work habits. We found several examples from our own research where this attitude showed through. First, the media gave prominence to the views of a leading HR consultant who blamed TKM management (as well as other Japanese company managements in India, e.g. Honda) for causing industrial unrest by failing to handle issues in a more sensitive manner and also by issuing periodic threats to transfer its operations out of Karnataka if the industrial climate failed to improve: “the management goofed up on both the PR as well as the HR front [...] Japanese managements have hardly made any effort to learn how to deal with India’s highly politicised unions” (Majumdar, 2006a). Second, during the early days of employee discontent TKM management refused to cooperate with a worker-inspired trade union and attempted to impose its own company dominated union using employees sympathetic to the dominant company paradigm. Third, a senior trainer for the company commented that he realised much of TKM training contradicted Indian culture and stated “but quite frankly we are doing it anyway” (interview with TKM trainer), a statement which seems to indicate a certain level of hubris and an absolute faith in their approach. Fourth, at the height of industrial unrest during 2006, TKM management continued to defend its policy of not re-instating workers who had been suspended or dismissed, arguing “we will not compromise on discipline; we are efficient because we are disciplined”

(thehindubusinessline.com, 2006). This moral indignation expressed by management reinforces the belief in the rightness of its cause. Fifth, during the latter stages of employee discontent when disharmony was reaching violent levels, there were several occasions when TKM management turned down the possibility of sitting together in common forums in an exercise of jointly seeking a new truth. Management refused to attend a conciliation meeting with the Labour Commissioner in 2006 and refused again a few days later to attend the rearranged conciliation meeting because external union officials were in attendance. The commissioner was forced to meet both sides separately. When the commissioner recommended a potential solution this was turned down by management but agreed to by the union.

During the early days of operations there is little doubt that Japanese trainers and managers were frustrated by Indian work habits. Indians failed to share with their Japanese visitors the emphasis on discipline, precision, timeliness, and quality. A Japanese trainer was reported as abusing a worker by seizing his cap, throwing it to the floor, and stomping on it, whilst shouting “you Indians” (interview with journalist). Local Indian managers could only rise to a certain level in the management hierarchy, with senior decision-making roles occupied only by Japanese (interview with senior manager). This inability to incorporate local knowledge probably exacerbated the groupthink mentality within the dominant TKM schema. An Indian manager reported an example of a Japanese manager raging “what kind of a country is this?” His retort back to the Japanese manager was “*we* know what kind of country it is, but *you* don’t [...] if it was like Japan then we don’t need you to come here and set up a car plant” (interview with senior manager). This retort again reveals the ethnocentric thinking behind much Japanese management philosophy in India and their inability to understand or incorporate local culture.

### (2) *Resorting to non-satyagraha methods*

When non-violent methods were met with perceived repressive actions and a refusal to enter into joint truth seeking, workers turned to the support of a left-leaning union federation. This marked an epiphany in employee relations at TKM with the creation of a hybridised philosophy combining *satyagraha* and class struggle. Various violent acts were pursued such as assault, destruction of property, and threats of self-immolation. Within a short period of time TKM management changed its stance and decided to recognise the trade union and reinstate suspended workers. What *satyagraha* had failed to achieve, non-*satyagraha* had been successful. It appeared that TKM no longer believed that it already represented the truth and was prepared to enter into dialogue and negotiations with a trade union about the best way to run its Indian operation. Had TKM been converted or conquered? Official statements issued by TKM management in the period after 2008 are illuminating. A new Japanese Managing Director commenced at TKM in 2008. His messages were reconciliatory: “we did not have much experience in the past ten years” (deepdictionary.com, 2008) and “the next ten years will be different from the last decade [...] it is now time for a new vision and mission” (thehindubusinessline.in, 2009). The Japanese Ambassador to India also joined the reconciliation bandwagon urging his countrymen-industrialists to “rework their perception of India” (Surendran, 2010). The new Managing Director continued to make a significant impact on relationships through his use of the media: “the cultures may be different, but the key to success of this joint venture is based on mutual respect [...] we’re human after all and what shores up this mutual admiration is very deep and frequent communication” (Mitra, 2010). It appears from these statements that TKM management was now embracing a new harmony.

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(3) *Reconciling the juxtaposition of satyagraha and non-satyagraha methods*

Can we reconcile the initial pursuit of non-violent protest at TKM with the later resort to more violent methods? Gandhi's notion of *satyagraha* involved converting not coercing the opponent so that his version of the truth is heard and a cohesive relationship is generated at a new level of harmony and lasting peace. However, against this strong philosophy must be set the two arguments we analysed earlier in this paper: first, the prevalent Indian mindset of improvised solutions (*jugaad*); and second, the tendency never to discard ideas but rather to find fresh ways of combining the new with the old. Developments at TKM display the process of going outside a system to solve a problem or an immediate dilemma (*jugaad*). Available resources are combined in any manner to get the job done in any way possible. This can be juxtaposed with the all-encompassing nature of Hindu thought which can incorporate a wide variety of different beliefs without allowing any one new idea to dominate. In this manner, we can argue that *satyagraha* has not been refuted at TKM. It has merely been combined with a new idea that has arisen in response. The recognition of the trade union at TKM and the new era of negotiated solutions we would suggest represent a new harmony of joint seeking of the truth at the company. Whereas Gandhi would argue that coercion can destroy a relationship and prevent the joint seeking of truth and the generation of a new harmony, the process of protest at TKM could be argued to have involved a coercive method aimed at forcing the opponent to see the new reality. When *satyagraha* is tried, but found to have no result, the resort to more violent methods can be embraced to coerce the opponent to see a new reality. Once coerced, the opponent may come to embrace a new harmony in their own time, an outcome that arguably has been observed at TKM in the period since 2007.

The contrast between the Indian experience of opposition to lean production compared with such opposition in other countries is instructive. Researchers have analysed the adverse impact of lean production on worker health and well-being and exposed the myth of worker empowerment under such a system (Stewart *et al.*, 2009). However, Indian culture stresses that no ideas should ever be discarded. Rather methods should be pursued of combining the new with the old. The aim is to eliminate antagonisms but not the antagonists. The approach at TKM has been for workers to employ both *satyagraha* and non-*satyagraha* methods in order to seek an accommodation with the lean production approach in the form of a new harmony of joint seeking of the truth at the company. Thus, the enemy is not destroyed and there is no defeat or victory. Since 2007 Japanese hegemony within the plant has been softened as a consequence of these oppositional methods. The trade union has been recognised, negotiation is extensively practiced, and work intensification techniques have been substantially downgraded in intensity to better accommodate the cultural mores of Indian workers. The label TIPS reveals the nature of this new accommodation, whereby the oppressor lives on in a converted state of lasting peace. In 2010 TKM opened a second plant in Bangalore alongside the original plant with an annual capacity of 100,000 vehicles to produce the new compact car Etios.

Placing this case study within its context is important to make sense of the process. India is vital to Toyota's global ambitions. The company has to remain within the country in order to take advantage of the massive available market whilst profiting from the cheap labour and other costs in the country. Leaving the country is not an option and hence could largely explain the reason behind the accommodation with the union since 2007. Thus, the "new harmony" may be the result of an instrumental short-term accommodation by TKM rather than a lasting conversion of recognising and

respecting the truth. For this reason the situation needs to be protected and enhanced through “constant vigilance” (interview with union shop steward). In the Indian context this implies a strong coalition of interacting forces. These interactions involve relationships between the internal trade union and its external federation, and through these between local and national political parties, community activists, local and international union groupings, and the media. These links started to be cultivated in the period 2004-2006 and represent a natural extension of the Indian practice of not separating work matters from family, social, and community practices. In this sense, the ability to build strong coalitions both to defend and attack established discourses is probably more easily achieved in the Indian context than in most western developed countries. To this end it would be instructive to extend the research findings in this paper to other Indian automobile producers such as Honda (which has experienced considerable employee unrest) and Maruti-Suzuki (which experienced stability in employee relations for many years but has recently suffered prolonged strikes).

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