Labor in South Asia: Introduction

Prasannan Parthasarathi
Boston College

Mao's counsel to "let a hundred flowers bloom; let a hundred schools of thought contend" applies to the articles that make up this special issue on South Asian labor. The authors are drawn from three continents. They include senior historians of labor and early-career researchers as well as doctoral students. Several of them write on issues of labor from neighboring disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, and environmental sociology. In many respects, they reflect the pluralism that has overtaken the field of South Asian labor history in recent years as the focus on factory labor in the formal sector has given way to an engagement with workers in all their variety and diversity.[1]

For readers interested in global labor history, the issue contains two articles that examine the long-distance movement of South Asian laborers. In "Oceans without Borders: Dialectics of Transcolonial Labor Migration from the Indian to Atlantic Ocean World," Subho Basu and Yoshina Hurgobin use transoceanic migration to rethink the agency of the indentured laborer from nineteenth-century South Asia. Navigating between two poles that see these migrants as either victims of a "new system of slavery" or as free agents choosing migration as a path to betterment, they argue that while migrant workers "chose" to move, they did so under the heavy constraints imposed by global colonial capitalism. Exploiting disjunctures and contradictions in the global order, and armed with their own networks of information, laborers moved across the world from the Indian subcontinent to survive under harsh economic conditions. This migration formed part of a larger labor resistance to the authority of capital for Basu and Hurgobin. Radhika Singha, in "The Short Career of the Indian Labour Corps in France: Experiences and Representations," returns to a topic she has explored in previous writings: Indian laborers serving as support for the military effort during the First World War. In her earlier work she examined the Indian Labour Corps from the perspective of recruitment in British India.[2] Here she turns to the experiences of these men after their arrival in France. In powerful and moving language, Singha recounts the racism and harsh conditions under which the Indians operated and the efforts of workers to resist and redefine the terms of their service.

For the politically inclined, in "Textile Labour Association and Dadigiri: Power and Politics in the Working-Class Neighborhoods of Ahmedabad," Rukmini Barua explores the role of political intermediaries, especially the *dada*, the local tough, and the *pratinidhi*, the labor union representative, in the lives of textile workers between the 1920s and the 1960s. There is renewed interest in the political dimension of working-class life in South Asia,[3] and Barua brings into focus previously neglected but critical figures.

International Labor and Working-Class History
No. 87, Spring 2015, pp. 4–6
© International Labor and Working-Class History, Inc., 2015
doi:10.1017/S0147547915000113

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547915000113 Published online by Cambridge University Press

She shows that the success of the Textile Labour Association was built upon its ability to use local intermediaries, especially the *dada* and his "performance of masculinity." The *dada* was "'virile' and manly, bullying his wife, ensuring that no romantic transgressions [took] place in the neighborhood, partaking of entertainment that was also possibly heavily sexualized" while the average male mill worker was "urged to be prudent, nonviolent, and respectable."

"Environment and Labor" was the focus of ILWCH 85 (Spring 2014). Siddhartha Krishnan, an environmental sociologist with a historical bent, builds upon some of the insights of that special issue in the context of the Toda, who inhabit the Nilgiri Hills of South India. In the nineteenth century, British interests in preserving the grasslands of the region for riding and hunting gave rise to policies that sought to maintain the Toda as pastoralists, thus leaving the ecology "undisturbed." From the late nineteenth century British policy gave the Toda land rights in order to turn them into cultivators. In a strange twist of fate, by the mid-twentieth century the Toda, although the proprietors of the soil, became indebted to their tenants, and, as a consequence, proletarianized.

The final two articles, along with two reports from the field, examine the changing world of labor in contemporary South Asia. Louis O. Mink, the great philosopher of history, argued that each generation must rewrite its history because history never stands still. Because history marches forward and reaches a different endpoint, historians must revise their narratives to take into account the new ending.[4] These contributions will give historians much fuel for thought.

In her essay, "Globalization and Ambivalence: Rural Outsourcing in Southern Bengal," Durba Chattaraj draws upon ethnographic research in the Indian state of West Bengal to document the shift of urban manufacturing jobs to rural areas where wages are lower. This shift is reminiscent of the rise of rural industries in early-modern Europe as well as of the diverse rural economy of pre-British South Asia.[5] Chattaraj evokes the profound ambivalences that workers feel as a consequence of these economic changes and argues that ambivalence, along with resistance and contestation, is an important worker response to the dislocations of globalization.

Michael Goldman's contribution, "With the Declining Significance of Labor, Who is Producing Our Global Cities?" brings together labor and financialization in the major South Indian city of Bangalore. Goldman, an economic and urban sociologist, identifies two forces that are marginalizing and squeezing workers in that city. The first is the informalization of labor, which has reduced the share of the product going to workers as well as their opportunities for remunerative and gainful employment. The second is the rise in land speculation, fueled by financial interests in collusion with urban political bosses, which is laying claim to the city commons and public property. In the process, workers are displaced from these areas and concentrated in shrinking spaces that are under constant threat of "development." While Goldman focuses on the city of Bangalore, he sees these changes as global trends that may be seen in Istanbul and Rio de Janeiro as well as Philadelphia and Detroit.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547915000113 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Finally, two reports from the field conclude the issue. Dina M. Siddiqi explores the fate of Bangladesh's garment workers since the collapse of Rana Plaza in April 2013, which led to the deaths of more than 1,100 workers. According to Siddiqi, the garment laborers are "starving for justice," both literally and figuratively, and she sees little prospect for significant change until the global economic conditions that demand cheap and fast fashion are transformed. At the same time, she identifies new "niches for labor activism and advocacy."

Kamal A. Munir, Natalya Naqvi, and Adaner Usmani report on the situation of labor in Pakistan, where the trade union movement is now "at its weakest point in recent memory." Since the 1980s, battered by a "neoliberal onslaught," Pakistani workers have experienced informalization, stagnant or declining wages, and rising unemployment. Despite this dismal situation, Pakistani textiles and garments face difficulties competing in global markets, which add to the pressures to cheapen labor.

Taken individually or together, these essays offer much for both newcomers to South Asian labor history as well as specialists. They reflect a field that has produced a number of classic works, but also shifted directions dramatically. They also reflect a field that is coming to grips with the staggering diversity that is the life of laborers in the past as well as in the present.

NOTES

1. For a historiographical review, see my "Indian Labor History," *ILWCH* 82 (2012): 127–35.
2. Radhika Singha, "Finding Labor from India for the War in Iraq: The Jail Porter and Labor Corps, 1916–1920," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 49 (2007): 412–45.
3. See Ravi Ahuja, ed., *Working Lives & Worker Militancy: The Politics of Labour in Colonial India* (New Delhi, 2013), ix–xvi.
4. Louis O. Mink, *Historical Understanding* (Ithaca, NY, 1987), 61–88.
5. Joan Thirsk, "Industries in the Countryside," in *Essays in the Economic and Social History of Tudor England*, ed. F. J. Fisher (Cambridge, 1961), 70–88 and Prasannan Parthasarathi, *The Transition to a Colonial Economy: Weavers, Merchants and Kings in South India, 1720–1800* (Cambridge, 2001), 53–61.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547915000113 Published online by Cambridge University Press