Indian Labor History

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The 1980s and 1990s were decades of great creativity in Indian labor history. The study of labor moved from a long-standing institutional focus on trade unions to a study of workers themselves, as well as from the economism and determinism that had characterized many previous writings. A growing interest in labor led to the first conference devoted to Indian labor history at the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam in 1995 and the founding of the Association of Indian Labour Historians the following year. The dynamism and the new intellectual horizons of Indian labor history in that period are captured in the work of three major historians: Dipesh Chakrabarty, Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, and Chitra Joshi. For the purposes of this essay, there is no need to review their contributions in detail (not least because such overviews may be found elsewhere), but it is nevertheless essential to provide a quick sketch of the arguments of each.

Chakrabarty was the first to make his impact felt with the publication of *Rethinking Working Class History* in 1989, although he presented the contours of his thinking in several articles, some of which were presented in the early volumes of *Subaltern Studies*.[1] Chakrabarty's focus was the jute mill workers of Calcutta, and he sought to explain their failure to achieve a European-style class consciousness. Critical of explanations that reduced culture to economics or politics, he argued that the precapitalist culture of hierarchy and primordial loyalties, especially of religion, blocked the emergence of proper liberal subjects who formed associations on the basis of class interests. *Rethinking Working Class History* was celebrated upon publication—one reviewer declared it to be the most important work in labor history since *The Making of the English Working Class*. With the passage of time, the book has been dissected and a growing list of shortcomings identified; nonetheless, it still has had a profound impact on the writing of Indian labor history.

Chandavarkar came to be seen as a figure to be reckoned with as a consequence of two important articles in the 1980s, but his position in the field was established with the publication of his *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India* in 1994.[2] His research centered on workers in the Bombay cotton mills and the ambit of his study included working class neighborhoods as well as the rural links of workers. For Chandavarkar, the industrial working class of Bombay could not be treated in isolation from a vast army of casual laborers with which it coexisted, thus challenging distinctions between formal and informal labor. Chandavarkar was also critical of what he saw as the culturalism of Chakrabarty and argued that the problems of working-class unity were due to state repression under colonial conditions, the casual and uncertain conditions

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of work, and the uneven development and fluctuating fortunes of the cotton industry in Bombay.

Joshi commenced her research on workers, mainly in the textile mills of Kanpur, in the 1970s. While she published important articles in the 1980s on aspects of the Kanpur working class, her full study, *Lost Worlds*, was not published until 2003.[3] In the period that Joshi studied the workers of Kanpur, the Indian working class itself experienced a dramatic reversal in fortunes, a development that she herself meditated upon in her book and which is reflected in her title (and which this essay will turn to shortly). The powerful contribution of Joshi's work is to assert the importance of the activities of the workers themselves in creating and maintaining a sense of community and solidarity, the memories of which were then drawn upon by workers at later moments of struggle. Paradoxically, according to Joshi, both Chakrabarty and Chandavarkar render the workers passive and apolitical, acted upon by an immutable culture or by the strategies of management.

Chakrabarty, Chandavarkar, and Joshi represent three important strands in Indian labor history in the last thirty years. By no means do they exhaust all the excellent writings in a field that was coming into its own in this period. I have focused on them not only for their importance, however. While the differences among these three writers have been explored on a number of occasions—and clearly they have been engaged in a dialogue with each other—what they share has been less examined: all three historians focus on workers in large-scale industrial settings. Despite the broadening of the context of these workers to include neighborhoods, their rural homes, and their families, it is the industrial working class that is at the heart of these studies and deemed to be of greatest interest. This focus reveals an implicit assumption (which in Joshi's case came to be shattered over the time of her research) on the political importance of industrial workers. And for all three historians, this assumption provided a center or an anchor for their study of labor.

That center has disappeared in recent years, however. In major manufacturing areas such as Kanpur the industrial working class itself has vanished in the last quarter century. At the present moment, the industrial working class has been pushed to the periphery in the work of Indian labor historians. A collection of essays published in 2009 in honor of Sabyashachi Bhattacharya, the doyen of Indian labor history, contains essays on labor in public works in the nineteenth century, emigrant ships, convict labor in the Andamans, and drink in the Assam tea gardens. Factory labor is not neglected—there are two essays on workers in Bombay—and labor in the extractive industries appears in an essay on the coalfields of Jharia. But such workers are a minority presence.[4] The same can be said of a special issue of the *International Review of Social History* on Indian labor history in which factory workers are absent altogether. The papers range from brickworkers to the Assam tea plantations, migrant workers in the West Indies, the circulation of labor, maritime work, and masculinity and proletarian humor.[5] With these contributions, the study

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of Indian labor has shifted decisively from the male (unionized) factory operative and has come to recognize the diverse forms of employment, status, work, and organization that characterize the past as well as the present.

These broader domains of labor were certainly contained in earlier writings. The study of the "informal sector" can be dated to the mid-1970s with Jan Breman's work on rural workers in Gujarat.[6] The study of Indian labor migration, both within and without the subcontinent, is also an established topic.[7] Maritime labor has been a longstanding area of inquiry, as has workers in the Indian plantation sector. Nevertheless, pride of place in Indian labor history was given to factory labor, and it was the site for the major theoretical, conceptual, and empirical debates of the last thirty years. The focus on factory labor reflects the fact that despite the critiques of modernization theory in both liberal and Marxist forms, the assumptions of that theory, both about the nature of historical development and political possibilities, continued to shape much labor history. The critique of modernization was incomplete in terms of alternative practices.

The disappearance of old concentrations of factory labor in contemporary India, the industrial working class's failure to fulfill its expected historical mission, and the casualization and fragmentation of work has created new economic and political realities, which historians must address as they try to make sense of the new conditions of labor that dominate India today and how we got here. Does the fragmentation of the object of study mean that the approach of labor historians must be equally fragmented? It is unlikely that a new center of gravity akin to factory labor will be identified (nor is it desirable), but some themes may be delineated, which can bring some order to what is at the moment a dispersed and diffuse area of study.

The move from factory workers to a broader field of laborers, laboring activities, and labor relations is an admission that the concentration and centralization of workers did not represent a decisive break in the history of Indian labor. It is also an admission that the structure of production relations in the Indian economy was not tending towards the creation of a large population of formal, proletarianized workers. Even at its peak, workers in the organized sector represented only a small minority of the total Indian laboring population. The persistence of informal and nonproletarianized forms of labor suggests that there are continuities in the life-world of laborers, for decentralized, dispersed, and casual forms of production have been longstanding features of Indian working life. Therefore, Indian labor history may benefit from a longer perspective than that of the nineteenth and twentieth century, which are now the temporal foci.

Extending the time horizon to the period before 1800 brings to the fore a number of analytical issues that may be used to frame the study of Indian labor in later decades. A central theme in writings on labor in the eighteenth century, for instance, is the survival strategies of artisans, peasants, and other types of laborers. Methods to reduce risk and insecurity were, in turn, an important dimension of survival strategies. Survival chances were increased and risk

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reduced through the possession of property rights, flexible production contracts, geographical mobility, and the forcing of economic and political elites to share risk and guarantee subsistence. The mobility of artisans, peasants, and others gave rise to associations that are still poorly understood but encompassed large regions and sustained migration strategies. They also formed the basis for producer power and protest.[8]

Although there are still debates on the extent and pace of the changes wrought from the mid-eighteenth century by the rise of British colonial rule, there is little doubt that the institutions and practices that were crucial for the survival of laborers were transformed.[9] The imperatives to survive and reduce risk remained, however, and laborers had to formulate new strategies to achieve these ends. Migration was one solution, and as Chandavarkar showed in the case of Bombay, it was essential for mill workers to maintain rural links to provide a cushion to make up for low urban wages and a fallback in times of retrenchment in the mills. Chandavarkar is not alone in discussing survival strategies in the nineteenth and twentieth century, and they may be found in a number of works, both on factory and other labor.[10]

Issues of survival strategies shaped the politics of workers from the eighteenth century to the present. In the late eighteenth century, there were large-scale protests by weavers and others to maintain prerogatives that protected them against economic fluctuations and thereby ensured a minimum level of income. In the 1770s, for instance, thousands of weavers in South India abandoned their looms to protest changes in the structure of merchant contracts that reduced the ability of weavers to profit from movements in the price of cloth and other goods. In taking this action, weavers were also seeking to preserve their autonomy and control over the work process. Control over production could itself help to guarantee a minimal level of earnings as captured in a Tamil proverb: "[W]hen the merchant reduces the money, the weaver reduces the thread."[11] These dual concerns of security and conditions of work reappear in the Kanpur strike of 1919, where "unfair wages and unfair discipline became a focus of the workers' strikes."[12] Similarly, in the Bombay mills during the interwar period, strikes were motivated by a demand for higher wages and opposition to rationalization schemes, which "for the workforce meant more work, less wages and higher chances of unemployment."[13] While the problem of security was not absent in the "formal" sector, it was ever present for workers in decentralized and more casual employment situations.

A focus on survival strategies can bring some order to the great diversity of labor relations that are found in Indian history. "Formal" labor relations coexisted with other forms and emerged in particular social, political, and economic contexts through the interaction between employer and worker strategies, the former having to do with questions of profitability and the latter with survival and security. A focus on survival strategies also broadens the study of Indian labor, most importantly to include the family, household, and gender. In the

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last two decades, issues of gender have been increasingly incorporated into the writing of Indian labor history, particularly in the work of Samita Sen, yet there is much that remains to be investigated. The work of women was critical to the survival and security of laboring families from the eighteenth century to the present but remains under-investigated.

In the eighteenth century, women's work in spinning, agriculture, and processing of agricultural products made substantial contributions to household incomes. Women's earnings were especially important during agricultural bad seasons—when activities like spinning yielded crucial cash for peasant and laboring families, thus providing a measure of security.[14] These opportunities for women declined in the nineteenth century, but the pattern, pace, and import of these changes are poorly understood. Our major source for these shifts continues to be Nirmala Banerjee's "Working Women in Colonial Bengal: Modernization and Marginalization," which is a classic article but more than twenty years old.[15] For the twentieth century, Chitra Joshi shows the many ways in which the work of women was crucial to the survival of working class families, whether they migrated jointly to Kanpur or divided with the males in the city and the females in the country. In the city, some women worked in the mills, while others worked at home rolling bidis or in other small-scale manufacturing. In the country, women's work—sowing, weeding, reaping, winnowing, and caring for children—was essential to the reproduction of the laboring family.[16]

Conceptions of the proper social role for women shaped the work that they did. The diffusion of the ideology of female seclusion in the late nineteenth century, for instance, may have limited the work opportunities, and thus economic power and autonomy of women, although this is an issue that is debated.[17] Male and female social norms were also codified in the law. A striking instance is the Assam Labour and Emigration Act of 1901, which limited the ability of women to migrate and thus reduced their autonomy and economic independence. "Married women may be said to have entered into a contract with her husband which precludes her from engaging in services to another party for a term of years without his consent," the act read.[18]

The state in India, therefore, played a critical role in the lives of laborers, both men and women. In recent years Samita Sen, Prabhu Mohapatra, and others have expanded our understanding of the legislative impact of the British beyond the long-time focus on the factory acts that were introduced from the 1880s. Colonial legal interventions with labor began in the early nineteenth century (although it was preceded by ad hoc interventions in the eighteenth century). Prabhu Mohapatra explored the ways in which British legal acts constructed the category of "informal" labor and regulated it from the early nineteenth century.[19] Samita Sen tracked the long intertwining of labor and marriage in Bengal from the Regulation VII of 1819 to the Assam Labour and Emigration Act of 1901. Others have traced the translation of master and servant acts from Britain to India in the nineteenth century. In the colony, the law of master and servant lived on for "a half century longer than

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in England, a delay in reform that is in striking contrast to other changes in the doctrines of Indian law."[20]

Aditya Sarkar has reinterpreted the early factory acts in India from the vantage point of the broader field of vision that Indian labor history has adopted in recent years. He points to the important protective role that state regulation played in the working lives of laborers and more generally points to the contradictory stances of the state toward labor.[21] Political authority in India, in the past and in the present, could both regulate labor as well as assist it. State assistance took the form of ameliorating the conditions of work, as was the case with the factory acts, as well as aiding workers in their struggle for survival and security.

The latter state role is most evident in the precolonial period when states and elites, whether merchants or dominant groups in agriculture, were forced to bear the risk of those below them in the political or social hierarchy. The British colonial state refused to play this risk-sharing role. When creating the system for collecting land tax in South India, for instance, British officials recognized that, in the precolonial order, states shared risk of fluctuations in harvests and prices with the dominant agrarian classes, who in turn shared some of the risk borne by peasants and laborers who did the work of cultivation. The British had no interest in bearing risk, and they replaced an order in which risk was shared widely with one in which the laborers on the bottom came to bear a disproportionate burden of the uncertainties associated with the risky enterprise that is agriculture.[22]

The preceding discussion began with laborer survival strategies and showed how these lead to the important issues of gender and the state. With this framework, the focus of Indian labor history shifts from a single category of workers—factory labor—to a set of analytic themes or problems that may be applied to almost any category of labor in the past. This framework also helps to bring some order to the bewildering diversity of laborers and their contexts and conditions in Indian history and allows for both the comparison and integration of laborer experiences, making possible larger statements about change over time in the world of Indian labor.

The broadening of Indian labor history from factory labor to the vast "informal" sector is very much a response to the steady casualization of work in recent decades. A focus on survival strategies, gender, and the state are, in turn, emerging from the crisis of working people in India today. For the past two decades, the Indian economy has experienced high rates of growth but low rates of employment creation. In the 1990s virtually no net jobs were added. Between 2004–2005 and 2009–2010 the employment rolls increased by barely a million, at a moment when there were nearly 500 million employed in the country.[23]

Women workers have been the hardest hit by the stagnation in jobs. Female labor force participation has fallen sharply, leading to a dramatic increase in the unpaid contribution of women to household enterprises, whether in manufacturing or agriculture.[24] Women's wages increased "relatively little" in the period

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between 1993–1994 and 2004–2005, and the gender gap in earnings widened across all categories of workers. As a consequence, female distress migration has grown.[25]

State policies have both accentuated and alleviated these developments. At the all-India level, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act of 2005 guaranteed one hundred days of work per year for rural adults at a minimum wage, which held great promise to reduce poverty and improve the situation of laborers. The results have been mixed, however. Loopholes in the language of the bill have led to wage payments below minimum rates, and high levels of inflation in recent years have reduced the real value of the wages. The implementation of the scheme was left to states, which has resulted in unevenness in its operations and differences in its effectiveness.[26]

State policies toward labor vary in other respects as well. While state governments compete against each other to offer an attractive investment climate, including a low-cost workforce, a few states have instituted social welfare measures targeting low-income households. The state of Tamil Nadu, for example, has heavily subsidized essential food items, including rice, cooking oil, lentils, and spices; distributed free gas stoves with subsidized gas supplies; implemented a health insurance plan for the poor; and launched a social security and welfare scheme for agricultural laborers, which provides maternity care, health and accident insurance, and pensions. At the same time, Tamil Nadu has been lax in its enforcement of labor laws, which has led to a casualization of employment. The share of employment in small factories and workshops has risen, and workers in these smaller enterprises are not covered by state social welfare schemes.[27]

State governments have also actively allied with employers to counter worker attempts to unionize and fight for higher wages and better working conditions. In the widely reported 2011 conflict in a Maruti plant in Manesar, Haryana, where workers sought to form an independent union, the Haryana state department of labor joined management in refusing to recognize or negotiate with the newly formed Maruti Suzuki Employees' Union. The union only achieved recognition after a thirteen-day strike. The worker struggles in the plant led the *Economic and Political Weekly* to write, "Much of the economic growth we have seen in recent years is based on similar, and often much worse, forms of exploitation, oppression and brazen appropriation of working peoples' labour, lands and livelihoods."[28]

The past and present of Indian labor were brought together in the ninth international conference of the Association of Indian Labour Historians in March 2012. The theme of the meeting was "Work and Non-Work: Histories in the Long-Term," and historians, anthropologists, sociologists, filmmakers, and activists examined the situation of labor from medieval to contemporary times. The expansive vision suggests that labor historians are working to develop a new analytic framework to interpret the long history of labor that can replace the now discarded shift from informal to formal. It also indicates

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that historians of Indian labor are very much part of the struggle to create an alternative to our neoliberal present.

NOTES

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5. *International Review of Social History*, vol. 51, Supplement S14 (2006).

6. Jan Breman, *Patronage and Exploitation: Changing Agrarian Relations in South Gujarat, India* (Berkeley, CA, 1974).

7. See, for example, Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas, 1830–1920* (London, 1974).

8. Some of these themes are explored in my *Transition to a Colonial Economy: Weavers, Merchants and Kings in South India, 1720–1800* (Cambridge, 2001).

9. Contrast, for example, Parthasarathi, *Transition to a Colonial Economy* with Ravi Ahuja, "Labour Relations in Early Colonial India, Madras 1750–1800," *Modern Asian Studies*, 37 (2002).

10. Chandavarkar, *Origins of Industrial Capitalism*, chap. 4; Joshi, *Lost Worlds*, 135–136.

11. Parthasarathi, *Transition to a Colonial Economy*, chaps. 1 and 4.

12. Joshi, *Lost Worlds*, 183.

13. Chandavarkar, *Origins of Industrial Capitalism*, 100.

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15. Nirmala Banerjee, "Working Women in Colonial Bengal: Modernization and Marginalization," in *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History* ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Brunswick, 1990).

16. Joshi, *Lost Worlds*, chap. 3.

17. Contrast Samita Sen, *Women and Labour in Late Colonial India: The Bengal Jute Industry* (Cambridge, 1999), 133–41; Joshi, *Lost Worlds*, 87.

18. Samita Sen, "Offences Against Marriage: Negotiating Custom in Colonial Bengal," in *A Question of Silence? The Sexual Economies of Modern India*, ed. Mary E. John and Janaki Nair (New Delhi, 1998), 105.

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