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MATERIAL CONDITIONS AND BEHAVIOURAL ASPECTS OF CALCUTTA WORKING CLASS 1875-1899

RANAJIT DAS GUPTA

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A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

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The only instance of non-cooperation is the lack of any response from several well-known Calcutta-based private commercial firms to request for access to their business archives.

The responsibility for any errors of opinion, fact or logic is solely mine.

Material Conditions And Behavioural Aspects Of Calcutta Working Class 1875-1899

I

Introduction

In eastern India the latter half of the nineteenth century saw the intrusion of metropolitan capital and the launching of colonial enterprises like jute and cotton mills, engineering concerns, coal mines, tea plantations and some processing-type firms. This was necessarily accompanied by the social process of transformation of sectors of population into an industrial working class, a distinctly new kind of labour force. While admittedly the potential of industrial capitalism in its colonial context was extremely limited, it would be wrong to ignore the importance of the beginning of a change, no matter how limited it may have been, towards capitalistic labour process and mode of production.

For nearly a century the textile industries, particularly the jute industry, formed the nucleus of modern industrial production in Bengal, and the textile mill workers constituted the core of the growing working force. There is sufficient ground to believe that these workers lived in precarious conditions of life. Wages and level of living were abysmally low; even prior to the introduction of electric lighting in the mid-nineties, working hours occupied virtually the whole day; dwelling-places were turned into mere sleeping-quarters; family life became almost

non-existent; traditional amusements and leisure suffered erosion. No less significant is the reality that the workers during the period came mostly as first generation workers from outside, not necessarily in the locational sense but in the sense of their departure from a non-factory background. All this took place under operation of economic forces of which the workers could have very little comprehension. They were placed in a strange setting which reduced the workers to the position of mere cogs in a complex mechanism, a system in which even their security and duration of employment was determined by fluctuating states of world export demand about which they had little knowledge or understanding.

But in all their misery the workers were not averse to labouring. They did not want to live on alms or to idle away their time.[1] Notwithstanding the recent U.S. sociological preoccupation with 'commitment',[2] the fact remains that even the first generation

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1. Here is a piece of evidence. During the five years 1886-91 because of depressed export market demand the jute mills resorted to short-time working. We find that most of the jute mill workers appearing before the Indian Factory Commission of 1890 expressed in clear terms their preference for six days' work over four or five days' work. See Report of the Indian Factory Commission 1890 (hereafter IFC 1890 Report), pp.77-88.

2. The term commitment has been defined by Feldman and Moore in the following language: "commitment involves both performance and the acceptance of the behaviours appropriate to an industrial way of life". W.E. Moore and A.S. Feldman (eds), Labor Commitment and Social Change in Developing Areas, Social Science Research Council, New York, 1960, p.1.

   Some other scholars state, "A committed worker is one who stays on the job, and who has severed his major connections with the land. He is a permanent member of the industrial working force, receiving wages and being dependent for making a

factory workers were able and willing to work. And, however impersonal relations in factory life might have been, the toiling people were never devoid of their thinking, critical and reacting faculties. Furthermore, they assembled together in hundreds during working hours in factories and when not at work many of them also huddled together in the bustees and mill lines as the only habitat

(Contd. footnote 2)

living on enterprise managements which offer him work and direct his activities at the work place". Clark Kerr, John T. Dunlop, F. Harbison and C.A. Myers, Industrialism and Industrial Man, Pelican Book, 1973 (First published in 1960), p.177.

Morris D. Morris tells us, "Commitment ... refers to the participation by workers in industrial employment on some permanent basis as measured by objective behavioral indexes". 'Labor Market in India', Moore and Feldman (eds.), op.cit., p.173.

The concept of commitment, defined, as just noted, with some variations, is of some use in certain cases. But the term is unsatisfactory as it sidesteps and, as a matter of fact, misses the more important problem of rerooting of uprooted and fragmented human beings under industrial capitalism.

A more fundamental criticism is that the theorists of commitment abstract from relations of production and the consequent social conflicts. In contrast to 'capitalism' spoken of by Marxists, the key term used by them is 'industrialism' or 'industrial way of life'. They speak of 'industrial work force' and not of 'industrial proletariat' or 'industrial working class'. They study labour problems not in the context of process of capitalist production but in the context of process of industrialization. They ignore the specific consequences of capitalism, and consider that all processes of industrialization have common characteristics. Viewed in such a context, the term 'commitment' tends to obfuscate the labour problems arising from capitalism, the central problem of conflict between labour and capital.

For criticisms of labour commitment theory from somewhat different angles see Surendra Munshi, Industrial Labour in Developing Economics : A Critique of the Labour Commitment Theory, Economic and Political Weekly, August 27, 1977, p. 11-74; Anil K. Sen Gupta, Commitment of Indian Workers, Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta, Working Paper Series, No.13, October 1975; and A.K. Sahay, Labour Commitment in Industry-Jharia Coalfields 1900-1939, Marxist Miscellaney, September 1976.

available to them. While this meant living in extreme penury and squalor, the conditions would also impart to workers a new sense of being commonly exploited. Their responses might as well begin to pass into the formation of a common experience.

So the question arises : how did the nineteenth century factory workers in Bengal feel, behave and react? We do not know of any depth-study of this question except one made by one scholar very recently.[3] Perhaps the extremely fragmentary and scattered nature of evidence is primarily responsible for this serious gap in our labour history.

The workers themselves could neither read nor write. So they left no chronicles. There is of course the oral testimony, at times quite informative, given to the various committees appointed by the Government to enquire into conditions of labour.[4] But this kind of evidence is not plentiful, and, furthermore, their statements were limited by the specific terms of reference most of which had nothing to do with workers' own feelings and behaviour in the whole situation.

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3. Dipesh Chakrabarty, Communal Riots and Labour : Bengal's Jute Mill Hands in the 1890s, (hereafter Communal Riots and Labour), Occasional Paper No.11, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, 1976.

4. A number of workers gave evidence before each of the following committees : IFC 1890, Indian Factory Labour Commission of 1908 and Royal Commission of Labour in India of 1929.

Perhaps, some of the folk songs reflect more vividly the state of the new industrial workers. For example, note the poignant melancholy of a migrant worker in a Bhojpuri folk-song.[5]

The watching of cows is gone,
The bath in the Ganges is gone,
The gathering under the pakari tree is gone,
God has taken away all the three.

One important source of information could have been contemporary newspapers and periodicals, particularly those brought out by educated Bengalis from Calcutta and other towns adjacent to the new industrial centres. But it is unfortunate that files of most of these publications have not been preserved. Moreover, our survey, even though of a limited range, as available in some selected journals, and newspapers and press-clippings[6] gives us the impression that the journalism of the Bengali bhadraloks (a term specifically used in the Bengali language from the nineteenth century, to connote those who by birth or ascribed status were not chhotolok, i.e. those who did not work with their hands and had the wealth or means to hire, lesser, smaller people, chhotolok, who did such work) of those

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5. Cited in Indra Deva, The Changing Pattern of Rural Society and Culture : Significance of the Rural-Urban Nexus, M.K. Chaudhuri (ed.), Trends of Socio-Economic Change in India 1871-1961, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Simla, 1969, p.169.

6. Press-clippings from newspapers and periodicals published in Indian languages were compiled as Report on Native Papers.

days lacked the awareness, or much of any concern for the industrial labour question.[7] Recent discovery and publication of all the issues of one complete year of Bharat Shramajeebi,[8] commonly considered to be India's first labour journal, and Dipesh Chakrabarty's study of Sasipada Banerjee,[9] a Bramho social reformer and the founder and editor of this magazine, confirm this impression. It is not that late nineteenth century newspapers and periodicals published in Bengal made no reference to factory labour - in fact we will have occasions to use these references - but that such references were extremely scanty and casual in their approach and coverage.

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7. For a survey and analysis of the attitude of the Indian nationalists and Indian newspapers to industrial labour and particularly factory legislation in the late nineteenth century see Bipan Chandra, The Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India, People's Publishing House, New Delhi, 1966, chapter VIII, especially pp.330-39, 345-52, 353, 357. Bipan Chandra's finding is that, "most of the leading nationalist newspapers ... either remained silent or adopted an attitude of hostility towards labour" (p.357). Sumit Sarkar too presents an insightful account and analysis of bhadralok attitude towards labour. See The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal 1903-1908, People's Publishing House, New Delhi, 1973, pp.101-3.

   The Indian newspapers, however, generally reacted sharply against the condition of the Assam plantation labourers. Cf. Bipan Chandra, op.cit., pp.363-5, and also Dwarkanath Ganguli, Slavery in British Dominion (a compilation of Ganguli's articles published in The Bengalee, September 1886 to April 1887), compiled by Kanai Lal Chattopadhyay, Jijnasa, Calcutta, 1972.

   For a different view of attitude of educated Bengalis towards labour see Chinmohan Sehanavis, Bramho Samaj and Toiling People, Mainstream, Annual Number 1978, pp.119-22.

8. Kanai Lal Chattopadhyay (ed.), Bharat Shramajeebi (in Bengali), Devalay Trust, Calcutta, 1975. It is a compilation of all the twelve issues of 1879 with an introduction from the editor.

9. Dipesh Chakrabarty, Sasipada Banerjee : A Study in the Nature of the First Contact of the Bengali Bhadralok with the Working Classes of Bengal (hereafter Chakrabarty, Sasipada Banerjee), Occasional Paper No.4, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, 1975.

Under the circumstances we have no other alternative but to depend heavily on the records, left by employers, police and government officials,[10] even though the data yielded by such sources also suffer from biases and inadequacies of their own. Let us proceed then to chronicle and analyze the available evidence on the mental make-up, behaviour and activities of the emerging working class. In doing this we hope to know more about certain significant features of the forms and content of labour's social existence at the inception of the factory system in colonial Bengal.

II

Industrial Proletariat In The Process Of Early Formation

The nineteenth century expansion of the jute industry, founded in 1855, took place by four well-known spurts - spurts in mid-1860s, 1872-73, 1882-85 and the closing five years of the century.[11] Hence it may be safely said that till about 1890 all the workers belonged to the first generation. And most of them came from the agricultural and fishermen community and the displaced weaver and artisan groups in the surrounding areas and districts in Bengal. Long-distant migrants from Bihar, Orissa and the United Provinces formed only a small proportion of the growing working

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10. Here also we suffer from our failure to get any access to archives of the mills and business companies.

11. See The Investor's India Year Book 1927-28, Calcutta, pp.177-9.

force.[12] In this section we intend to focus attention on the mental attitude and reactions of these early workers, the self-employed agriculturists, the labourers on land and the weavers and other craftsmen who joined the factory labour force upto 1890, the labourers who were in the midst of a process of transformation, though of a slow and halting nature, into a working class.

Nature of Work

How did the raw factory operatives - all the diverse elements coming from outside the factory and joining factory work for the first time in their life - view the new work and environment? The work of the operatives was, as one jute mill manager, D.Cochrane of India Jute Company, Serampore, put it in 1879, of 'a very light nature'[13] and this was no isolated opinion. "The mill industry appears to be generally popular [with the factory workers]", remarked R.C. Dutt (the noted scholar and economic historian) who in the capacity of officiating Burdwan Divisional Commissioner was reporting on the working of the Factories Act in the year 1893.[14] Similar views were expressed by other government officials including H.R. Risley, the Secretary to the Bengal Government in early 1890s.[15]

12. See Ranajit Das Gupta, Factory Labour in Eastern India: Sources of Supply 1855-1947, Indian Economic and Social History Review, (hereafter IESHR), September, 1976, Vol.XII, No.3, pp.277-329.

13. National Archives of India (hereafter NAI). Home Dept. Judicial Br. No.35 of January 1880.

14. West Bengal State Archives (hereafter WBSA). General Dept. Miscellaneous Br. Nos.12-13 of August 1894.

15. Return relating to East India (Factory Inspection) for 1892. Parliamentary Paper. 1894, Cmd. 7465. Vol.58, para 12.

But a close and careful examination of early labour behaviour shows that the factory workers considered their work and environment distasteful, uncongenial and irksome. A detailed enumeration and analysis of the many and varied repellent forces do not come within the scope of the present paper. Here we may only briefly touch upon those which were both economic and non-economic.

That the work was 'monotonous' was even sometimes admitted by officials.[16] And the "continual noise" and whirr of machines, "necessity of standing to work the whole time" and "a quantity of fluff [always] floating in the air"[17] added to the unpleasantness and strain of factory work.

The change over from the seasonal rhythm of work of agricultural activity to the regularity of work involving attendance at fixed hours and confinement to factory premises till the end of day's work and the pace of work set down by machines must have been distasteful. Here is the typical factory routine prevailing in early 1890s, as described by Shama Charan Samuth, a weaver in the Budge Budge Jute Mills : "The mill begins to work at 5-30. The engine is stopped at 12 o'clock for oiling the machinery. The first shift leaves and the next shift comes in ... After that the engine works till dark. He being a weaver is supposed to work continuously, an arrangement prevails among themselves by which he gets ½ hours'

16. See f.n. 13 above.

17. Report on the Working of Indian Factories Act of 1881 for 1894. (hereafter Report, IF Act) NAI. Judicial No.264 of November 1894.

leaves at 9 0'clock for eating his breakfast. Then again half an hour in the afternoon, about 3-30 or 4, for eating sweetmeats. For the two hours he is away the man at the next loom does his work, and he in a similar way does that man's work when he is away". Giving an indication of pressure generated by machine he continued, "A man can work two looms for a time, but he could not possibly work two looms for the whole day ...".[18]

That the female and child workers too had to submit to, with minor variations, to a similar routine was pointed out by several worker witnesses appearing before the Indian Factory Commission of 1890. "The women work the same hours as the men and the boys", said a Bowreah Cotton Mills worker.[19] Another worker employed in Budge Budge Jute Mills stated, "They [the boys] work the same time as all other people".[20]

Hours of Work

This sort of routine at the work place involved long hours of labour, from early morning to dusk. In 1875 H.J. Reynolds, officiating Secretary to the Bengal Government noted, "The hours of a labour appear long ... Nine to ten hours of work, exclusive of intervals for rest and meals...".[21] And A. Crabbe, the Champdani

18. IFC 1890 Report, p.29. See also evidence given by Majoo Maithi, Noderchand and Abdul Barik, pp.78-9, 86-8.

19. Ibid, pp.78-9.

20. Ibid, p.79.

21. NAI. Legislative No.126 of April 1881.

Mill manager was still more forthright in his admission when he said in 1879, "... this mill along with the other runs on an average for about twelve hours daily all the year round...".[22] And in 1890 the Indian Factory Commission reported, "... it is the rule for nearly all Indian factories to work from daylight to dusk, that is, taking the extreme limits in summer of 5 A.M. to 7 P.M., or 14 hours with half an hour's interval...".[23]

While these were the hours spent in the factory itself, the working day was still longer. For, as Reynolds observed, many of the factory operatives including "women and children [had] sometimes to walk two or three mills to their work, and the same distance back to their homes in the evening".[24] Thus many workers had to start for their mills when it was quite dark in the morning and returned to their dwelling-places when the following night was well advanced. It is obvious that even those living close to the factories had to put in a daily minimum of twelve hours of work and those coming from some distance a maximum of sixteen hours inclusive of actual work, breaks at work and travelling time.

Such a daily routine most certainly reduced the 'homes' of the workers into mere sleeping-quarters. This also could not but have been destructive of all normal family-relationships. Inevitably,

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22. NAI. Home. Judicial. No.35 of January 1880.

23. IFC 1890 Report, para 13.

24. See f.n. 20 above.

opportunities for traditional recreations and leisure must have greatly narrowed down.

It is perhaps needless to add that in the factory life, relationship of the workers with their masters was basically different from the one prevailing in agriculture or craft industries, subsistence-oriented work began to give place to cash-stimuli-determined work and the workers faced new uncertainties and insecurities.

All this - the regular hours, stresses and strains of factory work, discipline at the work places, new pressures upon the workers and their families, and so on - worked upon the mind and behaviour pattern of the industrial proletariat-in-the-process of formation.

However, the workers did not form an inert and passive mass yoked to the factory routine. The labourers leaving their traditional callings and environment and entering into factory life usually and almost inevitably responded through, what C.H. Parker has described as, "an instinctive and often unconscious exercise of the 'strike in detail' - simply drifting off the joy".[25]

Dilatory Work Behaviour

Even though recruitment to the factories was formally made voluntarily, it was not devoid of compulsions of both economic and

25. Cited from C.H. Parker, The Casual Labour and Other Essays, Harcourt, and Brace Howe, New York, 1920, p.76 in Clark Kerr et al, op.cit., p.206.

non-economic nature. The mill operatives were secured through push off the land or dislocated artisan industry, and had to work too under compulsion of various types. The early work-people coming from outside and used to irregular spasms of hard labour were deeply averse to the monotony and work-pattern of factory life. Their reaction manifested itself in "the dilatory and desultory habits of Indian workmen".[26] This was an issue of frequent complaint of the employers and mill managers and many government officials. In 1879 a top Bengal Government official reported that "the Indian workmen must have his accustomed smoke and sometimes even his sleep and his bath during the hours of work".[27] The same complaint was echoed by many others. Cochran observed, "... the worker goes out to eat, bath and smoke in his employer's hours...".[28] "The whole day you will see the workers come out of the mills, go to the tanks to wash their hands and feet, then to some place set apart in all the mill compounds for smoking to smoke, and then to the water deliverer of their own or some superior caste to drink water; this is the most leisurely manner immaginable", said another mill manager, A.M. Downs of Bowreah Cotton Mills,[29] in an evidently hostile tone. He went on to say, "I believe that if the time was

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26. Communication from Secretary, Government of Bengal (hereafter GOB) to Government of India (hereafter GOI), dt. May 13, 1879. NAI. General No.31 of January 1880.

27. Ibid.

28. See f.n. 12 above.

29. NAI. Home. Judicial No.36 of January 1880. See also comments made by E.A. Bradbury, SDO, Serampore, and A. Crabbe, Champdani Mill manager. Home. Judicial. No.35 of January 1880.

carefully noted, mill workers in Bengal spend from one and a half to two and a half hours per day in the mill compounds,..." In addition to what is noticed about the "leisurely manner", Downs's remark is important on another count too; for it indicates, though not strictly relevant for this paper, the carry over of caste practices right inside the work places.

H.W.I. Wood, Secretary, Bengal Chamber of Commerce, noted, "... the length of time occupied at work is of itself an insufficient test to determine whether the labour is oppressive or otherwise. The intensity with which the effort is applied is an essential factor in such a question. The character and habits of the mill operatives in their country indispose them to earnest endeavour in the persecution of the work entrusted to them, but the lack of this persistency is partially met by the ease with which they can continue at work for many hours together".[30]

Generalizing their findings with regard to the work habits of factory workers, the Indian Factory Commission of 1890 observed, "Our enquiry has shown that ... the operatives in all the Provinces visited by us are, without exception, in the habit of going out at odd times for 5 or 10 minutes for all sorts of purposes. We have ourselves seen them engaged in drinking water, washing, smoking, and looking about".[31]

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30. NAI. Home. Judicial. No.50 of January 1880.

31. IFC 1890 Report, para 26.

Irregularity of Attendance

The difficulties encountered by the employers and mill managers did include not only a most dilatory work behaviour but also a great propensity of the workers to attend their work places with utmost irregularity. In Bowreah Cotton Mills, it was estimated, "the average attendance [was] not more than 22 days per month".[32] In other words, every worker was absent for no less than 16 per cent of the total working days in a year. We do not know with how much accuracy the estimate was made. We also do not know whether the absenteeism rate in that particular mill was representative enough. M.D. Morris has cast doubt on the usually accepted notion of high rate of absenteeism in the early Indian mills.[33] But from the near universal nature and embittered tone of the complaints made by contemporaries, by those who were proximate to the situation, it is not unreasonable to surmise that it must have been widespread and considerably high.

Customery recreations, family ceremonies and religious festivals, all common traditions in rural life, were persistent problems, and these were frowned upon by the employers. "The least cause will keep the ordinary native worker away from his labour, - 'a puppet show', ' the marriage of a friend', 'a tumashaw of any kind within any reasonable distance'...",[34] said our informative

32. A.M. Downs, Bowreah Cotton Mill Manager. NAI. Home. Judicial. No.36 of January 1880.

33. Morris, The Labor Market in India, pp.173-200.

34. NAI. Home. Judicial. No.36 of January 1880.

Bowreah Mill manager in 1879. Often the factory workers absented themselves on religious occasions, and later on asked for their wage.

And, about ten years later, in 1890 the same complaint was echoed by the Indian Jute Manufactures' Association. Virtually opposing all moves to amend the Factories Act of 1881 the Association stated, "In England factories work with highly disciplined regularity of attendance on the part of the work people ... But in India ... people come and go in a manner undreamt of in England, and in a way which would reduce English manufacturers to despair ....".[35] The Bengal Chamber of Commerce too memorialized the provincial government in the following terms, "... in England and Europe factory labour is ordinarily continuous and constant, in India the exact reverse is the case, not because the mills are not run, but because the habits and ways of the people are utterly unlike anything found anywhere else. They do not under the best of circumstances work for the same number of hours during the day as would be thought quite an ordinary day's work elsewhere..."[36].

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35. Indian Jute Manufactures' Association (hereafter IJMA) to Bengal Chamber of Commerce (hereafter BCC), No.15D, Calcutta, February 1890. Report of the Committee of the Bengal Chamber of Commerce from 1st February 1890 to 31st January 1891, Calcutta.

36. Letter from BCC to GOB No.290, Calcutta, 10th April 1890 on the subject of amendment of the Indian Factories Act of 1881 in ibid.

What the memorialists chose not to remember in 1890 was that similar complaints had been voiced about British work people in the 18th century when the British industrial working class in its own earliest process of formation were accustoming themselves to the change over from agrarian society to factory discipline. But imperialists have rarely been introspective about their own national past as a yardstick for condemning subject races.

Labour Turnover and Absenteeism

High labour turnover was another major sore point with the early employers and managers. Labour turnover, however, refers to varieties of behaviour. First, it implies permanent drop out of workers from an industry and return to their villages after a short spell of factory work. Though we have ample data on length-of-service pertaining to the 1920s[37] and 1940s,[38] the extremely fragmentary nature of evidence does not call for the inference that in the jute industry this occurred extensively during the period under consideration. For 1890, we find from the evidence of twelve jute mill workers that 41.6 per cent of them had been employed for less than one year and another 25 per cent for between one and five

37. Royal Commission on Labour in India 1929 (hereafter RCLI 1929).

38. Labour Investigation Committee, Government of India. Report on an Enquiry into Conditions of Labour in the Jute Mill Industry in India by S.R. Deshpande, Manager of Publications, Delhi, 1946 (hereafter LIC 1946 Report), Table VI, p.12.

years.[39] No doubt, the sample is very small. But it indicates a distinctly noticeable feature.[40]

The second aspect of labour turnover indicates prolonged absence, no matter with prior sanction of the management or not, and visit to the native places of workers to escape monotony of factory work, to see their relations, to attend family ceremonies, or to lend hands to the family members during the peak agricultural season. Some evidence relating to this follows.

In this case we can use some accounts given by the workers themselves. Thus Taroni, a woman worker hailing from Midnapore and engaged in Baranagore Branch Jute Mill, testified before the Indian Factory Commission of 1890, "Her uncle and aunt live in the country, ... She goes sometimes once a year, sometimes once in two years, to her home. [She] went last about a year ago, and stayed there about four months".[41] "He goes home after a year and a half or two years", Majoo Maithi, a Cuttack labour employed in Bowreah Cotton Mills informed the Commission, "and stays there eight or ten months ... He works in his field when at home".[42] Sookwaria of Baranagore Jute Mill said, "She is a

39. IFC 1890 Report, pp.77-88.

40. This estimate should be handled with caution. On the one hand, there is perhaps some understatement. For the data relate to first generation workers whose length-of-service was naturally short. But on the other hand, length of service was perhaps also inflated by inclusion of periods of non-employment.

41. IFC 1890 Report, p.78.

42. Ibid, p.79.

native of Chuprah ... She got ill and went home, and was there a year and a half".[43] Another female worker, Jaggo who worked in the roving department of the Victoria Cotton Mills attested, "She has just returned from a visit to her home [in Midnapore] during the Poojah holidays. She generally goes home after two years or a year and half, and stays there generally for a month".[44]

On behalf of the jute mill-owners exasperated at this absenteeism and visit to native places of the workers the IJMA observed in 1890, "... in India the residence near the factory is distinctly temporary. The people follow with interest the domestic concerns of their tribesmen, castemen and neighbours, and avail themselves of long absences to a degree not only unknown in England, but, according to English ideas, absolutely incompatible with manufacturing success".[45] The Bengal Chamber of Commerce too said, "Nowhere else do the factory operatives regard factory labour as incidental rather than as regular employment. The hands are constantly taking leave for sensible [long] periods, and on grounds which would be deemed impossible in England. It is rare, indeed, to find a mill-hand in India who does not go to his home in the country every year or eighteen months, or as soon as he has accumulated enough to enable him to carry out this the very first wish of every

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43. Ibid, p.86.

44. Ibid, p.87.

45. Proposals for Amendment of Factories of 1881. WBSA. General. Miscellaneous. Nos.7-31 of April 1890. IJMA Secretary's letter to BCC Secretary, dt.14.2.90.

operative throughout the country".[46]

Related to all this was the trouble arising out of the persistence of subsistence-oriented work and failure of workers to respond to cash stimuli. The remark made in 1888 by Ritchie, the Magistrate of Howrah, on the basis of what he learnt from the Bowreah Cotton Mills manager that "Many hands who come in from neighbouring villages are content to do 21 days' work only in the month saying that they can earn quite sufficient in that time, and do not care to labour on the remaining days"[47] reflected the generally prevailing situation and could have been made in relation to other factories too.

The workers' habits were so leisurely and their attendance so irregular, noted the Bengal Government official quoted earlier, that "the Bengal mills... [had] to employ a larger number of hands than English mills of same size..."[48]. Downs too stated bitterly, "There is not a mill in Bengal that is not compelled to keep on their books from 15 to 20 per cent more persons than they require, in consequence of the irregularity of the attendance of their workers".[49] The Bengal Chamber

46. Letter from BCC to GOB (General), No.290, dt. Calcutta, 10th April 1890 on the subject of the amendment of the Indian Factories Act of 1881 appended to Report of the Committee of the Bengal Chamber of Commerce from 1st February 1890 to 31st January 1891, Calcutta.

47. Report on the Condition of the Lower Classes of Population. NAI. Famine. Nos.1-24 of December 1888. Report from N.S. Alexander, Burdwan Divisional Commissioner, para 85.

48. See f.n. 25 above.

49. NAI. Home, Judicial. No.35 of January 1880.

of Commerce Secretary remarked, "... it is necessary to employ in a mill in India - at all events in Bengal - about three times the number of hands that are required in a similar establishment in England".[50] True, low productivity and low level of skill - as a matter of fact much skill was not asked for by the employers - partly accounted for this. But that extensive absences too, both authorized and unauthorized, led to the recruitment of large number of substitute hands and consequent inflation of muster roll is also quite clear from all the available materials, particularly from the 1890 evidence of mill operatives.[51]

It should be mentioned here that leisurely pace of work, high rates of absenteeism and turnover, existence of rural nexus, and such other features of factory labour in India have been emphasized by many scholars[52] not infrequently without the support of sufficient information. Further, most of them provide no analysis or any sign of proper awareness about certain significant implications of this sort of workers' behaviour.

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50. NAI. Home. Judicial. No.50 of January 1880.

51. IFC 1890 Report, pp.77-88.

52. See, among others, the following. India. Factory Labour Commission, 1908. Report of the Indian Factory Labour Commission, 1908 (hereafter IFLC 1908 Report) Vol.I, Government of India, Simla, paras 25,27,28; 1908, S.H. Fremantle, The Problem of Indian Labour Supply, The Journal of Royal Society of Arts (hereafter JRSA), May 14, 1909, p.517; P.P. Pillai, Economic Conditions in India, George Routledge & Sons Ltd., London, 1925, pp.236-8; Beryl M. Le. P. Power, Indian Labour Conditions, JRSA, June 24, 1932, p.770; Radha Kamal Mukherjee, The Indian Working Class, Hind Kitabs, Bombay, 1945, pp.22-6, 35, 37-8; C.A. Myers, Labor Problems in the Industrialization of India. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1958, pp.43-54; and Ralph C. James, The Casual Labour Problem in Indian Manufacturing, Quarterly Journal of Economics, February 1960, pp.101-03.

However, on the basis of his study of the labour force in Bombay cotton textile industry and Tata Iron and Steel Company, Morris has questioned the validity of these observations.[53] But the evidence presented above, we believe, clearly signify that the jute and cotton textile workers in nineteenth century Bengal betrayed a kind of nostalgia for pre-industrial ways of life and work as well as semi-proletarian habits and orientation. Incidentally it may be stated that we have ample evidence to confirm that all this holds good to a still greater extent for another major section of the industrial working class, the miners.[54]

Another aspect of labour turnover, as revealed in the mobility of workers between mills, points as well to the spirit of independence among at least some factory labourers. One might almost say that they

53. Morris, The Emergence of An Industrial Labor Force in India, Oxford University Press, Bombay, 1965, pp.58, 60, 86-91, 93-100, 198-205; and Labor Market in India, 173-200.

54. Cf. the following: 'The Sonthalis and Bawris [who formed the overwhelming majority of the colliers] prefer doing no more work than they are obliged to do, and are only anxious to earn enough to live on. When they have collected enough for a few days' eating and drinking (and their holidays and festivals are numerous) they take themselves off..." Report of the Labour Enquiry Commission, Bengal Secretariat Press, Calcutta, 1896 (hereafter LEC 1896 Report), para 26. The Commission further observed, "As regards the hours of work, the local men are most casual in their time of commencing work" (para 41). Continuing they reported, "As regards the days of labour, the local miner is equally irregular.... He gets capital pay, and in a few days can earn enough to keep him and his family idle and let them enjoy themselves thoroughly for a few days. He accordingly takes advantage of Sundays and all possible holidays, and takes a holiday with, or without, an excuse. The Manager would like to get a steady six days' work per week out of his men, but, on an average, he does not get more than four or five" (para 42).

exhibited attributes of true, free wage workers, workers who were not subjected to any overt and direct compulsion. Skrine, Senior Joint-Magistrate of the 24-Parganas and a Factory Inspector under the Factories Act, reported in 1882 with obvious disapproval and much resentment, "Here the workers are masters of the situation. So far from the labour market being overcrowded ..., the hands command their own terms, are excessively independent, and at least attempt to coercion they migrate at once to another establishment..."[55].

In the present context the passage is highly significant for what it tells about behaviour of the factory workers who were considered to be mere 'hands' to the mills. The workers being "masters of the situation"; the workers laying down "their own terms"; the workers showing excessive independence; the workers defying coercion; the workers exercising their right to enter into engagement and also terminate it at their own free will! This must have presented a striking contrast to foreign employers and administrators who had already become accustomed to the employment of overtly unfree labour in the tea plantations[56] and semi-servile labour in the coal mines.[57]

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55. Correspondence relating to Meade-King's proposed amendments to Indian Factories Act of 1881. NAI. Home. Judicial. No.218 of September, 1883.

56. See, among a large body of literature on tea plantation labour, Rajani K. Das, Plantation Labour in India, Calcutta, 1931; Sanat Bose, Capital and Labour in the Indian Tea Industry, Trade Union Publication Series No.8, All India Trade Union Congress, Bombay, 1954, chapter IX; and Amalendu Guha, Formation of A Working Class in Assam Plantations : A Study in Retrospect (cyclostyled), Paper presented to a Seminar organized by North-East India Council for Social Science Research, Gauhati, November 1975.

57. C.P. Simmons, Recruiting and Organizing an Industrial Labour Force in Colonial India : The Case of the Coal Mining Industry, IESHR, October-December 1976, Vol.XIII, No.4, pp.455-85.

Traditionalism and Non-conformism

Two particular features of Bengal's factory labour force may then be given due importance : first, the displaced artisan, the peasant, the agricultural labourer came on their own, under the influence of powerful operation of primarily repellent but also partially attractive forces, to the jute and cotton mills in search of a livelihood by selling what Marx called 'labour power'; secondly, on entering the factories the same labourers developed a strong repulsion to the new process of labour and conditions of work. Indeed, such a position of the industrial workers was connected with the background from which they had been practically evicted, and with the new forms of labour which had them become obligatory for having their bare means of subsistence. In the first place, moving away from the interior rural environment to villages or mofussil towns around Calcutta growing into mill areas, the peasants, agricultural labourers or handicraftsmen who became wage-earning industrial workers, remained prone to their accustomed way of life, to, what Weber termed, "traditionalism", that is, a way of life in which "a man does not 'by nature' wish to earn more and more money, but simply to live as he is accustomed to live and to earn as much as is necessary for that purpose".[58] And out of this attachment, that is "the character and

58. Mas Weber, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, Tr. Talcott Parsons, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., London, 1950 Reprint, p.60. In one of the most perceptive studies on Weber it has been remarked that, according to Weber, "Traditionalism is present when workers prefer less work to more pay, when during working hours they seek a maximum of comfort and a minimum of exertion, when they are unable or unwilling to adapt themselves to new methods of work". Reinhard Bendix, Max Weber : An Intellectual Portrait, Methuen & Co. Ltd., London, 1969 reprint, pp.51-2.

habits of the mill operatives in the country" which was noticed by the Bengal Chamber of Commerce Secretary in an observation cited already, they made an instinctive effort to preserve, protect and even to carry over their earlier work behaviour, customary practices, patterns of recreation and leisure-spending even to their new work-places and environment.

No less significant is another aspect. The segment of pre-capitalistic labouring population turning into 'factory hands' as 'instruments of capital', felt an inevitable aversion for the new form of labour, the pace of the factory plant-routine and its rules of action. Subject to a new mode of severe exploitation, the workers' human selves were striving to express a kind of protest in their leisureliness and resistance to the prescribed work pace in their propensity to move from one mill to another, high rates of absenteeism and turnover, and indifference to work. This was no conscious protest nor a rational attempt to achieve an alternative to the existing state of things. The crux of all this, whether at the individual or at group levels, lay in their latent dissatisfaction with the new order of life, although in a negative way.[59] However, the instinct of rebellion against capitalist exploitation was writ large over this whole complex of workers' attitude and behaviour.

Some scholars consider the whole phenomenon from a narrow management angle of disciplining the newly recruited labour force.[60] Some

59. See Myers, op.cit., pp.43-50.

60. Cf. Kerr et al. op.cit., chapters 5, 6 and 7.

others have pointed out that technical arrangements and relative costs of capital and labour in most industries, developed in India prior to 1947, did not require rigid discipline and hence the problem was largely non-existent.[61] For certain limited purposes even these different propositions, this emphasis on labour disciplining aspect on the one hand, and this stress on flexibility of discipline and permissive attitude on the part of management on the other, are of use.

But in both these views, particularly in the second one, the broader and in a sense the crucial import of the problem is not only side-tracked but missed altogether. For the two interrelated constituents of labour behaviour - attempt to control their own time and lives according to their accustomed way, and an obdurate refusal to conform to the new conditions of work and living - essentially represented problems of adaptation to the nascent capitalist mode of production and capitalist order of life. At the same time, the reactions and responses of the early workers could not but significantly influence the mental attitude and activities of the growing industrial labour force.

At this stage of our discussion it should be noted that the sort of responses referred to above was not peculiar to factory workers of Bengal or India in the seventies and eighties of the last century. That in the classic British case and in the initial period of all the industrializing countries the early workers, in the words of Hobsbawm, "the first-generation immigrants from pre-industrial societies", behaved by and large in a similar fashion is too well-known to merit any

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61. See Morris, The Emergence of an Industrial Labor Force in India, pp.106-17, 202-4, 208-10.

repetition here.[62] But in Britain (and other industrializing countries of the nineteenth century) such problems were transient in history and incidental to a fundamental economic and social transformation; the elements of pre-capitalist habits of mind and behaviour, whether in workers' attitudes or in the totality of the social structure, were transcended through the cumulative progress of the Industrial Revolution which accounted fro the transformation of workers into a working class within the broader society, and also for the growth of working class consciousness and action, ethos and culture.[63] The case of India was

62. For a discussion of the problems of first-generation immigrants in the early phase of the Industrial Revolution see Neil J. Smelser, Social Change in the Industrial Revolution, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1959, Chapter IX, Sidney Pollard, The Genesis of Modern Management Penguin Books, 1968, chapter 5, particularly pp.189-91, 213-4, and E.J. Hobsbawm, Social Bandits and Primitive Rebels, The Free Press, Illinois, 1959, pp.3, 108. See also Hobsbawm, Industry and Empire, Pelican Books, 1969, chap. 4; and T.S. Ashton, An Economic History of England : The 18th Century, Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1964 reprint, pp.203-6, 211-2. For an examination of similar problems in North America see Oscar Handlin, The Uprooted : The Epic Story of the Great Migrations that Made the American People, Little, Brown and Company, Boston, 1953, and in Latin America see Hobsbawm, Peasants and Migrants in Politics in Claudio Veliz (ed.), The Politics of Conformity in Latin America, Oxford University Press, London, 1967, pp.43-65.

63. Among a large number of studies dealing with these aspects see particularly Smelser, op.cit., chapter XI, and E.P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class, Pelican Books, 1975 (first published in 1963); also Hobsbawm, Industry and Empire, pp.89-90.

The integration, and even adjustment to capitalism, referred to in t text can, however, be never complete or final. As pointed out in a recent study, "the habituation of workers to the capitalist made of production must be renewed with each generation, all the more so as the generations which grew up under capitalism are not formed within the matrix of work life, but are plunged into work from the outside, so to speak, after a prolonged period of adolescence during which they are held in reserve. The necessity for adjusting the worker to work in its capitalist form, for overcoming natural resistance intensified by swiftly changing technology, antagonistic social relations, and the succession of the generations, does not end with the 'scientific organization of labor', but becomes a permanent feature of capitalist society' Harry Braverman, Labor and Monopoly Capital, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1974, pp.139-40.

different. In a situation of deformed and disjointed 'industrialization' - if that is the right word -, while the dynamics of genuine capitalist industrialization was ruled out by colonial order, the brutalizing consequences of early industrial capitalism came to have a more durable significance. It is no wonder that under such conditions large body of workers, even second or third generation workers, remained rootless, part-human, half-proletarian, wretched creatures. And so the "covert withdrawal of effort"[64] which was merely a passing phase in the workers' behaviour in the West became a chronic problem in the process of development of industrial labour force in this country.

To come back to the issues with which the present paper is concerned, we find that an instinctive withdrawal from exertion was the major form through which the first generation jute and cotton mill workers in Bengal expressed their discontent.

Legal Action

But was "strike in detail" the sole form of early workers' response to their conditions in those days? Records consulted by us show that they resorted to other forms of action too. Sometimes workers, or rather a very small minority of them, perhaps only certain individuals, took recourse to legal action to get their grievances redressed. Unfortunately we have scanty information about actions of this nature.

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64. Clark Kerr et al, op.cit., p.200.

We know of an 1888 Sealdah court case in which one John Miller of Sealdah Jute Mills was charged by a worker of the same mill for assaulting him. The particulars as reported in a contemporary newspaper were awful. The worker asked for leave from Miller. But on being abused by the latter he wanted his wage and then Miller assaulted him by giving "a blow and a kick". Miller being found guilty by the court was fined Rs.20.[65]

A careful reading of the evidence presented before the 1890 Factory Commission indicates the prevalence of similar practices among mill workers. Majoo Maithi, a cotton-spinner in Bowreah Cotton Mills, told the Commission, "I remember two or three cases in which the operatives went to court for their wages and won their cases".[66] Noderchand of Baranagore Jute Mills stated, "He knows of instances where the work people resorted to the Courts for wages and won their cases".[67]

It is evident that the grievances were related to wage (perhaps in connexion with the then practice of withholding of wages), demand for leave and misbehaviour on the part of the managerial staff. It seems, however, that the practice of resorting to legalistic action was not widely prevalent. In fact, several witnesses informed the Commission that they had no knowledge of such instances.[68]

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65. This information has been extracted by Dipesh Chakraborty from Amrita Bazar Patrika, September 27, 1888 and given in his Sasipada Banerjee, pp.24-5.

66. IFC 1890 Report, p.79.

67. Ibid., p.86.

68. See evidence given by Shama C. Samuth, Kedar Dass, Hem Chunder and Abdul Barik.

In discussing this particular form of workers' reaction Dipesh Chakraborty rightly remarks, "Our labour historians have not noticed this so far. Probably the practice was local and confined to certain mills only ... But a limited spread of the practice would really be paradoxical. If there were chances of winning cases, why did not the practice spread? Also, there must have been people from outside the working class community helping them with court fees, legal advice, etc. Who were they? We can only admit our ignorance here".[69]

The Early Stirring

Another form of workers' reaction to their wretched and brutish conditions must have been occasional outburst of individual violence. The Englishman of a later date (April 22, 1898) reported, "At Sealdah yesterday Shaik Hossain, employed in the Baranagore Jute Mill, was sent to prison for a fortnight, for committing an assault on Mr. Alexander Partick, assistant manager of the Mill". We do not know what led to this assault. It would perhaps be not unreasonable to presume that such cases of individual violence must have taken place in the period under consideration. But no adequate information is available to warrant any firm inference. In any case, such individual protest actions were of limited social importance.

Of real and much greater social significance was the fact that even in that early stage of factory system when distinction between industrial wage labourers and other groups of labouring poor remained blurred some open and direct group actions, such as strike and picketing,

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69. Chakrabarty, Sasipada Banerjee, p.24, f.n.108.

characteristically modern working class forms of action, were not unknown. The first of such actions by factory workers about which we have some information[70] (not necessarily their first strike action) took place in 1875. We are informed by the Burdwan Divisional Commissioner, "The jute and cotton mill industries are enlarging, and the coolie population is beginning to acquire factory characteristics, and to need the special attention of the Police and Excise Departments. A case of rattening occurred at Serampore since the close of the [last] year, when the coolies demanded the punishment of a factory jemadar, and not obtaining that, stopped the spinner boys going into the mill to work".[71]

Several points in this passage deserve serious attention : first, the government official was already discerning certain attributes, "factory characteristics", of the workers employed in the textile mills which distinguished them from other labouring poor. Secondly, the working population was a force which not only suffered but was also striving to

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70. It is of interest to learn that the first known strike action by industrial workers in its broadest sense took place as early as 1848. In a Assam Tea Company garden, plantation labourers resorted to strike because of three months' arrear in wage payment. H.T. Antrobus, A History of the Assam Tea Company 1839-1953, Edinburg, 1957, p.389.

Gopal Ghosh has chronicled some of the early strikes of the non-industrial urban labouring men. The first recorded strike of this kind in Bengal was the palki-bearers' strike of 1827. See Gopal Ghosh, Bharater Shramik Andolaner Itihas (in Bengali), Lok Itihas Prakasan, Calcutta, 1967, pp.52-6.

For several instances of strikes by non-industrial workers such as butchers, brick-layers etc. in Bombay and Ahmedabad in late nineteenth century see V.B. Karnik, Strikes in India, Manaktalas, Bombay, 1967, pp.8-10.

71. Burdwan Divisional Commissioner's Annual Administration Report for 1875-76. WBSA. General. Miscellaneous. Nos.1-2 of October 1876.

assert its position in the work place. Thirdly, in doing that it was resorting to forms of action - picketing and strike - which one would associate with the industrial proletariat. But these first generation workers also took recourse to sabotage or rattening and this along with the earlier mentioned physical violence against employers reminds us in some ways of the Luddites.[72] Details of this particular type of activity are, however, lacking. The passage also brings out that the administration and presumably the management too were already watching the workers' behaviour with some discomfort and evident concern and were viewing the problem as one of law and order. In fact, they were asking for special police arrangement.

But this was not the only instance of direct action in those days. F.H.B. Skrine, Session Joint Magistrate of the 24-Parganas and a factory inspector under the Factories Act of 1881 reported in early 1880s, "It is a noteworthy fact ... that strikes are by no means unknown ...".[73] And we know that a strike presupposes conscious or unconscious group intervention. And in 1886 the Magistrate of the 24-Parganas reported the occurrence of "strikes [in the cotton mills] against a reduction of 12½ per cent in wages, which was necessitated by the depressed state of trade".[74]

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72. For a study which throws new light on Luddites see Hobsbawm, Labouring Men, London, 1964, chapter entitled 'Machine Breakers'; and Thompson, op.cit., pp.537-45, 598-659.

73. NAI. Home. Judicial. No.218 of September 1883 pt.A.

74. Quoted in Presidency Divisional Commissioner's Annual Administration Report for 1885-86. WBSA. General. Miscellaneous. Nos.1-3 of November 1886.

Occasionally the government tended to put up a bold face and wish away disturbing realities. Thus in connexion with an enquiry conducted by the Royal Commission of Labour (1892) the Government of India asked for certain information from all the provincial governments. In response to this the Bengal Government submitted a Report relating mainly to the 1880s. It reads, "... there are no Trade Unions in Bengal, and ... strikes and lock-outs play a very small part in the textile industry as it is carried out in this Province. Generally speaking, employers and employed are on the best of terms, and the relations between them in this branch of manufacture have never been a cause of anxiety to Government ... The British Indian Association states that there is usually the greatest good feeling between labourers and masters".[75]

Thus not only the British Indian Government but also the British Indian Association noticed the existence of "usually the greatest good feeling" between factory-owners and labourers. One may pick out this passage to prove the absence of workers' open and direct action, and sometimes this has been done.[76] But such a view is misleading. For this may result in attaching undue importance to certain other activities of workers. Further, it is factually erroneous. That everything was not so sweet and placid as the above citation tried to make out is not only evident from Skrine's remark quoted earlier but also from something else contained in the same Report of the Bengal Government.

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75. NAI. Home. Judicial. No.280 of September 1892 pt.A.

76. Chakrabarty takes this position in his paper Communal Riots and Labour, p.7.

In fact, this description of peace and order was followed by a passage which stated, "There have been no strikes or lock-outs of general interest or importance. Individual mills have had trouble when they have tried to reduce the rates of wages in any department in which the wages have been proportionately higher than in others, or higher than in neighbouring mills; and workers have, in a few cases, combined and refused to work under an overseer who has made himself obnoxious to them and in some cases there have been stoppage of work for a week at a time. Thus in the Ghoosery Cotton Mill there were strikes in 1881 and 1890, the former lasting for ten days and the latter for three days. The cause of the strikes was a reduction of wages, but in both cases the employees ultimately accepted the terms offered, though the company states that they lost Rs.2,000 over the two strikes. An organised strike affecting the whole trade, or even all the workers in one mill, has never occurred. Whenever employers have come into collision with the employees, and persevered in carrying out whatever alternatives they had determined on, even against a strike of their own workers, they have, it is believed, been uniformly successful".[77]

The passage is significant in more than one sense. There are signs of historical emergence of the working class. Its members had neither trade unions or any other organization of their own - at least we do not have any knowledge of any such institution - nor any idea of their tasks. Themselves victims of illiteracy and ignorance, workers had no instruction or advice from external source. And, to our knowledge, whatever advice was available pressed workers towards conformity and in

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77. See f.n.75 above.

actual practice served colonial capitalist interests.[78] Moreover, factory workers were characterized by a good many ethnic, religious and other differences. But in spite of all this there were occasions when they spontaneously tended to combine and go into direct action.

The Issues

What were the issues around which the workers acted? It is possible to indicate at least two - perhaps three - such issues. First,

78. Sasipada Banerjee, generally considered to be the pioneer of labour movement in Bengal, we are informed by his son Sir Albion Rajkumar Banerjee, "advised the workers to look to the interests of their employers, and at the same time to present their grievances in a legitimate manner". The Working Men's Society founded by Sasipada, in the words of his son,"exercised a healthy influence on the workers with a view to ending the use of the strike weapon". Albion Rajkumar Banerjee, An Indian Pathfinder : Memoirs of Sevabrata Sasipada Banerji, The Devalaya, Calcutta, 1971 reprint, p.71. Sasipada himself told a meeting in England during his 1871 visit to that country, "I have opened a night school for the working class in the town where I live, but a loud cry is raised against me that I am disturbing society, settling class against class ... [But] I have been trying /to to teach them that labour is honourable, not/bring disorder and confusion amongst them, but to bring class with class in sympathy with each other". Cited in ibid., pp.36-7, This, however, is not a new point. Chakrabarty has pointed out this attitude of Sasipada in his Sasipada Bannerjee, pp.23-4.

Emphasizing this aspect Sumit Sarkar observes, "False consciousness here had gone so far that a 'progressive' reformer, occasionally hailed even as a pioneer labour leader, was inculcating virtues that obviously served capitalist interests out of sheer alternism, all in the cause of foreign capital". Sumit Sarkar, The Radicalism of Intellectuals in a Colonial Situation (cyclostyled), ICHR, New Delhi, 1976, p.9. See also Sukomol Sen, Working Class of India : History of Emergence and Movement, 1830-1970, K.P. Bagchi, Calcutta, 1977, p.73.

It should, however, be remarked here that Sasipada Bannerjee's well-known activities among the mill workers at Baranagore represented the earliest effort, no doubt a greatly confused one, of Bengali social and religious reformers to ameliorate certain aspects of their misery, such as illiteracy and drunkenness. He was moved by deep humane feelings of sympathy towards the workers. But his work which suffered from serious limitations did never take the shape of a movement, and did not have any durable impact.

there was the underlying idea - however confused that might have been - that they were to be taken into account. They expected that their grievances were to be considered and redressed.

Second, the workers refused to work under oppressive foreman or sirdar. A sirdar of course belonged to a caste, community or locality from which many of the workers also came, but he was also the person who usually hired, supervised, admonished, fined, granted leave and fired them. It was natural that the uninstructed workers often held the sirdar, and not the company located in Calcutta or still far away in London or the relatively remotely placed top mill managerial personnel, directly responsible for their sufferings and misery and hence often the former became the obvious target of their agitation. As a sirdar formed the lowest rung of the system of management at the mill level such an agitation necessarily had an anti-management direction. But at the same time perhaps the workers had an implicit belief that the top management represented fairness of treatment. In the absence, however, of any supporting evidence this latter proposition can only be a surmise. The workers' agitation on this issue was of course significant on another count too. It indicated that a new sense of common interest and solidarity against an oppressive sirdar was beginning to get an upper-hold on the workers' minds which prevailed over

loyalties of caste, community and linguistic groups.[79]

The third element that triggered off the strikes was related to wage. The workers normally lived on the verge of subsistence, and any cuts in wage rates or increase in prices were bound to make their existence still more critical. And this is what happened in the 1880s. While many employers resorted to wage cuts - sometimes, as we are informed, to the extent of 12½ per cent - from the middle of the decade, prices showed a steady movement in the upward direction.[80] Spontaneously but inevitably workers reacted against this attack on their miserable level of living with strikes and perhaps other forms of protest action. And their agitation was clearly directed against a class of exploiters.

These flurries, it is true, had a spontaneous and temporary nature, and were confined to certain mills. And most probably they had

79. For evidence of the presence of oppressive sirdars in Calcutta jute and cotton mills in the 1890s see WBSA. Judicial. Police. Nos.6-11 of January 1896. Also see British Indian Association's letter to the Royal Commission on Labour 1892. Foreign Reports. Vol.II. The Colonies and The Indian Empire (hereafter RCL 1892 Foreign Reports). Parliamentary Papers, 1892. Vol.36, Pt.V, pp.146-7.

On the institution of jobbery in early twentieth century Fremantle wrote : /"In Calcutta Mills 7 the jobbers are men of the coolie class, who have reached their present position by superior cleverness. The system of depending on them saves trouble to the management .... But the system is open to great abuses. The worker has to pay a fee to the jobber for engaging him, and is very frequently in his debt. The jobber's control over the labourers is complete..." S.H. Fremantle, The Problem of Indian Labour Supply, Journal of the Royal Society of Arts, No.2947, 14 May 1909, p.514.

For the workers' protest actions against the oppressive practices of the sirdar's see below Section IV.

80. For wage and price situation see Sec.III below.

no conscious direction. But it also emerge from above that through these concerted actions at least some first generation workers were trying to achieve something positive and were not just reacting negatively to their new conditions. And our evidence tells us that in many cases they fought tenaciously - at least in one case, in the already mentioned 1881 Ghoosery Cotton Mill agitation, they remained on strike for ten days at a stretch.

But these were of no avail. In the circumstances then prevailing, the workers were destined to lose in these skirmishes. Their importance, however, lay in the fact that these were signs, no matter how feeble, of the process of emergence of a new kind of orientation among semi-proletarian worker of the 1870s and 1880s.

The citation made above also throws light on employers' policy and government attitude relating to direct actions of factory workers. It appears that the employers stood firm and did not yield to workers' pressure. Apparently the government too did not attach much importance to these protests. But a careful reading of the passage makes it clear that even though the government commended the firmness shown by the employers, they at the same time indicated their own sensitiveness to workers' restiveness.

III

The Workers : Immiserisation, Tension And Instability

From what has been stated in the closing paragraph of the last section it must not be thought that the battles of the early 1880s were

immediately followed by further direct action of broader sweep and greater intensity. Nothing of the kind happened. On the contrary, the period from mid-1880s to mid-1890s was one of lull. In fact, upto 1893 there is no record of any open conflict between the workers and their employers except the already mentioned 1890 strike in the Ghoosery Cotton Mill.

How are we to explain this lull? In the first place, this period, particularly the quinquennium 1886 to 1890, was bad for the largest factory industry in the Calcutta industrial area. Depressed state of export markets and competition from Dundee had certain adverse impact on the industry.[81] Thus though in the period 1885-86 to 1890-91 and in the succeeding one of 1890-91 to 1895-96 the size of the jute labour force increased by 28 per cent and 32 per cent respectively (see Table 1), the expansion of the industry was characterized by the appearance of surplus capacity.

Table 1

Increase in Looms and Labour Force in Jute Industry 1885-1900

(in per cent)

Period	Looms	Labour Force
1885/86 to 1890/91	16.77	28.21
1890/91 to 1895/96	30.30	31.87
1895/96 to 1900/01	50.85	47.82

Source : GOI, Statistical Department, Financial and Commercial Statistics of British India.

81. The Investor's India Year Books 1927-28, Calcutta, p.178.

Furthermore, even workers who were already in employment suffered from extensive periods of unemployment. For, it is to be remembered, in the period 1886-90 the industry resorted to working for short time, its extent varying between four days a week, nine days a fortnight and five days a week. Further, sealing of a certain portion of sacking looms, a method often used in later years for the purpose of output restriction, was first made in 1890. Again in 1892 a few mills had to close down their operation for some period.[82]

All this meant increased competition among the labouring poor for employment. Some indications of this is available from the evidence given to the Indian Factory Commission of 1890. Here are a few excerpts :

"She only works four days in the week. This has been the case since the Jute Mill Association has started short-time work.... She would prefer to have work for six days ... There are others to take her place....."[83]

"He only works four days in the week now under the new rules.... and would prefer to work six days.... Sometimes they have difficulty in getting men for the mill, and sometimes they have plenty of men".[84]

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82. Ajit Das Gupta, Jute Textile Industry in V.B. Singh (ed.), Economic History of India : 1857-1956, Allied Publishers, Bombay, 1965, pp.262-3; and also D.R. Wallace, The Romance of Jute, Calcutta, 1909, pp.43-4, 46.

83. IFC 1890 Report, pp.77-8.

84. Ibid., p.79.

"She has now only four working days; she would like to work six days.... They can get others to take her place".[85]

"There are lots of people to ready to take his place".[86]

It was clearly a picture of a glutted labour market.

Secondly, the experience of defeats in the early skirmishes must have prevented the growth of workers' confidence in the efficacy of direct action which was indispensable for sustenance and spread of such action. On the contrary, these defeats were likely to have demoralizing effects not only on the actual participants but also on other workers, all of whom lacked any organization or guidance.

Such circumstances were certainly not propitious for any direct protests by the workers. Food prices of course had been moving in an upward direction, with some year to year fluctuations during the period 1886-1895 (see Table 2).

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85. Ibid., p.85.

86. Ibid., p.87.

Table 2

Quinquennial Average Index Nos. of Prices of Common Rice and Wheat (1871-75 = 100)

Districts	1881-85		1886-90		1891-95		1896-1900	
	Rice	Wheat	Rice	Wheat	Rice	Wheat	Rice	Wheat
24-Parganas	97	103	101	102	122	118	139	-
Calcutta	110	96	102	102	137	115	149	135
Hooghly	102	94	114	105	145	113	155	133

Source: Prices and Wages in India, 21st Issue, Table No.23, pp.129, 134.

We do not have any data to indicate movement in rates of wage in late 1880s or early 1890s. But there is no ground for suggesting any increase in these rates. Rather the possibility is that the employers took advantage of the situation prevailing in the industry and labour market to reduce rates of wage. But even if it is supposed that money wage rates remained unchanged, the real wage must have suffered some decline. And we have fragments of evidence to show that money wage earnings declined because of reduced days of working of jute mills. For example, a female spinner employed in the Union Jute Mills informed the 1890 Factory Commission, "In those days [i.e. prior to short time work] she earned Rs.2-8 a week, and now she earns only Rs.1-10 for four days".[87] Another female labourer working in the drawing machine of the Baranagore Branch Jute Mills stated, "She earns less now

87. Ibid., p.78.

by working only four days in the week".[88] "He is suffering loss of income by this present arrangement...", said a Budge Budge Jute Mills weaver.[89] "Since the mills have taken to working only four days", a Baranagore Jute Mills weaver testified before the Commission, "there has been hardship experienced by the mill-hands".[90]

It is obvious that there were ample grounds of dissatisfaction among the workers with their earnings and material conditions of existence. But in a situation of depressed condition of the industry and competition among workers for jobs the mass of illiterate and ignorant workers could perhaps think of no other alternative but to carry on somehow their harassed existence. It, however, needs to be recalled that many of the workers appearing before the Commission expressed their preference for six days working to four days working. This reveals an important attribute of the labouring poor including industrial workers, their willingness to work, which was much different from the attitude of beggars or paupers.

This state of submission was, however, not to continue for long. Midway through the 1890s or still somewhat earlier a number of trends simultaneously came in motion which brought a change in the situation and led to a spate of strikes and violence against the employers and to communal riots, involving the factory workers, and in some cases the

88. Ibid., p.78.

89. Ibid., p.79.

90. Ibid., p.87.

urban labouring poor in the broad sense. Some of these trends, such as rising prices and immigration of non-Bengali upcountry labour, had been in operation from the earlier period. Others, such as the introduction of electric light, were relatively sudden. All these adversely affected not only the material conditions of existence but also non-material areas of life.

The first point that deserves notice is that from early years of the nineties, the jute industry, though not yet fully out of difficulties, began to look up, and in 1891 short time working was virtually given up for quite a few years to come. The industry received powerful impetus from the tapping of new export markets and enlargement of the existing ones in the middle of the decade.[91] And the final few years of the century were, as shown in Table 1, a period of substantial expansion in terms of both looms and size of the labour force. Perhaps one important consequence of this buoyancy in the condition of the industry was that even in a situation of excess labour supply there was a relative improvement in the workers' bargaining position and this was reflected in the outbursts that took place in that period.

But, as already suggested, there were a number of factors in operation, which led to intense immiserisation and aggravation of the suffering and agony of the labouring poor. Many of these factors were associated to a large extent with the huge influx of immigrant labour from Bihar and the UP or what was generally called "the upcountry".

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91. Wallace, op.cit., pp.46-7, 49-50. Wallace noted, "With one or two exceptions all the mills have averaged good profits since 1895 and that practically without having recourse to short time until March last year [1908_7 ..." (p.50).

This immigration into Calcutta and the neighbouring districts which had been continuing for over many decades of the nineteenth century increased enormously in the final two decades of the country. Indeed this was perhaps the single most important factor that led to increased and desperate competition for job referred to above. To have a proper understanding of the dimensions of the serious problems arising out of immigration of upcountrymen it is necessary to keep in mind that already in 1891 more than 3 lakh inhabitants of the four mill districts were estimated to have been born in places outside Bengal proper, particularly in Bihar and the UP; and within the single decade of 1891-1901 the number of immigrants from these areas swelled by more than 1.82 lakhs. Admittedly, the great majority of them emigrated from their native places mainly as an escape from a sub-subsistence economy and formed a large component of the most poorly paid labouring force in the slowly growing Calcutta industrial area.

To reiterate a point considered earlier, this migration of rural labouring men meant a tremendous upheaval in the life of the peasants, agricultural labourers and craftsmen turning into factory workers. Though by 1890 the industry was more than thirty years old, hereditary workers, that is, workers who were children of the early workers and also workers who were in industrial employment for a considerable length of years formed only a negligibly small minority of the industrial labour force. Thus while second-generation working force community was minuscule, there was an enormous influx of non-Bengali workers accustomed to unbelievably poor standard of living. This influx which had many importants points of similarity and contrast with Irish immigration in the

early years of the English Industrial Revolution and also partly with the immigration into the USA that operated to shape the American society led to the formation of a highly unstable and excitable industrial work force. These immigrant workers were usually considered by the employers as quite steady operatives. For they were thought to be more amenable to exploitation.

Prices and Wages

It is important to note that the labour force swelled particularly by the influx of immigrants suffered from sharp deterioration in its economic position. Unfortunately we do not have detailed and systematic information regarding various important elements determining their conditions of existence, such as wage or consumption or mortality. The British employers in India were usually very much secretive about wage and such other aspects. As Dr. R.A. Barker, who as a Civil Medical Officer in Serampore was entrusted with the responsibility of factory inspection, remarked in 1893, "It is difficult to ascertain the exact wages of the employees as the managers of the jute factories here are less communicative than employers of labour elsewhere".[92] It is no wonder that we do not have much wage data. To form a more or less accurate idea about wage situation it is essential to have access to the mill and managing agency records. But till such access is obtained it is worthwhile to use whatever wage data are available keeping in mind

92. Factories Act, Report for 1892. WBSA. General Miscellaneous. Nos.1-33 August 1893. See also D.H. Buchanan, The Development of Capitalistic Enterprises in India, Frank Cass, 1966 reprint (first edition 1934), London, p.326.

their limitations. However, before doing so, it should be observed that if we are right in our earlier inference that not only money wage earnings but wage rates too declined in the years of depression, then it is possible that with an improvement in the prospect of the industry in the nineties the wages went up to their previous level. We have wage data for different categories of workers in one jute mill for the years 1890 and 1895 which show that between these years money wages increased (see Table 3).

But these data along with much of wage statistics published by the government have one serious limitation. Money wage rates for various categories of jute mill workers for the years from 1895 to 1920 were given in the government publication Prices and Wages in India. And these data show that money wages tended to rise in the last six years of the nineteenth century (and also throughout the early years of the present century). K.L. Datta's wellknown series of nominal wages for the years from 1890 to 1899 too indicates a rising trend.[93] But several points arise at this stage of analysis. Firstly, it is possible that wage rates for certain categories of skilled workers, such as mistris increased. But in a situation where supply exceeded demand in the labour market there is no theoretical reason for any rise in the wages for unskilled or semi-skilled workers, such as coolies and even for skilled workers like weavers most of whom had recently been uprooted from their crafts.

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93. K.L. Datta, Report on the Enquiry into the Rise of Prices in India, Vol.III, pp.16, 28, 66.

Table 3

Average Wage (in Rs.) in a Jute Mill in Bengal in Selected Years

		1890	1895	1899	1900	Per cent increase in			
						1895 over 1890	1899 over 1890	1899 over 1895	1900 over 1895
Per week	Carding	1.31	1.37	1.41	1.44	4.58	7.63	2.91	5.10
	Rovers	2.00	2.06	2.19	2.25	3.00	9.50	6.31	9.22
	Spinners	2.25	2.50	2.75	3.00	11.11	22.22	10.00	20.00
	Shifters	0.75	0.87	1.00	1.00	16.00	33.33	14.94	14.94
	Winders	2.00	2.50	2.75	3.00	25.00	37.50	10.00	20.00
	Beamers	2.50	2.75	2.75	3.00	10.00	10.00	-	9.09
	Weavers	4.50	4.75	5.00	5.25	5.55	11.11	5.26	10.52
Per day	Mistries	0.62	0.75	0.87	0.87	20.96	40.32	16.00	16.00
	Coolies	0.28	0.30	0.31	0.31	7.14	10.71	3.33	3.33

Source: For 1890 Annual Report on the Working of Indian Factories Act for 1910, para 2, and for the other years Prices and Wages in India, 35th Issue, Table 23(17).

The second point is that the officially published data relate to only one particular jute mill, and, as Amiya Bagchi has remarked, there is no basis for considering that these were "representative in a statistical sense".[94] And there is some evidence to show that wages

94. Amiya Kumar Bagchi, Private Investment in India 1900-1939. Cambridge University Press, 1972, p.123.

didfered to a certain extent from one jute mill to another.[95]

Thirdly, we have some across some crude wage data relating to jute mills located in the Serampore subdivision. These data presented in Table 4 suggest a stationery level of wages, even though in a rough way. Comments made by officials in their Report on the Working of Indian Factories Act tend to strengthen this suggestion.

For 1895 it was reported by Presidency Divisional Commissioner that "there was no material change in the rates of wages paid to the different classes of operatives" and by Burdwan Divisional Commissioner that "there has been no perceptible change in the rates of wages..."

For 1896 M. Finucane, Secretary to the Government of Bengal commented, "There was no appreciable change in the rates of wages paid to different classes of operatives during the year under review".

For 1897 the Commissioners of the Presidency Division and Burdwan Division found "no change in the rates of wages paid to the operatives employed in factories".

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95. Here are some data about wage rates paid weekly to male operatives in 1893 :

	Rs. As.		Rs. As.
Wellington Jute Mills	1-8	to	10-0
Soorah Jute Mills	1-5	to	7-0
India Jute Mills	1-15	to	-
Gouripore Jute Mills	2-8	to	3-8
Titaghar Jute Mills	3-2		
Shamnagore Jute Mills	3-0		

Factories Act. Report for 1893. WBSA. General Miscellaneous. Nos.12-13 and 16-17 of August 1894.

In 1898 too "no appreciable alteration in the rates of wages paid to different classes of operatives" was noticed by any of the two Commissioners.[96]

Table 4

Rates of Wage paid Weekly 1893 and 1897

		1893			1897		
		Rs.As.		Rs.As.	Rs.As.		Rs.As.
Wellington Jute Mills	Male	1-8	to	10-0	1-10	to	8-0
	Female	1-6	to	3-0	1-6	to	3-0
	Boys	1-0	to	3-0	1-1	to	2-0
	Girls	1-0	to	1-6	1-1	to	1-6
Hastings Jute Mills	Male	1-8	to	5-8	1-8	to	5-8
	Female	1-4	to	3-0	1-4	to	3-8
	Boys	0-12	to	1-6	1-0	to	1-6
	Girls	0-12	to	1-6	1-0	to	1-6
India Jute Mills	Male	1-15			1-15		
	Female	1-7			1-7		
	Boys	1-1			1-1		
	Girls	Nil			1-0		
Champdani Jute Mills	Male	1-14			1-8	to	12-0
	Female	1-4			1-2	to	2-0
	Boys	1-12			0-12	to	2-8
	Girls	0-12			0-12	to	1-4
Victoria Jute Mills	Male	4-4			4-4 (weavers)		2-8 (coolies)
	Female	1-6			1-8		
	Boys	1-3			1-3		
	Girls	1-3			1-3		

Source: Factories Act, Reports for 1893 and 1897, WBSA. General Misc. Nos. 12-13 of August 1894 and Nos-30-31 of September 1898 respectively.

96. For 1895 WBSA. General Miscellaneous. Nos.21-25 of July 1896; for 1896 Nos.24-5 of September 1896; for 1897 Nos.26-7, 30-1 of September 1898; and for 1898 Nos.25-6 of August 1899.

Relevantly it may be noted that S.H. Fremantle who in 1905 along with B. Foley conducted an extensive enquiry into various aspects of industrial labour in Bengal (and also the United Provinces) reported that between 1896 and 1905 "there has been very little advance in wages [of jute operatives]. The increase is estimated by one of the mill managers who was questioned on the subject at 10 per cent in eight years. Others say that there has been no general increase, only small adjustments which have, of course, an upward tendency, and any small rise there is can probably be accounted for by increased efficiency".[97] "So the increasing demand for labour", remarked Fremantie, "has not as yet had the effect of raising its price to any extent".[98]

What was the trend in actual earnings of the workers? We have one piece of evidence which shows that the jute mill workers' earnings in 1896 were higher than those in the preceding year. Thus, on the authority of Dr. Gibbons, Superintendent of the Campbell Medical Hospital, the Presidency Divisional Commissioner reported in 1897, "... in jute mills the workers had earned more than in the preceding year [1895] owing to regular attendance at their work. In ordinary years the hands remained away from work from time to time for a day or two besides taking a long holiday to visit their native country. This year owing to scarcity and consequent high prices of food grains the workers had been usually steady in attendance".[99]

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97. S.H. Fremantle, Report on the Supply of Labour in the United Provinces and in Bengal, Nainital, 1906, para 41.

98. Ibid.

99. Factories Act. Report for 1896. WBSA. General Miscellaneous. Nos.1-25 of September 1897.

Before proceeding further, a few comments are called for. First of all, in the Commissioner's remark there is no indication of any rise in wage rates. The earnings rose, according to this British official, owing to regular attendance of the workers.

But stated in this form the observation is misleading. It gives the impression that the workers were prone to ease and indolence. But, as emphasized earlier, the workers were not and could never be naturally inclined to idleness. As regards their attendance habit, the point to be noted is that previously when food prices were relatively lower not infrequently could they earn that sum of wages which was enough to maintain the level of subsistence to which they were accustomed, by working four or five days a week, and so long as this was possible, they would not work the whole week. But as the necessaries of life, particularly food articles, became dearer, they were compelled to labour the whole six days in the week just to ensure that level of subsistence. In other words, it was increased work which resulted in greater wage earnings for the labourers.

Again, we should take particular account of one factor which was entirely missed by the contemporary British officials. Previously, the wage earnings were less not merely because the workers were necessarily involved in irregular attendance, but also that less work - work only for a part of a week - was available. More work was thus available as a result of a marked improvement in the state of the jute industry. This led to a rise in the earnings of the workers.

Another factor of much importance was that the non-local non-Bengali immigrant labourers who were rapidly moving into the industry

in the closing decade of the industry were more steady in work and more regular in attendance than the Bengali labourers who were in the earlier days of the industry preponderant in the jute textile labour force. The Bengali labourers, usually coming from villages surrounding the mills and districts neighbouring the mill areas, had some elbow room in terms of food marginally available at home and could take short leave on various occasions. But the non-local immigrants coming from considerable distance had no such leeway. Practically cut off from their roots and compelled to leave their dearest and nearest ones behind in the country and placed in a totally strange setting, their only aim was to earn as much possible through their hard labour. So the increased regularity in attendance noticed by the Presidency Divisional Commissioner was at least partly owing to the changing composition of the labour force. Indeed, this characteristic of the non-local immigrant labourers was often favourably commented on by the employers and was an important factor influencing their recruitment policy. Here was the scope for employers not only to keep the wage rates at a low level but also to create a docile labour force as well as have a try at dividing it.[100]

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100. In this connexion it may be noted that in a letter to the Bengal Government J.C. Duffs & Co., a Jute bailing and shipping firm employing 1,500 persons, observed in 1892, "This labour is imported, that is, our workers come in for the season from the mufassal, chiefly from the Benaras district. They are most industrious and work with all their might for the eight months the season lasts... Their one idea is to work. They voluntarily labour from daylight to dark, with short intervals for food and bathing purposes. They ask for no holiday, and only desist working on Sundays by compulsion". NAI. Home. Judicial. No.288 of September 1892-A.

Pratt, a Deputy Inspector General of Police, who in 1895 conducted an enquiry about certain aspects of textile labour force around Calcutta, was informed by the management of Victoria Jute Mills, Telinipara (Hooghly district), "The upcountry men work steadily, and they go home with their earnings once a year, and in due course come back again". WBSA. Judicial. Police. Nos.8-9 of January 1896.

(contd....p.54)

So far as the movement of real wages is concerned, it is to be observed that any attempt to indicate its trend is beset with serious difficulties arising from the limitation of data and wellknown problems relating to construction of cost of living index numbers. K.L. Datta tried to derive this trend for the period 1890 to 1912, and estimated that while real wages fell in a few individual years, the trend for the decade as a whole was a rising one.[101] No doubt, his finding was based on a wide survey and technical exercise. But if his results are compared with other sources, /it appears that he found gains for the jute mill /such as Prices and Wages in India labour, where most probably there was nothing of the sort.[102] Thus his series of nominal index numbers shows an improvement which was much greater than even the one shown in the official publication mentioned earlier.

(contd..f.n.100)

Fremantle too reported in 1906, "New mills from their institution depended to a great extent on this migratory labour /from Bihar and the UP/, and the old mills, finding it more satisfactory and regular than the local labour, began more and more to rely upon it". Op.cit., para 39.

101. K.L. Datta's series of real wages for the years 1890 to 1891 is reproduced below.

Index Numbers of Average Monthly Real Wages in Jute Industry
(Average of 1890-94 = 100)

1890	100	1895	106
1891	100	1896	107
1892	99	1897	95
1893	97	1898	106
1894	104	1899	112

Source : Op.cit., pp.194-5.

102. Regarding the adequacy of wage study made by Datta who was a high official of the finance department D.H. Buchanan remarked, "Two criticisms suggest themselves ; first that sufficient data for the establishment of wage tables did not exist; and second, that the work was biased by a perhaps unconscious effort to show the improvement which his employers were probably anxious to show". Op. cit., pp.351-2.

Again, he underestimated the extent of price rise. His estimate of price rise is considerably less than that revealed by that publication. The price data for common rice for the 24-Parganas and Hooghly - both of them mill districts - given in this publication, as reproduced in Table 2 above, shows a sharp increase in the nineties. It is found that the common rice price in the quinquennium 1896-1900 was higher than that prevailing in the preceding one (1891-95) which was again higher than that in 1886-90. There was a spurt in wheat price too.[103]

Thus in the final decade of the century while money wage rates remained substantially unchanged, food prices rose appreciably. This means that there was a fall in the real wage in the decade as a whole with marked drop in particularly bad years like 1897.

It also deserves to be noted and emphasized that this fall took place in wages which, though slightly higher than what could have been usually earned in agriculture or handicrafts, were already so low that only unremitting arduous labour enabled the mill operatives to earn that sum which was essential for keeping them alive. The wage was fixed at a level which just provided subsistence to an individual and a small margin to meet the most pressing requirements of his family which normally stayed in the rural areas.[104] And any fall in this abysmally low level of wages could not but have been severely distressing for the workers.

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103. See Table 2.

104. Cf. Buchanon, op.cit., pp.317-8.

Lengthening of Working Day

At this stage of our analysis it should be noticed that an important element determining the material as well as non-material conditions of existence was the length of working day. That the working day was usually very long has been noted earlier. But even this was further lengthened, lengthened beyond all natural limits, by the application of a new scientific technique, that is, electric light. It was in 1894 that a jute mill was for the first time fitted with electric light. By the end of 1895 eight of the twenty seven jute mills and by the close of the following year most of the principal jute and cotton mills in Bengal were electrically lighted.[105] One of the major advantages this innovation conferred on the employers was a lengthening of the working day. For the majority of the employers, as pointed out in the Bengal Administration Report for 1895-96, "it afforded great advantages over the system of working from daybreak to sunset, notably the advantages of less waste, better work and a longer working day, a possibility of introducting a system of night shifts..."[106]

We unfortunately have few reports on the actual length of working days in the latter half of the mineties. But the following is significant. In his Report on the Working of Indian Factories Act for 1892 C.A. Walsh, the Special Inspector for Factories, observed, "The usual working hours in the jute mills average from 6 A.M. till 6.30 P.M. During the hot weather the mills may work from one to one and a half

105. Bengal Administration Report for 1896-97, Pt.II, p.148.

106. Ibid., p.134.

hours longer", and he was particular enough to point that at that time "no jute mill worked by artificial light".[107] Thus, to emphasize once more an aspect dealt with earlier, even prior to the introduction of electric light the mills were working for a minimum of twelve and a half hours and a maximum of fourteen hours a day. It may be reasonably inferred that with the introduction of electric light the working day must have been lengthened further in the closing years of the century.

This inference is strengthened by what was reported by a Commission appointed a few years later, the Indian Factory Labour Commission of 1908. The Commissioners found, "All the [jute] mills work, nominally, from 5 A.M. to 8 P.M. without stoppage; but it is admitted that in certain mills constant endeavours are made, when the conditions of the labour market permit of this, to 'crib time', and in such cases the factory may run from 4.30 A.M. to 8.30 P.M."[108] In other words, a fifteen hours', and not infrequently sixteen hours', day was the standard. And the position in the late nineties most probably did not differ much from this arrangement.

However, the employers and many government officials too always made much of the point that, because of a system of shifts which was introduced in the industry quite early, and of a practice of granting intervals, no individual worker except a weaver had to work actually for more than nine to ten hours. But for weavers then there was no shift system and so at least for them the length of actual hours of

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107. WBSA. General Miscellaneous. Nos.1-33 of August 1893.

108. IFLC 1908 Report, para 11.

work and the time for which a mill was kept running in a day coincided.[109] Weavers could, however, have short intervals usually by mutual arrangement among themselves.[110] And it may be noted that weavers constituted a considerable proportion, perhaps no less than one-fourth, of the labour force.[111]

Secondly, whatever might have been the contention of the employers it appears from the 1908 Commission's Report that in the jute mills the management cribbed time not only to extend the hours for which the mills were kept in operation a day but also to lengthen the actual hours of work of the labourers. Though firm evidence is lacking we strongly suspect that the employers resorted to what Marx characterized as "the small thefts" of capital from the labourer's meal and recreation time....".[112] And the introduction of electric light most probably increased the scope of this kind of 'pilferings'. From the extract of the 1908 Report reproduced earlier it is evident that often the labourers were compelled to attend the mills at least half an hour before the stipulated time and allowed to leave after the day's work half an hour

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109. 'The weavers must, however, be all present at the opening and closing of the mill; and they are therefore on duty ordinarily for 15 hours a day, or where 'time-cribbing' is resorted to, their actual employment may extend to 16 hours a day". Ibid., para 11.

110. Ibid., para 11.

111. According to an estimate made by in the much later year of 1946 nearly 26 per cent of the workers were in the weaving department. LIC 1946 Report, p.9.

112. Capital, Vol.I, p.232.

later. Apparently and on paper too the working hours of most of the operatives were fairly short; but through such petty practices the actual hours of work were lengthened. But this lengthening occurred at a time when a substantial proportion, perhaps more than 60 per cent, were paid by the day.[113] As the wage rates remained by and large unchanged, lengthened working hours of the labourers did not automatically mean higher wages. Instances of overtime payment are known. But not being governed by any established or legally stipulated principle, overtime payment was open to all sorts of arbitrary practices and abuses.[114] All in all, it appears that as a consequence of the introduction of electric light the hours of work of a considerable portion of the workers was lengthened. But this lengthening was not necessarily accompanied by higher earnings.

Before leaving this point, it should be stressed that the length of hours of work only is not a proper indication of the strain and gruelling nature of the labour of the workers. As suggested earlier, the length of working day including time for meals and time taken to go

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113. We do not have any accurate information for the industry as a whole. But we have a piece of evidence which shows that in 1896 in the Shamnagore Jute Mills the workers employed in the winding, beaming, weaving and finishing departments were paid by piece-work. Rest, that is, all those in the jute carrying, batching, jute-cutting, preparing and spinning departments were time-rated workers. (LEC 1896 Report, Appendix O). From what is known about the later distribution of the jute labour force between the different departments, it is not perhaps wrong to infer that no less than 60 per cent of the workers/paid by day. (LIC 1946 Report, pp.9, 19).

/were

114. For evidence of overtime payment in early 1890s see replies by individual companies to questions of RCL 1892. Foreign Reports, pp.143-6. Birkmyre Bros. (Hastings Jute Mill) stated that overtime remuneration was paid by hours, and quarter of an hour added to each hour.

and come from the factories is also very important. And a reading of the evidence given by many jute mill managers themselves before the 1908 Commission makes it amply clear that electric light operation led to marked lengthening of the working day. But this meant further encroachment on the workers' own time, their relations with their families, their leisure and amusement. Many of them had to get up in the early hours of the morning, tramp a considerable distance in all the weathers and return to their dwelling-place, properly speaking their sleeping quarters, on which they did not set their eyes except at week-ends.[115] All this could not but have heightened their suffering and tension.

Squalor and Misery

And what places to even sleep in! These were nothing but dingy, overcrowded, ill-ventilated hovels situated in most filthy, insanitary surroundings. Indeed, an element having major unsettling impact on the formative working class community were the worsening conditions of housing, sanitation and health in the villages or towns which were changing into mill areas. The conditions which were already appalling deteriorated noticeably with the swelling of the labour force, particularly

115. T.W. Clark of Kankinarah and Kamarhati Jute Mills stated in his written evidence before the 1908 Commission, "It is one thing to work ten hours during an ordinary day, and quite another and altogether different for a man, and especially for a woman, to have to get up at 4 to 4.30 A.M. on a cold and foggy morning, and tramp (as many of them had to do) a considerable distance to the mill, or, when on the last shift, only to be able to reach their homes at 9.30 to 10 P.M., after which their cooking and preparation of the evening meals has to take place. The present system is destructive of all kinds of proper family life". IFLC 1908, Vol.II, Evidence, Parliamentary Papers 1909, Cmd.4519, Witness No.170.

with the huge influx of non-local labourers from Bihar and the United Provinces and the fast expansion of the mill towns.

It may be noted here that in the final two decades of the century these towns showed an extraordinary growth of population. Between 1881 and 1891 the population of Howrah increased by 28 per cent (from 90,813 to 116,606), of Serampore by 41 per cent (from 25,559 to 35,952) and of Bhatpara by 38 per cent (from 10,239 to 14,135). The other mill towns also mushroomed. In the succeeding decade Howrah added nearly 41,000 persons, an increase of 35 per cent, while Bhatpara increased by 52 per cent from 14,000 to 21,000 and Bhadreswar by 57 per cent from 9,639 to 15,150. The mill towns of Serampore, Baranagore, Kamarhati, Halishahar, and others continued to grow.[116]

This rapid growth of the mill towns and the congregation of the migrants created tremendous pressure on the scanty urban facilities and led to horribly filthy and unhealthy conditions of living. But there were persons who saw 'beauty' in these places. Thus an 1895 letter addressed to Secretary, Government of Bengal, reads as follows, "The places which were formerly covered with marshes and jungle or were sparsely inhabited by a sickly and starving class of people languishing for employment have, by the establishment of mills and factories there, been soon transformed into busy and beautiful towns teeming with a prosperous population". Thus wrote Sitanath Roy, Honorary Secretary, Bengal National Chamber of Commerce.[117] But in contrast to this sort

116. Census of India, Vol.V, Bengal, Pt.II, Table 5.

117. IJMA. Report of the Committee for 1895, Appendix F.

of ecstasy there were numerous reports pointing out the wretched conditions of living of not only the factory workers but also of the urban labouring men in general.

At this point it should be observed that it would be not quite apt to romanticize over the living conditions in the countryside. There the labouring poor lived in the most primitive way, usually in tiny ramshackle huts, consisting normally of only one room, and the entire family along with a large number of children crowding into this one-room hovel. Yet one cannot miss the large difference between the living condition in the rural areas and that of the mill operatives, particularly of those living in the bustis and mill quarters. At least there were vast open space, abundant supply of fresh air and plenty of sunshine in the rural life. All these were totally lacking in the mill quarter and bustis surrounding the mills. The 'homes' in the Calcutta suburbs and the mill towns were certainly much worse than those to which the immigrants from the countryside had been accustomed. And plenty of evidence is available to indicate the notorious conditions of living of the factory operatives and their association with the heavy influx of labourers seeking most poorly paid jobs, particularly of immigrants from Bihar and eastern UP who had been living in most terrible poverty.

Thus Dr. Barker whom we have quoted earlier stated in 1893, "The North-West coolies are ... very dirty in their habits, and the houses they live in are as a rule very close to each other, and the sanitary arrangements of these cooly lines or bustis are bad". Continuing he remarked, "I have seen, as many as five in a low apartment of

six feet square".[118] On the basis of what he had learnt from the Magistrate of Hooghly, R.C. Dutt in his capacity of Offg. Commissioner of Burdwan Division reported, "The mill coolies are chiefly men of Bihar and the North-West, who live near the mills in low, dark, ill-ventilated, ill-conserved bastis".[119] Similar report was submitted by the Civil Surgeon of the 24-Parganas. He spoke of "the miserable state of living of the working classes, particularly in the suburbs of Calcutta, where they generally live in overcrowded and insanitary bustis..."[120]

By way of illustration, here is an account of Noapara and Garulia, two villages situated to the north of Barrackpore where the majority of the operatives employed in two big textile mills, the Samnagar Jute Factory and the Dunbar Cotton Mills, lived. In a letter jointly submitted by Dr. J. Ganguli and Dr. A.S. Khan, two medical practitioners attached to these two mills, stated in 1894, "[Noapara], in which the Hindu and Mahommedan permanent residents of the village, as well as many of the Mill hands live, is remarkable for the numerous dirty tanks which it contains, the thick jungle surrounding these and the dwelling-houses, and the dirty state of the few metalled lanes that there are in it. As the result of all these the village is, as it were, the hot bed of Malaria, which seems never to leave the people".[121]

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118. WBSA. General Miscellaneous. Nos.1-33 of August 1893.

119. WBSA. General Miscellaneous. Nos.12-3 of August 1894.

120. Factories Act. Report for 1893. NAI. Home Judicial. No.264 of November 1894.

121. BCC Report. From 1st February 1894 to 31st January 1895, Vol.II Documents and Correspondence, Riverine Municipalities, Statement H, pp.276-7.

But the conditions in the neighbouring Garulia Bazar were still worse. "This place", we are informed, "has only come into existence since the establishment of local Mills", and "is the abode of nearly four thousand human beings, Mill hands for the most part, packed of together in a few hundred of the most miserable huts which one can imagine".[122] Giving a detailed account of this place which they had seen "many hundreds of times" the two doctors wrote the following :

"1st. The huts in which these poor beings live are made in the most primitive fashion. The thatched or khola-tiled roof of the verandah of a small hut, as well as that of a long string of wretched mud-walled rooms, called a 'line' is very often so low that light can hardly ever enter the room inside, and one must stoop a great deal before one can enter these socalled rooms. The huts, moreover are so crowded together and so many people live in them, that whenever an epidemic disease, like cholera, breaks out in one of them, it is a miracle if the neighbours escape, and if one hut is accidentally on fire, scores, and sometimes hundreds of them are at once burnt down to ashes".[123]

And there was no relief from this state of living. If one stepped outside his crowded hut or room there was no open space but most stinky lanes. The two doctors described these lanes thus, "The lanes which divide these Bustees are, with the exception of two or three, all kutcha ones, full of mud and urine in the rainy season, and always

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122. Ibid.

123. Ibid.

teeming with the sweepings of the adjacent huts. There being no urinal in this crowded place, the people invariably pass water by the land side".[124]

The terribly filthy state of latrines was another issue of complaint by these two observers. They noted, "The latrines are indescribably filthy. The one behind the local School has a brick-built reservoir for the water and urine. We found it full, and the neighbours said that very often this liquid flows over on the adjacent ground. A private latrine to the south of the main road has six earthen pots or gumlahs full to the brim, and the adjacent ground is terribly dirty. Another private latrine, not far off, is so filthy, that muck and water were actually running on the adjacent ground, and the lane on which it is has been rendered impassable in this rainy season, on account of the mud mixing up with the dirt and flowing over a good part of the lane". What was the condition of public latrines which were of course very few? To quote the two doctors once more, "The Municipal latrine, to the south of the reeling rooms of the Dunbar Cotton Mill, is little better, and the stink and filth near it is something terrible. A latrine near the river is nearly in the same condition. The invariable complaint of the residents around every latrine, private or Municipal, is that life is simply miserable to them on account of the stink and filth in this rainy season".[125]

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124. Ibid.

125. Ibid.

Another aspect of this horrible living condition was the water which they consumed. "The drinking-water of the people for more than four months of the year", pointed out our keen observers, "consists of the river water containing a thick solution of earthy matter".[126]

Living and sanitary conditions as these were reported from every mill areas. Here is what was stated by C.A. Walsh, Special Inspector of Factories, in his annual report for 1894: "The quarter in which the operatives live need, I think, investigation. Glance ever the boundary wall of Baranagore, or walk a hundred yards from Shamnagore, Titaghur or other large mill, and look at the miserable quarters of those whose lot it is to labour daily in the mill. A collection of filthy hovels meets the eye, constructed rudely of mud thatched with grass or kerosine-oil tins flattened out, devoid of drainage, and too crowded for a proper supply of air. It remains a marvel how human life, however accustomed to insanitary surroundings, can survive".[127]

Disease and Death

But in fact there was nothing to marvel at. For these places were, in the words of one Burdwan Divisional Commissioner, "vertiable hot beds of disease".[128] There are many reports to indicate that the workers lived in bad health, suffered from all kinds of disease and

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126. Ibid.

127. WBSA. General Miscellaneous. Nos.23 of July 1895.

128. Factories Act. Report for 1898. WBSA. General Miscellaneous, No.25 of August 1899.

not infrequently died of these. Thus in the two doctors' letter quoted earlier it was said, "As the combined result of the above insanitary conditions, the villagers of Nauparah [Noapara] and Garulia are never free from disease. The four principal ones with which they are troubled are - Malaria, Cholera, Dysentry and Diarrhoea..."[129] Mortality data are not easy to get. But there are scraps of evidence indicating large number of deaths. For instance, in April 1894 Dr. Leahy, the Civil Surgeon of the 24-Parganas noted, "There were 56 deaths from Cholera during the last two months in the bastis surrounding the Dunbar Cotton Mills".[130]

Such reports on disease and deaths were many. In a report for the year 1892 Barker, the Serampore doctor wrote, "... they [the factory labourers] suffer from malarial fevers and outbreaks of cholera disease within the sphere of preventive measures".[131] Walsh noticed in 1893 "an unusual amount of fever ... among the operatives" with which the Eruopeans too were affected[132] and reported "a certain amount of sickness amongst the operatives" in 1894 deaths from which were probably above the average.[133] Dr. Leahy who was in charge of inspection of a

129. Op.cit.

130. Ibid., Statement A, pp.269-70.

131. Op.cit.

132. WBSA. General Miscellaneous. No.7 of August 1894.

133. WBSA. General Miscellaneous. No.23 of July 1895.

large number of factories in the 24-Parganas expressed concern at the outbreak of "a bad type of malarial fever" and "a great many deaths from it" in 1897 and C.E. Buckland, the Presidency Divisional Commissioner, recorded 59 cases of cholera with 20 deaths in the same year in factories under Leahy and also a severe outbreak of small pox in its epidemic form among the Shamnagore Jute Mill labourers.[134]

For these wretched conditions of living, squalor, disease and deaths the British factory owners always blamed three parties - the victims themselves, the mill-town municipalities which on the basis of very limited franchise and with extremely restricted powers were just having elected Indian Chairman and Vice-Chairman, and the landlords and bustee-owners.

The thesis that filthy and most insanitary living was a defect of the Indian workers, particularly of "the North West coolies", that is, the up country labourers who were "very dirty in their habits" was a very popular one with not only the employers but also with many government officials including medical officers.[135] These observers never mentioned that the workers, who were paid just that amount as wage which was enough to keep them alive so that they could labour in the mills and factories, had neither the means for improving their living condition nor any knowledge about how these diseases could be prevented. They, the employers in particular, were vehement in their criticism of the

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134. WBSA. General Miscellaneous. Nos.26-7 of September 1898.

135. See WBSA. General. Miscellaneous. Nos.1-33 of August 1893 and No.25 of August 1899.

municipal administration.[136] Their criticism of the landlords too were not unfounded.[137]

But the aspect on which they preferred to remain silent was the responsibility of the government as well as the mill-owners. However, the total absence of any sanitary provision in the Indian Factories Act speaks a lot. Under the circumstances the employers had no legal obligation to provide filtered drinking water or healthy accommodation for the operatives. And it deserves notice that in reporting outbreaks of enteric fever or cholera disease the officials, not to speak of the mill authorities, generally took care to point out that "the infection was traced to sources outside the factory premises".[138] But the fact was that with some exceptions all the mills and factories in those days supplied unfiltered water of the river Hooghly and even of impure tanks and wells as drinking water to the workers.[139] In his report for 1893

136. BCC Report, From 1st February 1894 to 31st January 1895. Vol.II. Documents and Correspondence, Riverine Municipalities, Statement H, pp.268-9, 278-9, 281-2.

137. See Chakraborty, Communal Riots and Labour, pp.26-8.

138. Factories Act. Report for 1897. WBSA. General Miscellaneous, Nos.14-5 of September 1898.

139. Ibid, Nos.12-3 of August 1894. From available accounts it is learnt that there were four different types of arrangement for supplying drinking water. The factory inspector for the Serampore mills reported in 1892: "In the Hastings Mill the water from the river is pumped into settling tanks..., and distributed by pipes (fitted with taps)... In others the river water, without settling, is either conveyed by pipes or carried by hand to the workers. A third plan ... is allowing the coolies to go and drink water direct from the river". Factories Act. Report for 1892. WBSA General Miscellaneous, Nos.1-33 of August 1893. The fourth type was the supply of filtered watered in some mills located in Howrah and Calcutta. Factories Act. Report for 1893. WBSA. General Miscellaneous. Nos.12-13 of August 1894.

the Special Inspector of Factories observed, "Many factories on the banks of the Hooghly still continue to supply water for drinking direct from the river, although allowed to settle in large gharras /earthen jars/.."[140] And it must be kept in mind that at least during the rainy season the river water was, in the words of this official, "extremely muddy and dirty"[141] or, in other words, contaminated. And it needs to be stressed that many of the disease were water-borne. So the employers could hardly be absolved of their responsibility for sickness and epidemic among the labourers. But the government itself nationalised this arrangement. Thus, a top Bengal Government official, T.N. Richardson, Under-Secretary to the Government of Bengal wrote to the Special Inspector of Factories in a most callous fashion, "it would be of little benefit to insist on the mills supplying filtered water, when people in their own houses drink it unfiltered".[142]

With regard to housing of the operatives too the employers' attitude was that they were in no way responsible. And when the Special Inspector reflecting the government's concern at the wretched and deteriorating housing condition said that "when it is considered so many mills are paying large dividends, it is surely not too much to ask that a few thousand rupees be annually spent on improved, well-drained, ventilated pucca quarters for the operatives, together with public

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140. Ibid, No.7 of August 1894.

141. Ibid.

142. WBSA. General Miscellaneous. Nos.1 to 5 of January 1893.

latrines and urinals,"[143] the IJMA representing the jute mill -owners reacted most strongly. They blamed the municipal authorities and the landlords for the deplorable state of housing and criticised the Special Inspector and also the government for putting forward a suggestion which in their consideration may lead to dangerous conclusion.[144]

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133. Ibid, No.23 of July 1895. The Bengal Government's concern was reflected in the fact that the Special Inspector's remarks were quoted with approval in the Provincial Government's Report on the Working of Indian Factories Act for 1894. NAI. General. Judicial. No.486 of October 1896. Furthermore, in response to the IJMA's sharp reaction to Walsh's suggestion C.E. Buckland, Secretary to the Bengal Government wrote to the Association, "There are various ways of improving the dwelling-houses of mill operatives without running counter to the powers vested in Municipal Commissioners or to the wishes of private owners. Land in the vicinity may be leased by the mill-owners or purchased as opportunity offers, and suitable dwelling-houses erected on it, and a gradual improvement thus effected". IJMA. Report of the Committee for 1895, Calcutta, 1896, Appendix G.

144. In a strongly worded letter addressed to the Secretary, Government of Bengal the IJMA observed, "It is a matter of regret that Mr. Walsh shoule have hastily come to the conclusion that it was in the power of the Mills to effect Municipal reforms, and to make bustees outside Mill limits rival Mill lines within those limits, and further that he shoule have put forward the idea that the expenditure of 'a few thousand rupees' only on the part of the Mills is all that is necessary". In an angry tone this body enquired, "The Committee venture to ask on what ground Mills should spend 'a few thousand rupees' to improve and render more valuable the property of landlords, who will not improve their bustees, but who are so alive to the effect of the existence of the Mills as to resolutely refuse to allow the Mills to purchase the neighbouring lands? Again on what ground are Mills to be expected to contribute 'a few thousand rupees' to Municipal funds in addition to the rates which already fall upon them much severely than upon the landlords and residents of the Municipalities in which the Mills are situated". Continuing the IJMA contended, "... the state of things outside Mill limits to which Mr. Walsh has drawn attention, is not strange or uncommon in this country, and that bad as the bustees may be, they are the ordinary bustees of the country, to which the people are accustomed, and where they feel more comfortable and at home, than they do in the labour lines of the Mills". Ibid, Appendix G See also IJMA. Report of the Committee for 1896, Calcutta, 1897, Appendix A.

Nonetheless, in order to keep the experienced and skilled operatives, particularly those coming from Bihar and the eastern UP, attached to particular mills, to have greater control over the labourers and especially to ensure regular attendance - high absenteeism owing to sickness having assumed a serious proportion and affecting the working of the mills - some employers began to take measures to construct mill quarters which were considered by the Special Inspector as "decent".[145] Though these quarters were not as bad as the busti huts, they were neither adequate nor could they be viewed as much better. In 1896 in the 24-Parganas, we learn from the Commissioner of the Presidency Division, "out of 18 factories under the Civil Surgeon, quarters for operatives [were] provided in 7 of which 2 [had] pucca buildings for them".[146] Obviously enough, a considerable proportion of those living in mill lines continued to reside in mud-walled, thatched kutcha quarters. And according to an incomplete estimate made in 1897 by the Inspector General of Police, only 10,296 workers out of 74,498 jute mill workers employed in the jute mills, that is, only 13.8 per cent of those workers resided in lines belonging to the mills.[147] What is more, these mill quarters, no

145. WBSA. General Miscellaneous. No.23 of July 1895.

146. WBSA. General Miscellaneous. Nos.20-21 of September 1897.

147. WBSA. Judicial. Police. Nos.95-99 of September 1897. See the Statement submitted by E.R. Henry, the Inspector General of Police.

In his Report on the Working of the Indian Factories Act for 1898 the Offg. Burdwan Divisional Commissioner observed, "Several mills notably the Bally Paper Mill and the National Jute Mill have lines specially constructed for the accommodation of a portion of their workers which are usually well laid out and infinitely superior from a sanitary point of view to any houses that the men can obtain for themselves". But he took care to point out, "It is, however, only a very small proportion of the operatives who are or can ever expect to be thus provided for". WBSA. General Miscellaneous, No.25 of August 1899.

matter whether kutcha or pucca, remained ill-ventilated, overcrowded hovels.[148]

All this had most disturbing impact on the labouring population of the mill towns. The terrible state of dark, ill-ventilated and unclean busti huts and even mill quarters, the extremely dirty condition or drains often blocked with all kinds of refuse, the filthy narrow lanes and passages between the bustis filled with reeking muck, urine and excrementitious matter, the numerous open, defiled cesspools, the foul air saturated with faecal odour, the drinking of contaminated water, the bad health and sickness, the deaths from preventable disease, and so on created an unstable labour force and accentuated the frustration, dissatisfaction and sore feeling of the inhabitants of the mill towns.

148. As late as the 1920s the condition of the mill quarters was as follows: "In nearly all cases the rooms /constructed by the mills/ are made back to back and in most pucca floors and tiled roofings have been provided with narrow verandahs, generally 4 ft. wide used for cooking purposes by the workers. No electric light is provided inside the rooms, and very often the rooms are dark and in none of them sunlight can penetrate through.

"Regarding ventilation, it is unsatisfactory being back to back houses, and the only openings in the rooms are the doors and if there are windows, they are kept shut. There are no chimneys or openings kept for escape of the smoke in majority of houses.

"Each room is usually occupied by three or four workers, i.e., 25 square feet of space are usually available for each worker..." This is an extract from a 'Report on Housing and Health Condition, based on data obtained from 23 to 28 Jute Mills near Calcutta during the last seven years, 1922 to 1928' submitted by Dr. G.L. Batra, Assistant Director of Public Health Government of Bengal to the Royal Commission on Labour in India. RCLI. Evidence. Vol.V, Pt.I, p.31.

Disrupted Family Life

To add to these unsettling effects, there was another trend associated with non-Bengali upcountry immigration. It was that the family relationship was being broken-up. Earlier too, as noticed in the preceding section, there was considerable pressure on the traditional family structure. Because of long working day and the nature of work often it was not possible to look after the children and pursue family affairs. But for the mill workers coming from nearby places and districts surrounding the mill areas their physical separation from the family members was neither prolonged nor total.

Now with the growing influx of non-local immigrants the nature of the problem and its effects changed significantly. It was no longer a question of lack of time to rear children or look after family problems. The problem was much more serious.

That the upcountry immigrants were overwhelmingly single males is well-established and is borne out by Table 5.

Table 5.

Sex Composition in Bengal Towns 1872-1901

Category of Towns	Number of females per thousand males			
	1872	1881	1891	1901
Average country town	947	971	903	869
Average industrial or commercial town	798	767	685	605
Calcutta City	552	556	526	507
Bengal	992	994	973	960

Source: Census of India, 1921, Vol.V, Bengal, Pt.I, Report, Para 83.

It is evident from the above table that while from 1881 onwards there was a steady decline in the number of females per 1,000 males for the whole of Bengal, it was never so marked and sharp as the corresponding change in the average industrial or commercial towns. In fact, in the case of these towns the decrease took place from 1872. The heavy and increasing influx of predominantly male labourers, particularly of immigrants from the upcountry, explains this growing disproportion in sex ratio. For a variety of reasons the immigrant male workers, though usually married, were compelled to leave their womenfolk behind in their native villages and to lead a life of 'bachelors' in their places of employment.[149] And frequent or short visits to their homes being ruled out by distance and cost of travel they remained separated from their near and dear ones for considerably long period of time. Manifestly enough, for most of the workers this was an existence of a most unnatural kind,[150] and under the circumstances their only aim, if they had any aim at all, was to earn enough to send home. It is needless to add that this sort of disrupted family relationship was a matter of very serious import[151] and this worked to compound the immigrant workers' anxiety, agony and instability.

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149. Cf. Census of India, 1921, Vol.V, Bengal. Pt.I. Report, para 83.

150. Dipesh Chakrabarty has stressed the sort of "fluid" sex relationship to which the disproportion in sex ratio gave rise. See his Communal Riots and Labour, pp.30-1.

151. Census of India, 1921, Vol.V, Bengal, Pt.I, Report, para 83.

Holidays and Discriminating Management Practices

Here one more important trend associated with Bihari and UP labour immigration deserves mention. It was that a major component of the growing labour force, especially of the non-Bengali immigrants, belonged to the Muslim community.

We of course do not have definitive information about the religious community-wise break-up of the labour force for the period prior to 1897. But one evidence is available to give some idea of the community composition of the work force. In 1895 a somewhat detailed enquiry was conducted by Pratt, a Deputy Inspector of General of Police, regarding certain aspects of labour unrest, management practices and police measures needed to meet the labour situation in the jute and cotton textile mills and some other factories located in the Calcutta industrial area.[152] This enquiry threw up the interesting information that while the granting of two to five days' holidays on the occasion of Bengali Hindu religious festival of Durga Puja and one full day's leave on the Rathajatra day for all the workers irrespective of their religious affiliations was not an uncommon management practice, the usual practice with regard to Muslim religious occasions like Muharram or Id

152. Pratt's enquiry was undertaken in response to IJMA's representation to the Bengal Government for strengthening the police force in the mill areas and towns. IJMA's move was prompted by the outbreak of labour disturbances in the early part of 1895. Pratt visited 32 mills and factories, mostly jute and cotton mills, and gathered information from the managers and babus. For details in this regard see Police Supervision in the Riverine Municipalities. WBSA. Judicial. Police, Nos.6-11 of January 1896.

was to sanction only a few hours' (three to four hours in most cases) leave for exclusively the Muslim workers. In fact, Pratt's report reveals that before 1895 in no instance except one a whole day's leave was given to Muslim workers on account of religious festivals of their community.[153]

Perhaps even in the early years and most certainly in the later years a conscious desire on the part of the management to foster fissiparous tendencies among the workers had a role to play behind this discriminatory practice, particularly the management's almost universal rejection, as reported by Pratt, of Muslim workers' prayer for a full day's paid leave on their religious occasions.[154] But it also strongly suggests that in the earlier years the Muslims formed only a small fraction of the labour force. That was one important reason why the question of giving Muslim holidays was never a pressing one in the initial years. But with the changing composition of the labour force

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153. At the Dunbar Samnagar Cotton Mills Pratt was informed, "No holidays are given at Rath Jatra and Muharram, but four days are given during the Durga Puja". At the Victoria Jute Mills, Telinipara the DIG obtained the following information: "At the Id and Bakr Id the Musalman coolies of the Victoria Mills were allowed to go away for three hours, from 9 A.M. to noon. Bengalis are given half a day for the Rath Jatra and in 1894 the mills were closed for two days for the Durga Puja holidays". On the occasion of Durga Puja the Fort Gloster Bowreah Cotton Mills "closed absolutely for five days". At the Samnagar Jute Mills "holidays were given this year [1895] at the Id and Bakr-Id for three hours each day... A day was given at the Rath Jatra". Ibid.

It may be noted that the Hindu and Muslim holidays were in addition to holidays allowed on the occasion of Christian festivals and New Year's Day.

154. Ibid.

since the 1880s the weightage of the Muslims had begun to increase and by 1895 it was considerable. These Muslim immigrants included weavers from Benares and Azamgarh, poor peasants from Saran and Patna, artisans from Gaya and Ghazipur, and all sorts of distressed labouring men from western Bihar and eastern UP districts; and for the closing decade of the century it was to a considerable extent, perhaps more than ever, a Muslim immigration. That it was so is unmistakably shown by the fact that according to the 1897 estimate mentioned above 31,146, that is 41.8 per cent of the work force, were Muslims.[155] That the share of the Muslims in the jute mill work force was never so large, may be reasonably inferred from the 1911 Census data showing that the Muslims' proportion dropped to about 32 per cent.[156]

These immigrant Muslim labouring poor moving into Calcutta and the mill towns carried with them their traditional religious fashions and forms and were anxious to establish the outward forms and ceremonies of Islam. They did so not because the Muslim workers were intrinsically communal but because they like all other rural immigrants fervently wanted to maintain their traditional ideas, assumptions and prejudices including the religious ones. The point is that the preconceptions, practices and rituals which had encompassed the lives of the Muslim common folk for over many centuries continued to operate as a powerful driving force among the Muslim industrial workers. The relatively organized character of Islam and the strong influence of Muslim priests

155. WBSA. Judicial. Police. Nos.95-99 of September 1897.

156. See Das Gupta, op.cit., Appendix B.

reinforced this persistence. And anything that stood in the way of the pursuance of their traditional ceremonies and rituals tended to intensify their restlessness which was common to all the immigrants. Hindu revivalism and the associated Muslim revivalism certain aspects of which have been admirably dealt with, even though in a somewhat exaggerated form, by Dipesh Chakravarty further exacerbated their instability.

But these tensions, as we would have occasion to analyze, did not necessarily and usually find expression in sectarian community approach. There were, of course, a few riots, two or three in all, between Hindu and Muslim workers. But, though the Muslim labouring poor were never free from tensions, these scarcely took communal forms. For, most of these were tensions from which all the workers irrespective of their religious belief suffered.

Before concluding this section it may be noted that there were other important features too which accentuated the instability, worry and grievances of not only the non-local immigrants but of all the workers. Dismissals, fines, physical assaults, restrictive payment practices and such other harsh disciplinary measures which we do not propose to consider here magnified their feeling of insecurity, hardship and misery.

By way of a brief summary it may be said that wages verging on an extremely low physiological subsistence level, rising food prices, lengthening hours of monotonous toil, the constant threat of a total calamity from illness or disabling injury, nasty and brutish condition

of living, massive influx of immigrants wrenched from their accustomed life, disorganized family structure, disruption of traditional religious life, new forms of oppression and punishment - all combined to make the emerging working class community particularly unstable and explosive.

IV

Riots And Protest Action

The instability, tension and anger generated by the wretched and in many respects deteriorating conditions of existence on the one hand, and the upcountry labour influx with a very high Muslim component on the other brought about a mood for protest among workers. This led to various open manifestations of their discontent, such as presentation of demand, 'unlawful' assembly, threatening demonstrations, strikes, affrays, and riots (in the sense of collective assult and violence and not necessarily Hindu-Muslim communal conflict). The final years of the nineteenth century were punctunated by a spate of direct group actions by factory workers against their employers and management - Shibpur and Howrah Jute Mills strikes (1893), Shamnagar Jute Mills strike (1894), strikes in Titagarh and Champdani Jute Mills, troubles and riots in Kamarhati, Kankinara and Budge Budge Jute Mills - all in 1895, Baranagore Jute Mills strike of 1896 and Bowreah Cotton Mills strike and riots of 1896 and 1899. While, as we shall see, all of these were related to grievances arising out of economic as well as non-economic conditions of life, a few riots - actually not exceeding three in number - involving labour employed in Standard Jute Mills at Titagarh and Lower Hooghly Jute Mills at Garden Reach (1896) and labouring poor of Rishra in

Serampore sub-division (1898) were sparked off by purely communal consideration.[157] The biggest of the riots of those days, the Talla riot of 1897, though apparently belonging the second category was, as we shall have occasion to consider, actuated by a set of complex motives and could not be assigned only to communal determination.

Widespread Disaffection

The fact of widespread discontent among the mill operatives was admitted in the Pratt report, to our knowledge the only source giving a fairly comprehensive account of the state of the workers' feelings and behaviour in the middle of the decade. The manager of the Kamarhati Jute Mills spoke of "quite a new attitude on the part of the mill coolies". Giving an indication of the agitated mind of the labour the police official was informed by the management of the Dunbar Cotton Mills (Shamnagore), "There may be trouble on pay day". Further, "No strike yet, but one is anticipated". At the Shamangar Jute Mills he learnt that strike "is quite possible any day". "This year [1895] the coolies are more exacting than they have been hitherto", this was what Pratt learnt at the Baranagore Jute Mills. Such were the reports from a number of mills,[158] situated on the left bank of the river Hooghly.

The DIG of Police got similar reports from many mills located on the other side of the river in the Hooghly and Howrah districts. From Duncan, the manager of the Victoria Jute Mills at Telinipara (Hooghly

157. For an account of the latter kind of riots see Chakrabarty, Communal Riots and Labour, pp.16-9.

158. Pratt Report.

District), he came to know the following, "...it is admitted that the workmen are dissatisfied. They are idle, [and] are not so willing to work as they were formerly". Moreover : "Mr. Duncan says that he cannot tell when there may be a strike, as strikes happen from quite unforeseen causes". At the Ganges and Fort Gloster Jute Mills, said Pratt on the basis of what he heard from the mill authorities, "coolies appear to be more exacting than hitherto.." The attitude of the Bowreah Cotton Mills workers is disclosed from the following, "There is a feeling of unrest all over the mill".[159]

Thus from a large number of mills there were reports of growing discontent. Dissatisfaction was prevalent even among the workers employed in the Gouripore Jute Mills (Naihati), a mill where the management, in view of the practices and circumstances generally prevailing in those days, may be considered to have possessed a comparatively liberal attitude to their labour. On the authority of Orr, the mill manager, Pratt stated, "He [Orr] says that it is a fact that this disaffection, hitherto unknown, is making way.... He thinks that agitators are about, possibly old hands, who teach the younger ones their rights, or supposed rights".[160]

Pratt's own estimate of the situation prevailing in 1895 may be given in his own words, "The facts elicited from the various mill managers ... will plainly show that disaffection has existed, and still exists, at some mills .... It is hard to say what has caused this disaffection, which admittedly on all sides, did not exist to such an

159. Ibid.

160. Ibid.

extent last year. Possibly agitators are abroad, and they may be incited to mischief by the native papers....."[161]

Mischief-makers

The latter portion of the extract relating to Gouripore Jute Mills and Pratt's own assessment are of great interest in more than one sense. For here is perhaps the first ever information that agitators and organizers were at work among the factory labourers. Pratt hinted at agitation attempted by trouble-makers from outside and instigation by native newspapers. This allegation, the first of its kind, has since then been a pet one of the capitalist employers and the upholders of law and order. For the period under consideration we, however, have not come across any evidence in support of the imputation made by a DIG of Police. In fact, as mentioned earlier, the native newspapers generally speaking showed total lack of concern for the helpless condition of the industrial labour. It seems that the Gouripore Jute Mills manager was nearer to the mark in suggesting that the agitators perhaps did not come from outside or, in other words, there was possibly no outside instigation. Orr clearly indicated that the agitators belonged to the ranks of the factory labourers themselves, or, to be more specifically speaking, the old operatives, that is, those who generationally speaking belonged to the second generation. It seems from what Orr told Pratt that out of their own life experiences these workers gave words to the grievances shared by other workers and tried to influence and organize the new entrants to the industrial labour force. It appears from Orr's testimony as reported by Pratt that their agitation centered

161. Ibid.

around not any extraneous issue but issues vitally affecting the life of the workers vis-a-vis the employers and management. Orr was obviously worried as the workers strove to assert "their rights, or supposed rights". And from what Pratt himself reported it is clear that the features of the labour situation recognized by Orr were not features of the Gouripore Jute Mills alone but of, by and large, the entire jute and cotton textile industry in the Calcutta industrial belt.

So by the mid-nineties the dissatisfaction among the factory workers was widespread and was clearly noticed by the employers as well as the enquiring police official. This dissatisfaction found expression in the strikes, violent disturbances and ritos which were occasioned by wage dispute, excessive length of working hours, assault on workers by European mill assistants, plague innoculation drive or demand for festival holidays.

Wage Demands

Wage issue, either separately or in conjunction with some other demands, particularly demand for holidays, led to a number of open and direct group actions. In some cases these were precipitated by the attempt on the part of the employers to reduce the level of wages which were already hardly enough for bare existence. In the Howrah Jute Mills, for example, in 1893 new operatives were inducted and wages of the existing workmen were reduced. Though the source does not indicate the areas of origin of the two groups of workers, it may be reasonably presumed that the new labourers belonged to the group of upcountry immigrants in desperate search for jobs and the old ones were Bengalis.

If this is so, it would have been a deliberate move made by the employers to use the linguistic-cultural diversity of the work force as well as the destitute condition of the immigrants from the U.P. and Bihar in order to push down the wages.[162] This instance is significant also because of the fact that it gives an inkling about the factors that were active behind the process of change in the composition of the jute mill work force or, in other words, of an increase in both the absolute and relative weight of the non-local, non-Bengali labourers in it and, in particular, of the kind of considerations that might have determined the recruitment policy of the employers in the jute industry. Anyway, coming to the particular case in hand, it is found that there was a disturbance between the new and old workers. Though the actual outcome is not indicated in the available account, this much is stated that the old operatives resorted to a strike and police was called in to restore order.[163]

Action sparked off by similar, though not identical, attempts by employing authority is also exemplified by the Bowreah Cotton Mills

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162. Friedrich Engels writes, "With such a competitor [i.e. the Irish immigrant] the English working-man has to struggle, with a competitor upon the lowest plane possible in a civilised country, who for this very reason requires less wages than any other. Nothing else is therefore possible than that, as Carlyle says, the wages of English working-man should be forced down further and further in every branch in which the Irish compete with him ..." The Condition of the Working Class in England (1844), Moscow, 1973, p.132. Cf. also E.P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class (1963), Penguin Books, 1968, p.472.

163. Pratt Report.

strike and riot of 1899.[164] Indeed, this was a most remarkable case of direct action by factory workers in the nineteenth century.

In this case the action passed through several phases. In July 1899 wages of all the workers were reduced by 10 to 12½ per cent on the ground of depressed condition of trade. The reelers, who numbered 380 to 420 and were placed in an important position in the process of manufacture, suffered considerably. In October their earnings were 30 per cent less than those in October 1898. They greatly resented this reduction and demanded restoration of their wage to the old level. In the first phase they did not strike, but started what was in those days certainly a novel form of action - a go slow movement. The Manager, who was the same Downs whom we have quoted earlier, complained in November, "For some time they have reduced the work done by each man fully to 30 per cent". The impact of this was considerable. As Downs himself admitted, "... there was and is now all over the mills an accumulation of yarn in the cop and bobbin, the excess waste from which causes a loss to the mill Company of from Rs.2,000 to 3,000 per month".

The reelers organised several deputations, and management was forced to open negotiation with them. "I have reasoned with them", Downs said, "and talked to deputation time after time assisted by the Head Babu, Doctor and Anath Babu". But the talks failed, and the reelers refused to withdraw their movement till their demand was conceded.

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164. The following account is mainly based on Disturbance and Riot at Bowreah Cotton Mills. WBSA. Judicial Police Nos. 22-9 of December 1899, and all the statements within quotation marks are also from this record. See also The Englishman, 23 November 1899, Amrita Bazar Patrika, 24 November 1899, and Karnik, op.cit., pp.12-3.

The management felt that if the short work movement continued any longer, work in other departments too would come to a stop. So they decided to punish the reelers. The reelers were paid monthly, and, as in many other mills of those days, they were given the wage for a month about the middle of the next month. On November 13 Downs informed the reelers that their wages for October would not be paid till the reeling was brought up to date. Between the 14th and 18th Downs met three deputations of the reelers. The refusal of the manager to concede their demand led to cease work by the reelers on the 19th morning.

Thereafter events took place in quick succession. Learning that the reelers had stopped work altogether Downs virtually declared a lockout. He ordered the mill engineer "to draw fires and stop the mills", and issued a notice to that effect.

His visit to the mill office at noon of that day (19th) was followed by violent scenes. Downs who was soon joined by four European assistants was surrounded by an angry crowd of 200 to 300 workers.[165]

165. It is interesting to observe that from the very beginning and later on too the agitation was mainly of the reelers. The extent of participation of workers from other departments is not clear. Referring to this aspect the Howrah Magistrate F.W. Duke made the observation, "... the reduction of wages appears to have been more felt in the reeling than in the spinning department. It seems that the department became relatively unpopular, as some 50 to 60 fewer persons attended it than in the previous year. This no doubt tended to the increase of arrears which produced the state of tension which led up to the riot. Why the reduction was more unpopular in this department than in others I cannot pretend to emplain. It may be that the employees being all men with no admixture of women and children were more obstinate and more inclined to violent courses. We had ample evidence before us that if they chose to exert themselves they could within the usual hours earn as high, or higher, wages than before, owing to the higher class of work undertaken". WBSA. Judicial Police. Nos. 48-52 of January 1900.

Downs later on said, "...one man took me by the shirt front, and demanded his wage. I had said my last say in the memorandum, and told him to clear out. I then had a blow on the right shoulder. When this took place, I clubbed my umbrella and cleared a space round us, and one man received the blow on the body and smashed the umbrella ... We were then attacked by bamboos, brick bats and parts of the machine broken by the workers from the machine for this purpose". "A quantity of loose bricks lying in the yard supplied missiles to the rioters", J. Kennedy, the officiating Burdwan Divisional Commissioner, reported, "and the manager and his assistants got a very smart pelting".

To quote further from Kennedy's report, "A gun was now sent for, and three or four blank shots fired in the yard which encouraged the reelers, for they concluded there was no other ammunition. Mr. Downs and his party [who had earlier moved into the mill yard] now retreated towards his house; but the pelting of bricks getting more and there being imminent danger to life and property, Mr. Downs took the gun and fired two shots low in the direction of the rioters". Several workmen were injured from the one or two shots. Explaining how this could have happened Kennedy observed, "The ground here seems to be full of masonry and the shot ricochetted striking some eight or ten of the rioters in the leg. Then the rioters dispersed". The strike fizzled out, and within a few days normal working of the mill was restored. The management lodged a complaint with the police and some workers were arrested and sent for trial. Of the sixteen accused three were sentenced to six months' rigorous imprisonment, and thirteen to three months' rigorous imprisonment. A counter case was also lodged by the workers against Downs and other

European members of the staff, but this was not pressed.[166] Both the management and the police authority were mutually appreciative of their respective roles, and Kennedy advised dismissal of the ringleaders.

The question of wage increase also was a major factor behind disaffection among the workers and trouble in quite a number of cases. Pratt reported that the Fort loster Jute Mill workers prayed for wage increase and "appear to be more exacting than hitherto".[167] In July 1895 the spinners of a jute mill in Garden Reach demanded a rise in wage, and a strike was averted by concession.[168] But several strikes and riots too were associated with this demand. In the Kankinara Jute Mill in 1895[169] the Manager had reduced the pay of the spinners from Rs.3 as. 8 to Rs. 3 as. 4. But the spinners were not in a mood to meekly accept the cut. On the contrary, they along with other workers asked for a wage increase. One particular development prompted them to press for higher wage. The establishment of new mills - the Gondolpara Jute Mills in French Chandernagore, across the river and another mill in nearby Shamnagore - meant some increase in demand for labour. Further, the Gondolpara Mills offered a higher rate of wages. These specific factors in the prevailing situation of general discontent and tension among the workers led them to demand not only the restoration of the cut but also

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166. Ibid.

167. Pratt Report.

168. Report, IF Act for 1895. NAI. Judicial. No.241 of December 1896.

169. The account that follows is based on Ibid and Pratt Report: see also Amrita Bazar Patrika, 25 June 1895.

a rise in wage. The demand was rejected by the management, and the result was a serious distrubance. Though the sequence of events is not clear, it is possible to indicate the major developments. A four-day (June 15 to June 18, 1895) strike took place. The Manager "tried to look out the ringleaders, but this caused some excitement".[170] The Mill was closed for ten days after a riot, from which the Manager narrowly escaped. We learn from the Pratt Report, "Iron bolts, & c., were thrown at him, and his house was attacked. The manager had some police whom he had sent for; five men were arrested, and an attempt at their rescue from the police station was made, but failed". Pratt commented, "This /i.e. Kankinara episode/ reveals quite a new attitude on the part of the mill coolies". In this connection it was observed by M. Finucane, the Officiating Secretary to the Government of Bengal that the custom of keeping a week's pay always in hand was also "one cause of the disturbance".[171]

Demand for wage increase led to a three-day strike also in Champdani Jute Mills in February 1895. Interestingly enough, here the initiative was taken by the boys employed in the spinning department, and the adults joined in later. No violent incident, however, did occur there.[172]

It is important to note that the restrictive wage payment practice prevalent during the period under consideration, the practice of

170. Report, IF Act for 1895. NAI. Judicial No. 241 of December 1896.

171. Report, IF Act for 1895. NAI. Judicial No. 241 of December 1896.

172. Pratt Report.

withholding of wage payment for a week or even more than that as a disciplining measure, was one underlying cause behind these actions. Reporting the Kankinara Mill incident to the Home Department of the Government of India Finucane observed, "It appeared that the custom of keeping a week's pay always in hand was one cause of the disturbance. There is no doubt that this is felt as a grievance by the employees, as it prevents their leaving a mill to better themselves except at the sacrifice of a week's wages. This has been pointed out by the Commissioner to the Managers concerned, but the grievance has not been removed".[173]

In the Baranagore Jute Mills at the time of Pratt enquiry the Manager had anticipated a claim for wage increase.[174] And in 1896 a strike actually took place on that issue. On March 30 of that year the spinners of the South Factory surrounded the Manager and Spinning Master and refused to work unless given increased wages. Next day the workers of the North Factory too went on strike. The Englishman reported that the striking workers were in a violent mood, assaulted an Indian clerk and showered brickbats into the mill premises. Police arrested several workers and sent them for trial with the charge of being members of an unlawful assembly and committing a riot. On April 4 all workers on strike assembled at the factory gates to demand their wages, but were dispersed by police force.[175] From a contemporary periodical we learn the following: "Referring to the case in which a number of juvenile mill

173. Report, IF Act for 1895. NAI. Judicial. No. 241 of December 1896.

174. Pratt Report.

175. The Englishman, 1 and 8 April, 1896.

hands have been charged by Mr. Macpherson, Manager of the Baranagore Jute Factory Company Limited, with assault, the Sanjivani of the 11th April [1896] complains that the Police is arresting the boys on the charge of assault, depending for the identification upon Mr. Macpherson's men. The Police is subjecting these boys to great ill-treatment and insult". Continuing it asked, "Will the Police authorities allow the boys to be ill-treated in the unlawful way before the guilt is proved?"[176]

Lengthening of Working Hours and Other Grievances

It is of interest to note that this strike and the demand for wage increase were associated with the question of length of working hours and its further prolongation following the introduction of electric light. Believing that the working time has been further lengthened the workers demanded higher wage. The Special Inspector for the Factories observed, "The cause [of the strike] was traced to the introduction of electric light, the operatives believing that the day had been increased with the light..."[177] Walsh denied any such effect in this particular case. But there is no doubt that some strikes were occasioned by the workers' grievance over the question of working hours. In view of what we have noticed about the length of the working day it is scarcely surprising that a number of strikes took place around this issue. As Walsh in his Report on the Working of Indian Factories Act for 1896 stated, "I have noted that small strikes are more frequent of late than formerly, and a few of these may be traced to discontent due to the

176. Report on Native Papers (Bengali) [hereafter RNP (B)] for the week ending on April 18, 1896.

177. Report, IF Act for 1896. WBSA. General. Miscellaneous. No.7 of September 1897.

long working hours".[178] And disputes and strikes over this issue became more frequent in the first decade of the twentieth century.

The sardari system fostered as a mode of recruitment as well as supervision at the lowest level of management was another source of disaffection. The resentment, however, was not against the system as such. That would be too much to expect from the ignorant and helpless workers of those days, the workers who usually depended on the sardars for their jobs, shelters and a host of other things. Under the circumstances the workers' resentment was directed against individual sardars who were particularly notorious for their oppressive and obnoxious behaviour. That there were overt manifestations of this grievance in early 1880s have already been noticed. And with the increasing consolidation of the sardari system in the period under study we come across more instances of direct action by the workers. Thus in 1893 in the Shibpur Jute Mills the operatives demanded dismissal of "an objectionable sardar" and a strike took place.[179] In June 1895 a much more serious disturbance took place in the Budge Budge Jute Mills. The spinners demanded dismissal of an unpopular sardar, but the manager refused to concede the demand. In protest the spinners resorted to strike. It spread to other departments and the entire work of the mill came to a stop. The manager declared a lockout and at the same time withheld the payment of wage for work done in the preceding week. The Englishman of June 20 reported that several thousand mill operatives held a demonstration and attacked the quarters of the European assistants, throwing

178. Ibid.

179. Pratt Report.

brickbacks at the building. A European fired upon the "rioters", and, according to newspaper accounts, two of them were seriously wounded. Police help was sought, and they had some difficulty in dispersing the rioters. Twentyone workers were sent for trial and nineteen were convicted; and for several days the Mills remained closed. On July 9 Pratt visited the Mills and reported, "Two days ago the mill was working upto nearly full strength but owing to a scare that the police were going to arrest more rioters 30 per cent deserted". This reaction of the workers also throws light on the behaviour of the police.[180] With reference to this strike the Directors of the Mill reported under date of October 13, 1895 reported that they "regret that a strike among the workpeople, by which mills were closed for nearly six weeks occurred during the half year", had cost the Company 80,000 rupees.[181]

Instances of trouble arising out of certain other grievances were also not unknown. Thus in 1894 "there was a strike in the spinning department [of the Shamnagar Jute Mills] because a European struck a cooly".[182] The Indian Daily News of January 4, 1895 reported that on January 3 in the Sealdah Court a complaint was filed against six workers of a jute mill situated in Ultadanga. They were charged with causing a strike among other workers. The accused, it was alleged, were fined for

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180. See ibid; Report, IF Act for 1895. NAI. Judicial. No. 241 of December 1896; The Englishman, June 20 and 21, 1895; and Amrita Bazar Patrika, June 26, 1895.

181. Quoted from the Directors' Report to the Shareholders in Buchanan, op.cit., p.421.

182. Pratt Report.

doing work negligently, and in protest against the fine they struck work and "instigated" others to go on strike, with the result that the work in the weaving department came to a stop.

Sometimes misgivings and apprehension in the mind of the ignorant and helpless workers caused excitement and disturbances. One striking example is the 1898 plague riot in Howrah.[183] Plague visited Calcutta and Howrah and led to large number of deaths. In its inoculation drive against plague the government resorted to harsh measures. Inevitably these resulted in misunderstanding and resentment in the mind of the people, particularly among the labouring men, and disturbances broke out.

Religious and Festival Holidays

The single major issue around which largest numbers of demand were voiced or action took place was the question of fully paid holidays on Hindu and Muslim religious occasions, particularly Muslim festivals. Interestingly enough, almost all of these were reported in one particular year 1895.[184]

In a large number of mills demand for such holidays was expressed and in many cases the management, it appears from the Pratt report, was forced to give in. In the Gouripore Jute Mills festival holidays were

183. Plague Riot in Howrah. WBSA. Judicial. Police Nos. 14-19 of August 1898.

184. If not stated otherwise, the source of information about disturbances on the issue of religious holiday is Pratt Report.

For an account of these see also Chakraborty, Communal Riots and Labour, pp.13-4.

asked for by workers belonging to both Hindu and Muslim communities. Pratt reported, "Mr. Orr says that it is only quite lately (this year) [i.e. 1895] that the Id, Bakr-Id, Muharram and Rath Jatra holidays have been claimed. Last year and in former years they were never demanded". From Clarke of Kankinarah Jute Mills it was learnt that in 1895 holidays were not only claimed but also taken. In the Dunbar Cotton Mills both Muslim and Hindu holidays had to be granted to the labourers. Pratt informs us, "Holidays were given this year at the Id and Bakr-Id for three hours each day". On the occasion of Muharram the labourers pressed for a full day leave. From the report it appears that the mill authority refused to accede to the workers' demand. But "the coolies determined to take, and took a whole day at Muharram". Apparently the labourers took unauthorized leave and the management ultimately preferred to ignore it. On the occasion of Rathjatra the management readily conceded a day's leave. From the Ganges Jute Mills it was reported that the workers were "exacting". "While they used to be satisfied with three hours on a holiday, they now claim a whole day".

In several mills the issue was a major cause of strikes and violent incidents. In the Dunbar Cotton Mills, according to Pratt, a certain number of workers resorted to a strike as the manager refused to give holidays and intended to cut the pay of those who took holidays. "The Assistant Manager made no secret of their wish", revealed Pratt, "to coerce the coolies into returning to work by keeping back their pay". In the Baranagore Jute Mills a riot took place on the occasion of Bakr-Id in 1894, eleven weavers - all Muslims - were dismissed and sent for trial for causing riot, and two of them were convicted.[185] In 1895 too

185. The Englishman, 28 March, 1894; see also Pratt Report.

a disturbance was about to break out as the management refused to grant Muharram holiday. Eventually any serious trouble was avoided by giving the concession. In the Kamarhatty Jute Mills, as Pratt reported, "there was a little disturbance last Id on account of leave being refused. Some coolies owing to leave being refused struck the Manager and the durwan by throwing brickbats at them". From the Bengal Government's Report it is learnt that in the same mill difficulty arose also at the 1895 Muharram time, but the mill authority eventually gave the holiday.[186]

We have at least one report of violent disturbance on the occasion of a Hindu festival. The Indian Daily News of April 5, 1895 reported that the workers of a mill at Titaghur asked for a holiday on account of the Anna Purna Puja. As the management refused to grant the demand, there was a serious disturbance in the course of which the manager of the mill was assaulted. Two police sub-inspectors and one constable was called to the mill, and the workers attacked them, with the result that the police had to beat a retreat.

The most serious disturbance in connecion with the issue of festival holiday took place in the Titaghur Jute Mills on the occaion of Id-ul-Fitr in April 1985.[187] From available account it is found that at that festival the workers in previous years received three hours leave and the same leave was granted in the year of disturbance. But the workers were not satisfied with this and made demand for a fully

186. Report, IF Act for 1895, NAI. Judicial No. 241 of December 1896; and see also IJMA Report for 1895, Appendix H, pp.76-80.

187. Report, IF Act for 1895. NAI. Judicial. No. 241 of December 1896, and IJMA Report for 1895, Appendix H, pp.76-80.

paid holiday, "a demand", in the words of S.E.J. Clarke, the IJMA Secretary, "for something more than was customary". As the Manager of the Mills refused to concede it, a certain number of Muslim workmen - according to the Pratt report, all the workers - absented themselves for the whole day and resorted to picketing, or, as Clarke put it, "a mob... endeavoured to keep the other employes from their work".[188] In a report to the Presidency Divisional Commissioner, E.W. Collin, the Officiating Magistrate of the 24-Parganas, stated that as a disciplinary measure the mill authority "not only deducted the pay of that day from absentees, but also imposed a fine".[189]

Collin attributed the subsequent disturbance to this measure. As he observed, "this led to a riot and a breach of the peace". The workers protested against this measure and made "a threatening demonstration against the Manager", and the latter placed a charge of rioting against the ringleaders.[190] From official records we learn that when a police party consisting of a sub-inspector and twenty constables came and tried to arrest the leaders, they were resisted, beaten and dispressed by the workers and the mills were attacked. The Mill Manager and his European assistants fired upon the violent crowd and five men were wounded.[191] The Calcutta Urdu weekly the Darussaltanat and Urdu Guide reported that several Muslim workers were not dead, and a few others

188. Ibid.

189. Ibid.

190. Ibid.

191. WBSA. Judicial. Police. Nos. 6-8 of August 1896.

were wounded.[192] According to the official account three men were arrested, tried and sentenced to nine-months' rigorous imprisonment for involvement in the disturbance.[193]

Asignificant feature of the Titaghur case was the move made by the management to utilize the Hindu-Muslim division of the workers and turn the whole affair into a communal one. For at one stage of the disturbance Hindu durwans were instructed by the Manager to give the recalcitrant workers a good thrashing and drive them away. Commenting on this the Darussaltanat and Urdu Guide wrote, "The Manager in order to get scot free, threw the blame on the Hindu and Musalmans, saying that the [incidents] were the result of a religious quarrel between the Hindu and Musalman labourers".[194] But it appears from all the accounts that this subterfuge failed.

Further, it seems that the agitation had a salutory impact on the management. Thus though it was reported to Pratt in July 1895 that "no disturbance simmering at present" in the Titaghur Mills, he was also informed that "since the riot coolies are more exacting, and the manager does not press hard on them, fearing the consequences".

In fact, so far as the demand for festival holiday is concerned the workers were successful not only in this particular mill but in the

192. Darussaltanat and Urdu Guide, 25 April 1895. RNP (B) for the week ending on 4 May 1895.

193. WBSA. Judicial. Police. Nos. 6-8 of August 1896.

194. Op.cit.

industry as a whole. It is noteworthy that the reasonable nature of the demand for such holidays came to be admitted by a number of government officials. Collin observed, "There are certain days, such as Bukri Edd and the Mohurrum for Mohomedans, and the Kali Puja for Hindus, which the employees may reasonably claim as holidays...."[195] And Pratt giving his own estimate of the situation stated, "Agents and Managers have been taught a lesson, and they will be chary in refusing them [religions festival holidays] in future. They cannot afford to stop the mills".[196] Thus here was an achievement of great significance - the first major victory of the jute textile labour force and in a sense of the formative working class community in Eastern India.

Some times cases of individual outbursts too occurred. Here is one such 1896 incident reported in The Indian Daily News.[197] One Sheik Hossain, employed at the Baranagore Jute Mills, was found by Alexander Patrick, the assistant manager of the mill, standing near the mill machinery and idling away his time. "When remonstrated with, he not only refused to work, but he definitely snatched up a wooden bobbin and struck Mr. Patrick a ... blow in the face". It is likely that such incidents were not uncommon.

The Talla Riot

Our account of labour behaviour in the 1890s would, however, remain seriously incomplete if we leave out of our consideration the

195. IJMA Report for 1895, Appendix H, pp. 76-80.

196. Pratt Report.

197. The Indian Daily News, 22 April 1896.

Talla or Chitpur riot of 1897.[198] Though urban crowd actions were not unknown in India and, further, in certain respects the Shambazar riot of 1891 anticipated the Talla riot,[199] it was "the first ever large scale"

198. The Talla riot has received extensive and penetrating discussion in the hands of Dipesh Chakraborty. See his Communal Riots and Labour, 40ff. Certain important aspects of the riot, however, have been inadequately treated by Chakraborty.

199. A systematic study of urban popular actions in India is yet to be made. But instances of eruption of urban discontent in colonial India, violent or non-violent, are not unknown. One scholar refers to food riots and violence against the authorities in Murshidabad at the time of 1770 famine. (Gautam Bhadra, The Famine of 1770 and the Town of Murshidabad, Marxist Miscellany, June 1975, p.75, f.n.60). One source reports a threatened crowd violence on account of food scarcity in Chinsura in 1783. (WBSA. Board of Revenue, Grain Department. D.C. of 3 November 1783). I owe this reference to Gautam Bhadra.

We have a report of a deputation and demonstration in Calcutta of about two thousand Khalaris (salt workers) employed in the nimak mahal of Dwarkanath Tagore. Some time in early 1830s they assembled near the Governor-General's residence and protested to Lord Bentinck against Dwarkanath's oppressive and exploitative practices. Sambad Bhaskar, 9 August 1856, No.52; and also Abanti Kumar Sanyal, Babur Bangsabichar [Geneaology of Babus], Ekshan, Vol.XII, Nos.3-4 pp.39-40, f.n.23. From the same source we learn also about one protest assembly that took place in 1856.

We have also some reports about protest actions that took place in towns and cities of other parts of India. The imposition of a tax on houses in Benares town in 1810 led to a "grave commotion" and the people resorted to "non-violent passive resistance" and hartal. See Sashi Bhusan Chaudhuri, Civil Disturbances during the British Rule in India (1765-1857), World Press, Calcutta, 1955, pp.79-81, and see also Richard Heitler, The Varanasi House Tax Hartal of 1810-11, IESHR, Vol.IX, No.3, September 1972, pp.239-57. In 1816 a violent popular upsurge took place at Bareilly in protest against the imposition of a police-tax. In the clash that occurred more than three hundred of rebels were killed, and a greater number wounded and taken prisoners. On the British side, "only twenty-one were killed..." (Chaudhuri, op.cit., pp.81-7). In 1844 Surat also witnessed a serious popular unrest in reaction to the imposition of a salt tax (ibid, pp.174-5).

For another hartal that took place in Ahmedabad in 1816 - the year preceding the annexation of that city - see Kenneth Gillion, Ahmedabad : A Study in Indian Urban History. Berkeley, 1968, p.21. Gillion also gives an account one mob violence in Ahmedabad in 1899 (ibid, p.172).

For an account of the Shambazar riot see Chakraborty, Communal Riots and Labour, pp.9-10.

urban crowd action to break out in Calcutta and, further, it involved widespread violence. Emphasizing the unprecedented nature of the incident Sanjivani wrote,[200] "Calcutta escaped unhurt even during the Sepoy Mutiny. But what did not take place during the mutiny took place during the recent Calcutta riots. Calcutta never before witnessed such a reign of terror, such daring atrocities committed by the mob, such a parade of police and the military".

The ostensible occasion for the riot known as Tala or Chitpore riot was the demolition by the police of a masonary construction which was claimed as a mosque by one Himmat Khan, a Mohammedan mason. The construction was situated on a disputed piece of land in Talla in north Calcutta and a court decree ordered Himmat's eviction. The court decree was executed on June 28, 1897.

The police action caused great resentment among the Muslims of the locality. Himmat and two of his neighbours went to consult Haji Nur Muhammad Zakaria and several other leading Muslims of Calcutta. These persons whose sympathy for pan-Islamic movement has been indicated by Dipesh Chakraborty[201] directed the Talla Muslims to rebuild the mosque and to resist any attempt to dispossess them. We learn from A.H. James, the Police Commissioner of Calcutta, that"... acting upon this advice the ignorant Mohamedans of Talla Chitpore and Baranagore and Nikaripara

200. Sanjivani, 3 July 1897, RNP (B) for the week ending on 10 July 1897.

201. For biographical information about the Haji and his pan-Islamism see Chakraborty, Communal Riots and Labour, pp.45-7, 50-3. For pan-Islamism in India see Aziz Ahmed, Islamic Modernism in India and Pakistan 1857-1964, pp.123-40.

assembled at the spot on the night of Tuesday, the 29th June". He received the message that "more than 2,000 people had assembled in and about the disputed land, that they had entirely stopped the traffic on the public road, and that they were holding the Talla Bridge and molesting people".[202]

Reporting the incidents The Englishman observed, "The disturbances began with the blocking of the traffic along all the roads in the neighbourhood of this building [Talla mosque], and especially with reference to Europeans, the greatest inconvenience was the result. Rapidly the situation became graver. From merely obstructing Europeans, the rioters proceeded to insult and then to stone them..."[203]

A strong police party was sent to the place and the Police Commissioner himself went there. He tried to control the crowd both by threat and peaceful persuasion. As the latter method failed, in the early morning of June 30 the police went into action. A short melee took place, the assembly was broken up and seventyfour arrests were made. The police Commissioner did not anticipate any further disturbance, but at about midday the crowd reassembled and renewed clash occurred. A police party which was on picket-duty there was attacked by the crowd, and in return the police fired on them. Some of the rioters were injured (according to police version none seriously), a few arrests were made and the crowd was dispersed.[204]

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202. Riots at Chitpur and on the Northern Parts of Calcutta 1897, A.H. James's report of 22 July, 1897 (hereafter briefly James's Report). WBSA. Judicial. Police, Nos.39-43 of July 1897, para 5.

203. The Englishman, 2 July, 1897.

204. The paragraph is based on James's Report, paras 5 and 6.

But soon after that violent crowd action spread to other parts of north Calcutta. The Police Commissioner who went to Tala immediately after the midday incident and remained there till the afternoon was attacked on his way back of Lalbazar, the police headquarters. He reported, "... stones were thrown at us by men gathered on the road-side, at the corner of the Gas Street, on the Circular Road". Continuing he stated, "Shortly after, a party of 80 constables, with their officers, also returning from Talla ...., were attacked by a mob in Machooa Bazar Street, and, after a sharp encounter, the Police dispersed them". Further, "a couple of officers of the Gloncestershire Regiment, while riding their bicycles on the Upper Circular Road, had been attacked". By the evening "it became clear that the Talla rioters had shifted their scene of operation from Talla to the Machooa Bazar section of the town".[205] And The Englishman of July 2 said that "over a large part of the northern division of the city mob law on Wednesday night was supreme". The turmoil which engulfed Upper Circular Road, Raja Bazar, Narkooldanga, Gas Street, Belliaghata, Machooa Bazar, Harrison Road, Bhabani Charan Datta Lane, Thanthania, College Street, Chitpur Road and Shambazar[206] continued till the afternoon of next day. (It may be noted here that these have almost always been among the most disturbed areas in twentieth century crowd violence in Calcutta).

Composition of the Rioters

Who were the participants in this outburst of violence? Those foremost in the riot were, according to the Police Commissioner, low-class

205. All citations are from ibid, paras 6 and 7.

206. Ibid, para 9 and The Englishman, 2 July 1897.

Muhammedans.[207] C.W. Bolton, the Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal, reported that "the mass of those who took part in the riots were influenced by religious sentiment".[208] That "pan-Islamism also formed an important part of the feeling that circulated during the riot" has been ably demonstrated by Dipesh Chakraborty.[209] In a letter to the Amrita Bazar Patrika one correspondent said that "the news of the victory of the [Turkish] Sultan over the Greeks" provided impetus to the Talla Rioters.[210]

But there were other elements too. From Bolton we learn that "many among the rioters had no interest whatever in the religious question..." He pointed out that "many of the bad characters, Hindu and Muhamedan" who "were animated solely by the desire of causing disorder" joined the riot. Even one Jew was arrested on charge of rioting.[211] However, the bulk of the rioters were poor upcountry immigrants into the

207. James's Report, WBSA. Judicial, Police. Nos.39-43 of July 1897, para 12.

208. C.W. BOLTON'S report to the Secretary, Home Department, Government of India, dt. Calcutta, 28 July 1897 (hereafter briefly Bolton's Report). WBSA. Judicial. Police. No.44 of November 1897, para 4.

209. Chakraborty, Communal Riots and Labour, p.53.

210. Amrita Bazar Patrika, 11 July 1897. Hitavadi of 9 July 1897 RNP(B) for the week ending 17 July 1897 wrote, "War news began to be picked up by ignorant Musalmans from their semi-educated brethren, and by the latter, from their educated coreligionists ... Ignorant Musalmans now began to talk to one another in this strain - "The Sultan has defeated the Christians. He can now, if he chooses, drive the English out of Egypt at any moment. English fear him and the Amir of Afganistan". There was also widely circulated rumour of aid coming from the Sultan and the Amir for the cause of the rioters. See Chakraborty, Communal Riots and Labour, p.54.

211. Bolton's Report, paras 4 and 5.

city. The Mihir-O-Sudhakar said that the rioters were "men who had come from up-country to making a living in Calcutta".[212]

We of course know very little about the actual occupational background of the people participating in this violence. That some of them were jute mill workers is gathered from available accounts. But their actual participation was perhaps at the fringe level. As Bolton reported, "The only mill hands who took part in the riots appear to have been some of the men employed at one or two mills at Sealdah".[213] Another official noted, "On the second day of the riot it was believed that weavers from the large jute mills in the vicinity took part, but I was informed by the Manager of Baranagore that there were no absentees from the weaving or other departments at the time. Doubtless a number of jute sorters from the large [jute] presses at Chitpur and Cossipore were engaged in the disturbance".[214] Dipesh Chakraborty in his valuable study has brought out from official records and newspaper reports that the crowd was composed of "men of different labouring occupations". "There was, for example, Sheikh Chadi, a fifty year old rioter killed by the police, who was a 'thatcher by profession'. So was Gajadhar Kurmi, another killed by police firing - a fifteen-year old boy. Natra Abdul, another of the rioters, was a "coolie" who declared in court that 'he and several others kept away from work' during the riot on the 30th June. Another accused,

212. Mihir-O-Sudhakar, 24 July 1897. RNP(B) for week ending on 16 July 1897.

213. Bolton's report, para 5.

214. C.A. Walsh's (Special Inspector of Factories) Annual Report on the Working of Indian Factories Act for 1897. WBSA. General. Miscellaneous No.21 of September 1898; see also James's Report, para 12.

Nanku Khan, 'worked in Jetty' and lived in Subedarpara, an area of rioting. One Nabijan was identified as having been among a group of labourers who were accused of assaulting one Mr. Slotter, an engineer in the Ashcroft Jute Press at Chitpore ... and the newspapers described the 'hundreds of masons and coolies' who fought a see-saw battle throughout the two days of rioting".[215]

E.M. Cohen, the arrested Jew, was a young man without any employment. Thus bricklayers, weavers, thatchers, masons, coolies, jetty workers, sorters in jute presses, jute mill workers, persons doing all sorts of sundry jobs, underemployed and unemployed were the people who made up the rioting crowd.[216] So it was an explosion on the part of "a sizeable section of the city's labouring poor".

The Pattern of Rioting

What was the pattern of rioting? In several respects the Talla incident anticipated the future pattern of Calcutta's urban riots in future. In the two days of violence and riotous action repeated clashes broke out between a crowd which was unarmed or at most armed with lathis or brickbats on the one hand and the police armed with guns and reinforced by military on the other. The crowd roamed through the city streets, lanes and bye-lanes and carried on their violent activities. Here is, for example, an account of the pattern of crowd violence. The Englishman (July 2) reported that on the night of June 30 "the attention of the

215. Chakraborty, Communal Riots and Labour, pp.48-9.

216. Ibid, p.49.

advancing [Calcutta] Light House being drawn to the fact [of several Europeans being attacked by a mob in College Street-Mechuabazar Street junction], they charged the mob who had barricaded the road by placing large bricks and large water pipes. The troops cleared the obstruction and charged. The rioters, however, managed to escape into the dark bye-lanes and bustis which abound in the locality but not before sending forth a shower of stones which hit some of the members".

A feature of the crowd behaviour was that even when it was broken up by the police or the military at one place, it regrouped in some other parts. Here is one such report. "The European Police ... opened fire [on the rioters] ... but although the rioters fled at the time, they reassembled at different centers of the northern portion of the town, keeping the military as well as the police on continuous motion throughout the night [of June 30]".[217]

The rioting crowd was not subdued by warnings or approach of the police and military. Its defiant mood can be gauged by the report of a Deputy Commissioner of Police on his experience in the forenoon of July 1.[218] Under instruction from the Police Commissioner he along with a police force was going to Baliaghata thana. In narrating his experience he states, "I saw an immense number of men coming in one direction from Machooa Bazar and from Upper Circular Road ... Warning was given to the mob to disperse, but it was evident they had no intention of doing so, for they at once commenced closing on us and throwing stones ... I ordered the police to open fire on them. Those in the line of fire quickly dispersed. We then went into the lanes of Raja Bazar with a

217. The Englishman, 2 July 1897.

218. Deputy Commissioner's Report. WBSA. Judicial. Police. Nos.39-43 of November 1897.

view to making some arrests. For this purpose we separated into three parties. I saw soon afterwards a most determined attack on one party, notwithstanding that they were firing on the mob. The man were struck with bricks and had to fall back. I went to their assistance with the remainder of the men ..." James reported that the Deputy Commissioner "was ..... obliged to fire on them before he could disperse them, and get on to his destination"; but "on his way back, he was again attacked at the same place".[219] It was not an isolated incident. Similar reports indicating a defiant attitude on the part of the crowd came from many other areas of the city.

From the very beginning of the disturbance the agitated crowd tried to disrupt the transportation of the city and thereby normal city life and activity. We have already noted that on the night of June 29 road blocks were raised in the public road near Talla and all traffic came to a stop. With the spread of the riot similar tactics was adopted in other areas. On the Harrison Road "they [the rioters] pulled down the old wooden lamp-posts and set fire to them. They also rolled out the big drain pipes, which were along the side, into the middle of the road, which effectually stopped wheel traffic".[220] In Beliaghata telephone wires were twice cut and in an attempt to stop traffic "some telegraph or railway wires ... had been securely fastened from tree to tree across the road".[221] Cohen was arrested when he was engaged in

219. James's Report, para 10.

220. Ibid, para 8.

221. Deputy Commissioner's Report. WBSA. Judicial. Police. Nos. 39-43 of November 1897.

cutting telephone wire in Harrison Road.[222] "Tramcars and carriages were stoned and wrecked".[223] Attacks on Electric Light Department and gas works were apprehended and special measures were taken to prevent these. In certain parts of north Calcutta normal life came to a stop. "A large number of Europeans and Eurasians", noted one newspaper, "who are employed in mills and factories beyond Chitpur, but who are residing in town, could not reach home as usual owing to the principal thoroughfare leading to the city being held by the rioters..."[224] Many areas wore a deserted look. The Englishman (July 3) reported that at night "the affected parts of the town became literally deserted. Not a living being was seen anywhere, and quite a dead calm prevailed the night through".

Objects of Attack

From all accounts it is evident that the anger of the crowd was directed largely against the police and military. The Police Commissioner commented, "The rioters' chief object of attack was the Police..."[225] We have already referred to a number of incidents involving attacks on the keepers of law and order. It is possible to cite many more instances of such incidents. In one case "a party of four soldiers of the Gloucestershire Regiment were being driven to the Talla works when the mob turned on them and pelted them with stones. The soldiers then made their way to their destination on foot with fixed bayonets, amid repeated

222. Bolton's Report, para 5.

223. Sanjivani, 3 July, 1897, RNP(B) for the week ending on 10 July 1897.

224. The Englishman, 2 July, 1897.

225. James's Report, para 12.

showers of stones".[226] Reporting another incident The Englishman (2 July) wrote under the caption 'Determined Attack Upon The Police', "A batch of twenty-four native constables of the Puddapooker Thana while returning after dusk from Chitpur along Circular Road on Wednesday night [June 30] was suddenly pounced upon by some 500 rioters armed with lathis. The constables used their sticks with marked effect but being outnumbered they attempted to beat a retreat, fighting all the while, but eventually they were overpowered. They have been so seriously injured that they had to be removed to the Campbell Hospital, where many of them are not expected to live".

The Europeans too were among the prime targets of the fury of the rioters. That from the very beginning the Europeans were assaulted has been mentioned earlier. Deeply regretting the outbreak of the violence and expressing solicitude for the Europeans the Sanjivani wrote, ".... for three or four hours there was anarchy in a portion of Calcutta, and the gundas and badmashes had their own way of assaulting and seriously ill-treating European ladies and gentlemen. There was no constable at the time at College Square. Here and in the neighbourhood Europeans were brutally ill-treated". Continuing it said, "There was none to check the misrule and protect the innocent Europeans passing by the road".[227] We are informed by Sahachar (7 July) that even "natives who had appeared in European costume" were not spared. And one top Bengal Government official remarked, "The attacks made on the Europeans in the

226. The Englishman, 2 July 1897.

227. Sanjivani, 10 July 1897, RNP(B) for the week ending on 17 July 1897.

streets of the disturbed area were a very deplorable incident of the disturbances". The same official stated, "They are explained to some extent by the intense excitement prevailing, and were perhaps chiefly committed by bad characters, who took advantage of the situation to molest respectable persons using the public thoroughfare ..."[228]

We also learn about attack on some government officials. For example, Babu Shyammadhab Rai, Deputy Magistrate of Sealdah, became a target of acrowd. Here perhaps simple venegeance was at work, for there were "several men among the rioters whom he had convicted and sentenced to imprisonment in jail" a few days back.[229]

These 'deplorable incidents', as mentioned above, were the handiwork of, in the words of Sanjivani, 'gundas and badmashes' or in the language of a top British official 'bad characters'. But this very official reported that "no firearms were used by the rioters, ... no looting was committed, and ... no attack was made on private houses, whether European or Native".[230] Thus here was a remarkable kind of behaviour on the part of the 'criminal elements'!

Suppression of the Riot : The Police and Military Terrorism

But these hooligans were not to be given a free hand. Though Sanjivani wrote in great anguish that "there was none to check the

228. Bolton's Report, para 5.

229. Mihir-O-Sudhakar, 24 July 1897, RNP(B) for the week ending on 31 July 1897; and The Englishman, July 3 and 6, 1897.

230. Bolton's Report, para 5.

misrule [i.e. mobrule]", [231] the facts tell something else. The violent outburst was put down swiftly and efficiently and with great ferocity. In addition to the police, several companies of the Gloucestershire Regiment, troops of Bengal Cavalry, Calcutta Light Horse, British Infantry and Royal Munster Funlises were deployed. Largescale arrests were made out of whom eightyseven people were sent up for trial on charges of rioting. In the trial which continued for several days [232] A.C. Bannerjee, a barrister who was to play a prominent role in the labour movement of Swadeshi days, appeared along with two Muslim barristers and other lawyers in defence of the accused. [233] Ultimately eightyone were sentenced to various terms of imprisonment. [234]

The brutality with which the riot was suppressed is revealed by the way in which the crowd was repeatedly and indiscriminately fired upon by the police and military. Here is one such report from The Englishman of July 2 : "... the annoyance caused by the rioters on Wednesday night [June 30] having become intolerable, a company of soldiers who were patrolling Shambazar were compelled to open fire. The mob dispersed, several of their number, it is reported being killed and wounded, and carried away by their comrades ...".

231. Sanjivani, 3 July 1897, RNP(B) for the week ending on 10 July 1897.

232. The Englishman, 15 to 23 July 1897.

233. The Englishman, 17 July 1897. For A.C. Bannerjee's role in labour movement see Sumit Sarkar, op.cit., pp.194-7, 201-2, 209-14, 232-43.

234. WBSA. Judicial. Police. Nos.65-68 of December 1897.

The police of course reported a total of eleven deaths caused by police firing.[235] But the Sanjivani observed, "... it is not known how many were killed during the late Calcutta riots. The Indian Daily News put the number at 300, and The Englishman at 900. According to the police report, however, only seven persons were killed. The writer has, however, ascertained that dead bodies were carried to the trenching grounds in Municipal waggons with layers of filth on them, in spite of which, hands and legs were visible. The number of wounded, also, has not been correctly ascertained. Very few of the wounded have been admitted into hospitals. Most of them are lying helpless in their homes. Indiscriminate shooting was resorted to, and was attended with disastrous consequences as shooting in crowded streets, without previous warning, is sure to be".[236] Hitavadi complained, "Many have been killed or wounded through the indiscretion or wantonness of the Officers".[237] And The Englishman wrote, "The wildest guesses are still being made as to the number of rioters who have been killed. As we have said, popular estimates run up to a thousand and over.... It is impossible at present to give even aproximate figures ... There can be no doubt, however, the loss of life has been considerable and that to this cause must be ascribed the sudden collapse of the disturbance at the moment when it had reached a head".[238] But in spite of these differences in estimate

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235. James's Report, para 26.

236. Sanjivani, 10 July 1897, RNP(B) ending for the week on 17 July 1897.

237. Hitavadi, 9 July 1897, RNB(B) ending for the week on 17 July 1897.

238. The Englishman, 6 July 1897.

about casualty figures one thing is pretty obvious : the labouring poor of Calcutta had to pay a quite heavy and bitter price in this urban riot.

The Aftermath

Though excitement continued to prevail throughout the first week of July and even thereafter and stray incidents were reported from different parts of the city,[239] by around 4 P.M. of July 1 the riot was over. By the evening of that day Haji Zacharia, whom we have seen in the role of an adviser to the Talla Muslims before the actual outbreak of the riot and whose activities at the time of rioting remain obscure, had appeared on the scene and he along with some other leading Muslims (Syed Shamsul Huda, Syed Mohamed Tahir and Haji Abdul Razaq) was making a conciliatory move. At about 7 P.M. they met the Police Commissioner and told him that they were trying to have an amicable settlement. In the next two days their effort was to arrive at a compromise over the disputed piece of land and also to make a show of victory.[240] The move, however, roused a howling opposition from the members of the European Community and the Anglo-Indian Press.[241] Anyway, the move failed and it was reported that some Moulavis tried to incite their co-religionists and revive the disturbances.[242] But the Haji and five other prominent

239. Ibid, 3,5 and 6 July 1897.

240. For details see James's Report, paras 14-6.

241. In The Englishman of 3 July 1897 see the editorial article 'Compromise or Surrender' and the three separate letters of Scrutator, Destiny and J.H.M.F.

242. The Englishman, 6 July 1897.

Muslims came out with a fatwa (a religious circular) with the avowed purpose of mollifying the feelings of the aggrieved Muslims. It said that the disputed land was not consecrated, and so, according to the holy books, the hut upon it was not a mosque, and suggested that a new mosque should be built near the place after purchasing some other land.[243] On July 8 the Muhammedan Literary Society of Calcutta and also Sahebazada Bukhtear Shah along with four other Muslim gentlemen issued two separate circulars more or less in the same tone[244] and the former one with the advice that "the Muhammedans should not quarrel and fight with the authorities over this land". But perhaps even after these appeals the excitement had not fully subsided. So, again, on July 14 two circulars were issued to the effect that the Imams of Calcutta mosques and the readers of Khutbas should explain to their congregations that the Talla mosque affair was bringing discredit to the Muslims and that they should desist from all quarrels over the land.[245]

A sequel to the Talla riot deserves notice. That there was physical participation, though of a marginal nature, of some jute mill labourers in the riot has been noticed above. But after the riot had come to an end, considerable commotion was seen among a large body of Muslim workers employed in the jute mills north of Calcutta.[246] The

243. For full text of the circular see The Englishman, 8 July 1897.

244. Both the circulars appeared in full in The Englishman of 9 July 1897.

245. James's Report, para 22.

246. For details of the agitation and disturbances in the mill areas see Chakraborty, Communal Riots and Labour, pp.43-5; and WBSA. Judicial. Police. Nos.83-103 of September 1897.

excitement came to the surface at first among the Kankinara Jute Mill workers when on the morning of July 6 a letter purported to have been written by the Haji but later on described by the Haji as a forged one[247] and enjoining them to join the Talla rioters reached them. The Kankinara Jute Mill workers immediately struck work and the commotion spread to the neighbouring mills in the Jagaddal area.

Some disturbance and violence took place in the Alliance Jute Mills too. There work was started as usual in the morning, but, according to the Managing Agents of the Mills, a gang of outsiders tried to interrupt work. At about 10.30 A.M. a "notice was brought that a large gang of men armed with lathis had attacked the gate, burst it open, and were surrounding the mill". Soon afterwards "the engine-house was attacked, large quantities of bricks thrown at the engine, the governor gear was broken, and other damage done". The Agents reported that to protect the Mill and also their own selves on two occasions the Europeans made a few rounds of snipe shots at the rioters, and this forced them to retire to a safe distance. "Two of their leaders were called forward to state their grievance, which were to the effect that 'we were very much at fault not having stopping the Mill at 6 o'clock and sent out all Muhammedans in our employ to those marching on Calcutta to riot against Government'".[248] In the meantime the mill was stopped and on being

247. The Englishman, 10 July 1897. The leaflet referred to was in Bengali, and the Haji stated, "I need hardly say that I can neither speak nor write the Bengali language".

248. All the citations are from a report made by Messrs. Begg Dunlop & Co., the Managing Agents of the Alliance Jute Mills. WBSA. Judicial. Police. Nos.83-4 of September 1897.

satisfied as regards this the leaders along with the crowd moved away. Muslim workers in several other mills also struck work and assembled together. They intended to proceed to Calcutta, "but", as Bolton remarked, "were turned back without difficulty by the military".[249]

Thus the unprecedented but short-lived urban rioting was crushed by police and military terrorism. The brutality with which it was put down indicates, apart from callous attitude to human life, the kind of panic which had gripped many of the officials, the police and military, and the European community in general. As the Dacca Prakash put it, "The troops and the European residents were so bewildered with fear that they made no distinction between friend and foe, Hindu and Musalmans in using their firearms".[250]

Their reaction betrayed their overriding concern : the fear that the disturbance might touch off a far more dangerous conflagaration, a conflagaration similar to the 1857 upheavel. Thus under the pseudonym of 'Lookout' one correspondent wrote in The Englishman. "We have arrived at one of those oft-recurring crises in the history of the country at which nothing is more far-reaching in its consequences, nothing more fatal than irresolution. With the lessons of the Mutiny of 1857 before us, do not let us repeat any of the blunders which marked our first dealings with that great crisis..."[251] Similar was the

249. Bolton's Report, para 5.

250. Dacca Prakash, 11 July 1897, RNP(B) for the week ending on 17 July 1897.

251. The Englishman, 2 July 1897.

reaction of many other members of the European community.[252] And though the Police Commissioner was criticized by the Government of India for failure to take timely and effective measures,[253] we have seen that there was no lack of firm and effective measures on the part of the authority concerned.

Hindu-Muslim Communal Riot

It is also necessary to make mention here another kind of violent crowd actions. We have already referred to the existence of some tensions between Hindu and Muslim workers. In the closing years of the century these tensions got exacerbated and these sometimes found expression in the form of open violent conflicts between Hindu and Muslim workers. The cases we have come across - taken together such incidents numbered not more than three - show that on each and every occasion the clash broke out around the issue of kine-killing. According to their traditional practice the Muslim workers wanted to sacrifice cows on the occasion of their great festival of Bakr-Id,[254] but the

252. See also the letter written by 'Scrutator' (The Englishman, 2 July 1897) and another one by 'Destiny' (ibid, 3 July 1897).

253. See the communication from J.P. Hewett. Secretary, Home Department, Government of India to the Bengal Government. WBSA. Judicial. Police. No.47 of November 1897.

254. Cf. the following : "The Idu-l-fitr and the Idu-z-zoha or Baquar Id are the two great festivals of the Musalman year, and both the learned and the illiterate share in them". (Jafar Sharif, Islam in India, Tr. G.A. Herklots, William Crooke (ed.), 1832, chapter XXV). The same authority writes, "Rich people after the prayers sacrifice a sheep ... in the name of God, in commemoration of Abraham intending to sacrifice his son, Ismail ... Or seven persons, men, women, and children, jointly sacrifice a cow or a camel, for those who offer such sacrifices, it is believed, be carried by these animals as quickly as a horse travels over the Pul-i-sirat or the Bridge of Death" (ibid, chap. XXV).

Hindus objected to it and tried to prevent it even by force. It was but natural that such a situation led to riotous actions which have been narrated in details by Dipesh Chakraborty.[255]

Crime and Its Implications

Before concluding this section we must make a reference to an aspect of labour behaviour which has so far been virtually neglected in our labour history. We mean the criminal practice on the part of the industrial workers. We are not aware of any study of this aspect except one, undoubtedly a notable one, made again by Dipesh Chakraborty about early railway workers.[256] We of course do not have the kind of information and wealth of facts about crimes so illuminatingly used by E.P. Thompson or Eric Hobsbawm and George Rude.[257] This to a large extent explains the gap mentioned above. But though fuller discussion and analysis will have to await further research and exploration of police and court-room records (which also is dependent on their being opened to historical scrutiny by the appropriate authorities), it is still worthwhile to take into consideration whatever evidence is available.

255. Chakraborty, Communal Riots and Labour, pp.16-9; and see also WBSA. Judicial. Police. Nos.29-39 of July 1896, Nos.1-15 of August 1896.

256. Chakraborty, Early Railwaymen in India : 'Dacoity' and 'Train-Wrecking' in Essays in Honour of Prof. S.C. Sarkar, People's Publishing House, New Delhi, 1976, pp.523-50.

257. See Thompson, op.cit., pp.63-6; and E.J. Hobsbawm and George Rude, Captain Swing, Penguin University Books, 1973, pp.53-7.

It should be stated that here too our major source is the Pratt Report. Yet a careful examination of even this single source throws some light on the prevailing crime situation. In fact, the concern with which this Report refers to this aspect, indicates that there must have been a considerable increase in crime among the labouring population in the mill areas. Thus Pratt speaks of "a petition from the Naihati residents, complaining of the insecurity of life and property, and etc., and of the inadequacy of the police". Without mincing any word the mill workers were held responsible for the crime situation in Naihati-Bhatpara area. We are told, "They [the local inhabitants] attributed the increase of crime to the influx of mill coolies from Gouripore and Kankinara Jute and Paper Mills".[258] Two years later, i.e., in 1897 similar complaint was made in the columns of Sanjivani. It was pointed out that the construction of three jute mills in Jagaddal, near Naihati, turned out to be a source of great inconvenience and annoyance to the local inhabitants and the labourers engaged in mill construction, particularly the brick-makers, annoyed them greatly.[259] From Samnagar area near Barrackpore area, too, Pratt obtained similar information. "These 4,500 coolies [of Samnagar Jute Mills] added to the 750 Dunbar Cotton coolies, being turned out in the bazar at dark, without any police duty to speak of in the bazars, is surely rather dangerous to the peaceful shopkeepers and others of densely populated mohulla of north Barrackpore". Continuing, Pratt reported, "The manager complains of dacoities being of daily occurrence. On enquiry from the Babu of the mill, I find that three dacoities have occurred in the last two and a half years in the immediate

258. Op.cit., para 12.

259. Sanjivani, 20 February 1897, RNP(B) for the week ending on 27 February 1897.

vicinity of the mill... But if what I heard be true many burglaries and thefts go unreported".[260] As regards the Titaghur area we learn, "On the mills [Titaghur Jute and Paper Mills] closing at dark the 3,000 coolies are let loose in the bazar... Last year burglary was very frequent". Further, "mill hands were under no control on Saturdays afternoon after the distribution of pay at 2 P.M. ... These 3,000 coolies let loose on Saturdays, pay in hand, go to gorgshop and get unruly, to the annoyance of quiet people".[261] Reporting a drunken orgy in the area The Indian Daily News wrote, "An affray, which at first threatened to prove serious, occurred last Wednesday [April 22, 1895] in the vicinity of the Titaghur Paper Mills, where it was reported that some 2,500 mill hands were rioting. It appears [that] a policeman attempted to arrest a drunken mill hand when the rest of his comrades, it is said, interfered. Inspector Klyen, on arriving found some 40 drunken mill hands collected about the place, but they promptly dispersed".[262] That the Howrah-Hooghly mill areas did not present any picture much different from the one prevailing in the Barrackpore - Naihati belt is sufficiently indicated by Pratt. The Fort Gloster Jute Mills (Bowreah) manager complained of gambling. "He says that this gambling is a great trouble..."[263] The Hastings Jute Mills manager reported that Peshawari 'thieves and badmashes' frequented the neighbourhood of the mill.[264] From the manager

260. Op.cit., para 15.

261. Ibid, paras 18 and 19.

262. The Indian Daily News, 25 April 1895.

263. Op.cit.

264. Ibid.

of the India Jute Mills at Serampore came the complaint that coolies turned out for theft got employment in the policeforce and some policemen committed thefts.[265] All these give us some idea of the crime situation prevailing in the growing mill area.

V

The Anatomy Of Crowd Violence And Labour Protests

A significant feature of the behaviour of the early industrial workers and the urban poor was its diverse forms. Illegal assembly, submission of demands, group deputation, threat of violence, concerted work stoppage, protest movement over various issues, 'mobbing' of, and assaults on, mill managers and European mill assistants and sometimes of even their Indian underlings ('babus' and sardars), crowd attack on police and other law-enforcing agencies, machine wrecking, widespread crowd violence, disruption of public transport, rowdyism and criminal activities - all formed part of this. It is probable that many of such actions remain unrecorded. But even the incomplete record shows that between 1893 and 1899, leaving aside the Talla riot and the criminal acts, more than thirty actual or threatened actions involving workers of at least twenty jute and cotton textile mills were reported.

What is of particular significance here is not so much the extent of these actions as their character. If we leave aside the incidents of conflicts between Hindus and Muslims, that is, communal

265. Ibid.

violence which numbered only three, it may be reasonably averred that these multiform activities basically reflected an atmosphere of anger and protest of the industrial (and urban) labour force which was being swelled by rural immigrants, arising out of, and very probably directed against their predicament and also against the persons or forces appearing as responsible for this.

Social Crimes

But it is relevant to raise the question : how do criminal activities fit in with this view? There is no doubt that some of the crimes were committed by criminals belonging to the professional 'under world'. This was hinted by Pratt in his reference to the Peshawaris. Many members of the police force too were involved in all sorts of crimes. There were surely certain crimes - cold-blooded murder, for example - which were committed out of personal malice and vengeance, and were crimes in the usual sense, most probably looked with odium by the labouring poor themselves.

Yet even such crimes involved considerable complexities. It may be stated with almost certainty, that simple thefts and burglaries formed bulk of all the criminal offences. But in these petty effences the early urban labouring poor might have sought some relief from their poverty and misery and also tried to give, in a very crude and individualistically anti-social manner, an expression of their hostility to all those who appeared to them as their exploiters and oppressors - from the ranks

of petty shopkeepers who used to cheat and fleece them to the police.[266] And many of the crimes - gambling, gang dacoities, unruly behaviour, causing of inconvenience and annoyance to the local inhabitants, public affray, drunken orgy - were essentially group or socially organized crimes, offences done usually by members of the emerging working class community.

All these reflected an entire level of social structure disrupted by colonialism, as well as the thwarted formation of a new class, and a distorted pattern of industrial and urban growth. That the residents of the villages and towns which were expanding into mill areas did not fail to attribute "the increase of crimes to the influx of mill coolies" has been noticed earlier. We have also considered the life-situation of the displaced rural immigrants turned out into urban wage earners in the final decade of the century. The social crimes were the products of this situation of social thrombosis, in which clots seemed to form in the blood-stream of the social movement of the lowest classes.

All the circumstances in the life of the early workers conspired to generate widespread demoralization among them. The problem of drunkenness and alocholism which drew attention of social reformers like

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266. In discussing the condition of the English proletariat Engels wrote, "The revolt of the workers began soon after the first industrial development, and has passed through several phases....

"The earliest, crudest, and least fruitful form of this rebellion was that of crime. The working-man lived in poverty and want, and saw that others were better off than he. It was not clear to his mind why he, who did more for society than the rich idler, should be the one to suffer under these conditions. Want conquered his inherited respect for the sacredness of property, and he stole". Op.cit., p.250.

Sasipada Bannerji as early as the 1860s was one symptom of this.[267] The 'criminal' behaviour as such symptomized the entire malaise. To put it somewhat differently, the incidence of the social crimes provides us with a rough indication of the economic and social pressures which were building up against the new industrial workers and of the increasing tension in their life and their society as well. In these crimes they may have found some sort of escape from their life-situation. But the crimes were also perhaps manifestations of a certain kind of restive and robust attitude, as well as of despair and blind rage of the work force against the propertied, incidentally against the police who maintained the propertied social order, against the usual order of life. Hence, it is not unreasonable to see in many of these violations of law of the land and defiance of authority, all of which meant for them nothing but a system designed to perpetuate their extreme insecurity of existence and their brutish life, an almost instinctive refusal to submit to the given set of affairs. This should not be construed to mean that this variant of rebelliousness by itself constituted any part of, or developed into an authentic labour movement, or implied much of social consciousness. But social crimes - the "sub-political" acts in E.P. Thompson's language - were certainly significant aspects of the collective habits of action of the formative working class community.[268]

The manifestation of the hostility towards the well-to-do and authority and the rebellious mood of the urban labouring population did

267. Chakrabarty, Sasipada Banerjee, pp.8, 11-2, 28.

268. Cf. Thompson, op.cit., p.64.

not remain confined to social crimes only. At least in one case, the case of the Talla riot, they appear to have mounted into an outbreak of popular violence on a very broad scale, a popular action having affinity with insurrection.

Complex Motivations of the Talla Riot

At one level it was a riot with religious, Muslim community-centric and pan-Islamic overtones. The Muslim preponderance among the rioting crowd, the triggering off of the riot by the demolition of a 'mosque', the alleged sacrilege of Islam, the stoppage of the organization of the haj pilgrimage as part of anti-Plague regulations, the fact of many of the rioters being "undoubtedly moved by religious feeling",[269] the reported instigation by moulavis, the undoubted complicitly of Haji Zacharia and other Muslim notables in the riot, the pan-Islamic orientation of the Haji and some other prominent Muslims, the almost millenarianist expectation among large sections of Muslim population of aid from the Turkish Sultan and Afghan Amir - all these point to such a narrow community-centric orientation. From these it may even be argued that the Talla riot was communal in character and had a pan-Islamic content.[270]

It is also important to note that the Talla rioters exhibited some features of a manipulated crowd. Though in all disturbances the

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269. Bolton's Report, para 5.

270. Cf. Chakraborty, Communal Riots and Labour. pp.49-50, 53-4, 58.

government usually found outside hands, in this particular case the Lieutenant Governor was not entirely wrong in his brlief that "the idea of resuming possession [of the disputed land] was ... the evil advice of others..."[271] The initial instruction of the Haji and the persons close to him, their later attempt to arrive at a face-saving compromise and ultimate climb down show that in a sense the rioting crowd was called out and activized by wealthy pan-Islamist tradesmen and merchants. Thus here was something of the technique which has been characterized by Thompson as "deliberate use of the crowd as an instrument of pressure by persons 'above' or apart from the crowd".[272] Rude has spoken of 'mob' in the sense of "hired bands operating on behalf external interests".[273] And the Talla rioters partly resembled this kind of 'mob'.

But at another level the occurrence was much more than a religious, communal and pan-Islamic riot. It was also something else than a mere managed crowd. It had a striking similarity with 'mob' as defined by Hobsbawm.[274] In the first place, Hindus, Bolton's Hindu "bad characters",

271. Bolton's Report, para 3.

272. Thompson, op.cit., p.67.

273. George Rude, The Crowd in the French Revolution, Oxford University Paper back, p.239.

274. "The mob may be defined as the movement of all classes of the urban poor for the achievement of economic or political changes by direct action - that is by riot or rebellion - but as a movement which was as yet uninspired by no specific ideology; or, if it found expressions for its aspirations at all, in terms of traditionalism and conservatism (the 'church and king mob'). It was a pre-political movement.." (emphasis in the original). E.J. Hobsbawm, Social Bandits and Primitive Rebels, p.110, also chapter VII.

participated, though perhaps marginally, in the violence; "many of the rioters had no interest whatever in the religious question";[275] and the "badmashes who took a prominent part in disturbance in Northern Circular Road and its neighbourhood had no interest in the Talla mosque grievance".[276] And strikingly enough, there is no report of any Muslim violence against the Hindus. Taking all this into account we cannot dismiss the Talla riot as one caused by merely by Muslim community-consciousness and pan-Islamism.

No less striking is the self-discipline of the crowd. Even in days of "intense excitement" and frenzy, of rule of gundas and badmashes, of what was considered by Sanjivani as "reign of terror" there was on the admission of the Police Commissioner and the Chief Secretary, no looting, no attack on private houses, no destruction of private property.

Indeed, this was the self-discipline common to urban poor. Hooligans or the "bad characters" were to a considerable extent blamed for the riot. But the criminal elements and the labouring poor were usually the same people - the "weavers and bricklayers", "masons and coolies" and "mill hands" many of whom were upcountrymen. And this labouring poor was often, by circumstances, "turbulent". But even in their turbulence they were selective.

The violence which was certainly kindled by religious bigotry, almost from the very beginning, took the nature of an essentially

275. Bolton's Report, para 4.

276. The Englishman, 3 July 1897.

discriminatory outburst of both Muslim and Hindu labouring population. Sumit Sarkar is right in his observation that this "developed into a general outburst of the poor of both communities 'against the Europeans'".[277] But it was even more than that. The attempt to disrupt transport, the raising of roadblocks, the repeated and audacious attacks upon the police and military, the large number of assaults upon the Europeans, the running battle of the crowd with the police and military, the excitement of the Jagaddal workers for joining the "riot against government" - all indicated a selective pattern of crowd action and violence. At base must have been a mood of desperate defiance, a bitter hatred of the keepers of law and order who were notorious for their zulum, a rebelliousness against the constituted authority, the Raj, which was heavily weighted against the labouring poor and in favour of the rich, particularly the European employers and European masters. The "Muhammedans should not quarrel and fight with the authorities"; "it was enjoined on all true Mahomedans to obey the Government. This is one of the orders of God". "If ... they gave trouble to Government they were disobeying god" - these entreaties made by the Haji and his co-signitories to the leaflet of July 7[278] and also at a post-namaz meeting at Talla on July 2[279] too bring out that the outbreak went much beyond the limits of its origin and took an unmistakable anti-police, anti-British, anti-government character; the Haji had the safety-value that he could switch his role from mob-instigator to that of labour discipliner.

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277. Sumit Sarkar, The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, p.417. Cf. Chakraborty, Communal Riots and Labour, p.57.

278. The Englishman, 8 July 1897.

279. Ibid, 3 July 1897.

The nature of the reaction of the authorities and the European community and the fear of a bigger conflagration resembling the 1857 'Mutiny' only go to underline this nature of the riot. In other words, whatever might have been the immediate provocation, the Talla riot was a spontaneous outburst of an unorganized mass of migrant labouring population reflecting their fundamental grievances over their plight - their living in a world of extreme hardship, abnormal family life and endemic disease - their latent hostility towards the police and authority from whom they received nothing but trouble,[280] and their underlying resentment against the Europeans, the foreign masters and exploiters. For all this reason the rioting crowds cannot be regarded as just passive instruments of wealthy Muslim interests and pan-Islamists like Haji Zacharia.

But despite all these characteristics of the spontaneity of a working class in the making, it needs to be stated that the Talla riot had its anomaly. This was because its narrow Muslim-centered origin and pan-Islamic overtone on the one hand and its broad popular anti-police,

280. For an account of the oppressive practices of the police see Uma Das Gupta, Crime, Law and The Police in India, 1870-80, IESHR, Vol.X, No.4, December 1973, pp.353 ff. The Som Prokash of 12 June 1876 wrote, "The police officials look upon themselves as so many petty nawabs". Continuing it said, "They seem to believe that, though it is their duty to protect the life, honour, and property of the subjects from thieves, robbers, and other wicked characters, they have a perfect right to make use of their powers for the attainment of their own objects, for the exhibition of authority, or the promotion of self-glory. To this belief alone are due the manifold oppressions of the police" (cited in ibid). Though written in the 1870s, this was no less true for the police practices in the later decades. However, Das Gupta's paper, deals with police behaviour in relation to the middle class. Its practices vis-a-vis lower order of the society are yet to be studied.

anti-British and anti-government direction on the other. It is perhaps this anomaly which prompted The Englishman to speak of the "semi-political, semi-sentimental"[281] nature of the disturbance. In view of all these it may not be wrong to suggest that the rioting mass in the present instance, was a kind of mixture of a mob which was sought to be operated by pan-Islamic external interests and a crowd spontaneously rebelling against the police and the foreigners. And, even while striking against the repressive organs of the Raj, it was utterly confused about its intentions and objectives. Hence, the anti-police and anti-British feeling informing the violent crowd, should not mislead us into mistaking it for a politically conscious democratic crowd.

In fact, among the mass of ignorant and illiterate city poor no democratic political consciousness could spontaneously have arisen. It was to be brought from outside, from strata or social groups impregnated with such ideas. But this could not be done, as a wall of attitude and values sealed off Bengali nationalists and bhadraloks from the labouring population. In the fairly voluminous writings of that group, there is virtually no awareness of the deep-seated problems that led to the riot. In the press reports and comments on it, one can find some scattered and very muted criticisms of the indiscriminate police violence. But by and large the 'native' press wailed over the attacks on the Europeans, vehemently criticized the "misrule" of the mob, and almost vied with each other in professing their loyalty to the Raj. Perhaps the only exceptions to this position were Tagore's one highly perceptive reference

281. The Englishman, 8 July 1897.

to the riot[282] and A.C. Bannerjee's appearance as a defence lawyer. In a sense this was no fault of the educated Bengali middle class. This is what colonialism made of them. But this separation of the Bengali bhadralok samaj from the world of labouring poor left the latter susceptible to various influences and pressures from backward-looking ideologies and interests, such as pan-Islamism in the present case. This had serious adverse implications for the development of any broad democratic political movement. However, any discussion of the latter aspects is not within the scope of the present study. So far as the Talla riot is concerned, we may conclude by saying that it is an illustration of pre-political crowd in Hobsbawm's sense.[283]

But while the Talla riot was a violent eruption of the accumulated grievances and anger of the city poor composed of diverse elements, the actions around specific issues like festival holiday or wage demand or length of working hours reflected a stirring among not just the labouring populace but the working class - a distinctly new class, but not yet properly formed. Its separate identity, interests and aspirations were

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282. See Rabindranath Thakur, 'Kanthorodh', Rabindra Rachanabali (Collected works), Birth Centenary edition, Calcutta, 1961, Vol.XII, p.961. The relevant portion is cited in Chakraborty, Communal Riots and Labour, p.64.

283. See f.n.274 above. Cf. also the following : "... the pre-industrial urban crowds are pre-political people who have not yet found, or only begun to find, a specific language in which to express their aspirations about the world" (emphasis in the original). Hobsbawm, Social Bandits and Primitive Rebels, p.2.

expressed in the specificities and new kinds of demand and new modes of action.

Religious Festivals and Their Place in The Life of The Workers

Here too considerable complexities are once more to be found. These are most evident in the case of demands for religious festival holidays and actions around these demands. In considering these it is easy and simple to stress upon the communal aspect of these.[284] But a fuller account should take account of several considerations before coming to any generalization as to their communal character. Firstly, as noticed earlier, till about mid-1890s, whole day leave was not usually given on the occasion of Muslim ceremonies and festivals. But, with the increase in the relative weight of Muslim workers in the jute textile labour force, the demand for fully paid holidays on Muslim religious occasions was naturally a pressing articulation of the position of large groups. It was, as we have seen, the normal practice to give several days' leave on account of Durga Puja. Thus, notwithstanding a few

284. Cf. the following : "This community-identity is reflected in the demands (either for holidays on Bakr Id or for cow-killing) that we have examined. There is an element of continuity between the disturbances of 1894-95 [over the Muslim festival holiday issue] and the Bakr Id riots of 1896. Workers move from a simple demand for holidays on certain religious festivals to a demand for the freedom to celebrate them the way they would think fit". Chakraborty, Communal Riots and Labour, p.37.

Speaking about the early twentieth century labour movement in Bombay and Bengal, Sukomal Sen too tends to view the appeal of religion as a negative trait. Sen, op.cit., pp.114-5.

instances of demand for holidays on Rathjatra (car festival), the Hindu workers did not have much occasion to become particularly agitated on the issue of festival holidays.

And there are still more complexities to be taken into account. The conditions of separation from former village life and its familiar environment could be responsible for a sense of utter helplessness, loneliness and despair among Muslim workers. Hence, it would be natural on the part of the uprooted peasants, artisans or rural labourers turned into factory workers to seek compensation from the traditional customs, festivals and religious bonds. The very fact and extent of separation from the other aspects of traditional life which itself was undergoing disintegration tended to strengthen the hold of religion. Religion and participation in specific acts and practices of the community perhaps gave these people a sense of reassurance that they belonged to and were parts of a whole. (It may be noted in passing that in many ways the response of the immigrants torn up from their known rural surroundings in many other countries, for example, in nineteenth century USA[285] or Britain,[286] has been similar.) This feeling came to them spontaneously and did not require any deliberation or conscious choice or manipulation by external agencies. For year after year, generation after generation, as far back the immigrants from the countryside could recollect, Ramazan, Id-ul-Fitr, Id-uz-Zoha or Bakr-Id and Mohurram have been vital and integral constituents of the total order of the religious community.[287]

285. See Handlin, op.cit., particularly chapter V, pp.117-43.

286. Hobsbawm, Social Bandits and Primitive Rebels, p.3.

287. See f.n. 254 above.

Such festivals were common to all religions. But their importance was even more for the Muslim workers, since most of their religious practices including the namaz had a public and collective nature. Moreover, their religion had much more cohesive control over the minds of the faithful than that of Hindu religion.

The uprooted peasantry also found attractive the outward forms and fashions of their religion. The congregational Id prayers, the exchange of greetings and gifts, wearing of new and colourful dresses, feasts and distribution of sweets, purchase of fruits and toys at the fair, and alms-giving to fakirs on the occasion of Id-ul-Fitr,[288] the spectacle, fanfare and colourfulness of the Muharram procession,[289] or

288. Id-ul-fitr marks the close of the Ramazan festival. "This is a festival of rejoicing after the tension of the Ramazan" Jafar Sharif, op.cit., chap. XXIV. Here is also given an account of the customs and practices associated with this festival.

289. The Mohurram had its attractions even for the Hindus. Here is an account of some of the spectacular aspects of the Mohurrum festival in Sylhet town (now in Bangladesh) in the 1860s : "Though not quite a social function among us, Hindus, the Mohurrum was a very popular and exciting institution in our life in Sylhet in those days...

"All over the town there were Moslem populations and every Moslem quarter had its own Akhara or place of sword and stick play from which Tazias and processions used to be taken out during the Mohurrum. For the whole of the period, from the first to the tenth day of the Moslem month of Mohurrum, the whole town was resenant with music of these Akharas, while during the last four or five days preceding the final ceremonial, there used to be a great and gorgeous display of Tazias in our market place at night and the whole town practically turned out to witness the processions and the sword and stick play of the men. The processions from neighbouring villages also used to come here and occasionally there used to be free fights between the adherents of rival Akharas .... On the tenth day or the last day of the Mohurrum ... all the Tazias in Sylhet and the neighbouring places /were/ used to be brought to a large open space outside the town, called Idga-Maidan or the field of Id..." Bipin Chandra Pal, Memories of My Life and Times, Bipinchandra Pal Institute, Calcutta, 1973, pp.72-3.

the community sacrifice of an animal, usually a goat or a cow, feasts and a bit of meat on the Bakr-Id day[290] were natural sources of joy and festivity in an otherwise drab and sparse life and were essential elements of the country people's way of life. For the men and women working in the jute mills for long hours under monotonous and harsh conditions and living in cramped house amidst filty and squalor, these aspects appeared to have considerable relevance. Denial of religious holidays must have meant to them encroachment upon their traditional way of life. And, the demand for festival holidays reflected the desperate striving of the raw and new workers to reiterate and recreate the old way of life on an adapted basis. It was legitimized by more sophisticated traditions than a term like 'community consciousness' suggests.

The term 'community consciousness' is too narrow to encompass this social milieu, which this demand and the strivings it reflected, which was a part of the aspirations of the Muslim labouring poor. The term does fit the ephemeral relationship between the Muslim labour and the Haji and his propertied cronies, but there must have been more sociological substance to the festival holiday demand than that.

This demand mirrored a resistance at the passing away of the traditional way of life, loss of traditional forms of joy and festivities, leisure and recreation. But this was also a protest by the raw workers, however confused they might have been, against the new kind of oppression and exploitation they faced. And in the absence of any alternative

290. See f.n. 254 above.

ideology and programme, the country people turned into factory workers were compelled to turn towards traditional custom and religion. Their aspirations and protests were clothed in religious language, fashions and forms. In early nineteenth century Britain too the initial protests of the raw workers took religious forms. However, the specific and significant feature of the British protest was that it found expression in the activities of the heretical or sectarian Dissenters or numerous Protestant groups, not conforming with the Church of England or the Church of Scotland.[291] Also, improvements in working-class standard of life at the turn of the century, which colonialism in a sense made possible by creating security for industrial profits over time which minimally percolated to working-class material culture, led to British workers slowly individualizing and personalizing the social aspects of their leisure and divesting themselves of "the cry of the oppressed" which was also "the cry of the oppressor" and "the opium of the masses". But in India, colonialized industrialization was too stultified to make such divestiture possible for the alienated working-class.

It is also significant that, so far as our records show, there was not a single occasion (during the period under consideration) in which an uproarious demand for holidays culminated in a Hindu-Muslim tension and riot. An instance has been cited earlier of the employers' game to use the religious diversity of the labour force for fomenting communal tension and diverting an agitation on legitimate demand. Our source indicates that this game failed. It needs to be reiterated that

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291. See Hobsbawm, Social Bandits and Primitive Rebels, Chap. VIII, and Thompson, op.cit., pp.28-58, 77-80, 385-440, 639-42.

in each and every occasion the agitation was directed against the management. Obviously, here was an attempt on the part of the workers to settle their account with the employers, the exploiters.[292]

Dipesh Chakravarty has recently drawn attention to the formation of Mahomedan Association among jute mill workers at Kankinara (1895) as an example of his contention about the predominant importance of the sense of community-identity.[293] True, this Association, an organization of philanthropic character, had in its early days, among other things, the aim of recruiting more Muslims into jute mill work. But no less significant is the fact that very soon it began to enrol Hindu workers too as its members, looked after the interests of all the operatives irrespective of their religious affiliation and in its representation before the Indian Factory Labour Commission of 1908 demanded holidays on account of both Hindu and Muslim religious festivals. Kazi Zahir-ud-din Ahmed, the President of the Association, an upcountry clerk employed in a jute mill, stated in his evidence before the Commission that it was "composed solely of mill operatives" and "doing its utmost to popularize mill work amongst the masses of the population in general and Mussalmans

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292. It is of interest to note that in a communication to the Government of Bengal (dt. 28.2.98), a committee, composed of among others, Inspector General of Police and Chief Secretary of Bengal Government noted with concern that the experience of disturbances in mill towns and Calcutta showed that "under the impulses of religious fanaticism, both Hindus and Musalmans, may combine together in such numbers that an exceptionally strong and well armed forces is required to control them" (emphasis ours). Riots in Mill Areas in Neighbourhood of Calcutta and Police Protection. WBSA. Judicial. Police. Nos.39-41 of April 1899.

293. Chakravarty, Communal Riots and Labour, p.36.

in particular". He informed the Commission that in preparing his representation he had "consulted a good number of representative Hindu and Musalman workers". Continuing he said, "It was started in 1895 with the object of attracting more Mahomedans to jute mill, but since then Hindus had been admitted to membership, and now the association looked after the interests of the operatives generally. ... One Sunday in December [1907] about one thousand operatives assembled to discuss questions in connection with the present enquiry. All were agreed as to the necessity for more holidays. The Mahomedans wanted two days each for Id-ul-Fitr, Bakr Id, and Mohurrum, and the Hindus wanted a week for the Durga Puja. The meeting also approved of daylight working..." Though "there was a difference of opinion as to the proper length of the working day", the workers generally favoured working day less than the fifteen-hour day which was prevalent at that time. Zahiruddin informed the Commission, "The majority of those present at the meeting preferred enjoying better health to earning big wages, but some wanted shorter hours with an increased rate of pay. Some of the spinners advocated a ten hour day, 6 A.M. to 6 P.M. with a two hours stoppage at midday, and a Saturday half-holiday". He also spoke of the abuses of the sardari system including the payment of dasturis.[294] Scarcely can one view all this as merely signs of communal outlook, without any broader perspective of the working class, such as it was, trying to determine its labour time and its leisure.

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294. The paragraph is based on Kazi Zahiruddin Ahmed's evidence given to the Indian Factory Labour Commission of 1908. See Parliamentary Papers. 1909. Vol.63. IFLC 1908 Evidence. Witness No.176, All the citations are from Zahiruddin's evidence.

In view of all these we should be chary in making generalizations about communal identity or community-consciousness. The demand for religious festival holidays certainly indicated a community-feeling. But it was mingled with something much broader than this. In a sense, the direct actions around this demand represented an attitude and mood of workers in a period which may be described as an interlude during which they were on the process of becoming a working class. These were based on assumptions of a traditional social order and religion, and indicated a predisposition towards the defence of a deeprooted pattern of behaviour and belief, and when baulked, a somewhat primitive defiance of authority, social protests in which the underlying conflict between labour and capital was clearly discernible.

Anti-management and Anti-capitalist Aspect

And the anti-management and anti-capitalist aspect of the workers' behaviour is brought into still sharper focus if the demand for festival holidays is viewed in conjunction with the battles centering around a variety of other issues. The presentation of wage demands, agitation concerning the length of working hours, mobbing of managerial staff in protest against wage-cut, strikes demanding dismissal of oppressive sardars, violence against the management and the police - all signified the sharpening of an underlying conflict.

It is true that many of the actions were in the nature of spasmodic flare-ups and work-stoppages for short periods. It is also

true that all these took place on a miniature scale - at the department or at most at a mill level. There is no record of several mill-wise, not to speak of industry-wise, combination and action in any form.[295] No less true is it that there was neither any articulation of conscious goal or social objective nor any comprehension of the kind or nature of the antagonism that was involved. Furthermore, excepting the Mahommedan Association, no organization or workers came into existence either on permanent or even on ad hoc basis. That the Working Men's Club founded by Sasipada Banerjee (1870) was not a workers' organization has been shown by Chakraborty. It may be noted that the situation in Bombay, the other major industrial centre was somewhat, though not substantially, different.[296]

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295. Cf. the following: "While operatives fully understood the machinery of local strikes and have repeatedly forced employers to comply with their demand in isolated cases, they have been unable to combine over any large area with the object of securing a common end by concerted action". P.P. Pillai, op.cit., p.258.

296. For industrial labour situation in late nineteenth century Bombay and Ahmedabad see Karnik, op.cit., pp.10-2, 14-7; Gillion, op.cit., pp.155-6; L.A. Gordon, Social and Economic Conditions of Bombay Workers on the Eve of the 1908 Strike in I.M. Reisner and N.M. Goldberg (eds.), Tilak and the Struggle for Indian Freedom, People's Publishing House, New Delhi, 1966, particularly pp.532-7; and Morris, The Emergence of an Industrial Labor Force in India, pp.162-4.

For some notable traits of the outlook and activities of Narayan Meghaji Lokhande, a Satyashodhak philanthropist of Bombay and usually considered as the 'first labour leader' of India, see Gail Omvedt, Non-Brahmans and Communists in Bombay in Economic and Political Weekly, April 21, 1973, p.752. It is of interest to note that the discontent and unrest of Bombay workers found some loose organizational forms earlier than in Calcutta. Lokhande organized in 1884 a mass petition signed by 5,500 workers and a meeting of 10,000 workers in 1890 which was addressed even by female workers. For limitations of Lokhande's work see R.P. Dutt, India Today, People's Publishing House, Bombay, 1949, p.375.

The Problems, Limitations and Outcome

But it was not easy to combine and organize or to give shape to the interests and aspirations of the workers. For they came from so many different strata of rural population, so many linguistic-cultural groups, castes and sub-castes and religious communities. Furthermore, they were usually nothing but casual labour. And, no less importantly, men who had to work hard and virtually for the whole day, men who could neither read nor write, men for whom homes were just places for eating and sleeping, had no time, no desire and no strength left to go beyond their physical needs.

Kuczynshi, in his work on the emergence of the working class in Europe and the United States of America in late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, observes, "It stands for reason that men who work a daily minimum of thirteen and a maximum of eighteen hours, inclusive of breaks at work, travelling time and working time, have neither the time nor the physical nor mental energy to organize themselves on a political or industrial basis, to educate themselves, to stump up and down the country, to spread propaganda : in other words, to busy themselves with social life in a way other than by manual toil".[297]

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297. Jurgen Kuczynski, The Rise of the Working Class, trans, C.T.A. Ray, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London, 1967, p.112.

If this was true for the working class in Europe how much more true it must have been for the early workers in India.[298] And, in addition to the difficulties indicated above, the early militants and organizers constantly faced the dangers of fines, forfeiture of wages, dismissal from their jobs and arrest by the police. Moreover, at least in Bengal there was no help, not even the Sorabjee Shapurjee Bengalee, or N.M. Lokhande type of interest in the formation of limited working-class consciousness, that was being evinced in Bombay from social groups outside the labouring community. As it has been noted, the educated Bengali middle class, till the days of the Swadeshi movement was based on a structural disjunction from the conditions of the labouring poor. By and large they preferred to ignore the unrest and struggles of the 1890s.[299]

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298. Cf. the following : "Many observers have drawn attention to that peculiarly difficult situation of Indian workers in the early period of industrialization. A large majority of them are strangers in the cities in which they worked. They came from rural areas which were in most cases hundreds of miles away from their places of work. They spoke many languages and belonged to many castes and communities. Poverty had driven them away from their villages and employment was essential for them not only for themselves but also for the members of their families whom they had left behind. They had to take employment wherever it was available and at the rate the employer was prepared to offer. They were not in a position to dictate terms, nor even in a position to bargain them". Karnik, op.cit., p.17.

299. Cf. the following : "Sasipada Banerjee was the first point of contact of the Bengali bhadralok with the industrial workers of Bengal. Aswini Banerjee of the Swadeshi days was the second. It remains an intriguing question why, in the thirty years that intervened between the times of these two gentlemen, the Bengali intelligentsia did not show any signs of interest in the sizeable industrial proletariat growing up in and around the city, though much of their time in the late '80s was spent over the cooly-question of Assam...." Chakrabarty, Sasipada Banerjee, pp.38-9.

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The question becomes still more intriguing in view/a letter from Calcutta written in 1871 to the International Workingmen's Association, better known as the First International, "asking for powers to start a section in India" (Documents of the First International : The General Council of the First International 1870-71 - Minutes, Progress Publishers, Moscow, n.d., pp.258, 530) and also Chinmohan Sehanavis's suggestion (op.cit., pp.120-1) that Sivanath Sastri and some of his close associates had shown interest in socialism and socialist ideas.

We know little about the early heroes and martyrs of these battles. But it is fairly evident that they showed tremendous courage and made considerable sacrifices. For the "ringleaders", that is, the militant spokenmen and organizers - and in the Bowreah Cotton Mills it was a struggle continuing over several weeks - were always threatened by the factory managers or employers, the local magistrates and police and the supreme power of the colonial government with the loss of their jobs, and the refusal of work from any other employer, coupled with the threat of arrest and rigorous imprisonment.

But in spite of these insuperable difficulties, it is remarkable that within a short span of five or six years, strikes, uprearious actions and violent disturbances occurred in mill after mill. Perhaps many of these did take place with little or no organization. But at least some of these must have involved some organization, may be of very elementary nature. The Bowreah Cotton Mills type of struggle which continued for over several weeks could not have taken place without some kind of organization. Even the most spontaneous and sporadic outbursts, because of their group or collective nature, must have needed some initiative and also some consensus among the participants in these actions. The unknown agitators and militants of these struggles have left no account of how these were organized. But we find that the workers were often described by the employers as great gossip-mongers.[300] This means that they used

300. Here is a remarkable instance of bazar gossip mentioned by one of the early historians of the jute industry who himself was closely associated with the industry. "One forenoon in February 1872 a number of native mistries at the India Jute Mills, Serampore, waited on the manager, Mr. Cochrane, to ask him if the bazar report was true that the Lord Sahib [Lord Mayo, the then Governor-General] had been murdered. Twenty four hours later the steamer 'Dacca' signalled from Saugor the news of the assassination of Port Blair". Wallace, op.cit. It may be noted that Mayo was assassinated by one Wahabi Muslim prisoner.

to have some kind of communication among themselves. This also means that they loved to have chats among themselves, and in these chats, their situation of life - their immiserisation, denial of festival holidays, inadequate wages, excessively long hours of work, and such other aspects - must have figured as a major topic. Meal intervals, smoking breaks, assembly at namaz time, and informal gathering at grog-shops perhaps provided opportunity for discussion and exchange of their daily experiences and reactions and for arriving at some kind of consensus about open demonstration and presentation of demands before the managers. And it is most likely that the "old hands", as the Gouripore Jute Mills manager observed, taught "the younger ones" or the new entrants to the labour force "their rights, or supposed rights" or, in other words, took initiative in giving some collective expression of and shape to their grievances and dissatisfaction. We are informed that in quite a few labour actions in Bombay the jobbers took an important part.[301] Did such people take a similar position in the labour troubles in the Calcutta industrial area? Did the caste panchayat in the case of Hindu labourers or religious leaders like maulvis in the case of Muslim workers have any role in these disturbances? It is not unlikely that these elements took some part in initiating the agitations and struggles, but we have little definitive evidence as regards these.

What was the outcome of these outbursts and actions? That the workers achieved a major victory in relation to their demand for

301. Karnik, op.cit., pp.5-6; Gordon, op.cit., pp.505-6, 532; and also Buchanan, op.cit., pp.416-7.

festival holidays has been noted earlier. That "as regards the recognized holidays, Agents and Managers have been taught a lesson" was, as we have seen, the conclusion drawn by Pratt, a top police official. But so far as the other specific demands are concerned, success was negligible. Defeats, dismissals of the "ringleaders", arrest and imprisonment of the "badmashes" and "rioters" were the usual consequences in those cases. What Engels remarked about the fate of the workers' struggles in early nineteenth century Britain - "The history of these Unions is a long series of defeats of the working-men, interrupted by a few isolated victories" - is no less applicable for these actions of the 1890s in the jute and cotton textile industry in Bengal.

But whatever might have been the particular outcome in terms of the actual realization of the specific demands, these actions were of great significance. The way in which the employers and their representative organization IJMA reacted to the labour troubles in 1894-95 and in later years - their frequent references to "disaffection" and "quite a new attitude on the part of the mill-coolies", their "nervousness" about which Pratt reported, their complaints about the inadequacy of police arrangement and repeated representation to the government for strengthening the police supervision of the mill areas[302] - glaringly revealed that the "mill coolies" could no longer be ignored and that "their rights, or supposed rights" had to be taken into consideration.

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302. See, for example, IJMA Report for 1895, Appendix H, and IJMA Report for 1897, pp.38-45.

It is of particular importance to note that the demands (as distinct from some sporadic manifestations) put forward by the workers were neither backwardlooking and conservative nor millenial ones. Nor these were expressions of mere elemental and blind fury, as in the case of the Talla riot. Festival holiday, wage rise, dismissal of oppressive sardars or some other concrete demands were advanced by the workers. Thus, the Indian Factory Labour Commission of 1908 appears to have been wrong in its observation that "one of the main difficulties experienced at present when unrest appears among the employers is that no definite demands are formulated, no grievances are stated, no indication is given as to the cause of discontent..."[303]

Specific demands were formulated, and the obvious aims of these were reforms of the existing state of affairs or redress of certain specific grievances arising out of labour-capital relationship. In putting forward these demands, the workers quite evidently proceeded from the facts of the given situation. But they had wider significance and aims, though rather implicit in that stage of protest. For, whatever might have been the immediate demands, these reflected an entire complex of fundamental dissatisfaction of the workers with their inhuman suffering, as well their desire to settle accounts with the employers and capitalists. The very situation of course ruled out clear articulation of any conscious social goal and objective. But in these demands a striving of the workers towards overcoming of their situation, no doubt of a vague and confused nature, was clearly discernible.

303. IFLC 1908 Report, para 26.

Towards Working Class Forms of Action and Class Feeling

These actions also signified a groping attempt of the workers to go beyond the initial individual or small group responses in the form of 'strike-in-detail' which, as seen earlier, had virtually been the exclusive form in the earlier period. Not that this primitive form was altogether abandoned. For not only the decade with which we are concerned here but also for many decades to come, the drift off the job remained a major form of response of the growing labour force to the factory system of production. But even the miniature-scale deputations, 'mobbings', strikes, violent troubles and such other forms revealed not only a new state of ferment among the workers but also that they were trying to transcend the blind, individualistic, instinctive forms of reaction and to find new, more powerful and effective forms of protest. In fact, if we leave aside a few stray cases of direct actions in the 1870s, it may be stated that the workers in the 1890s were haltingly discovering certain new forms of social protest, certain elementary rules and truth about class warfare. They increasingly resorted to characteristically working class forms of action - combinations, active interventions and open and direct group actions.[304]

304. Cf. the following : "The inherent tendency of rebellion that lay dormant in the winds of the impoverished peasants and agricultural workers who eventually turned into industrial workers, impelled them to such acts of resistance against capitalist exploitation in the modern factories. Collective working in the factories generated a mutual sympathy among them. Growth of a caste, racial and regional unity among the heterogenous mass of workers also led them to collective resistance against capitalist exploitation". Sen, op.cit., p.76.

It is tempting to belittle the significance of these actions. For here was neither any theoretical and political articulation of any conscious social goal, nor any comprehension of the nature of social antagonism involved. Relevantly it may be noted that the kind of activities in which the workers in England or France or Germany in the early period of industrialization participated or the economic, political and social outlook exhibited by them or the type of organization they formed,[305] are not to be found here. The colonialized character of the industrial situation ruled these out. But what deserves emphasis is that in their demands, and also in their way of action, a striving of the workers, no doubt in an obscure and muddled fashion, towards going beyond their immediate situation was clearly discernible. Thus, here was the birth of a class-feeling - a feeling of an identity of interests as between the workers themselves and as against the employers. It was the feeling of a specific class, the formative working class or proletariat, facing another class, the capitalists. It was not yet class-consciousness - neither political consciousness nor even the trade-union consciousness which Lenin was speaking of, for St. Petersburg in this period. Yet it was an advance from the narrow level of social feeling of not only the peasantry, but also of the broader mass of urban poor. And in defending as well as advancing its immediate interests, the transitional work force was trying, of course in a rambling and sporadic fashion, to overcome its part-human, depersonalized, disembodied condition of existence, to establish working class and thus human rights and to get on the road towards self-awareness and working class consciousness. Did it succeed

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305. For a short but splendid survey of these activities see Kuczynski, op.cit., pp.109-35.

in achieving this? Any answer to this does not fall within the scope of the present investigation. But this much should be stated that, even the very early feeling, demands and actions of the workers with all their limitations and strength, their defeats and victories had permanent imprints on the history of twentieth century Bengal.

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