

Occasional Paper No. 40

SOME ASPECTS OF LABOUR HISTORY
OF BENGAL IN THE NINETEENTH
CENTURY : TWO VIEWS

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and
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AMIYA KUMAR BAGCHI

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in the Nineteenth Century : Two Views

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02

CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS AND LABOUR HISTORY OF
BENGAL: A CRITIQUE OF RANAJIT DAS GUPTA'S
PAPER 'MATERIAL CONDITIONS AND BEHAVIOURAL
ASPECTS OF CALCUTTA WORKING CLASS
1875-1899'

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'... it is only too often the case that the theory takes precedence over the historical material which it is intended to theorise. It is easy to suppose that class takes place, not as historical process, but inside our own heads. Of course we do not admit that it goes on only in our heads...'

E.P. Thompson in Social History, Vol.3,
No.2, May 1978.

Ranajit Das Gupta's paper contained important criticisms of my essay on 'Communal Riots and Labour' (CRL)¹. I am flattered by his attention and occasional complimentary references, but I do feel called upon to answer some of his charges and investigate our differences². If the tone of my disagreement is sharp at places, it is not because I do not consider Das Gupta's work valuable. Even in opposing, one learns. But I am concerned about the ideas being put forward, and it is this sense of concern that my tone may betray.

I am grateful to Barun De, Anthony Low and Tapan Raychaudhuri for criticisms of an earlier draft. Partha Chatterjee and Roger Stuart have acted as excellent sounding boards for testing out of ideas. All remaining follies are results of my own shortcomings.

This note is also written in the belief that the ideas I criticise here are widely shared by leftist historians of the Indian working class. So engaging in a debate with Das Gupta will, I hope, have a relevance broader than that which is merely personal. In structuring this note, however, I start with Das Gupta's specific criticisms of my work, and from there try to work my way towards some questions of wider interest.

The following are some of our differences that I have been able to pinpoint:

- (a) Das Gupta finds my CRL 'somewhat exaggerated' (p.79).
- (b) He finds my term 'community consciousness' 'too narrow' (p.137).
- (c) He implies (p.150) that CRL in effect 'belittles' the 'significance' of the jute workers' struggles in the 1890s, when, according to him, the workers were showing 'class feeling' (original emphasis) and were trying to become class conscious (p.150).
- (d) Das Gupta thus proposes 'class consciousness' against my 'community consciousness' as a better category for understanding the jute mill workers of the 1890s.

There are at least three specific instances where Das Gupta misreads the text of CRL. His misreadings at times verge on misrepresentation.

- (i) On p.33, Das Gupta quotes from the Government of Bengal's reply to the Labour Commission of 1892

where the government denied the existence of any trade unions in Bengal, and said that "strikes and lockouts" played only "a very small part" and that employer-employee relations "have never been a cause of anxiety to Government". He then says: 'One may pick out this passage to prove the absence of workers' open and direct action, and sometimes this has been done' (my emphasis). Who has done it? A footnote adds: 'Chakrabarty takes this position' in CRL, p.7. And then follows a paragraph on how 'misleading' 'such a view' is, how it attaches 'undue importance' to things unimportant, and how, above all, it is 'factually erroneous' (my emphasis) to conclude that the period before 1892 was one of working class passivity.

I open CRL at p.7 to discover that Chakrabarty does not take this position. In fact, the page in question is not about working class reality, but about changes in government and capitalists' attitudes. I was arguing that even if labour gave no anxiety to the government and the IJMA before 1892, by 1895 it definitely did, and this could be a pointer to an intensification of labour unrest.

But this is not all. After stating on p.33 how 'factually erroneous' it would be to see the pre-1892 period as one of lull, Das Gupta himself goes on to say on pp.38-39 :

it must not be thought that battles of the early 1880s were immediately followed by further direct action of broader sweep and greater intensity. On the contrary, the period from mid-1880s to mid-1890s was one of lull /my emphasis/. In fact, up to 1893 there is no record of any open conflict between workers and their employers except [one] ... [1].

- (ii) Das Gupta (p.139) takes me to task for suggesting the formation in 1895 of a workers' association, which of its own choice gave itself the name Mahomedan Association, was indicative of the labourer's community consciousness. I wrote (CRL. p.36):

It is only in this context /of sustained community consciousness/ that we can understand why the first organisation of mill workers ... would choose to call itself Mahomedan Association, why it spent money on renovating mosques, and why it had as one of its principal aims recruitment of more Muslims to jute mill work. /Community consciousness seems to have been the migrant worker's substitute for closed-shop trade unionism./

If anything, I would now criticise the last sentence as having been too economic in spirit. But I don't see the point of Das Gupta's criticisms. He actually agrees that the Association was more Muslim than anything else 'in its early days' (i.e. about 1895), but then implies that by 1908 things had turned and on occasions held meetings to discuss working hours. 'Scarcely can one view all this as

signs of merely communal outlook', say Das Gupta, 'without any broader perspective of the working class ... trying to determine its labour-time and leisure' (p.140).

Apart from pointing to the distinction that I make (see below) between 'community-consciousness' and 'communal outlook', let me also mention three other points here. First, my remarks were about the mid-1890s and not 1908. Second, going by Das Gupta's own material, the changes of 1908 do not seem to have been very profound. The Association said (in 1908) that it was then trying "'to popularise mill work'" (Das Gupta misses the importance of the significant word 'popularise') "'amongst the masses of the population in general and Mussalmans in particular [my emphasis]". Why 'Mussalmans in particular'? This brings me to my third point. In 1905 - and Das Gupta does not mention this - the Association and its President were exhibiting distinctly pro-Muslim, pro-British, loyalist sentiments³. It would be difficult to explain all this purely in terms of labour-capital conflict.

- (iii) Das Gupta accuses (p.127) me of arguing that the Talla riot of 1897 'was communal in character and had a pan-Islamic content'. He then proceeds (p.129) to say, rightly, that 'there is no record of any Muslim violence against the Hindus' and so 'we cannot dismiss the Talla riot as one caused...

merely by Muslim community-consciousness and pan-Islamism'. (The word 'dismiss' is of course symptomatic of Das Gupta's standpoint. Why must we 'dismiss' a communal riot? Surely, even a communal riot needs explaining?)

But did I ever describe the Talla riot as 'communal'? Nowhere in the pages of CRL that Das Gupta has referred to (pp.49-50, 53-54, 58) do I use the word 'communal' to describe the Talla riot. 'Communal' was a word that I had expressly reserved in CRL (p.5) for cases of 'overt Hindu-Muslim tension', and Talla riot was not a case of Hindu-Muslim conflict. But surely it originated around Muslim community-centred demands, Muslims surely formed a majority among the rioters, and rumours afloat during the riot surely show a pan-Islamist content. The above-mentioned pages of CRL give enough evidence to make these points and I have no hesitation in standing by them.

These specific misreadings are themselves indicative of a broader misreading: Das Gupta obviously misunderstood my category of 'community consciousness' to mean that the workers were 'intrinsically communal' (see pp.78-80) and that the Hindus and Muslims were always out for each other's blood. In CRL the problem at hand was to understand the relationship between the Hindu-Muslim conflicts of 1896 and the jute mill working class. The question at the centre of the essay was: why were communal riots a possibility in the mill working class

milieu? Das Gupta's argument that there were only three such riots⁴ is totally beside the point. ✓ To quote what he himself says in a slightly different context: 'What is of particular significance here is not so much the extent of these actions as their character' (p.123). ✓

In trying to understand the 'significance' of these riots, I looked at the years before and after 1896, i.e. 1894-5 and 1897, and saw a continuity. This was the continued existence of what I called 'community consciousness'. In the rather-too-apologetic 'introduction' to the Occasional Paper version of CRL, I defined community consciousness to mean 'a state of mind whereby a Muslim worker thinks of himself primarily as a Muslim, or the Hindu of himself firstly as a Hindu' (p.5). That is to say, it referred to a consciousness to which religion was of crucial importance, and for which religion was a means of ordering the world. I used 'communal', as I have already said, to indicate overt Hindu-Muslim conflicts (CRL, p.5). In other words, communal conflicts were an articulation of community consciousness, but they also included a degree of intolerance for people outside the community - something that I did not see as a necessary attribute of community consciousness, as I had defined the term.

Why is Das Gupta so dismissive of the communal riots of 1896? The question gains additional importance in view of the fact that while (see Das Gupta, p.142) there was not even a single strike in which all the workers of a mill combined, not to speak of inter-mill combinations, all the riots mentioned saw labourers from different mills participating in them. Das Gupta's blindspot is created by his idea of class consciousness that he opposes to my category of community consciousness. Let me quote Das Gupta here in extenso on class consciousness, for the point is crucial :

it may be stated that the workers in the 1890s were haltingly discovering ... certain elementary rules and truth[s] about class warfare ... (p.149). ... Thus here was the birth of class feeling [original emphasis] - a feeling of an identity of interests as between the workers themselves and as against the employers ... in defending as well as advancing its immediate interests, the transitional [original emphasis] workforce was trying [my emphasis], of course in a rambling and sporadic fashion, to overcome its part human ... condition of existence, to establish working class and thus human rights and to get on the road towards self awareness and working class consciousness [my emphasis] (p.150).

Inspiring words - but we must admit, a rather tortuous imagery. The point is not stylistic, as the imagery invoked is quite in keeping with Das Gupta's idea of class consciousness. For, 'trying to get on the road etc.' assumes an important awareness on the part of the proletariat: that such a road exists, and the road indeed is the proletarian highway to class consciousness. This is a pointer to one important aspect of Das Gupta's handling of the category of class consciousness. For him it is not an open-ended, problematical phenomenon. It is an automatic result of the capitalist mode of production. The working class anywhere is born with an instinct for moving towards class consciousness. It is the sense of this 'movement' that Das Gupta packs into the expression 'transitional workforce'. Indeed, his workers 'discover [my emphasis] ... rules and truth of class warfare' - rules and truths that were obviously already there - by the very fact of being workers, so great is their 'epistemological privilege'. Das Gupta clearly sees 'the instinct [my emphasis] of rebellion against capitalist exploitation - writ large' over their actions.

Such an 'instinctive' view of class consciousness - a class consciousness that spontaneously results from the objective position of the proletariat itself - can only be ahistorical. It exists by separating the concrete history of labour from the concrete history of capital. This becomes clear if we follow closely Das Gupta's argument,

Das Gupta seems to have a three-step argument with respect to the phenomenon of class consciousness. The first step states that first generation workers in all countries exhibit certain similar forms of pre-capitalist behaviour and mental attitudes:

✓ 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 industrialising countries [my emphasis] the early workers behaved by and large in a similar fashion is too well known to merit any repetition here (pp.26-7),

The second step states that what really makes a 'class' of this mass of factory workers by developing class consciousness in their minds is intensive industrialisation :

But in Britain (and other industrialising countries of the nineteenth century) such problems were transient in history ... the elements of pre-capitalist habits of mind and behaviour, in the worker's attitudes or in the total social structure, were transcended through the cumulative progress of the Industrial Revolution which accounted for 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

(p.27, the reference here is to, among others, E.P. Thompson's The Making of the English Working Class).

✓ The third step, then, is to argue that in the Indian case, because 'genuine capitalist industrialisation was ruled out by the colonial order', it is 'no wonder that even second or third generation workers remained rootless, part human, half proletarian, wretched creatures' (p.28). Thus

it may be noted that the kind of activities in which the worker in England or France or Germany in the early period of industrialisation participated or the economic, political, social outlook exhibited by them or the type of organisation they formed, are not to be found here [Bengal]. The colonialised character of the industrial situation ruled these out (p.150).

So, if the working class here did not show class consciousness, the blame, in this analysis, lies squarely with colonialism. For, as Das Gupta says, the workers, on their own were of course 'trying ... to get on the road towards ... working class consciousness'. They even had 'class feelings' against their employers. Yet 'it was not ... class consciousness' (p.150), because the colonial laboratory where the working class was being made lacked the crucial reagent of an Industrial Revolution, so important for the precipitation of such consciousness!

There is, may I say, a profoundly mistaken reading here of E.P. Thompson. Thompson clearly says:

The making of the working class is a fact of political and cultural, as much as of

economic, history. It was not the spontaneous generation of the factory system. Nor should we think of an external force - the 'industrial revolution' - working upon some nondescript undifferentiated raw material of humanity, and turning it out at the other end as a 'fresh race of beings'. ... the Industrial Revolution ... [was] imposed, not upon raw material, but upon the free-born Englishman - and the free-born Englishman as Paine had left him or as the Methodists had moulded him. The factory hand or stockinger was also the inheritor of Buryan, of remembered village rights, of notions of equality before the law, of craft traditions. He was the object of massive religious indoctrination and the creator of political traditions. The working class made itself as much as it was made.

Thus, for E.P. Thompson, the making of the English working class takes place in the context both of the Industrial Revolution and the actual cultural and political traditions that the working class inherits from its empirical past. But not so for Das Gupta. True, he spends a few pages (see pp.134-141) discussing 'religious holiday demands', but for him, religion is either a mere psychological prop for the uprooted migrant, or a source of entertainment in the drab life of the labourer, or simply a 'language' for protest. (Das Gupta underscores the last formulation). It is never a part of a world-outlook. He overlooks the specific nature of religion here. He does not stop to think how the specific cultural past of the jute worker relates to the question of class consciousness. His lack of interest in the specific leads him to draw a parallel again with the history of the English working class - a parallel quite superficial and unwarranted. Das Gupta writes

... in the absence of any alternative ideology and programme, the ... factory

workers [here] were compelled to turn towards traditional custom and religion. Their aspirations and protests were clothed in religious language, fashions and forms [original emphasis]. In early nineteenth century Britain too the initial protests of the raw workers took religious forms (pp. 137-8).

∩ Two points need to be made about this supposed similarity between the two histories. Firstly, there is very little in common between the relationship among religion, working class and capitalism in England and that here. E.P. Thompson, for example, writes about the 'double service' that Methodism performed for the Industrial Revolution. It became a religion both of the bourgeoisie and the working class; it was instrumental in the development of work-discipline in the factories⁶. Founding dissenting, working class sects there was often a matter getting out of employer-controlled churches⁷. There is no such relationship between Islam or Hinduism and colonial capitalism in Bengal.

Secondly, to the extent the early English working class displayed class consciousness, the articulation of that consciousness was not religious. The English model does not provide us a basis for equating class consciousness with religion. The state of knowledge in this regard was thus summarised ten years ago by a well known Marxist historian

It is naturally to the world of the artisan that historians have turned in attempting to define the metropolitan radical and socialist tradition. This world has been finely evoked in recent works by Eric Hobsbawm, Edward Thompson, Gwyn Williams and Royden Harrison ... The texture of this artisan radicalism was secular rather than religious, rational rather than inspirational. Its spiritual forefathers were the Levellers, Paine, Volney and Voltaire.⁸

Yet Das Gupta constantly uses the rhetoric of The Making without using its problematic. His workforce is 'transitional', it is in 'the process of becoming a working class' (p.141), his Talla riots are comparable to E.P. Thompson's Gordon riots⁹, his 'sophisticated' disapproval of my term 'community consciousness' comparable to Thompson's of the term 'riot'¹⁰. Even his formulation on 'class feeling' echoes strongly that of Thompson's on class consciousness, and I will quote them both here:

Das Gupta : Thus here was the birth of class-feeling - a feeling of an identity of interest as between the workers themselves and as against the employers (p.150).

Thompson : ... the period between 1790 and 1830 ...
[saw] the growth of class consciousness: the consciousness of an identity of interest as between all the diverse groups of working people and as against the interest of other classes (p.212).

Both the similarities and the differences between the two formulations are striking. Thompson's phrase 'all the diverse groups of working people' is dropped in Das Gupta's formulation - I suppose it is one way of avoiding the problems that religion, caste and other primordial loyalties pose; and the word 'consciousness' is replaced by the word 'feeling'. This replacement is interesting, for it enables Das Gupta to add that it 'was not yet class consciousness'. But does that improve matters? If the workers felt an identity of interests between themselves and against their employers, weren't they, for all practical purposes, class conscious - unless Das Gupta is referring to the kind of hatred and hostility that the urban poor often reserve for the rich¹¹? Can this 'class feeling' be really inferred from documents? Isn't Das Gupta smuggling in 'class consciousness' through the backdoor? And if he is, does it not contradict his own argument that we need the Indus-

trial Revolution to transform pre-capitalist attitudes into class attitudes? How did it all happen here in the course of a few years - for Das Gupta's workers were showing pre-capitalist attitudes even in the 1880s - without the Industrial Revolution intervening? The answer, in his terms, can only be sustained by using some ahistorical category of class consciousness such as he has produced in his paper.

✓ Yet, to be fair to Das Gupta, he is not alone in investing 'class consciousness' with some degree of automaticity. He belongs to a tradition of historiography in India. Among recent authors writing on Indian working class, Sukomal Sen and Panchanan Saha have come up with very similar ideas¹². For them, as for Das Gupta, protest becomes equal to class consciousness - in other words, no distinction is made between class struggle and class identity - and nothing mediates between the economic/objective position of the worker and the generation of such consciousness. The actual, empirical consciousness of the worker hardly gets a notice in the hands of these authors, both the 'growth' and 'retardation' of class consciousness being explainable solely in terms of economic exploitation. Consider, for instance, Sen's formulation on class consciousness, which is very close to what I have described as Das Gupta's three-step argument:

Class-consciousness of the proletariat, as a general rule, rises in proportion to the advance of economic struggles against capitalist exploitation. But in a colony, some specific features of exploitation as distinct from that in a metropolitan country, impede the development of economic struggles of the workers and in consequence retard the growth of their class political consciousness¹³.

But then, again, Sen alone is not to blame; for long before him, there was R.P. Dutt (whom Saha quotes with approval) who, in his trail-blazing India Today (1946), left a framework that later Indian Marxists have often blindly accepted. The following quotation from Dutt will make clear how similar the concerns of his, Sen's or Das Gupta's are :

For the early history of the Indian labour movement it would be necessary to piece together the records of the strike movement from the eighties onwards in the documents of the period. Although there was not yet any organisation, it would be a mistake to underestimate the growth of solidarity in action and elementary class consciousness of Indian industrial workers ... [before] 1914.¹⁴

We are thus all heirs (or prisoners, shall I say), within Marxism, to ways of thinking about class consciousness. One of these traditions seems to postulate an extra-historical rationality (and hence class consciousness) that can indeed be read into the actions of the working class anywhere. It seems to me that insofar as we want to make the writing of Indian labour history a serious, intellectual proposition - and this will have implications for our political practice - this particular aspect of our heritage needs to be seriously, re-examined. A brief excursion, at this point, into some theoretical considerations may help clarify the issue.

One can identify four moments in the development of Marxism when the question of class consciousness received attention: in early Marx (two key texts being Poverty of Philosophy and The Holy Family), Lenin's What Is to Be Done? (1902), Lukacs' History and Class Consciousness (1922/3) and in the writings of Gramsci. I shall skip early Marx, for

some of the problems that his category of class consciousness poses for the practising historian have already been noted.

The couplet alienation/class consciousness derives from the early Marx. Consciousness, in this sense, implies the recuperation of an alienated essence, ...As is well known, Marx derived this schema from an application and extension of the Feurbachian critique of Hegel. The moment of consciousness here is not historical, but ontological. It appeals to a moment of absolute truth, to which no concrete historical process could ever aspire. Indeed, this is its most obvious defect; that - quite apart from other epistemological objections which could be raised against it - it bears only the most notional and abstract relation to material history¹⁵.

I shall also skip Lenin. For two reasons: (a) the 'formidable difficulties' that historians may face in applying Leninist categories to concrete historical situations are very well brought out in Gareth Stedman Jones' review of John Foster¹⁶; (b) the philosophical foundations for Lenin's views were really worked out by Lukacs whose idea of class consciousness I discuss below.

With Lukacs we come to a rigorously analysed concept of class consciousness which is indeed ahistorical and universal, but a concept that has very little to do with what actually goes on in people's minds in specific historical junctures. Class consciousness, for Lukacs, consists of 'the ideas, sentiments, etc., which men in a given situation of life would have, if they were able to grasp in its entirety this situation, and the interests deriving from it, both as regards immediate action and as regards the structure of society which (would) correspond to those interests'¹⁷. Thus

class consciousness consists in fact of the appropriate and rational reactions 'imputed' [my emphasis] ... to a particular typical position in the process of production. This consciousness is ... neither the sum nor the average of what is or felt by the single individuals who make up the class [my emphasis]¹⁸.

As the editors of the English translation of History and Class Consciousness explain, Lukacs 'imputed' consciousness is a logical category, it refers 'neither to the actual consciousness of a class, nor to the consciousness it ought really to have'¹⁹. Class consciousness, for Lukacs, is completely separate from the 'empirically given'. More important, there is no passage between the two, we cannot pass from one to the other. He makes this clear in his comments on Marx's remarks regarding 'the revolt of the Silesian weavers'. Discussing Mehring's question if Marx did not overestimate the weavers' consciousness, Lukacs writes:

The unique element in its [the working class's] situation is that its surpassing of immediacy represents an aspiration towards society in its totality regardless of [my emphasis] whether this aspiration remains conscious or whether it remains unconscious for the moment²⁰.

One may or may not agree with Lukacs in his 1919-1923 phase, but it is easy to see that his concept of class consciousness is not of much help to the historian writing about what goes on within people's heads. This is why Hobsbawm, in his aforementioned article on Lukacs, quickly takes leave of the master by saying, ' I shall ... leave aside much of Lukacs's discussion as irrelevant to my purpose, which is the rather modest one of a historian'.²¹ Some of the historian's problems

✓/ with the Lukacsian standpoint, as well as those envisaged from a broader perspective, have been effectively put forward by Richard Johnson:

Lukacs remains important for his concentration on consciousness, for his criticisms of an unreflexive epistemology ... But he is also a classical instance of two recurrent tendencies ...: the tendency to see class cultures as straightforwardly and wholly conditioned by social position (for this is the argument, ultimately, about class consciousness); and the tendency to ascribe to whole societies one 'central' or 'essential' modality of thought which enters the consciousness of all classes (for this is the argument about 'false consciousness'). The major fatality, as always in the class/class consciousness problematic, is any concrete, complex account of lived cultures, how they are formed and how they may be transformed²².

I chose to discuss Lukacs because his seemed the best exposition of an ahistorical idea of class consciousness, an idea logically pursued in an extremely rigorous analysis. Of course, Das Gupta does not use an explicitly Lukacsian concept; nor do Panchanan Saha or Sukomal Sen. Their intellectual premises, as we have seen, go back to What Is to Be Done?, or nearer in time, to R.P. Dutt. But Dutt's was also an ahistorical, acultural notion of class consciousness, as it was employed within the Stalinist tradition. The point emerging from our discussion of Lukacs was that you could not both sustain an ahistorical concept of class consciousness and at the same time write working class history using what E.P. Thompson has recently called 'the empirical idiom'. Lukacs of course was aware of this and divorced his concept from empirical history. But Das Gupta wants to marry the two and no wonder ends up contradicting himself at several places. To mention only a few:

- (a) Das Gupta's workers show 'indifference to work' in the 1880s (pp.25, 28). But a few years later to the Factory Commission of 1890, they in fact show their 'willingness to work' (p.43). Das Gupta has no problem explaining. The former shows the worker's 'instinct of rebellion against capitalist exploitation', while the latter 'reveals an important attribute of ... industrial workers ... which was [so] much different from the attitude of beggars...':
- (b) Das Gupta (p.32) explicitly 'associate[s]' strikes 'with the industrial proletariat' yet in the same breath mentions (p.31, n.70) 'early strikes of the non-industrial labouring men' of Calcutta, long before even the modern factories came up.
- (c) On Das Gupta's own admission, the jute mill workers were 'nothing but casual labour' (p.143). Yet this seems to have posed no problems for either their 'discovering' the 'rules' of 'class warfare' or for their 'striving' to get on to 'the road' to class consciousness.

The trouble is that both Das Gupta and the provider of his kind of framework, R.P. Dutt, seem to be writing history in terms of inspiring presentday struggles. Which is why both of them - and others in the same tradition - are anxious not to 'belittle' or 'underestimate' (see Das Gupta, p.150 and Dutt quoted above) the historical 'significance' of working class actions. The purpose of writing history, from this

standpoint, can only be to provide the present movement with its 'myths' that is, to mythologise the past²³. This may be a valid political gesture, but does not help the historian in dealing with his facts. If this, I can do no better than quote Hobsbawm:

To dip into the past for inspiring examples of struggle or the like is to write history backwards and eclectically. It is not a very good way of writing it²⁴.

But does that mean that Marxist historians of 'consciousness' are condemned to writing 'bad' history? Or to put it another way, is 'good' history of 'consciousness' of no use to Marxist political practice? This is where Gramsci's thoughts seem to point a way out of the closedness of Lukacsian formulation. For Gramsci, what goes on in the minds of people is important even in his philogophical framework; he argues from the premise that

Each man ... is a "philosopher" ... he participates in a particular conception of the world ... and therefore contributes to sustain ... that conception ... or to modify it, that is to bring into being new modes of thought²⁵.

So if hegemony has to be won for proletarian ideology, Marxism has to establish real relationships of exchange with the actual, empirical consciousness of people. It should be possible, in other words, to pass from one to the other. Gramsci writes:

Can modern theory [Marxism] be in opposition to the "spontaneous" feelings of the masses? ("Spontaneous" in the sense that they ... have been formed ... by the traditional popular conception of the world - what is unimaginatively called 'instinct'). It cannot be in

opposition to them. Between the two there is a quantitative difference of degree, so to speak, a passage from one to the other and vice versa, must be possible²⁶.

And again:

The unity between "spontaneity" and "conscious" leadership or "discipline" is precisely the real political action of the subaltern classes, insofar as this is mass politics and not merely an adventure by groups claiming to represent the masses²⁷.

The last quotation shows that Gramsci's is a position in favour of non-substitutionist politics. The organisational imperatives of such politics have not been worked out yet, and much of Marxist thinking on organisational problems to date remains deeply Leninist, the philosophical premises of which were set out by Lukacs²⁸. But if a socially hegemonic role for the proletarian ideology is seen as an important objective of political practice, such practice will need to be based on some of the Gramscian premises.

It then becomes necessary, as Gramsci said, 'to study and develop the elements of popular psychology, historically and sociologically, active (i.e. in order to transform them by educating them into a modern mentality)',²⁹. And the historian is free, once again, to be both a Marxist and a historian, and yet not mythologise history. My research on the jute mill workers of Bengal shows that religion, caste or 'community' continued to remain important to them at least till 1940 (where my study ends) and even later. And there are times when these factors act as real dividers of the working class. Some of the first 'battles' of the 1946 Hindu-Muslim riot, for example, were fought in the jute mills. A 'conspiracy' theory does not help, nor does a crude

idea of 'false consciousness' - and they both take real, actual, living people for fools³⁰. We need categories that can handle the existence of issues like caste or religion (or the like) in the minds of people, and also help explain their continued existence. My category of 'community consciousness' was a response to this need. I saw 'community' as an ensemble of relationships one is born into, as opposed to 'class' which is based on an associational principle³¹. It may have been an imperfect category. But the alternative category of an ahistorical, acultural and automatic 'class consciousness' simply will not serve.

FOOTNOTES AND REFERENCES

1. See Ranajit Das Gupta, 'Material Conditions and Behavioural Aspects of Calcutta Working Class 1875-1899' (Occasional Paper No.22, January, 1979, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta (CSSSC) and my paper 'Communal Riots and Labour: Bengal's Jute Mill Hands in the 1890s' (CRL). CRL has had two versions. In its first incarnation, it was circulated as the Occasional Paper No.11 of the CSSSC; in its second and much revised form, it is awaiting publication in Past and Present. Since Das Gupta's references are to the Occasional Paper Version, and since none of my later revisions would take me any closer to his position than I was before, all references to CRL in this note are to its 'first incarnation'.
2. See also my paper 'On Deifying and Defying Authority: Managers and Workers in Bengal Jute Mills c. 1890-1940' to be published in Ranajit Guha ed. Subaltern Studies, II, (forthcoming).
3. Hossainur Rahman, Hindu-Muslim Relations in Bengal 1905-1947 (Bombay, 1974), see Appendices (pp.153-4) where a letter written by Zahiruddin Ahmad is reproduced.
4. My later research indicates that there were more such riots. There is at least one very important file in the West Bengal State Archives (in the pre-1901 section) which I had unfortunately overlooked at the time of writing CRL. Most of the files, however, have been destroyed.
5. E.P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class (Harmondsworth, 1968; first pub. 1963), p.213, my emphasis.
6. Ibid., pp.391-393.
7. See for example, John Foster, Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution (London, 1977; first pub. 1974), pp.30-31.
8. Garoth Stedman Jones, Outcast London (Oxford, 1971), p.339. Emphasis added.
9. Compare the following :
Das Gupta (p.152) on Talla riot: 'was a kind of mixture of a mob ... sought to be operated by ... external interests [i.e. a 'manipulated' mob -DC] and a crowd spontaneously rebelling ...'

Thompson, The Making, p.78: 'We have here ... something of a mixture of manipulated mob and revolutionary crowd'.

10. Cf. Das Gupta, p.137: 'It [the demand for festival holidays -DC] was legitimised by more sophisticated traditions than a term like "community consciousness" suggests'.
- Thompson, The Making, p.67: 'It [riotous action-DC] ... was validated by more sophisticated traditions than the word 'riot' suggests'.
11. See Jones, Outcast London, p.342. Jones however clearly distinguishes such casual labour-urban poor radicalism from artisan 'class consciousness'. 'The suggestion [the reference here is to G. Rude The Crowd in History (1964) p.221] that ideas like "the rights of man" or "the sovereignty of the people" began to permeate the consciousness of the metropolitan poor from the French Revolution onwards, finds little echo in the existing evidence ...'
 12. Sukomal Sen, Working Class of India (Calcutta, 1977) and Panchanan Saha, History of the Working Class Movement in Bengal (New Delhi, 1978).
 13. Sen, ibid., p.87.
 14. R.P. Dutt, India Today (Bombay, 1946), p.331 quoted in Saha, op.cit 'Preface' and p.1.
 15. Gareth Stedman Jones, 'Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution [a review essay on Foster's book by the same title], New Left Review, No.90, March-April 1975, p.47.
 16. Ibid., pp.47-8.
 17. Georg Lukacs, History and Class Consciousness (London, 1971), p.51. I have however used Hobsbawm's translation of this sentence, as given in E.J. Hobsbawm, 'Class Consciousness in History' in Istvan Meszaros ed., Aspects of History and Class Consciousness (London, 1971), p.6.
 18. Lukacs, History, p.51.
 19. Ibid., p.345.
 20. Ibid., pp.174, 219.

21. Hobsbawm, 'Class Consciousness', p.7.
22. Richard Johnson, 'Three problematics: elements of a theory of working-class culture' in John Clarke *et.al.* eds., Working-Class Culture: Studies in History and Theory (London, 1979), p.211.
23. This I think is one reason why a serious tradition of labour history has not developed in India so far.
24. E.J. Hobsbawm, 'Labour History and Ideology', Journal of Social History, Summer 1974, p.375.
25. Q. Hoare and G.N. Smith eds, and trans., Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci (New York, 1973), p.9.
26. Ibid., pp.198-9.
27. Ibid., p.198.
28. Gramsci's position is based on the (problematic) assumption that consciousness can indeed be changed by purposeful intervention. There is also the point that substitutionist politics may in fact be the more feasible alternative in a country like in India in the short-term future, at least insofar as raising people's standards of living and capturing state-power are concerned. These are important considerations but they need not detain us here.
29. Gramsci quoted in Johnson, 'Three problematics', p.209.
30. Cf. E.P. Thompson, Whigs and Hunters (Harmondsworth, 1977) p.262: '... people are not as stupid as some structuralist / Thompson's unfortunate term for 'Stalinism' in modern intellection -DC / philosophers suppose them to be. They will not be mystified by the first man who puts on a wig'. For Thompson's critique of 'structuralism', see his 'The Poverty of Theory' in his The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays (London, 1978).
31. For a theoretical discussion of the problem, see Partha Chatterjee, 'Thinking About Ideology: In search of an Analytical Framework', CSSSC Occasional Paper, No.21, November 1978, pp.7-10.

A REPLY

Ranajit Das Gupta

I am grateful to Dipesh Chakrabarty for his critique of my Material Conditions and Behavioural Aspects of Calcutta Working Class 1875-1899 (hereafter Occasional Paper 22). His sharply critical tone notwithstanding, I am sure his poser of certain important issues will contribute to a better understanding of labour history in colonial India and also of Marxism as a method of investigating and analyzing that history.

At the outset I must admit that at several places of my Occasional Paper the language and style are not happy. I also must admit that in one or two places Chakrabarty has caught me at my weak spots. He has taken exception to my ascribing to him the position that he picked out a passage from the Government of Bengal's reply to the 1892 Royal Commission on Labour to prove the absence of open and direct action on the part of workers in the 1880s. I agree that this is certainly not his explicitly stated position. But it must also be emphasized that there is not a single reference in his Occasional Paper to any of the several open and direct actions of the workers that took place in the 1870s and 1880s.

Despite Chakrabarty's hard-hitting criticism I find no reason to revise my basic position. Chakrabarty's essential contention that the workers in the 1890s were only community-conscious and at times even communal and did not exhibit any working class attitude and characteristics is in my view absolutely wrong. The disagreement arises from fundamental differences of perspective, method, handling of materials

and analysis. In this reply I am going to limit myself to those disagreements which may be discussed fruitfully. Acrimony, in however smart and elegant a prose style, is not only infructuous but tiresome as well.

My central concern has been to study the process of transformation of sections of the labouring population into an industrial working class in late nineteenth century Bengal. This was a complex social process full of zigzags and contradictions. In the paper my focus has been on the formation of the proletariat (Occasional Paper 22, pp.7-8), and their conditions of work and existence as well as their mental and behavioural response to such conditions in a colonial setting.

In doing that study I have touched on certain aspects of Dipesh Chakrabarty's Occasional Paper. I have found his intention to go "beyond the bounds of conventional labour history and venture into the field of urban and political histories", a line of enquiry full of promise. But, in practice, his central and only focus is unambiguously indicated by the title of his Occasional Paper: 'Communal Riots and Labour'. His area of interest is considerably different from and, so far as the above-mentioned paper is concerned, much narrower than that of mine. Chakrabarty neither sees labour history as a historical process nor indicates any awareness of the immense complexities involved in the unfolding of such a historical process.

In the context of such an approach it is not surprising that he implies that there is a contradiction (Critique, p.3) between my observations that it is "factually erroneous" to speak about "the absence of workers' open and direct action" in the 1870s and 1880s (Occasional Paper 22, p.33) and that "the period from 1880s to mid-1890s was one of lull" (ibid, p.38). But the same passage, which Chakrabarty quotes

(Critique, p.4), mentions "the battles of the early 1880s" (Occasional Paper 22, pp.52-6). Chakrabarty fails to comprehend that history of workers' action is not a history of linear progression. The early stirrings among factory workers in Bengal were followed by a few years of quiescence. But this was temporary. Soon workers' action began to take place in much greater frequency and intensity than before. I have tried to chronicle as well as analyze the significance of these actions. If there are any apparent contradictions in my paper, then they arise from the contradictory developments and processes to be found in the actual happenings of history. The problem here is not any internal contradictions in my argument, but Chakrabarty's attempts to ignore all happenings which do not fit in with his stereotype of the community-conscious worker.

Chakrabarty accuses me of 'misreading' and at times of 'misrepresentation' (Critique, p.2). He is indignant with me for finding his 'Communal Riots and Labour' 'somewhat exaggerated', for holding him responsible for 'belittling' 'the significance' of the jute workers' struggle in the 1890s, for considering his term 'community consciousness' too narrow (Critique, p.2) and for accusing him of arguing that Talla riot was "communal in character and par-Islamic in content", (ibid, p.5). It is true that he draws a distinction between the two categories 'community consciousness' and 'communal outlook'. Also true, he does not explicitly characterize the Talla Riot as 'communal'. But his Occasional Paper gives the clear impression that his sole concern is with communal aspects of workers' feeling and attitude and also with only those riots which were communal. The very title of his paper - 'Communal Riots and Labour' - does not leave any scope for ambiguity

regarding his central focus¹.

In course of his argument and analysis in 'Communal Riots and Labour' the definitional distinction drawn between 'community consciousness' and 'communal attitude', a distinction about which he speaks so much in his Critique, gets blurred and the two categories become interchangeable. Thus, he speaks of "...rioting by mill hands on ... communal issues, or of the growth of 'community consciousness' among some jute mill hands" (CRR, p.19) spelling out his objective he writes, "We are for the (sic) beginnings of certain social trends, e.g. trends of communal tension among labouring men in Calcutta" (ibid, p.6). He adds, "We have selected data with this objective in mind" (ibid, p.6; emphasis mine). In view of all this is it misleading to consider his category of 'community consciousness' as synonymous with 'communal outlook'? Considering the fact that he has chosen to disregard all those aspects of the Talla riot which show that it was much more than only a religious, communal and pan-Islamic riot, am I to be faulted for suggesting that in Chakrabarty's view the Talla riot was just a 'communal and pan-Islamic' riot?

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1. Repeatedly he states that his almost only concern in the paper is with 'communal culture' of jute mill workers ('Communal Riots and Labour', p.1), 'the history of communal violence in the city', 'the beginnings of the tradition of "politics of mass communal violence" in Calcutta' (ibid, p.2), those demands 'of the immigrant mill hands and the city poor' 'that essentially represented community issues, and that at times bordered on communalism' (ibid, p.9), 'a growing communal culture' (p.11) and rioting by mill hands on 'communal issues' (ibid, p.19). In the same vein he writes that "communal sentiments were not confined to the jute mill labourers only, they seem to have been shared in the very same period by certain other groups of the city's labouring poor too". Continuing he states, "These men participated in some communal riots that broke out in Calcutta and in the suburbs in the 1890s" (ibid, p.2).

Chakrabarty asks in a tone of disapprobation: "Why is Das Gupta so dismissive of the communal riots of 1896"? (Critique, p.7). But am I really so dismissive? I have made two pointed and specific references to these riots in two places, (Occasional Paper 22, pp.80-81 and 119-20), with due acknowledgement to Chakrabarty himself. But I had no wish to repeat the discussion made by Chakrabarty. I also wanted to view these riots in the overall context of labour discontent, violent action and even criminal practices on the part of the workers in the late nineteenth century.

Chakrabarty, however, takes a different view. He concentrates on the communal violence to the virtual exclusion of all other kinds of group action. This is nothing but a highly one-sided and misleading treatment of communal riots, particularly when, to go by even Chakrabarty's own account in his Occasional Paper, there were only three incidents of the former kind; while the number of open and direct actions, such as mass deputations, strikes and crowd violence in the 1890s around industrial issues in defence of their interests at the department or factory level were no less than fourteen.

Chakrabarty's reference to archival and newspaper sources indicate that he must have come across at least some of the relevant evidence, which is also quoted copiously in my paper. Yet, after making a mention of these actions in a most perfunctory manner, it is he who chooses to take, to use his own term, a 'dismissive' view of all protest actions and industrial struggles against capitalist employers - all actions that cut across religious community boundaries. In fact, he himself makes the admission: "Our sample of riots is .. biased" (Communal Riots and Labour, p.3). Again: "This paper also suffers from a lopsided emphasis" (ibid., p.5). What Chakrabarty describes as

'biased' and 'lopsided', I prefer to call 'exaggerated'.

What is involved in all this is not just belittling of the 'significance' of workers' action but something more. There is a total disregard for workers' collective action against capitalist employers. In his Critique he is full of self-righteous injunctions about writing 'concrete history of labour' (Critique, p.9, emphasis in the original), 'empirical history' (ibid, p.8) and 'good' and 'bad' history (ibid, p.29). It is indeed unfortunate that Chakrabarty's own way of writing 'concrete history of labour' and 'empirical history' consists in ignoring all awkward facts.

The argument in my paper has not been that the early jute workers never exhibited community-centric attitudes or at times were not embroiled in communal riots. The argument has been that they were not merely communal or community-centric but that they also put forward demands and resorted to mass actions which reflected, despite various limitations, their efforts to bring about some improvement in their conditions of work and living. Similarly, the argument has not been that the demand for festival holidays did not indicate any 'community consciousness'. The argument has been that the category 'community consciousness' is not adequate for understanding the demand for festival holidays which in my view "reflected the desperate striving of the raw and new workers to recreate the old way of life on an adapted basis" and "also a protest by the raw workers against the new kind of oppression and exploitation they faced" (ibid, p.137).

Chakrabarty does not either question the evidence or refute my line of reasoning. He simply makes certain assertions. With regard to the Kankinarah Mahomedan Association and the Talla riot he makes an attempt to present some sort of logic. In my paper I have argued

that though the Association in its early days (i.e. about 1895) was just a philanthropic organization looking after the interests of Muslim workers only, soon there was a change in its composition as well as nature of activities. Thus, Kazi Zahir-ud-din Ahmed, the President of the Association, in his evidence submitted to the Indian Factory Labour Commission of 1908 stated, "It [the Association] was started in 1895 with the object of attracting more Mahomedans to jute mills, but since then Hindus had been admitted to membership, and now the Association looked after the interests of the operatives generally..." He informed the Commission that in preparing his representation he had "consulted a good number of representative Hindu and Musalman workers". And he asked for holidays on account of both Muslim and Hindu religious festivals². Chakrabarty, however, mentions only that portion of Zahir-ud-din's evidence which seems to buttress his argument but leaves out all that contradicts his thesis. In his Critique (p.4 and f.n.3) he refers to a piece of evidence, a letter written by Zahir-ud-din to the private secretary to the Viceroy, that purports to establish that he was pro-British and anti-Hindu. This letter, written at the height of Swadeshi movement shows that he certainly exhibited a loyalist attitude and was opposed to the Swadeshi movement which he thought was led by some Calcutta-based Hindu Zamindars. But does this establish that the Mahomedan Association was an organization of Muslim workers only and looked after their interests only? Further, have I argued that the Mahomedan Association of which Zahir-ud-din was President was an anti-British and militantly anti-capitalist organization? What I have argued is that the activities and various demands including the demand for religious festival holidays had much wider implications. But Chakrabarty stubbornly refuses to see the significance of the fact

2. See Parliamentary Papers, 1909, Vol.63. Indian Factory Labour Commission 1908. Evidence. Witness No. 63.

that Zahir-ud-din, despite his loyalist stance, was not averse to opening the doors of the Association to Hindu workers, holding joint meetings of Hindu and Muslim workers and putting forward demands for Muslim as well as Hindu festival holidays. He also doggedly refuses to see the underlying incipient labour-capital conflict in all this.

With regard to the Talla riot, Chakrabarty complacently reiterates, "... surely it originated around Muslim community centered demands, Muslims surely formed a majority among the rioters, and rumours afloat during the riot surely show a pan-Islamist content". On the basis of evidence that I could gather I have contended in my paper, "... the Talla riot had its anomaly. This was because of its narrow Muslim-centred origin and pan-Islamic overtone on the one hand and its broad popular anti-police, anti-Government direction on the other" (op.cit., pp.131-2). I do not still know whether Chakrabarty agrees with these findings and observations.

Chakrabarty deliberately selects that portion of the available evidence which supports his theory of communal sentiments or its new fangled substitute 'community consciousness'. The 'theory in his head' takes precedence over historical materials. This is, if anything, a trifle peculiar from somebody who prefers to preach with E.P. Thompson's celebrated dictum as his guiding epigraph. Is it too much to expect that some one who goes on hectoring about 'how to write good history' should practice at least, some of his own precepts?

I have argued that in the 1870s and 1880s faced with the uncongenial world in the towns and industries of colonial capitalism the pioneer workers responded with 'strike-in-detail'. This behaviour was provoked not by a desire to change their working conditions or

wages but to maintain their pre-industrial work behaviour, as far as possible. In the 1890s, however, there was a new state of ferment among the jute mill workers that found manifestation in a heightening of group and at times mass action. Several cases of collective action - deputations, disorders, strikes, violent troubles and riots etc. occurred. To reiterate my position they did not express a clarified socio-political goal or comprehend the basic antagonism involved but these protests do show that the workers were trying to improve their lot through collective action. The crucial difference in the 1890s was the nature of the grievances : wages, length of the working day, oppression of sardars, festival holidays and other industrial matters. These incidents, however represented only the tip of an iceberg - the existence of widespread dissatisfaction among not only the jute mill workers but among the labouring poor of Calcutta. It is this dissatisfaction that found a dramatic expression in the Talla riot.

Chakrabarty is, however, determined to ignore the significance of all this. For him demands like festival holidays can only have a community-centric implication. But in my view the context was more complex and this must not be glossed over. These have been elaborated and analyzed in my Occasional Paper (pp.134-8). My point is that in the conditions prevailing in those days, the emerging working class was desperately short of means of resistance to the new ways of exploitation and authority and had to resort to everything including religion.

Chakrabarty takes exception to my characterization of the term 'community consciousness as being "too narrow". But this characterization was made in the course of discussing the demand for festival holidays (ibid, p.137). I made the further observation, "In view of all these we should be chary in making generalization about ...

community consciousness. The demand for religious festival holidays certainly indicated a community-feeling. But it was mingled with something broader than this" (ibid, p.141). Chakrabarty does not agree with this reasoning and rejects it. He does not give any reason or argument. He merely asserts (a) that Das Gupta "does not stop to think how the specific cultural past of jute workers relates to the questions of class consciousness" and (b) that Das Gupta draws "a quite superficial and unwarranted" parallel with the history of the English working class (Critique, p.11).

This really is not a sufficient reason to reject my argument. Even if I grant for argument's sake that the parallel drawn is wrong, but what does that have to do with my main line of argument and interpretation in relation to jute workers' demand for festival holiday? Also, is the parallel drawn so unjustified as Chakrabarty tries to make it out? He refers to various authorities to establish his point; E.J. Hobsbawm is one of them. But it is Hobsbawm who with reference to Dissenting Labour Sects speaks of "proletarian organizations and aspirations of a sort expressed through traditional religious ideology"³. Again, "it was natural for the common people to use religious language to express their first aspirations ..."⁴. Sure enough, there are very important differences between dissenting Christianity in Britain and Islam or Hinduism in Bengal. But no mechanical parallel has been drawn, the differences in the two situations have been hinted at in my paper. (op.cit., pp.135-138).

3. Social Bandits and Primitive Rebels, (Manchester 1959), p.7.

4. Ibid, p.145; see also pp.126, 127, 129, 130.

So far as (a) is concerned, the accusation made against me is quite unfair. For in dealing with demand for holidays on the occasion of festivals I have been exactly trying to do what I am accused of not doing. Throughout I have tried to understand, examine and explain the influence of the cultural past in the lives of the first generation jute mill workers. I, of course, have not considered the influence of cultural past in its entirety. My focus has been on one particular but important aspect, that is, religion. I have tried to show how the forms of traditional religion, which had encompassed the lives of common people for centuries, affected the early industrial workers (Occasional Paper 22, pp.95-100, 134-38).

Chakrabarty's several other specific criticisms of my paper warrant some comments. He rejects the concluding observations I made. In his presentation of my view I am supposed to have spoken of class consciousness of the jute workers in the 1890s. (Critique, pp.2, 7). Further, I am represented by him as arguing that "The working class anywhere is born with an instinct for moving towards class consciousness" (p.6). May I submit that Chakrabarty actually makes a caricature of my analysis? While he professes "to quote Das Gupta in extenso on class consciousness" (p.7), he in practice omits significant portions and mutilates my argument.

So let me quote the relevant portions from the section entitled 'Towards Working Class Forms of Action and Class Feeling':

"... it may be stated that the workers in the 1890s ... increasingly resorted to characteristically working class forms of action - combinations, active interventions and direct group actions It is tempting to belittle the significance of these actions ... 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 not yet class-consciousness - neither political consciousness nor even the trade union consciousness which Lenin was speaking of, for St. Petersburg in this period (emphasis added). 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 advancing its immediate interests, the transitional work force was trying, of course in a rambling and sporadic fashion (emphasis added), to overcome its part-human, depersonalized, disembodied condition of existence, to establish working class and human rights and to get on the road towards self-awareness and working class consciousness" (pp.150-51; if not stated otherwise, emphasis in the original).

It is possible to agree or disagree with the above passage. But by no stretch of rarefied imagination can it be derived that I have described the workers in the 1890s as exhibiting class consciousness. If Chakrabarty had read the piece with a modicum of humility and attention he would have noted that I was making a very cautious and qualified statement. In fact, here a clear distinction was being made between three categories : class feeling, trade union consciousness and class consciousness. And such a distinction is present in Marxist analysis. 'Class feeling' encompasses something more than what Chakrabarty thinks ("hatred and hostility" for the rich, Critique, p.73). This is clearly indicated by the fact that specific demands were formulated by the workers in the 1890s, and the obvious aims of these were limited reform, of the prevailing state of affairs. I have

viewed all this as class feeling as the workers were going beyond isolated and individual feeling and reaction found in the 1870s and 1880s and resorting to group and collective, i.e. social expression of their resentment and aspirations⁵.

Chakrabarty asks the question : "If the workers felt an identity of interests between themselves and against their employers, weren't they, for all practical purposes, class conscious...?" (Critique, p.13; emphasis in original). This seems to be a strangely muddled notion of class consciousness and more than a little surprising when it comes from some one who gives the impression of being familiar with classical Marxism and its more sophisticated 20th century variants.

In Marx's terms proletarian class consciousness involves not merely a sense or feeling but a pervasive understanding and comprehension of the proletariat's position and role in the economy and society; it also involves an intellectual or theoretical articulation of that understanding, and also a conscious and active striving for bringing about a revolutionary transformation of the economy and society through a formal organization including mediation of a political organization⁶. In this context the jute mill workers in the 1890s manifested just class

5. Chakrabarty is factually wrong when he asserts that "there was not even a single strike in which all the workers of a mill combined" (Critique, p.7). In fact, at least three instances of mill-wise strikes and group actions - Kankinara Jute Mill and Budge Budge Jute Mill strikes of 1895 and Baranagore Jute Mill strike of 1896 - have been mentioned in my paper (pp.89-92).
6. See Marx, The Poverty of Philosophy, Moscow, n.d., pp.192-5; and Marx and Engels, 'Manifesto of the Communist Party' in Selected Works, I, Moscow, 1950, pp.40-1, 42.

feeling at which they had arrived at instinctively or, what in my view is the same thing, spontaneously.

Chakrabarty, however, strongly, objects to the use of the term 'instinctive'. He attributes to me "an 'instinctive' view of class consciousness". Marx, Engels and Lenin, the founding fathers ^{of} Marxist theory and practice, have themselves spoken of "the instinct of rebellion" against capitalist exploitation. Their writings clearly suggest spontaneous generation of discontent as well as certain aspirations as distinct from 'class consciousness' from the objective position of the proletariat⁷.

My observation that "the workers in the 1890s were haltingly discovering certain elementary rules and truth about class warfare" is also found to be objectionable by Chakrabarty. Ridiculing this he writes, "Indeed, his [Das Gupta's] workers 'discover' (emphasis Chakrabarty's) rules and truth of class warfare, - rules and truths that were already obviously there - by the very fact of being workers so great is their 'epistemological privilege'" (Critique, p.8). In his zeal to ridicule, he misses the main point. The position is not whether any rule is laid down somewhere waiting to be discovered. It is an essential aspect of social reality that the workers, and indeed any subordinate group or class, because of their position in class society cannot make things move unless they act collectively. The jute workers in their first generation of existence were discovering this truth

7. See Marx, The Poverty of Philosophy, pp.192-5, Marx and Engels, Manifesto of the Communist Party in Selected Works, I, pp.40-1, and Engels, The Conditions of the Working Class, Moscow, 1973, pp.255-6, 261-2. Lenin used the very term 'instinct' in the sense of "unconsciousness (spontaneity)" in the context of generation of trade union consciousness. Thus, he writes : "... instinct is that unconsciousness (spontaneity) [giving rise to trade union consciousness] to the aid of which Socialists must come" ('What Is To Be Done', Collected Works, Vol.5, p.368).

through their experience of labour and life. Chakrabarty, however, is oblivious of all this.

For Chakrabarty historical processes are to be seen in black or white, shades of grey are irrelevant. Hence, there can either be community consciousness or class consciousness. A work force cannot exhibit, for Chakrabarty, the multiplex reality of overlapping levels of interests, feelings and consciousness. Thus workers must show either an "indifference to work" or a "willingness to work" (Critique, p.12); an organization must be pro-Muslim, anti-Hindu or an anti-British labour organization. (See Chakrabarty's treatment of Mahomedan Association.) Change or flux, or process of formation are to be glossed over. History unfortunately is not so neat, and complexities relating to change or process are of some relevance to a serious study of labour history.

I am grateful to Prof. Amiya Bagchi for suggestions on an earlier draft.

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15. On the Scientific Study of Politics : A Review of the Positivist Method (*The State of Political Theory : Some Marxist Essays*. Calcutta, Research India Publications, 1978)
PARTHA CHATTERJEE
16. Trade and Empire in Awadh, 1756-1804 (Forthcoming in *Past and Present*, Oxford)
RUDRANGSHU MUKHERJEE
17. The Ethnic and Social Bases of Indian Federalism
SHIBANI KINKAR CHAUBE
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