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# THE BINDERY WORKERS OF DAFTARIPARA

## I. Forms and Fragments

ASOK SEN

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APRIL, 1991

CENTRE FOR STUDIES IN SOCIAL  
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~~Binding workers of Daftaripara...~~



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THE BINDERY WORKERS OF DAFTARIPARA

I. Forms and Fragments

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Asok Sen

## ABSTRACT

The paper presents the first report of our findings about the bindery workers in the Patwarbagan-Pataldanga locality (Calcutta Corporation Ward 37). The area is known as daftaripara for its age-old concentration of book-binding. Apart from book-binding there are a large number of units engaged in khata-binding, ruling, pad-binding, envelope-making, numbering, labelling and scrap-picking. This first report situates the workers in relation to the overall structural features of the binderies and other allied activities of daftaripara. We find the co-existence of various modes of processing, their diversities of size, activity, composition of work-force and owner-worker relationship. The second report will follow with its presentation of thirty-five life-stories collected from as many workers.

## THE BINDERY WORKERS OF DAFTARIPARA

### I. Forms and Fragments

#### Introduction

In an earlier enquiry about the Calcutta Metropolitan District, we observed the large size of the so-called informal sector in the city's pattern of employment. (Sen and Banerjee 1983, p.37). The Census of Establishments i.e. the Economic Census of 1981 indicated that the proportion of those in the informal sector could reasonably be estimated as 30 per cent among industrial workers alone. The weightage of the informal sector would necessarily be higher in various tertiary activities.

Thus, the extent of structural diversity in labour forms is significant within the city of Calcutta and its wider metropolitan areas. We took up two case studies in August 1988 to explore the socio-economic and cultural patterns characterizing the large labour force in the informal segments of the economy. The object of this enquiry was far from any attempt to have an aggregative view of the city's informal sector. We selected two areas for an investigation of the specific characteristics of some particular segments of the labouring people. It was our aim to have a composite view of the socio-economic and cultural characteristics among the particular groups of labouring people. We also cared to take account of the linkages between the informal and the organised sectors.

Our selection of the two areas followed a design whereby we could observe the labouring people in a particular activity of long standing and also the diversity of activities among the labourers of a particular habitat. The area chosen to serve the first object is Ward 37 of the Calcutta Corporation District. This is the Patwarbagan-Pataldanga locality with its concentration of book-binding. The entire ward is known as daftaripara. The habitat selected for the second object of our enquiry was a part of the squatters' colonies located in lands adjacent to the railway tracks spreading to the west of the Dhakuria station.

This report presents our findings on the bindery workers of daftaripara. Apart from book-binding, there are a large number of units engaged in khata-binding, ruling, pad-binding, envelope making, numbering, labelling and scrap-picking. While we have taken an overview of all the activities of daftaripara, our enquiry made a more intensive investigation of book-binding, khata-binding and ruling.

### Location and Coverage

The enquiry used no schedule for a structured investigation of workers. It was aimed more at the collection of their own life-stories, work history, attitudes to various aspects of their life and experience as narrated by bindery workers themselves. We planned however for a complete enumeration of all units of binderies and other allied activities in daftaripara. The information about the number of units in various activities, their regular and seasonal workers, the extent of self-employment of owners as labourers, and some ideas regarding the floor area of a unit were all obtained from this complete enumeration.

A large majority of the regular workers in binderies work on a daily wage basis. They are not entitled to any leave with pay or paid holidays. Nor do they have payment for days when there is no work. Usually, they receive wages once a week. Such workers are often practically attached to a unit. Very few bindery workers are employed on monthly salaries with leave and holiday benefits. They belong mainly to large units. The medium units also have some workers on a monthly salary basis. We have considered both daily wage labourers and those employed on monthly salaries as regular workers. The criterion is their practical continuity of work in a unit. Seasonal workers are those who find work only in periods of high demand in binderies. Such seasonal demand is most pronounced in book-binding and khata-binding. They are employed on a daily wage basis for the whole or part of a busy season lasting for 2 to 4 months at a stretch.



There are some workers who are employed on a piece rate basis. They are mostly found in sorting and stitching jobs in book- and khata-binding. Our information at the stage of complete enumeration was not collected for any precise reference period; it was obtained in respect of the characteristic pattern of a unit.

The ward 37 of Calcutta Corporation is known as daftaripara i.e. the locality of book-binders. There is dense concentration of binderies in this ward. Its boundaries are set by Acharya Prafulla Chandra Road on the east, Raja Rammohan Sarani on the west, Keshab Sen Street and Surya Sen Street on the north and the south respectively. Baithakkhana Road spreads from the south to north all along the ward and divides it into eastern and western parts. Near the middle of its long spread, Baithakkhana Road is joined from the east by Kali Shome Street and Dr. Kartik Bose Street from the west. The latter act like a corridor through the middle of the ward between Acharya Prafulla Chandra Road and Raja Rammohan Sarani. Patwarbagan Lane and the area known as Patwarbagan are situated to the north-east of this crossing on the Baithakkhana Road.

Within the ward, the densest concentration of units is in Patwarbagan. A large number of units are also located in Baithakkhana Road and the Keshab Chandra Sen Street. Some fewer numbers are spread over Budhu Ostagar Lane, Anthony Bagan Lane, Kali Shome Street, Ramnath Biswas Lane, Pataldanga Street and also the part of Acharya Prafulla Chandra Road covered in the ward area. Patwarbagan is the oldest centre of bindery work in the locality.

Our attempt to have a complete list of binderies and other allied activities in the area yields a total of about 500 units. The total number of persons working in these units were about 4000. They include both regular and seasonal workers. Annually seasonal workers increase the size of the employed labour force by 30 to 35 per cent of regular workers. The binderies include both book-binding and khata-binding units. There are units engaged in the other activities like ruling, packet-making, envelope-making, pad-binding labelling, file-making, numbering, punching, and sorting of white scraps from the heaps of paper refuse. Such scraps are used as inputs of fresh paper production.

The largest number of units are engaged in khata-binding constituting about 36 per cent of all units with almost the same proportion of total regular workers. As for the seasonal increase their share amounts to 47 per cent of all seasonal workers.

Book-binding comes next in number of units and workers. It constitutes <sup>nearly</sup> 23 per cent of units with about 29 per cent of all regular workers. The share of seasonal workers was about 37 per cent. The units engaged in envelope-making were about 11 per cent with more than 8 per cent of regular workers. The weightage of different activities may then be broadly summed up in the following table :

Activity	Percentage of units	Percentage of regular workers	Percentage of seasonal workers
1. Book-binding	22.60	28.80	36.63
2. Khata-binding	36.30	36.60	47.13
3. Ruling	7.31	5.80	4.02
4. Packet	7.76	8.32	1.34
5. Envelope	10.96	8.67	5.00
6. Pad	8.45	5.50	3.42
7. File	1.14	1.15	1.34
8. Numbering	2.28	2.00	-
9. Others	3.20	3.16	1.12
10. All	100	100	100

### Past and Present

The composition of ownership and labour in bindery work has passed through several notable changes through the last fifty years. We could interview people who had the experience of working in binderies and ruling units of this area for many years.

At present the owner of a ruling unit, Harendra Nath started work as an ordinary labourer in the mid-fifties. He had to leave his native place in East Bengal on account of pressing insecurity after the country's partition. His long career in daftaripara began as an apprentice of a muslim master workman (ostad kariqar).

Harendra gave us a lot of information which he learned about the past of the bindery business in daftaripara from very senior and old workers. He knew some of them in the early days of his career. The original locale of printing and bindery mainly sponsored by British rulers was in Radhabazar and Chinabazar, the areas adjacent to courts and offices. With the rise of land prices in those parts of the city, further expansion of bindery work shifted to daftari-para. Many bindery workers lived in daftaripara even before the particular activity itself came to be concentrated in the area. This area was mainly inhabited by Muslims from East Bengal. They also constituted the bulk of the bindery workers. Ruling work required high skills and also advanced instruments. Local labourers were initiated to ruling work by English promoters. In view of the eminence of skill in ruling work, it was done in strict secrecy behind curtains in order to conceal the process of ruling from the general view of outsiders. This information obtained from Harendra Nath, was corroborated by several other old workers of the locality.

We talked with Bimal Basu who belongs to a family of long standing in the locality. He has been born and brought up in this locality. Basu is now about 57 years old. He has his own bindery establishment and told us from his own experience : 'Bindery work was almost wholly confined to the Muslims. It was considered "low work" by the Hindus. Among the Muslims in this work, bindery often assumed the position of a "hereditary occupation". Later, after the partition, the Hindus also entered this activity. They are now very

much in it both as workers and employers. Still, the Muslim workers are far more adept and efficient. They continue to be the majority in khata-binding, envelope-making, labelling etc. In book-binding however, the Hindus now constitute a large majority both in respect of ownership and labour.'

Thus, in daftaripara, the binding business was in the beginning almost an exclusive monopoly of East Bengal Muslims. This was true of both owners and workers. Patwarbagan had a very large component of resident Urdu-speaking population from Bihar. They owned many houses in Patwarbagan. Some of those buildings were rented to binderies, their owners and workers, for business and residential use. The initial link of non-Bengali muslims to binderies did not go beyond this landlord-tenant relationship. They were themselves engaged in diverse activities like press and printing, fruit selling, shoe making, rickshaw pulling, hotel keeping, and miscellaneous services.

Subsequently, the size of non-Bengali Muslim families increased and the amount of rent income tended to be inadequate for their proper maintenance as a result of the division of house property. About 20 per cent of them had to seek livelihood in binderies. The women did sorting and stitching work put out by the binderies as low wage piece rate jobs to be done in households. In cases of utter distress and poverty, which had been quite numerous, even the children were sent to binderies for some-earnings.

It may then be possible to think of three stages in the changing composition of labour and enterprise in the binderies of daftaripara. Firstly, the business was almost wholly in the hands of Muslims from East Bengal. They were inclined to have workers from their own native places. Secondly, in course of their business, the East Bengal Muslim owners became more and more familiar with the local people of their own religion themselves mainly immigrants from Bihar and thus began the recruitment of the latter as bindery workers.

Thirdly, after the partition, there occurred large movements of East Bengal Hindus from their native places to Calcutta, and of East Bengal Muslims from Calcutta to the newly formed East Pakistan (now Bangla Desh). Many poor Hindu refugees became bindery workers in their frantic search for a livelihood. The proximity of daftaripara to the Sealdah railway station, where the displaced persons from East Bengal arrived in large numbers, also contributed to such a push of Hindu refugees to bindery work.

Moreover, the earlier decades after independence witnessed a continuous process of ownership transfers. Such transfers were frequently caused by the exodus of Muslim owners to East Bengal. The bindery units were often left in charge of their able and senior Hindu workers who eventually assumed virtual ownership since the original owners never returned to Calcutta for any stable resettlement. In course of our enquiry during a much more recent period between 1988 and 1990, we have seen a few instances involving owners who now live with their families in Bangla Desh, but are not yet

agreeable to relinquishing their ownership claims on binderies in daftaripara. Some complex legal disputes came to our notice in this regard.

### Scale and Forms

Book-binding and khata-binding are the most prominent activities of daftaripara. Together they account for about 60 per cent of total units in all activities, 65 per cent of regular workers and 84 per cent of seasonal workers. Their share of the total value of all work done is much larger than that of all the remaining activities (viz. ruling, envelope-making, pad-binding etc.).

Ruling has its characteristic of being more capital-intensive than any other activity. No units in ruling are found to have more than ten regular workers. About 85 per cent units have owners who work also as direct labourers. The ruling machine is indispensable. And so are the skilled labourers who can ably operate those machines. Ruling units are supplied with paper by their customers and can do work of such specifications that are feasible with the machines in their possession. Ruling work at this level is now in an acute and perhaps irreversible crisis posed by the spread of offset printing.

In book-binding, barely 9 per cent of all units have a size of regular work-force of 13 or more labourers. They account for no less than 24 per cent of all regular workers in book-binding. Such units enjoy a steady flow of work over

time. They need only 8 per cent of all seasonal workers in book-binding to cope with any abrupt fluctuations in the volume of work. No owner of a unit with a regular work-force of 13 and above takes part in direct labour, while owners' participation in direct labour prevails among numerous units of smaller size.

Thus, the segment of book-binding in daftaripara, having an average workforce of at least twenty workers per unit, satisfied the conditions of organised capitalist business. It is true of their employer-worker relationship, their infrastructural strength, their resource endowment, and the nature of their clientele being provided by several large publishers of the city. Some large units have the monopoly of bookbinding orders from one or more big publishing houses. Such a scheme of demand and supply is facilitated by the storage spaces in the possession of the large binderies. It enables them to stock the unbound formes of books which are printed in large numbers. Big publishers can then take delivery of complete books in phases appropriate to the state of market demand.

Our idea of the large units will remain incomplete unless we take account of some differences prevailing among themselves. All large units are not similar in their full articulation of the mode of capitalist business. Such disparities are particularly evident in respect of the methods, terms and conditions of labour employment. This aspect will be more elaborated in the sections on 'variations in owner-labour relations' and 'earnings and living'.



Apart from large establishments of 13 or more regular workers, we have grouped book-binderies into small (1-4 regular workers) and medium (5-12 regular workers) units. No less than 76 per cent of all regular workers are engaged in small and medium units; their share of seasonal labourers amounts to 92 per cent. The small ones cover 37 per cent of all units and 17 per cent of regular workers. Their share of seasonal labourers amounts to nearly 30 per cent. Four-fifths of small units have owners who are also direct labourers. Such self-employed workers constitute nearly one-third of the regular work-force in small units. 50 per cent of the hired workers in such units are seasonal. In small units where owners are not direct labourers, seasonal workers constitute 60 per cent of the total work-force.

The medium units in bookbinding constitute 54 per cent of all units having nearly 59 per cent of regular workers. They account for 62 per cent of seasonal workers. The proportion of medium units with owners' participation in direct labour is 32 per cent and they account for 39 per cent of regular workers in the group. Their share of seasonal workers in the group is 28 per cent. About one-third of the work-force in units where owners also work, is provided by seasonal labour.

Considering small and medium groups together, 51 per cent of units have owners who are direct labourers. Their share of the regular work-force in the two groups together amount to 40 per cent. Thus, among small units and also to a notable extent among medium units as well, the mode of production shows no clear differentiation between capital and

labour. There is wide prevalence of what we can characterize as petty mode of processing with self-employed owner-workers in numerous units.

Some possible advantages of division of labour can be suitably derived only in units with larger number of workers. A group of five labourers is the minimum size of a labour team which can distribute among itself the separate jobs making up the entire process of book-binding. The job of sorting and stitching is usually assigned to casual workers. It is noteworthy that in medium units with no owner participation in direct labour, the average size of work-force is nearly eight regular workers per unit, while in units where owners take part in direct labour, such average size is just about six regular workers.

Again, the advantages of division of labour can be obtained from larger availability of storage and working space. We have no suitable information as regards the differences in this regard between small, medium and large units. It has not been possible to gather reliable information about godown spaces, which are separate from the binderies themselves. In terms of spaces available at the bindery units, medium units have an average size roughly twice that of small units. Many small units cover tiny floor areas between 50 and 80 square feet. Rarely does a small unit exceed an area of 120 square feet. The medium units have wide variations in areas occupied by them, ranging from barely 100 square feet to nearby 3000 square feet. The spaces are bigger for those medium units which have a work-force of 8 and more regular

workers. The area of a large unit is seldom less than 1000 square feet. The average size of large units is 130 per cent above that of medium units. Obviously, the medium units are in different positions ranging from being just above the small units to that closer to the organised business-like operation of large units, depending on the size of work-force, the separation of owners from direct labour, and the available working and storage space. Many owners of medium units rise from their earlier occupations as direct labourers. They often continue to take part in the labour process so that the level of productivity may be enhanced with less expenditure for hired workers.

The overall structure of book-binding activity appears to be marked by the preponderance of petty self-employed production at one pole and the prominence of business units organised on clearer capitalist criterion at the other. The monopoly control of the latter over a very substantial part of the market for bookbinding is also evident. The capacity of the developed capitalist sector never generates a labour demand which is sufficient for eliminating the petty non-capitalist or semi-capitalist units of book-binding. They are satisfied with the level of profits yielded by certain limits of the scale of production which is sufficient to meet the demand of the more affluent publishers. The capitalist sector does not find it profitable to capture the demand for book-binding served by the sector of petty production.

Between the two poles, there also lies the segment of that part of medium units who have better resource endowments and also the conditions for developing into fully capitalist business. The coexistence of all these groups and their modes of articulation across the various sectors and levels are to be understood in terms of the differential labour forms and their social existence patterns. We shall proceed to that part of our discussion after a brief resume of the scale and forms of other activities in daftaripara.

In khata-binding, 59 per cent of all units had five or less regular workers and their share of total regular workers in the activity was 42 per cent. The owners themselves constituted 24 per cent of those regular workers. The owners were direct labourers in 83 per cent of small units (1-5 regular workers). The medium size units (6-10 regular workers) were about 40 per cent of all units and they had about 55 per cent of all regular workers. In more than one-third of those units the owners were direct labourers. The small units employed 49 per cent of seasonal workers and the medium units shared 48 per cent. The weightage of large units with more than eleven regular workers is negligible in khata-binderies.

In all other activities, the extent of petty mode of processing is evident from the preponderance of units which have owners who are also self-employed workers. Such units of self-employment with few hired labourers constitute 92 per cent of all units in those activities. Almost all units have workforce not above the size of ten regular workers. Taking

the activities together, about 69 per cent of workers belong to units which do not have more than five workers. This proportion would be even larger (about 79 per cent,) but for some specialised larger units in packet-making.

### Variations in Owner-Labour Relations

#### (i) Large Units

Most of the workers in large units have permanent employment. They are often inducted on the recommendation of persons who enjoy the owners' trust and confidence. Also some workers, who are already employed, succeed in securing the recruitment of their own relatives and friends. There are occasions of extremely high demand when large units employ some additional workers on a temporary basis. Most of the large units employ no female or child labourers.

The permanent workers of large units are entitled to gratuity, provident fund and family pension facilities. They enjoy 19 days' festival leave during a year and further 16 days of other paid leave. The higher labour productivity of large units follows from the employment of more skilled and efficient workers, use of auxiliary instruments of production, spacious work places and the scope for improved application of division of labour through the organisation of workers in good many complementary groups. With the provision of electric fans in their work-places, the labourers of large units can work in reasonable comfort for long hours. The

instruments which are usually possessed by a large unit, are one cutting machine, a copy press machine, a stitching machine, one backing machine and a hot press machine.

Large units often have paid supervisors and managers. A supervisor fixes the work to be done by various groups. It is the responsibility of a supervisor to plan the time schedule of each assignment and to ensure that a particular work is completed according to its programme. All coordination in this respect is also the supervisor's duty. A manager takes care of the negotiations with the customers. The tasks of making production estimates, costing, billing, submission of tenders, the keeping of accounts, and looking after receipts and payments are the responsibility of managers.

The large units are contained in a strict code and provisions of discipline to ensure uninterrupted work. Indeed, the workers are bound by a labour process which conforms to the mechanical regularity of inanimate machines. In view of all this, the relation of workers to owners tends to be quite impersonal in tenor and assumes the typical characteristics of employer-labour relationship in a capitalist enterprise.

#### (ii) Medium Units

There are medium units with owners taking part in direct labour. As they participate in the labour process, the owners have close working relations with all other labourers employed in the unit. Such owners are highly skilled and have long experience of working as direct labourers previous to their taking up own units of production. While

working in a group which splits up the whole work into different jobs, they can engage themselves in the assignments which require maximum skill and efficiency. It endows them with a position of natural leadership.

Still the owner-worker remains very much a part of the group of labourers. The nature of the labour process itself requires unhindered coordination of all participants. The relation of workers to owners is characterized by a sense of personal reciprocity which is essentially different from what exists between a capitalist owner and his hired workers.

The elements of personal relationship do not always contribute to the benefit of employed workers. The owner does not want that the more skilled workers leave the unit. This is where the latter may forgo better wage opportunities because of their personal bond with the present owner. The same bond prevents them from expressing any demand for higher wages. Such circumstances generate a state of suppressed discontent among workers. If a worker leaves the unit for better earnings, the owner is hurt and says that he would be ready as well to pay higher wages. There are cases when a worker returns through this process to the previous owner at higher wages. The owner's capacity for higher wage payment is limited by the rate which can be charged to customers. It also helps the growth of personal relationship between the self-employed owners and hired workers in medium units.

The work discipline in medium units, where owners are also self-employed workers, is largely influenced by the personal relationship between the owners and the hired

labourers. Although the owner himself takes part in direct labour, he has to look after other things like the purchase of work materials, negotiations with customers and settlement of bills. The labourers relax their pace of work during the owner's absence. With his own experience as a worker, the owner does not bother over those moments of relaxed pace since he is more or less sure of how much time can be required for completing the particular work. Thus, a suitable time-schedule can be enforced even after allowing for periods of relaxed pace.

While the owner is more free to stay away from direct labour, his critical role in setting the pace of work is no less significant. For example, during the tiffin recess when other workers are having rest, the owner may proceed with the preparatory work which sets a better beginning for those who start work after the recess. Again, the owner may continue to work for some time after the scheduled hour to finish a particular work already nearing completion. Other workers cannot cease work under such circumstances. A sense of co-working prevails over the formal rule of scheduled working hours.

There are instances of other kinds of dependence of the owner on some of his hired workers. The more literate among the workers come to an owner's aid in the calculation of bills and realizing their settlement. Thus the owner gets used to being corrected by his employees and is also reconciled to sharp criticism in this regard. All this makes the relation of workers and owners a mixed product of numerous



economic and extra-economic considerations. No impersonal principle of employer-worker relation solely governs the pattern of owner-worker behaviour and their overall understanding.

The conditions are different in medium units where owners are not direct workers. Those units are subject to more strict rules of pure business. Not being familiar with the intricacies of the labour process, such owners aim at maintaining workers within a rigid framework of work and discipline. The units have patterns closer to that of capitalist enterprise in large binderies.

The relation of workers to the owners of a medium unit is subject to numerous tensions and even ambiguities. This is particularly noteworthy in case of units where the owner takes part in direct labour process. The point can be illustrated by citing one of the instances observed by us. It occurred in a bookbinding unit of medium size having ten regular workers. The unit is owned by Majid who is also a direct labourer.

Majid was working at the cutting machine inside his workshop. He was accompanied by the head workman among his hired workers. In the outer fringes of the workshop one worker was engaged in moulding the spines of books. The backing machine was being used for this purpose. A polythene sheet was above his head. There was a deposit of water in this sheet. It was caused by rains during the previous night. The work at the backing machine was disturbed by water dripping from the polythene cover overhead. The worker cleared

the sheet of water which made wet the adjacent place occupied by stitching workers. This started a noisy quarrel between workers. The backing machine worker was vociferous about his inconvenience due to the water on the polythene sheet. The stitching workers made loud protests as the water was spilled on their place of work.

Majid was disturbed by the noise. He came out and stood in silent rage before the backing machine worker. Majid's silent rage was enough to express his disapproval. After a few minutes he rebuked the backing machine worker, 'I'll flay you ! ' Majid returned to his spot of work still shouting in anger. He spoke aloud that all such troublesome hands would be discharged; they were no good for work in his unit.

Majid did not start his own work for a while. He lighted a cigarette from his packet of 'filter wills'. After having a few puffs Majid moved mechanically to the cutting machine and ordered the head workman 'Start work, let us not bother about what may happen ! ' His tone expressed a kind of indifference to the quality of cutting to be done. It drew another worker to the cutting machine. He was keen to avoid any wastage of paper being caused by listless cutting in result of Majid's anger and apathy. However, once the cutting began, Majid was found to be taking full care for its proper performance.

The incident brings out the conflict and its reconciliation between the two selves of Majid. As a worker, he is bent on giving full attention to the job in his hand. As

an owner, he has to ensure orderly work in every part of the workshop. Majid loses his temper when the requirements of the latter interrupt the smooth process of his own work. The backing machine worker, whom Majid takes to be guilty in this case, is rebuked in the most violent words. His owner self asserts itself vis-a-vis a subordinate worker. Majid even expresses the extreme threat of discharge. The ambiguity of the two selves is also manifest in the tone of indifference in Majid's order to the head workman. Perhaps this strain also contains an element of threat to all hired workers of the unit. Significantly, a third worker rushes to the cutting machine in the fear that the owner's anger might result in some substandard work. In a way, such concern is symptomatic of the relationship between an owner-worker and his hired labourers.

### (iii) Small Units

In bookbinding 80 per cent of all regular workers in small units (1-4 regular workers) were engaged in workshops where owners also worked as direct labourers. Nearly 34 per cent of the regular workers in those units were the self-employed owners. Also in khatabinding, 81 per cent of regular workers in small units (1-5 regular workers) were in workshops where owners participated in direct labour. Such owners constituted 24 per cent of the regular workers in those units. We have already indicated even larger weightage of small units and self-employed owner-workers in other activities like numbering, pad-binding, file-making, ruling etc.

In small units, the relation of owner-workers to their hired labour is interlocked in a manner that often makes their positions indistinguishable. The size of a unit is too small to enable the formation of a working group in which one particular job can be precisely assigned to a worker. The result is an ad hoc mixing of jobs among few workers. The owner may then be frequently required to do odd jobs of lesser importance merely to complement the progress of work made by his hired labourers. The owner can hardly be choosy in the matter since the problem is one of completing the work at hand with few workers. Because of the meagre volume of work in small units it is no less a problem to provide the few workers with uninterrupted work during the scheduled hours.

The owner is found to be rendering even petty services to hired workers. Such services include bringing glasses of water, fetching tea from shops in the neighbourhood, making a quid of tobacco and passing on the bidi-box to working hands. Further, the owner has to arrange for the hiring of equipment which his unit may not have in possession. The stock of other materials in hand is also extremely limited in small units. There often occurs stoppage of work for lack of necessary materials. An owner has to do all that he can to keep such stoppages as short as possible.

The pressure of such ad hoc jobs makes it convenient for owner-workers to have child labourers in the small units. Such child workers can be obtained for paltry wages and they even work for food only during their initial months of work.

The child labourers are known as 'boys'. Very young girls working as child labour are also known as 'boys' in the hierarchy of bindery workers. The child labourers are of great help to owners who are perpetually caught up in a medley of diverse odd jobs. They stand ready to attend the owners' orders. The boys also help in cooking when the owner-worker and his labourers stay at the work-place and share a common mess. Such arrangements are quite frequent in small units. The resident workers go to their native homes once in a week or a fortnight.

An owner has to take some care of the boy in his service. The child worker has to be given some clothes and medical care, as and when necessary. If the boy is from outside Calcutta, he has to be paid some money and rail fare when he goes for some days to his native place. Due to the paucity of workers in small units, the boys can have opportunities for learning bindery work. They are called to do jobs for which no adult workers are available at some moment. An owner sees to it that the boy, who is thus assigned a job, can do the same reasonably well without any gross errors. All this can be of considerable help to a child worker who has the desire and initiative for learning the different jobs of binding.

The female workers for stitching also find more work in small units. They are the most floating and most casual of all workers in the binderies. Their assignments are invariably fixed on a piece rate basis. They move from one unit to another in search of work. In small units having

tiny areas of work, the women workers do their stitching and sorting on an improvised platform raised between the ceiling and the floor. We shall go for a fuller account of the characteristics of female labour in a subsequent section.

The small units represent the extreme point of the petty mode of production which obtains in a large part of bindery activity in daftaripara. The overlapping of ownership and actual labour indicates that the levels and patterns of processing have not reached the stage of any explicit division of labour and capital. The owner-workers are in need of hired hands for rendering supplies to customers. They have no steady demand and means to have those workers on a continuous tenure. At times an owner-worker may have to complete a work practically on his own with some incompetent assistance from extremely unskilled workers. The more skilled ones among his hired labourers may quit leaving a job unfinished since they are pulled by the prospect of continuous work for a longer period in another unit. This is how a vicious circle of lowering rates to capture more demand, further reduction of already paltry earnings, and cumulative weakness of the work units becomes a continuous phenomenon.

#### Seasonality of Different Activities

We can identify several broad seasons for bookbinding viz. (a) The peak season of binding for school and college text-books lasts for three months between April and June when teaching institutions begin their new sessions. The demand for text-books is negligible over the rest of the year.

(b) There are two periods in a year when the publication of fictions, books of essays, poetry and other miscellaneous features reaches its peak. The periods are the beginning of the Bengali New Year and the annual book fairs. At present, the book fairs have come to be more propitious for the release of new publications. Considering both book fairs and the Bengali New Year together, the peak binding season for this category of books is spread over more than five months from November to mid-April.

There are different groups of binderies working for text-books and those engaged in the other category of publications. The magnitude of peak period release is larger for text-books. Their purchase is mostly concentrated in the beginning of the school and college sessions. The peak period demand for the other category of books can be covered by 25 to 30 per cent of the total number planned for any edition. Obviously, the seasonal increase of demand for labour is larger for binderies engaged in working for text-books.

The seasonal demand for khata-binding can be divided into two groups, viz. (a) All kinds of exercise-books to be used by students for their course-work. Their seasonal peak is reached in the beginning of school and college sessions. Unlike the case of text-books, the demand for exercise-books is more regular during the rest of the year. This part of the khata-binding activity is undertaken to a large extent by business-oriented owners who invest in papers, ruling and binderies to reap substantial profits. In such business, even owners of small units may not be direct labourers. Most of them are Hindus who resorted to this activity

originally as displaced persons from East Pakistan (now Bangla Desh). (b) The peak demand for account-books, ledgers, court-cum-office books and registers occurs at the time of Diwali and Bengali New Year. For about four months in the year the seasonal demand for this work is considerably increased. The owners are mostly Muslims and they take part in direct labour. Requiring some specific skills of a high order, this activity is still retained by traditional Muslim binders. It is concentrated in Patwarbagan. The returns accruing to those units are, in the main, earnings of skilled labour including among them the owner-workers.

The demand for diaries is almost entirely seasonal. The binderies, which do this work, have their peak demand for four months from October to January. It is done mostly by khata-binding units engaged in the processing of registers and ledgers for banks and offices. Some units in book-binding also undertake this work. In addition, some master workmen (ostad karigar) accept orders for diary binding. They rent some room space for two to three months to do the work. Such temporary units enhance seasonal demand for labour.

The work of the ruling units is complementary to khata-binding. Such linkages account for seasonal increase in the demand for ruling work. The growth of offset printing has competed out traditional ruling units from the fields of diaries, graph-sheets etc.

The binderies become much more busy in response to seasonal demand. The units temporarily extend their areas



of work. Some rooms are available on rent for seasonal work. A number of workmen are also found to accept orders which are executed in such rented rooms. The seasonal demand of labour is much more pronounced in small and medium units. Large units have more settled workers and their seasonal demand relates to casual workers for stitching and sorting.

It appears from our broad enumeration that nearly 84 per cent of seasonal labourers find employment in book-binding and khata-binding. Our rough count reveals that about a 50 per cent addition to their regular labour force is required to meet seasonal increase in demand. Some influence of seasonal demand is also evident in ruling, envelope-making and file-binding.

A large part of the seasonal increase in labour supply is provided by women and child labourers. A woman can stitch materials which require six workers for their binding. Thus no high demand for female labour prevails through the whole year. The demand is substantially increased in peak seasons. The characteristics of female and child labour will be stated in more detail in the next section.

We can observe several types of male seasonal workers. Some of them are not skilled enough for permanent absorption. In lean seasons also they depend on some intermittent casual work in the binderies. No opportunities of more stable employment in other fields are available to them. One group of seasonal workers in daftaripara is engaged in agriculture for a part of the year. Most of them come from the villages of North and South 24 Parganas. They are skilled and hard-

working. With higher daily earnings in agriculture, the combination of agricultural and binding work enables them to have larger earnings over the year. Some of them are reported to have small plots of own arable lands. The more diligent and able child workers try to seize the opportunity of increased seasonal demand for labour to stabilize themselves as regular apprentices.

### Female and Child Labour

#### (i) Female Workers

The employment of female workers in binderies has cumulatively increased through the last four decades. They are mostly engaged in stitching work which has little need for training. Formerly, a large part of stitching and sorting was done by male workers. Now it is almost wholly done by female workers. Their daily wages are fixed on the amount of work done. Many have to move from one unit to another in search of work. At least 50 per cent of the women workers are floating labourers and have no fixed place of work. As already noted, the demand for their service substantially increases during the peak seasons.

The vast majority of women workers are pushed to binderies because they are in dire economic distress. They are widows, married women deserted by their husbands and housewives or unmarried women of very poor families. The modal age group of female workers is between 18 and 28 years. Such female workers seek immediate earnings for

their children or other dependents including their husbands who may be disabled, unemployed or just vagabonds not keen to do any work. Also the husband's earnings may be too small to maintain the family. This has pushed many married women to work in binderies. There are several examples that a married male lives with another woman abandoning his wife and children in an utterly helpless condition. It appears that the entry of variously distressed women to binderies had its beginning in the influx of refugees from East Bengal after the country's partition. As gathered from our extensive investigation almost all female workers in the binderies are Hindus.

The women workers usually come in trains from places outside Calcutta in North and South 24 Parganas. They live with their families in slums and squatters' colonies adjacent to the railway tracks. The work in the binderies of daftari-para start at eight or nine in the morning. Most women workers arrive later and can begin work by ten or eleven. The women are delayed by the unavoidable need to do some household work including tending of children before they can leave for their work-places. They return home by ten or eleven at night. Their daily payment is calculated for the exact amount of work done. It is piece-rate payment. Having started work later in the morning, they continue stitching for extra hours after five in the evening. This becomes necessary to have daily earnings for at least eight hours' output.

About 50 per cent of women workers have more or less continuous assignments in a particular unit. Their position is comparatively stable. The rest are floating in nature. They cannot often get work for eight hours a day. The floating workers have regular employment during the peak seasons only. In the busy season overtime work is also frequent for floating casual workers.

The large majority of women workers are engaged in stitching and sorting only. Among all persons working in stitching and sorting, no less than 80 per cent are women. The large units employ very few female workers. Also, the more affluent of the medium units do not employ many women workers. In those large and medium units, stitching is done by male workers.

A number of female workers were interviewed by us for their personal accounts of own life and experience. The life-stories tell their experience of life and work, their values, belief, and perhaps particular tendencies of their inclinations, sentiment and emotions. Such composite accounts could be gathered from several male workers as well. All this reveals many significant features which should not be condensed in a presentation of broad general features. We shall attempt their further delineation in the presentation of life-stories.

#### (ii) Child Labour

Most of the child workers come from poor families of West Bengal Muslims. The pressure of extreme poverty forces them to come for work in binderies. They get work

through the contact of neighbours and relatives who are bindery workers. Some have lost their fathers at an early age. The mothers are widows or abandoned by their husbands. Some others have too many brothers and sisters to be maintained at the low earnings of their fathers. And so they are pushed out of village homes in search of earnings. Quite often the child workers get work only in the busy season and return to their native villages for the rest of the year. One can find poor children coming to work even at the age of five.

The child workers are made to do all types of jobs by their employers. They help workmen (kariqar) and apprentices (sagred). In addition, a child worker is asked to spread glue on appropriate materials for binding, to carry formes from one spot to another, to arrange papers, to bring completed sheets of paper from the ruling room and to help in loading vans or rickshaws with the bound materials ready for delivery.

A child worker has to do a lot of work not directly connected with the process of binding. Being usually resident at the work-place, a child worker is required to work in the common kitchen. It is also among the duties of the 'boy' to bring things from the market and tea and tiffin for other workers. As things are, the working hours often spread from seven in the morning to eleven at night. The earnings of the child workers are very poor. They are often given only food and some clothes. The child workers are mostly employed in small and medium units. The small units have the largest share of child workers.

Amidst all this hardship a child worker learns the various jobs of actual binding. Many shape into skilled workers. Such development of child workers happens both in book-binding and khata-binding. It is more frequent in khata-binding. There grow up bindery workers who are confined to the world of daftaripara from very early childhood. Even as adults many of them know very little of the larger metropolis, but for a few market-corners and cinema halls near their work-places.

Some child workers come from the very poor Muslim families of Patwarbagan. They usually join the work of making packets and boxes. The children are found to be suitable since this kind of work is often done in very narrow rooms where children of small size can move about in more ease than adult workers. The local children are also found to combine their bindery work with attendance at free schools for some elementary education.

### Earnings and Living

#### (i) Earnings

The bindery workers are divided into several categories according to their levels of skill and range of earnings. Masters (osted) or head workmen are the ablest workers. A head workman is also given the charge of directing and supervising other workers in the unit. They are men of long and varied experience in the fields. Their monthly earnings inclusive of overtime payments are about Rs.700 in book-binding. In khata-binding and ruling their total monthly earnings are about Rs.600.

The workmen (karigar) come next in terms of skill and all-round ability. Their monthly earnings inclusive of overtime payments are in the range of Rs.600 to Rs.650 in book-binding. In khata-binding and ruling the total earnings of a workman are between Rs.450 and Rs.550.

There is another category of workers who are quite advanced in their process of learning the entire job, even though they still fall short of the level of full workmen. A workman can entrust some part of his job to this kind of workers. They are known as semi-workmen (nim-karigar). Their total monthly earnings (including overtime payments) fall between Rs.450 and Rs.500 in book-binding. In khata-binding and ruling their total earnings are between Rs.350 and Rs.450.

The apprentices (sagred) are still at the learning stage. They learn as helping hands to workmen and semi-workmen. The apprentices have monthly earnings in the range of Rs.450 to Rs.475 in book-binding. The amounts include their usual overtime accruals. In khata-binding and ruling their total earnings are between Rs.250 and Rs.350.

The child workers are known as 'boys'. They have to work as helpers for diverse types of jobs. We have already noted the miscellaneous character of their heavy burden of work. There are cases of a boy working without any cash payment. He is given food and clothes. The range of monthly earnings for a boy, who is paid, is in the range of Rs.100 to Rs.150. The amounts include what is calculated as his

overtime accruals. There is not much difference between book-binding and khata-binding or ruling as regards the payment to 'boys'. The agreement between the union of book-binding workers and their employers stipulates that from January 1990 a 'boy' will have a monthly payment of Rs.275. But most of the 'boys' in the binderies are not among the unionized workers.

The ranges of earnings for each category of workers are less in small units. The figures above are broadly true of large and medium units. For small units, the scale of monthly earnings would usually be lower by about 10 to 15 per cent for each category of workers. The smaller medium units also have workers at lower wages. All the scales of earnings have taken account of the increases which occurred in result of a strike and cessation of work in April 1990. In each category, payments were then raised by Rs.50 to Rs.100 per month for unionized workers in book-binding. In the small and medium units many workers are employed on a daily wage basis. The rates of daily wage range from Rs.13 to Rs.20. Such workers are paid for working days only. There being no work on sundays, they are paid wages for six days each week. They don't have facilities for any kind of leave with pay. A small unit may be without work for a number of days. It pushes daily wage workers from one unit to another. In this sense a floating character is imparted to daily wage workers. An annual increment ranging from Rs.5 to Rs.15 is given to workers who have worked continuously for a year in one particular unit.



In larger medium units we also find workers who have more stable employment. They are paid wages for sundays. They also have 15 to 16 paid holidays a year. Even without work in his units, the owners are to retain such workers on full pay for three months. They can be retrenched only when the unit has no sufficient work for a period exceeding three months. The more stable conditions of employment are the constant demand of unions. The larger medium units also find it necessary to keep at least a part of their work force on a relatively permanent basis. The element of uncertainty of work is most felt by small units. It is also present to a lesser extent in some medium units. The medium units offer more stability even when workers are employed on a daily wage basis. Such daily wage workers are paid at slightly higher rates to make up partly for their having no paid holidays, nor leave with pay.

Large units are assured of continuous demand. Their workers enjoy job permanence, weekly and festival holidays, and leave with pay for a period ranging from fifteen days to a month each year. Also several large units have arrangements of gratuity, provident fund and health insurance for their workers. The salary scales and total monthly earnings of the workers are more or less in the ranges which we have indicated above for the different categories of workers in the medium and large units.

Most of the large units have labour unions. The social insurance benefits (e.g. health insurance and retirement benefits) are not uniformly provided by all large

units. Some of them follow the practice of evading factory laws by understating the size of the work force. There is also the system of getting a part of the work done by contractors' labour so that the size of the regular labour force may remain less than what is actually required for the work done by a large unit.

The floating nature of many workers in small units has been noted. Those in stitching and sorting are the most floating of all workers. They are paid at piece-rates according to the actual amount of work done. A large majority of stitching and sorting workers are women. This work is done by men in large units only. Though paid at piece rates, their continuity of work is assured. The women workers in small units are extremely floating. They work for a day in one unit, the next two days in another and so on and so forth.

It requires about eight hours work a day to earn Rs.400 a month in stitching and sorting. It is calculated on the basis of regular work for a month. Given the number of dependents in the family, this amount is often much less than the minimum required for bare subsistence. Except for the peak period, the female workers in stitching and sorting get in a month about 16 to 18 days work in small units. Moreover, as we have already noted, they cannot usually begin work before eleven in the morning. This is due to the pressure of household work which they have to do before coming to the work-place. All this leads to a frantic search for overtime work. The women workers then return to

their homes outside Calcutta, not before ten or eleven at night. In medium units some women workers in stitching and sorting jobs are engaged on a more stable basis. They receive payments for sundays and about fifteen more holidays a year. Their piece rates are about 20 per cent below that paid to purely casual workers for stitching and sorting.

It is necessary to take account of owners who are also direct workers in their units. The position of such owners in small units and their compulsions for work have been explained in a previous section. Indeed, while an owner-worker in a small unit earns between Rs.800 and Rs.1200 a month, the net income of a small unit owner who does not take part in direct labour, is as low as Rs.400 a month. The difference is essentially due to the amount of intensive labour put in by an owner-worker. Such a pattern holds true of all activities in daftaripara, except for some units in khata-binding.

In khata-binding, some owners, though they do not take part in direct labour, make substantial earnings even in small units employing not more than five workers. It is true of binding exercise-books for students in schools and colleges. This work requires no high skill on the part of workers. The owners link up some speculative margins on their purchase of papers, on work put out to ruling units, and the gains obtained from binding. They have the business aptitude to plan ahead for maximum gains in the peak period of demand for various kinds of exercise books.

Many medium unit owners also take part in direct labour process. They are the owners who have raised themselves from the position of pure labourers. Such owners are highly skilled and cannot therefore completely withdraw from labour in their own units. At times it also helps them in having a substantial increase of their earnings. There is of course the other set of medium units where owners are not direct labourers and conduct business more on lines akin to that of pure capitalist enterprise.

It is noteworthy that more than 90 per cent of all units in activities other than book and khata-binding are those in which owners take part in direct labour and those units account for 74 per cent of their total regular workers. The units were largely of a size whose number of regular workers did not exceed five. Their share of all seasonal labour in these activities was about 85 per cent. Some activities like pad-binding, envelope-making, packet-making, numbering and labelling can be done in very small spaces. Generally, the system of piece rate payment prevails among hired workers in these activities. The levels of earning are usually lower than that of workers in book-binding, khata-binding and ruling.

In book-binding 46 per cent of all units have owners who are direct labourers and they account for 30 per cent of their regular workers. In khata-binding such units are 62 per cent accounting for 52 per cent of their regular workers. All those book-binding units were in the small and medium groups, and accounted for about 40 per cent of seasonal workers in the activity. In khata-binderies most of the

units having owner-workers were in the small group (1-5 regular workers). They accounted for 34 per cent of regular workers and 37 per cent of seasonal workers. Taking both small and medium groups, 50 per cent of seasonal labourers worked in khata-binding units with owner-workers. Thus, the role of units with self-employed owner-workers has much relevance for our understanding of the patterns of earnings in the binderies of daftaripara.

(ii) Living

It is not our intention to describe in full detail the living conditions of workers and owners. We may leave such specific accounts for the evidence of life-stories. This sub-section will indicate the main characteristics of living in regard to two broad groups of workers.

One group consists of those workers whose native homes are in the rural areas of North and South 24 Parganas, Haora, Hugli, Medinipur, Bardhaman and Murshidabad. In terms of origin they are the traditional bindery workers. The vast majority of them are Muslims. Previously, the bindery workers were mostly Muslims of rural origin. Through the last few decades Muslim workers have been reduced to one-third of all bindery workers. They still form a majority only in khata-binding.

About 90 per cent of this group of workers live in their work-places, Their families are in villages. A visit to native homes occurs once in a week, It may be deferred for a fortnight or till the end of the month. The workers take home a large part of their earnings for the maintenance of their families.

The workers usually live in their Calcutta work-places at a very low cost. It leaves them more to provide for their village homes. Their daily expenditure for two meals is kept within five rupees. In most cases the food is prepared in a common mess at the work-place. There are many cheap eating houses in the locality. If necessary, the workers can have their meals in those places. They have their bath at the corporation taps on the road. The public latrines which they have to use are extremely dirty and insanitary. The little leisure they have is spent in conversations among themselves, rarely to see a film, and more commonly by listening to transistors and tape-recorders. In case the viewing of T.V. is within their easy reach, it holds considerable attraction for the workers. Some workers belong to Muslim families of the locality. Their conditions of living are extremely squalid and poor.

The workers from villages seldom have cultivable lands. Even in rare cases of having some lands, an urban worker can hardly make its best use. Such workers are incapable of bearing the strain and hardship of field-work in agriculture. It therefore becomes impossible for them to have any reasonable supplementary earnings from agriculture. Their earnings from binding work are utterly inadequate for the maintenance of families even at a minimum level of living. The children are offered very little education. It seldom goes beyond the primary stage. The conditions are better only in families which enjoy some earnings from own arable lands, a pond or even a small orchard. Some relief is secured in case of joint families with several earners.

The homesteads are often in a poor state. In desperate efforts to increase the means of living, the women of the family try their hands at poultry or resort to paddy-husking. Paddy-husking by manual labour is in decline almost everywhere in rural West Bengal. Also they even take to working as maid-servants.

Though living at a minimum cost of Rs.30 to Rs.36 a week in his Calcutta work-place, a worker can not provide more than Rs.80 to Rs.90 a week for his village household. There are four to seven persons in a family. Thus most of the workers are pressed by extreme poverty and hardship all round.

The other broad group of bindery workers presents a stream that has grown since the partition of the country. They come mostly from poor Hindu families displaced from East Bengal. Such workers have no native homes in West Bengal. The most common course for them is to rent accommodation in slums and squatters' colonies adjacent to the railway tracks spreading from the Sealdah station to places in North and South 24 Parganas. Some are found to have either rented or own houses in the periphery or suburbs of the Calcutta city.

The families consist of four to seven persons. Their expenses of living are even higher than that of the rural households we have noted above. House-rent and the cost of fuel have to be fully borne by the families resident in urban areas. It becomes a pressing need that the wives of workers have some supplementary earnings. They go for

making of cheap paper-containers and other miscellaneous work including that of maid-servants in extreme cases. While the effort for children's education is more prominent among this group of workers, they are often forced by dire poverty to send young boys for some earnings,

Such workers come to work from their homes which are usually situated within fifty kilometers from Calcutta. Most of the female workers fall in this category. The women workers travel without tickets in trains. Usually their default is overlooked by ticket inspectors. The males face more risk in this regard. Still they can seldom afford to buy tickets. Both male and female workers of the group have their meals at home. They also carry from their homes some food for tiffin. Thus there is little difference in the levels of poverty of the two groups of workers.

### Towards Their Own Life-stories

#### A. Owner Workers and Wage Workers

The presentation which we have so far made in this paper is largely based on the information about some overall structural features of the binderies of daftaripara, their diversities of size, activity, composition of work force and owner-worker relationship. The information was collected not only through answers to a set of structured questions. Some general reports were prepared through elaborate investigation of the nature of the labour process in different units, the relation of workers to owners in small, medium and large units, the nature and background of owners taking part in



direct labour and the life styles of the workers in their work-places and households.

In addition, our description has already made use of the details which are available in about sixty life-stories of individual workers and owners. We shall present a selection of such life-stories in a separate occasional paper. Let us now bring together the main findings of all our investigations about the working of the binderies and their forms and conditions of labour. Our presentation will include the evidence whose concrete examples are to be found in the life-stories.

The entire complex of binderies and other allied activities in daftaripara is characterized by an amalgam of heterogeneous structural elements. At the highest level we find a small number of large units which are capitalist in their formations and exercise a considerable degree of monopoly control over their markets. This level of the binding activity articulates a clear capitalist framework. It lacks however the experience of an organic process of transition from earlier forms. Most of the large capitalist units start their business with big initial outlay, advanced tools and machinery, adequate workforce and sizeable storage space. We should note in this connection that some large units avoid the jurisdiction of factory regulations by taking to various evasive devices like employing a smaller number of regular workers and depending on casual labourers supplied by contractors or directly by the floating unemployed.

The large capitalist units enjoy almost exclusive monopoly of the market provided by big publishers. Such big publishing houses prefer the kind of management, the standard of work and storage facilities that are available in the binderies working on a capitalist basis. Superior binding and storage facilities furnish the main elements of attraction of big publishing houses to large binderies. The big publishers are ready to pay higher rates for the work done for them.

Such a pattern of clarified capitalist business obtains only at one of the various levels of binderies in daftaripara. As noted already, they account for about 24 per cent of all regular workers in book-binding. The rest of the regular workers are employed in the medium and small units. More than half of the units in small and medium groups of book-binding have owners who take part in direct labour. They account for about 40 per cent of the regular work force in the groups. All this marks out the extent of petty processing with self-employed owner-workers in book-binding. We have already indicated the even larger preponderance of units with self-employed owner-workers in activities other than book-binding.

Thus, daftaripara presents the co-existence of capitalist and petty modes of processing in its complex of binderies. It is only among some large bookbinding units that capitalism has its full articulation. They enjoy a monopoly of the demand from the big publishing houses. About 68 per cent of the medium units in bookbinding are

run by owners who do not take part in direct labour. Some of them are akin to capitalist business in terms of ownership, enterprise and labour forms. However their average strength of regular labour force does not exceed eight workers. Such scales of operation indicate the nature of their limited capitalism.

As already noted, no less than 40 per cent of all regular bookbinding workers are employed in small and medium groups are employed in units owned by persons who are direct labourers. Moreover, the large capitalist binderies and the bigger medium units serve almost exclusively the high and middle levels of the publishing business who are commercially and culturally oriented to have their binding work done by the units privileged with better skills, technology and management. The rest of the small and medium units of petty processing have to face a lot of cut-throat competition in the market inflicted by unforeseen rate-reduction and string-pulling to attract customers.

The classification which we have made here in terms of the capitalist and the petty modes of processing corresponds to the broad division between the formal and the 'informal' sectors. All conceptualization of the informal sector recognizes a duality in the structure of urban economies in developing countries. The 'formal' and the 'informal' have been variously characterized as two juxtaposed systems of production. For example, capitalist forms are taken to commingle with the peasant mode, or a 'firm centred economy' is shown to co-exist with 'a bazaar type economy'; or the

two sectors are understood to define 'the upper and lower circuits'; or a 'high profit/high wage oligopolistic sector is indicated to co-exist with a low profit/low wage competitive capitalist sector.' (Moser 1978, p.1052). Such oligopolistic influence is often mixed up with the exploits of foreign capital and multinational corporations over subordinate developing countries (Quiljano 1974, Quiljano 1983).

Still the concept of informality largely remains a matter of intuition than an idea with clarified analytical content. The ILQ's emphasis on the production rationale leads to an understanding of the informal sector 'as the sum of those activities carried out by enterprises organized in accordance with a particular economic rationale, whose object is to guarantee the subsistence of the family group. This rationale then differs from that of the formal (capitalist) sector, whose prime motivation is accumulation (Guerguil 1988, p.60). In contrast, the illegality-based approach ascribes the emergence of the informal sector to flaws in the existing tax system and in prevailing laws and regulations. This approach bears a close association with the classical position regarding the connection between free enterprise and overall economic betterment. Its endorsement of the postulates of the more recent supply-side economics is obvious (Ibid., p.62).

The search for a suitable definition of informality has to make clear the essence of what is reckoned as 'formal'. This will clarify the points of departure which are all loaded in the idea of 'informality' to account for many diverse phenomena and experience. Whether clearly stated or not the idea of the formal is invariably associated with

the structure and postulates of capitalism in terms of its experience of countries that have already achieved a high level of development. The idea of 'informality' refers then to situations, subjects and structures which are found not to fit with the defined capitalist forms even though they obtain in a total complex which also articulates capitalist forms and behaviour in several crucial parts of the system.

Such 'hybrid' structures were created by the colonial impact of capitalist Europe on the countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America. The effect of the impact varied from region to region, depending on specific local circumstances, the type of capitalistic penetration, and the intensity of the penetration. (Furtado 1964, pp.127-40). The emergence of a 'hybrid' structure was however the common experience of all colonial incursions of capitalism. It is not merely a question of capitalism moving slower in some countries than in others. The 'hybrid' structures are perpetually bound to an experience of capitalism where capital tends to combine both the 'modern' and the 'archaic' in its armoury of power and exploitation.

In this vital sense, the ILO emphasis on the production rationale may result in welfare aspirations not really relevant to the specificities of a 'hybrid' socio-economic structure. The amalgam can feature a kind of capitalism within the juxtaposition of diverse production forms, structural excess supply of labour and a multitude of market imperfections. The 'illegality approach' is even more removed from reality since it proceeds from such premises of capitalist

free enterprise that have no relevance for 'hybrid' economics. Moreover both the ILO and 'illegality' approaches take no account of the variable modalities of interaction between the state and the economy in the different politico-economic formations.

In the binderies of daftaripara the productive apparatus of capital obtains only at the level of the large and the bigger medium units. It is perpetually averse to the absorption of a large section of the workers who work in small and medium binderies. No expansion on that scale would be compatible with the logic of capital and its profits.

There occurs then a division of binderies between different levels which are not uniform in structural characteristics. The big units have hegemonic prominence in bindery business. But the capacity of capital to absorb and/or reabsorb the relative surplus population is outweighed by its tendency to generate a larger volume of the unemployed. So much so that even at a high level of accumulation a large part of the reserve labour force is not absorbed as wage workers in capitalist enterprise.

Thus, the multiplicity of sub-structures is symptomatic of the hybrid character of the entire economy. We find here a reflection of such structural diversity in the work and organisation of the binderies. The structural complexities are manifest in the various levels of the binderies in daftaripara. A large part of the labour force is afflicted with unemployment, intermittent work and low earnings.

Amidst such circumstances, self-employed workers are bent on the arduous, and often quite desperate, efforts to run small/medium units with a small number of hired workers. While employment is more regular and earnings higher in the bigger capitalist units their absolute wage rates are often merely sufficient for the maintenance of the worker and his dependents just around the poverty line.

The experience of workers about the barriers to getting a secure job or adequate wages often impells them to strive for having their own units. The life-stories of wage-workers provide several instances of the kind. The efforts to move out of the present position are also directed to other activities. For example, a senior ruling workman of long experience says, 'the present condition is unbearable. I am ready to go for any government job, even that of a peon or a sweeper.' It may be noted that the same workman had a significant part in the promotion of trade unions and their struggles in the ruling units. In another case, one semi-workman of a ruling unit wishes to shift to business in piece goods. He hopes to raise his initial resources from a Panchayat loan. Again, a senior workman in khata-binding expresses the desire to resume his own business of a tea shop on a larger scale. He has also obtained a license for the work of a bus conductor. Several young workers are not yet very hard pressed by family burden. They are however worried about their future. They apprehend that the earnings in bindery work will be inadequate for the maintenance of their families.

The life stories indicate the relatively higher levels of earnings derived by the workers of large organised units. Such differentiation is undoubtedly associated with the variations in productivity as described in the accounts of some workers who have the job experience of both large and small units. Still the absolute levels of income in most of the large units do not usually yield for the worker's family a per capita earning of more than Rs.200 per month. A senior workman of a bookbinding unit which runs as a private limited company says, 'I think of setting up a separate business of my own. I don't have sufficient means for a beginning. As I grow old, it won't be possible to bear the strain of such long hours of work and of commuting daily from Barasat to Calcutta.' We may note that the binding company where this worker is employed has arrangement for provident fund, gratuity and employees' state insurance benefits. Thus, the desire to find a better alternative widely prevails among the bindery workers. The attitude of those reconciled to their present employment finds a typical expression in the following remark in one of the life-stories, 'It is no use thinking of an alternative which is better than bindery work. I have no opportunities for such a shift.'

Only in terms of low earnings, irregular employment, and the lack of alternative job opportunities can it be understood why the bindery workers are so keen to have some other gainful work and at the same time bound to their present position as they abandon all hopes of securing some better job. Most bindery workers join the labour force at an age when they are pushed to work with very little education.



In the majority of cases, the worker is not in a position to choose any particular job. A job has to be accepted for some earning in circumstances where an employment can only be the product of chance.

Most of the workers are found to move from one unit to another before they settle in a particular bindery or ruling workshop for any length of time. No condition of formal permanence is stipulated for the jobs in small and medium binderies. Many of those units are run by owner-workers. The continuance of a worker in the service of one particular unit is more a matter of inter-personal relation and understanding than of any specified terms of appointment. The so-called rational principles of recruitment and employment can hardly be relevant for such a scheme of things. Competition is unrestrained in an imperfect market not only among wage workers, but also among owner-workers who are perpetually liable to lose a customer because of string-pulling and arbitrary bargaining of rates by some other units.

The life-stories reveal that the large majority of bindery and ~~ruling~~ workers joined the labour force at a very early age. The individual accounts tell us of their experience as child workers. Quite often the beginners were given their daily food only. There follows the hard process of learning through direct labour. The earnings of a child worker rise very slowly and a lot of movement from one unit to another takes place during this stage of a worker's development.

## B. The Strike Experience

Let us now consider the influence of trade unions on the bindery workers. There are two different central unions for the ruling and the bookbinding units in daftaripara. We shall find references to the ruling union in several life-stories. At present their position is not prominent because of the declining state of the ruling activity. The ruling union has no close political connections. It has no permanent central office.

The union of bookbinding workers has a permanent central office. They are closely associated with the CPI(M) and its local leadership. The owners of bookbinding units also have their own association. But they meet only in times of crisis. The sharp competition among the binderies from the medium level downwards retards cohesion among their owners. The labour unions have consolidated their position through the last one decade. After a days token strike in 1980 a tripartite agreement was made among the owners, workers and government. It stipulated higher wages, more stability, better leave facilities, and improved retirement benefits. The bookbinding unions remained firm about the maintenance and application of this agreement.

Even then our enquiry in 1988-89 revealed that the highest monthly pay of a worker seldom exceeded Rs.500. Some larger units paid at a higher rate and also gave provident fund, gratuity and health insurance benefits. The retirement benefits are subject to the condition of a minimum period of service in a particular bindery. The formal permanence of jobs with monthly salaries is mostly found in large and

bigger medium units. The continuity of service is more a matter of convention and practice for the large majority of other units and workers, who are paid on a daily work basis.

Thus the question of benefits attached to permanent jobs is not relevant for many bindery workers. Amidst such a pattern of employment and earnings the workers of the large and bigger medium units find it difficult to press their demands for further improvements. They are relatively better placed among all bindery workers. Their earnings and benefits are not at all satisfactory by any absolute standard. Still their comparatively better position makes it difficult for unions to assign priority to the demands of workers in the large and bigger medium units.

Indeed, for many small and in the lower medium units it is difficult to pay higher wages unless they can enhance the rates for the work done for their customers. In 1980 the union could not press for any substantial increase since most of the units were found to be incapable of paying higher wages out of the proceeds at the prevailing rates charged to customers.

We have noted already how small and medium units compete among themselves for obtaining more work. In this process the rates are often reduced by some units to draw more work to themselves. This is how insufficient work, low rates and low wages are interlocked in the realities of the bookbinding activity in daftaripara.

In April 1990, there was a three day strike in bookbinding units of daftaripara. The demand was for a monthly increase of Rs.100 in the wages of all workers. In binderies which are covered by the Factory Act, the demand was for a monthly wage increase of Rs.110 for all workers. The union prepared for the strike through the previous fortnight. It raised some other demands relating to gratuity provisions for the bigger medium and large binderies. Another demand was for a day's paid leave for any temporary worker who had put in twenty-six days of continuous service in a particular bindery.

The bindery owners were ready to increase wages by Rs.50 a month. They held that without a suitable increase in the rates charged to customers, it would not be possible to meet the full demand of the union. The owners appealed to workers to join the movement against publishers to press for payment at higher rates. The bindery owners also pointed out how the government's move to arrange on its own the binding of 80 per cent of text books had badly affected the binderies of daftaripara.

The course of events in April 1990 was significant. The workers went on strike for three days. The month of April is a month of peak seasonal activity for binderies on account of the order for books to be released at the Bengali New Year and the pressure of publishing text-books at the beginning of new sessions in schools and colleges. After a gap of three days, the owners also stopped work for three days. The consecutive strikes and stoppages of

workers and owners over about a week might have created a pressure on the publishers for raising the rates which they would pay for bookbinding. The workers had their payments for the days the owners went on stoppage. It was as if the workers and bindery owners were moving in a kind of quasi-agreement to put pressure on the publishers.

The same impression is confirmed by some more events. Prior to their strike, the workers rallied in several demonstrations in the localities of the publishers' business, on the roads like College Street, Bankim Chatterjee Street and Mahatma Gandhi Road. Apparently the workers' union had the object of showing to the publishers the mass strength behind their demands. Further on 4th May 1990 the workers' union celebrated their victory with fireworks and slogans of triumph on the Bankim Chatterjee Street just in front of the India Coffee House. The bindery owners agreed to an increase ranging from Rs.75 to Rs.100 in the monthly pay of workers. Some increase in the overtime tiffin allowances was accepted by owners. The increase in pay would be given effect from January 1990 for the permanent workers. The piece rates for sorting and stitching were also increased.

We have mentioned the impression of a concord between the workers and owners of the binderies to mount pressure on the publishers. All deliveries to the publishers were stopped after five in the evening for about a month prior to the strike. The understanding of workers and owners was more decisive in case of the small and lower medium units. A large number of owners in those units were workers themselves. The linkage of increased rates and

higher labour earnings could be instantly perceived by such owner-workers. It is a crucial structural characteristic of an activity in which numerous units have not yet reached the stage of a clear demarcation between labour and capital. The union also realizes that there is a limit to the extent to which the employers can be pressurised into conceding to the demands of the workers. (Ghosh 1990, p.109) Particularly, the small and lower medium units can give better wages only if they get better rates for bindery jobs.

The strike experience illustrates some specific characteristics of protest in a hybrid structure of activity like the binderies of daftaripara. The formulation of a demand for uniform absolute increase of wages at all levels implies a higher rate of benefits for workers currently employed at lower wages. The union had to be cautious about not putting a heavy burden of claims on small and lower medium units. Many owners of such units are labourers themselves. Most of their hired labourers work either on a daily basis or on piece rates. The demand for higher wages would mean a rise of Rs.2 to Rs.3 per day for those workers. The owners of small units could bear this increase without much difficulty as they derived definite gains from the increase of rates chargeable to customers. The question of increase in earnings of the workers who had worked continuously for a long period in small and lower medium units was mostly adjusted on a mutual understanding between the owners and those workers of long standing without any formal stipulation of permanence.

The frantic competition for work often impells small and lower medium units to accept orders at very low rates. The union had to be careful that the publishers could take no advantage of such a tendency on the part of small and lower medium units. Indeed, at one stage of the movement and negotiations, the publishers wanted to have a list of the binderies which were affiliated to the association. They were obviously thinking in terms of getting their work done at lower rates from non-affiliated binderies. There lies the importance of a union programme which can work towards the consolidation of each and every level of heterogeneous binderies and their workers including owner-workers in small and lower medium units.

The strike experience has its beneficial role in bringing some palliatives for the extremely low paid workers and owner-workers in the binderies of daftaripara. The owner-workers gain from the rise of rates which can be obtained from customers. However, it also manifests the inability of the overall structure to generate the material conditions and social forms necessary for an economic reconstruction. At one pole in the large capitalist binderies, the straight battle of labour against capital is compromised by the relatively better position of their wage labour compared to the very large number of workers and also owner-workers in the small and lower medium units. At the other pole wage labour and owner-workers are combined in production forms which, for their sheer survival, can articulate no straight confrontation between petty property and proletarian labour. All this is laid

in the context of a structural excess supply of labour whose employment is irregular, casual, marginal and which perpetually verges on a state of absolute unemployment and abysmal poverty.

### C. Residence and Life-style

We find a few broad residential patterns among the workers of daftaripara. Some of them live in their work-places and go home in the week-end and holidays. They are mostly Muslim workers from the villages of North and South 24 Parganas. Some others live for the whole week in Calcutta. A small number of workers have rented accommodation in the neighbourhood of daftaripara. There are workers in this group who have their homes in various places of the districts of Haora, Hugli and Nadia. Some workers commute daily from their homes in various places of North and South 24 Parganas to the work-place. Some others live in the periphery or in the suburbs of the city. They have either rented accommodation or houses of their own. Such houses are mostly built of mud plastered bamboo walls and tiled roof.

An important feature is revealed in some kind of rural security enjoyed by about 25 per cent of the workers covered by the life-stories. Such security may assume various forms. It may be arable lands owned by the family. A pond or a small orchard is also found to be quite helpful as a source of livelihood. Another kind of security is enjoyed by a worker in case his family has other earning members (e.g. father, brothers, sons, uncles) with whom he



has good relations. Such earners may work in Calcutta or in other urban areas. They may also be engaged in some gainful occupations in the native village.

We have noted in an earlier section how the composition of the work-force in daftaripara has changed since the independence and partition of the country because of the large influx of displaced persons from East Pakistan. This was the context in which many displaced Hindus tried to seek a livelihood in the binderies of daftaripara. The experience of a number of such persons is furnished by the life-stories collected by us. It is noteworthy that many of them received quite helpful treatment from the Muslim owners and workers of the binderies. Let us cite a few examples.

The present owner-worker of a small ruling unit came to Calcutta in 1948 from a village of the Dacca district. He was then a boy of ten years. At the age of eighteen he was pressed by extreme poverty to join work at daftaripara. This man gratefully recalls how a Muslim master workman trained him in all parts of the ruling work. He refers to him as 'my ostad' (i.e. my master). Another displaced Hindu from East Bengal is now the owner-worker of a very small bookbinding unit. He narrates the experience of a Muslim landlord who never troubled him for any delay in rent payment. Moreover the landlord also helped him with money for the purchase of some necessary binding equipment.

We have one account in which a displaced Hindu family leaves a boy of eight with the Muslim owner of a bookbinding unit. The boy's parents died soon and he grew

up under the Muslim owner into a workman. Another account gives us the experience of a Hindu boy who was treated with extreme kindness by a rich Muslim woman. He had food and shelter in this Muslim family for a long time till he became a fullfledged workman of a bookbinding unit.

Again, the owner-worker of a ruling workshop remembers the days when his father died soon after their migration from East Pakistan. His experience and that of his elder brother was, "We were employed in the units owned by Muslims ..... They had sympathy for us. It was the help of those Muslims which kept us alive.'

The efforts of some Bengali Muslim bindery owners of daftaripara to adjust their positions after the partition are quite significant. The life-stories offer a number of examples. While all the members of his family went to East Pakistan (now Bangla Desh), the Muslim owner of a ruling workshop tried in various ways to secure Indian citizenship which never materialized.

Another seventy-five year old Muslim owner-worker of a lower medium bookbinding unit still live in daftaripara. According to his own account, 'I live in my workshop. No other accommodation has been rented. I have my food in a local eating house. A worker lives with me. The days when he cooks, I have my meal at the workshop.' Further, on his own admission, 'I have no valid passport. I am a rare visitor to Bangla Desh. I contested against Government of India upto the Supreme Court for Indian citizenship. I Live in India on the strength of a Supreme Court stay order'.

All other members of his family are in Bangla Desh.

The workers who reside in their work-places are mostly Muslims. They include many workers who have their native homes in North and South 24 Parganas. It is their usual practice to go home every week-end. The Hindu workers usually come to work from their rented residence either in the suburbs of Calcutta or in the neighbouring places like Sodepur, Barasat and Naihati. Some of them are also found to have built low cost houses of their own in such places. Some Muslim workers are residents of neighbouring Rajabazar and a few are found to be living in their own or rented accommodation in Patwarbagan itself. The female workers are mostly commuters from places in North and South 24 Parganas.

The hours of work are quite long for the bindery workers. The work starts between eight and nine in the morning. It continues till five in the evening. There is tiffin recess for an hour. In case of overtime work the hours are extended to nine or ten at night. A commuter from outside Calcutta may return home around eleven at night and has to get ready for work by eight on the next morning.

The life-stories indicate little variation in the nature of food consumption among different families. It appears that most of the workers and owner-workers have a level of earnings which do not enable their families to live above the minimum level of subsistence. Many are even hard pressed to maintain that bare minimum. Quite often an earner has too many dependents compared to his earnings.

We have noted already that the level of monthly earnings of the best paid workers are within the limits of Rs.700 to Rs.800. Thus, with no other earners in the family, a number of five or more dependents on the worker would bring it perilously close or even below the poverty line.

The staple food of all Hindu families consists of rice and pulses. Chapati is a common item for at least once a day among many urban Muslim families. It is usual, for most families, Hindus or Muslims, to have some cooked vegetables. No family in the life-stories is reported to have fish for all the days of a week. The number of days on which a family consumes fish varies from one to four a week. Some life-stories state that the corresponding families cannot afford to have fish on most of the days. Meat and eggs are consumed more frequently by Muslim families. Regular consumption of milk is reported in the life-story of one Hindu owner-worker.

We find little variety in the food patterns of families. Rice, chapati, some vegetables and mudi (parched rice) are all the food found to be commonly consumed by workers of daftaripara. There are a number of cheap eating houses in the locality. One full meal in those places costs between one and two and half rupees. This gives an idea of the cheap quality of food served in the eating houses. Several eating shops owned by Muslims include beef in their menu. Some Hindu workers have their meals in those shops. They avoid beef. It is a common sight that Hindu and Muslim workers have different food sitting side

by side on the same bench. The number of eating houses under Hindu ownership are much less in the locality. Their food is usually costlier than that of the Muslim-owned eating houses.

The life-stories have little information about clothings used by workers and their families. It is usual for the Hindus to make their annual purchases at the time of the Pujas, and for the Muslims at the time of the Id. While at work, the outfit of a labourer is in most cases a lungi and a genji. The annual purchases are made within limited means as provided by advances or bonus payments made by employers.

The continuous strain and stress of living is obvious from what we have known about the bindery workers and their levels of earnings, number of dependents, hours of work and nature of food and shelter. The hardship is less for workers having arable lands in their native villages. They can meet the whole, or at least a part, of the yearly rice requirements for the family from their own lands. Also, some vegetables are often grown on such lands.

The presence of a number of earners living together in a family is another factor that can lessen the burden of a low-paid bindery worker. Such relief is enjoyed by some workers resident in urban areas. Some young workers of the age between fourteen and eighteen who come from their rural homes to work as apprentices in daftaripara have the benefit of both several earners in the family and arable lands. They come for work at an early age because of lack of interest in formal studies at the school.

In several families we find the concern for imparting a fair level of education to children. Those parents are keen to see their children, particularly sons, complete at least the secondary and the higher secondary levels of education. They are mainly prompted by the hope that their sons may then enter occupations which are superior to the bindery work in daftaripara. The expenditure incurred by them on children's education often appears to be quite a high proportion of the total family expenditure. It is mostly on the cost of private coaching that those expenses are required. The examples are found in both urban and rural families.

Although for girls the emphasis is more on arranging their marriage, we can see cases of their progress in school education. There are instances of female graduates in one or two families of owner-workers. While almost all the workers and owner-workers have very little formal education, such attitudes towards children's education show a distinct effort in the face of extreme economic difficulties. Indeed, there is no dearth of other instances when grinding poverty forces school-going boys to look for some earning opportunities at a very early age.

Very few workers are regular readers of newspapers. The transistor radios are possessed by many more. It is the media which is heard by numerous workers. The radio is liked not so much for its news broadcast, as for the programmes of music and plays. While the attraction of T.V. is quite obvious for many workers, they often face difficulties in having access to houses where one can conveniently watch

T.V. shows. The women workers living outside Calcutta in some nearby towns of North and South 24 Parganas have more opportunities on sundays to watch T.V. in the houses of neighbours and relatives. Some workers have their own cassette-players and a small number of cassettes. The cassettes are usually those of popular music and mythological plays.

The habit of reading books is extremely rare among the workers and owner-workers who have narrated their own life-stories. Most of them lack adequate literacy. The few cases where we are told of the subject's reading of books, the attraction appears to be more for popular writings on history and politics and the biographies of great men. Many Muslim workers make particular mention of their knowledge of Arabic which enables them to read the Quran.

The younger workers frequently go to see films. Most of the older workers state that they see very few films. Some can recall that they saw more films in their younger days. In any case, the life-stories tell us about the impact of feature films, whether seen at the cinema house or on T.V. An old Muslim owner-worker aged more than seventy-five years says, 'I had many lessons from the cinema. The films were so nice those days. Those films prompted me to bear the burden of my brother's education.' A Hindu owner-worker of a ruling unit says, 'I like those films which deal with the problems of social life.... The film "Chota Bou" was liked by me, so was "Guru Dakshina". The latter was specially liked by me since it depicted how a man kept to his word in the past. The promise made to the zamindar was fully

honoured. And once he received the sanction, the hero could sing again. Above all I appreciated the hero's hard labour and struggle to become a great singer.'

An old Muslim worker recalls the days when he saw 'silent bioscope' and the great stir created by the first showing of 'talkie films'. He also remembers the names of some earliest 'talkie films' which he had seen. Another Hindu woman who is a full workperson in a small bookbinding unit is emphatic about her liking for Hindi feature films seen on the T.V. Those films communicate to her the happy experience of the triumph of good over evil. Her own life is one of hard struggle through many years since she was deserted by her husband who went to live with another woman.

Many workers, both Hindus and Muslims, express their religious devotion in course of the life-stories narrated by them. Several Hindu workers mention their religious initiation by preceptors. A large number of Muslim workers, make note of their regular offering of prayers (namaj), observance of roza and giving of fetra, even though zakat and qurbani are beyond the means of most of them. We have the life-story of a woman who was born a Hindu and made to marry a Muslim when she was a very young girl. The marriage was manoeuvred by one of her first cousins who happened to be a friend of the Muslim groom. Her husband married for the second time and continuous maltreatment forced the first wife to leave her husband. She had a son and a daughter who accompanied her. This woman just ekes out a living by casual work on piece rates in daftaripara. For years she has no news of her son



who left for Bombay in search of a livelihood. She and her daughter live in utter distress. Still she remains a devout follower of the Muslim faith and says, 'it is my obligation to remain faithful to my husband's religion.'

Though not very decisive in their statements, some dissident notes are also heard in a few life-stories. For example, a Hindu owner-worker says that he has no faith in the rituals of religious worship. He has put a stop to Viswakarma Puja in his workshop. He dislikes the religious stance of the Brahmins. However, he does not obstruct the Lakshmi and Saraswati Pujas by the women of her family. Again, we have the example of a fourteen year old Muslim apprentice saying, 'A moulavi asks me to offer prayers (Namaj). I have not yet learnt how to do it. I have no fear of supernatural beings. Nor am I afraid of allah!' Another notable characteristic of daftaripara is general amity among Hindus and Muslims. Some Muslims remember the 1964 riots which forced many of their community to leave for East Pakistan (now Bangla Desh). It is reported by many that even in those troubled days, daftaripara had been a safe place for Muslims.

In a large number of life-stories the workers state their support for the CPI(M). Most of them however are quite frank about their lack of any serious political involvement. Some Muslim workers narrate how they shifted their political allegiance to the CPI(M). Formerly many of them were Congress supporters. They learned through experience that the CPI(M) would offer them the utmost protection in times of communal conflict. The workers who

express their support for the Congress also lack any deep involvement. It appears that the question of political support, whether for this party or the other, is more a creature of habit and family convention, than of any firm belief in a particular political creed. A few accounts express admiration for the CPI(M) as a party for the poor.

We have already problematized the co-existence of the 'formal' and the 'informal' in the binderies of daftari-para. Its effect spreadsthrough all levels of the particular activity and the corresponding labour formations. Our account of 'the strike experience' indicated the limitations of the trade union movement in that overall context. The lack of regular employment for the many means that even the employed are placed in a perpetual condition of insecurity and poverty. Amidst such circumstances, numerous workers may become indifferent to their appalling working conditions. The CITU Union's efforts at mediation through study circles, meetings and rallies have been practically fruitless (Ghosh 1990, p.104).

Further the nature and terms of hired workers present some distinct characteristics in the binderies where the owners are also direct labourers. Such owners are also of different types. Some are independent self-employed workers using a few hired labourers. There are also owner-workers who run small or lower medium binderies employing a number of regular hired workers. Whether they are more akin to the purely self-employed, or closer to the position of labouring employers in small and lower-medium binderies, all those units operate with meagre resources and extremely labour-intensive methods.

All this prevents the integration of the labour market for the binderies as a whole, a phenomenon commonly associated with the cleavage of the 'formal' and the 'informal' sectors. (Papola 1981, p.112). The large periphery of 'informality' has its influence on the wages in organised large units as well. They can maintain wages below the corresponding levels of higher productivity. As explained before, this is 'a situation of abundant stock and regular inflow of labour supply where demand variables like productivity do not play any effective role in determining wages.' (Ibid., p.120).

For the small and lower medium binderies, the struggle of workers to change things is subject to the duality in the position of owner-workers. In order to achieve even marginal improvements, the joint action of owners and workers is necessary to obtain higher rates for bindery jobs from the publishers. At all levels of the heterogeneous structure, the workers are subject to immense constraints on their struggle to change things. They have little means to confront the present and to look for ways of beginning to implement their hopes.

Indeed, the hopes take no shape in the absence of some better alternatives maturing within the nexuses of processing in the binderies. The bindery workers cannot set themselves tasks which they are unable to solve. The wider labour base of the Calcutta's urban economy and even of the overall national reality have numerous sub-spaces like that of the binderies of daftaripara with all their dualities and characteristic contradictions.

This reference to the larger economy outside daftaripara is not intended for any generalization. The point is to indicate the absence of any ready remedy from exogenous sources for the distress of bindery workers of daftaripara. The present exercise essentially aims at having a close view of the specifics of the bindery workers. The life-stories may contribute to the same object as far as possible within the scope of our present project. We have already made use of some details of the life-stories. A lot more is likely to be revealed in the nuances and stresses of personal accounts given by thirty-five workers about their own life and work.

The life-stories convey no aspirations for radical change on the part of the individual workers. Their sufferings, memories and desires constantly seek accommodation within the prevailing social order. However, in their reactions to materials and experience of life, there are traces of disbelief, anger, dissimulation and even rebuke or ridicule which, however fleeting in the daily routine and hardship of a worker's existence, may tell us of minds still looking for something better in their tacit protest and desire for change.

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