

The Labour History of South Asia, 1989-1999: Considerable Accomplishment

Historians of South Asian labour accomplished much during the final years of the previous millennium. An impressive output of books and articles, many of high quality, explored various aspects of the labour history of South Asia. A number of important conferences were held: the more recent of these being sponsored by the newly formed Indian Labour History Association, itself an indicator of robust accomplishment. If, as some have argued, labour has fallen out of favour among historians of Europe and North America, it grows as a specialty within South Asian history

A brief appreciation like this one necessarily must be highly selective. The approach taken here is to discuss six books that span the reviewed period which, in addition to their substantial, individual worth, collectively exemplify some of the diverse approaches and topics taken up by historians of South Asian labour in the closing years of the 20th century. Important contributions in article form are largely ignored. A search through recent volumes of *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, *Economic and Political Weekly*, *Modern Asian Studies*, *Past and Present*, and *South Asia* will turn up many but certainly not all of those contributions. Multi-volume collections of documents such as *Labour Movement in India* (New Delhi: 1989) published under the auspices of the Indian Council of Historical Research also are left out. Furthermore, all the books discussed below are anchored in the colonial period. The growing body of literature on labour in post-1947 South Asia is not covered. Those interested in the latter are encouraged to read Jan Bremen's two-part bibliographical review "Industrial Labour in Post-Colonial India," *International Review of Social History*, 44: parts 2 & 3 (1999), pp. 249-300 and 451-483.

The six books are: Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History: Bengal 1890-1940* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India: Business strategies and the working classes in Bombay. 1900-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Dilip Simeon, *The Politics of Labour Under Late Colonialism: Workers, Unions and the State in Chota Nagpur 1928-1939* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1995); Janaki Nair, *Miners and Millhands: Work, Culture and Politics in Princely Mysore* (Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, 1998); Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, *Imperial Power and Popular Politics: Class, Resistance and the State in India. c. 1850-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); and Samita Sen, *Women and Labour in Late Colonial India: The Bengal Jute Industry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Each work rests on extensive research into a varied but always impressive mix of sources in English and in the languages of South Asia: various levels of colonial records, newspapers and periodicals; private papers; records and papers

of unions, union leaders and other organizations; business records; interviews with workers and with the more prominent; and songs, sayings and other forms of orally-preserved memory. The use of a multiplicity of source-types is one of the hallmarks of the “new” histories of South Asian labour.

All the books deal with sections of the industrial workforce employed (largely in the 20th century) in what is sometimes labelled the organized or formal sector of the economy. This brings a certain unity to the discussion but it also means that works dealing with, *inter alia*, the vast realms of agrarian labour, plantation labour, and the large, historically longstanding groups of circulating labour are absent. People interested in the latter should begin with another work by Jan Bremen: *Footloose Labour: Working in India's Informal Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). He, however, deals mainly with late 20th century circulating labour. Ian J. Kerr, *Building the Railways of the Raj, 1850-1900* (1995; paperback edition: New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997) discusses one large body of circulating labourers in the 19th century – construction workers – with some description of their earlier roots.

Chakrabarty and Sen focus on the workers of Bengal's jute industry (located in greater Calcutta), Chandavarkar primarily focusses on the cotton textile workers of Bombay, and Simeon's main subjects are the employees of the giant Tata Iron and Steel Company and other companies in Jamshedpur and the workers in nearby coal fields – both located in the Chota Nagpur area within what is now Bihar State. Nair examines the miners of the Kolar gold field and workers in Bangalore city, both in the former princely state of Mysore, now Karnataka State, in southern India. Thus, there is some geographical spread among the six works but the fact that four of the six largely focus on Calcutta's jute workers and Bombay's cotton textile workers is representative of the main foci of colonial India's industrial labour history where, to date, these subjects have received the lion's share of scholarly attention. This geographical skew is one of the deficiencies of the field. Substantial bodies of industrial labour elsewhere in colonial India have received much less attention. Thus, for example, the massive (over one million in 1947) and more geographical dispersed body of permanent railway employees are little studied. Heavy engineering concerns, including, but not limited to railway workshops, is virtually unstudied.

Chakrabarty's book was acclaimed generally as a pathbreaking contribution to India's labour history. His examination of the cultural context of the Bengali jute workers emerging consciousness and their developing yet fragmented capacity for collective action broke decisively with previous ways of writing the sub-continent's labour history. A narrow political and economic focus on the organized labour movement in the industrial sector gave way to a wide-ranging contextualization including, crucially, what Chakrabarty saw as the continuing importance of pre-capitalist conditions (“prebourgeois relationships”) that shaped and limited the capacity of the workers “to constitute

themselves into a class by developing the necessary kinds of solidarity, organization, and consciousness.” It must also be noted that Chakrabarty was not centrally interested in the jute workers per se, his useful reconstruction of their history notwithstanding, but rather with, as the title of the book indicates, with rethinking the epistemological and teleological “foundations” of working-class history. In particular, Chakrabarty developed a critique of the emancipatory narratives and analytical categories of Marxism and especially of Marx’s assumptions regarding the shaping presence of a “hegemonic bourgeois culture.”

If Dipesh Chakrabarty remains an important background force in South Asian labour history insofar as many writers feel the need to situate themselves, admiringly, critically or both, with respect to *Rethinking Working-Class History* then Rajnarayan Chandavarkar is a significant, continuing and palpable presence. He is a presence in two ways. First, through his own writing including the two books mentioned here and, secondly, through his doctoral students and their increasing body of publications – including Samita Sen discussed below – who, arguably, are beginning to form a recognizable lineage among the labour historians of South Asia.

Chandavarkar continues to write substantive labour history – sophisticated and theoretically informed history to be sure but substantive accounts nonetheless, in which his narratives of the lives and working experiences, the social materiality of the worlds of labour, take centre stage. The hallmark of Chandavarkar’s approach is his examination of nested contexts: the multiple, interacting settings and social forces – neighbourhoods; work places; workers’ movements and capitalist calculations; the worlds of municipal and nationalist politics within the structures and strictures of colonial rule; and the rural villages from whence came many of Bombay’s textile workers and to which and to their often village-dwelling wives and families the workers regularly returned for annual visits or to ride out costly (no income), prolonged strikes. Indeed, recognition of the last point – the retention of crucial and continuing relationships with home villages by India’s urban, industrial workers – is a characteristic of the books discussed here and, more generally, of other recent writing in the field.

The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India: Business Strategies and the Working classes in Bombay, 1900-1940 is primarily a book about Bombay textile workers, their conflicts with the mill owners, and the ways in which the particular patterns of labour-capital relationships in the Bombay textile industry shaped the emergence of that industry, worker lives and political/union activity in Bombay. Chandavarkar, too, finds fragmentation and segmentation characteristic of Bombay working classes (working class, for Chandavarkar, is always plural) but he attributes the divisions to the particular processes and contexts of industrial growth and worker life in Bombay’s textile industry rather than to the survival of “prebourgeois relationships.”

In his *Imperial Power and Popular Politics* Chandavarkar provides eight, interconnected but separate essays ranging chronologically from the late 19th century through the 1940s although the inter-war years get most attention. Bombay predominates but some of the essays are pan-Indian in scope – or even wider as in the final chapter that offers an approach to the history of South Asian labour within the context of world capitalism. The introductory chapter highlights well the issues taken up in the rest of the collection and it, along with the sometimes combative essays and a good bibliography, provides what is the closest thing currently available to a survey of the major issues and writing in South Asian labour history. Running through the essays is Chandavarkar's contention that the forms and meanings of social relations are determined by political conflict. Politics commands albeit through a variety of interactive mechanisms, processes and expressions.

Dilip Simeon's *The Politics of Labour Under Late Colonialism* is a splendid, hard-edged effort informed throughout by the activist experiences of the author. Simeon believes that close attention to telling the local story is the best way to "elucidate hypotheses about the nature of plebeian nationalism, the system of production relations, and the struggle for hegemony in late colonial India." Thus, the book provides a finely-detailed, political chronicle of the labour movement in Chota Nagpur – viewed as a social movement not restricted solely to workers – within a period and contexts containing processes as diverse as the primitive accumulation of capital and nationalist politics in late colonial India: nationalist politics that included, after 1937, elected, representative governments in India at the provincial level that possessed relative autonomy within the colonial state. Therefore, Simeon's detailed narrative includes something of the ways that the politics and personalities of "high" nationalism intruded on the local labour movement. "Political" in Simeon's analysis is conceived broadly to encompass a range of activities through which collective interests formed, dissolved, and found ideological expression.

Nair's ambitious *Miners and Millhands* also is set outside Bombay and Calcutta. Indeed, the context she provides, the political jurisdiction of the former princely state of Mysore, offers innovative possibilities. Most labour history of colonial India is set in the area of direct British administration. The book compares the work, culture, and politics of distinct and geographically separated groups of workers: textile and other workers in the city of Bangalore and gold miners in the Kolar fields. Four processes – (a) patterns of industrial growth; (b) production processes in mines and factories; (c) patterns of migration; and (d) workers' politics – are identified as the main areas of comparison but it is workers' politics that most engage her attention. In fact, much of the book usefully explores the divergent patterns of political activity in Kolar and Bangalore both with respect to local worker protest and the intersection and incorporation (more and earlier for the Bangalore workers) of those protests into the wider movements of political protest and nationalism.

The combination of Nair's comparative concerns but separate treatments of her two bodies of workers, her conceptual eclecticism albeit with a substantial debt to "cultural" Marxists like Thompson, and her use of a thematic and episodic form of presentation sometimes obscures the central thrust of her analysis. Even so, an underlying direction is present: a nuanced concept of class is essential to the historian who seeks to understand the work, lives and resistances of labouring men and women caught in the uneven advances of industrial capitalism.

Women appear in the five books discussed above but not centrally, although the four authors do recognize, implicitly or explicitly, the crucial role of women in the social reproduction of labour power. The important contribution of Samita Sen is to make gender a central focus. In *Women and Labour in Late Colonial India* the narrative foregrounds the women jute workers and the analysis explores the ways in which gender was "crucial to the very constitution of labour processes" in organised industry and in many other realms of economic activity. However, and admirably, Sen does not abandon class as a crucial analytical tool but rather she seeks to reveal the interplay of class and gender in pursuit of answers to, among many other questions, the substantive, largely unasked historical question of "why or how the industrial working class became overwhelmingly male."

The book moves from issues of migration, recruitment and labour control to women's work in the rural economy; and from there to women's work in the mills, the effects of statutory regulation of working women from the 1920s forward, an exploration of the sexual and marital lives – and the shaping discourses thereof – of the jute workers; and finally to a concluding chapter on working-class politics and women's militancy. Thus, as all the books discussed here, Sen situates her subjects within a number of imbricated and coeval contexts: rural villages, factory floors, homes and neighbourhoods, union and related movements of protest, and political jurisdictions.

To summarize: the final years of the last millennium saw an impressive advance in the labour history of South Asia. The previous emphasis – I refer to the trend and not to the important exceptions – on narrowly-conceived political/institutional histories of union movements, on some excellent but economically-driven studies of organized sector, labour-force mobilization, or on statistical portraits of the working class, has given way to a more rounded, fuller working-class history from which socio-cultural dimensions are no longer largely absent and within which labouring men and women appear as agents with more than a numerical presence. Sen's explicit emphasis on gender, an important entry-point into less-studied dimensions, has furthered the advance. At the same time, most labour historians of South Asia have not abandoned a commitment to the cause of labour in the search for career success as clever, rarified and all too academic practitioners of politically sanitized cultural approaches. None of the historians discussed here would disagree with Dilip

Simeon's wish to render transparent "the conditions of wage-labour and the circumstances within which those condemned to a lifetime of physical exertion have to struggle for a better life" although each one has his/her own vision of a better life, what is central to its attainment, and through what explanatory frameworks historians best understand worker history.

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The Pursuit of Psychoanalysis under Conditions of Communism

Martin A. Miller, *Freud and the Bolsheviks: Psychoanalysis in Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

Martin Miller's *Freud and the Bolsheviks* provides a concise history of the vicissitudes of the psychoanalytic movement in Russia. He relates how the psychoanalytic movement started in tsarist Russia, how it adapted and further developed under Communism before it was outlawed, and how it blossomed again since the 1960s. Initially, Russia's cosmopolitan culture proved particularly receptive to psychoanalytic ideas. A number of works by Sigmund Freud had been translated before 1917 and two psychoanalytic societies had been founded. Initially, the new Communist regime allowed a relative freedom in intellectual exploration; some psychoanalysts were eager to demonstrate how their ideas could contribute to construction of the New Man for the new, Communist, society. During the late 1920s, however, debates around the nature of psychoanalysis and the compatibility of Freud and Marx became increasingly strident. Psychoanalysis came under fire for being bourgeois, idealist, biologicistic, and pessimistic; critics charged that it was inherently tied to its bourgeois roots and, as a suspect capitalist ideology, had no place in Soviet society. In the 1930s, psychoanalysis disappeared in Soviet Russia. During the next few decades, interest in psychoanalysis in the Soviet Union was limited to a few individuals who secretly kept the writings of Freud and discussed them in private. From the early 1960s on, slowly a new openness to psychoanalysis emerged; as the grip of the Communist party on society loosened, psychoanalytic topics were discussed more freely.

Miller has provided an extremely readable and comprehensive overview of the history of psychoanalysis in Russia and the Soviet Union. By presenting the most important parameters in that history, his book serves as a superb introduction to the topic. The first two parts of Miller's overview, dealing with psychoanalysis in pre-revolutionary Russia and under Communism until 1936, present information available in a wide variety of disparate sources; Miller