

Industrialisation and Emergence of Labour Force in Bengal during The Colonial Period: Its Socio-Economic Impact

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Abstract : *Bengal proved to be one of the most industrially developed regions in India in the colonial period with large number of jute mills, collieries and tea-gardens, financed mostly by the British capital. The labour force in the province was mostly of non-local origin. and by 1920's we find quite a large wage-earning industrial force in Bengal- large in absolute numbers though not in proportion to total population but as they were of heterogeneous (social, occupational, ethnic or religious) backgrounds with strong ties to their original roots, even at the end of the World War II, they could not be counted as 'industrial proletariat' in the proper sense of the term.*

Key words: *Industrialisation, Labour-force, Colonial period, Bengal.*

It was primarily with the intrusion of metropolitan capital and the launching of the colonial enterprises like tea plantation, colonies, jute textiles, engineering concerns and new modes of transport (like railways) in the second half of the 19th century that a distinctly new kind of labour force emerged in India. The industrial wage-earners were a distinctly new social group but they did not imply a formation of the working class in the classical Marxian sense.

Bengal, being the earliest citadel of the English colonial power, proved to be one of the most industrially developed regions in India in the colonial

period. Rich in natural resources, having great opportunities of transport and communications and helped by the existence of coalmines which provided steady sources of energy, Bengal was an ideal field for industrialization. The industrial landscape of colonial Bengal can be divided under three broad heads (i) Greater Calcutta with large number of jute mills along with some cotton mills, engineering concerns, iron foundries etc, (ii) the collieries and (iii) tea - gardens.

I. Jute:

Jute has been cultivated in Bengal for a long time past, particularly in the East Bengal districts. Even in the early years of the 19th century, there was a remarkably large textile industry in Bengal and as late as in 1850, the value of the finished jute products exported from India exceeded that of raw jute. But all these were handloom products and it was only in 1835 that pure jute yarn was made and sold in Dundee. The first jutemill of India was established at Rishra in Hooghly district of Bengal in 1854 - 55. Only one more mill came up by 1863-64 but from then on, the growth of industry was fairly rapid.¹ The maximum growth in jute mill formation took place from 1890's to 1911. Twenty mere jute mills were added during the inter-war years.

The jute industry of India was centered in Bengal and more particularly in the Calcutta metropolitan area. The few mills outside Bengal in U.P. and South India, were established only after 1919. Moreover, the Bengal mills possessed great advantage in being near the source of supply of raw jute for Bengal had a monopoly of raw jute cultivation. The whole of the jute mill area in Bengal was located on the either side of the river Hooghly, in a radius of about 50 kilometer north and south of Calcutta from the Bansberia in the north, to Budge Budge in the South. Even within this area, there were certain areas which accounted for considerable concentrations of jute mills such as Naihati, Kankinara, Noapara, Jagaddal, Shyamnagar, Titagrah, Khardah, Kamarhatty and Baranagar (all in what is now North 24 Paraganas District), Narkeldanga, and Beliaghata (Eastern Calcutta), Garden Reach, Metiabruz, and Budge Budge (in the present South 24 parganas), Chengail, Bauria, Sankrail, Uluberia, Bally, Shibpur, Ghosury(Howrah District),

Serampore, Bansberia, Champdany, Bhadreswar and Telinipara (Hooghly District).

Table²
Distribution of Jute Industry in Bengal (1939)

District	No. of fabrics	No. of works
Howrah	24	62,552
24 Parganas	57	1,68,835
Hooghly	16	49, 842

The jute mills or the manufacture of jute fabrics was overwhelmingly controlled by the Europeans for a long time. Since the very beginning the jute industry made efforts to energise itself in a way that world eliminates wasteful competition. It finally resulted in the formation of the Indian Jute Manufacturer's Association in 1884 whose name was later changed to Indian jute Mills Association (I.J.M.A). It became a monopolistic organization. Jute was basically an export item both in the raw and the manufactured form. Many of the problems of the industry followed from the economic factors inherent in an export oriented industry, the problems of production in excess of demand occupying often.

There were three important chronological phases in the growth of jute fabrics manufacturing industry.³ The first covers the initial uncertainties of the industry roughly upto the last decade of the 19th century; the second deals with the expansion of markets from the beginning of the 20th century and the great prosperity during the World War I when raw jute prices slumped and even as the demand for gunny which was used to make cloth, sandbag and canvas increased astronomically. Flushed by the trading profits, Indian businessmen mostly the Marwaris already engaged in export of raw jute and gunny dealing, made a rush to establish a number of new mills and to install additional looms in existing mills. This was in the early 1920's and the third stage started almost simultaneously when a lingering crisis began to engulf the jute industry and to continue for long with only some temporary exceptions. The combined forced of Indian entry and imbalances, in the

backdrop of an expanding and then sharply contracting finished jute-products market, had a manifold impact on the jute economy affecting both the employers and the employees.

The gradual replacement of the European magnates by the Marwaris was the most significant long-term development in the history of the jute industry in the inter war years.⁴ Already by the turn of the century, internal trade as well as the bulk of the jute export trade along with the speculation went into the hands of the Marwaris. After the World War I they started establishing new companies or buying up shares of European companies by offering good prices and in return for loans, both short or long-term, to them. During the Depression of the 30's the Marwaris garnered a large number of shares held by the middle class Bengalis. The position of the Marwaris in the jute companies was further well-enhanced during the second world war years. By the end of the World War II, the Europeans had seen the writing on the wall and were ready to leave. By 1947, 13 major European mills were taken over by the Marwaris and the industry started becoming "Swadeshi controlled". Within a decade after independence, the process was more or less complete.

As for the labour force in the jute industry there are certain salient features: First, there was a rapid increase in the number of wage-earning population employed in the jute mills since 1863 - 64, but systematic estimates are available only from 1879. The formation of the jute labour force was more or less complete by 1921, although it continued to expand till 1980, the peak year being 1929 after which the Great Depression started.

Second, because of the highly localized growth of the jute industry, the working mass also became concentrated in a relatively small number of jute mill towns.

Third, although the number of mills remained the same between 1929 and 1937, the number of labourers decreased by 60,000. This was primarily due to the World Wide Great depression (1929 - 1934) which had its impact on the jute industry too. The situation somewhat improved after 1934-35 and became stable after 1937-38, but it never reached the 1929 - 30

dimensions. The total number of labour again fell by 20,000 between 1942 and 1944. This reduction however, did not indicate any reduced availability of employment. On the other hand there was, in fact, a scarcity of labour, particularly of the skilled type, such as spinners. The process started in 1942 following the Japanese air-raids on Calcutta and the situation was at its worst in January, 1943 when, according to one estimate, the shortage of labour amounted to about 13.3 p.c of the total requirement. The mills had to work with inexperienced and untrained labour. Even when the World War-I ended, the position had not reverted to normalcy.⁵ The labour exodus to the native villages was not the main reason, but many jute workers had also found jobs in the military depots, opened in and around Calcutta, where rates of wages were much higher.

As for the regional composition of the labour force, in a report in 1906, Foley said,⁶ "twenty years ago, all the hands(in the jute mills) were Bengalis". In the initial stages, labour was almost entirely local and even though they constituted the vast majority of the workforce till the mid-1890's, its composition was already undergoing a noticeable change and by 1895 non-local non-Bengali labour constituted a fairly sizeable section of the workforce. The rapid growth of industry and the spread of information in the neighbouring provinces that work was available in the factories of Bengal might have accounted for this change. Moreover, agriculture in Bengal was more remunerative than work in the jute mills but what the jute mills paid was enough to attract labour from Bihar, Orissa, U.P. first and then from C.P. or even Madras.⁷ It is of interest to note that the period of the most rapid expansion of the jute industry and the concomitant growth of the jute labour force, i.e, 1891 - 1919 correspond to an enormous flow of people from Bihar, Orissa and U.P. to the Calcutta metropolitan area. The influx was responsible for a marked and quick change in the composition of that force and also in the demographic pattern of the concerned area. Thus as Prof. Parimal Ghosh has rightly pointed out⁸ that the industrial sector came to be appended to the traditional agricultural sector in the interior. Ordinarily, industrial employer did not spend anything towards the reproduction of their labour force and indeed dumped the burden of care of the sick and the needy on the rural society. Needless to say this helped to

make the industries all the more competitive in the world market. From the other side, the labour also benefitted. Left to itself, by all accounts, it seems there would have been a certain crisis in agrarian relations which were averted through the inflow of remittances from the labour in the cities. Moreover, as Foley observed⁹ that each mill had formed connections - not deliberately fostered but nevertheless regular and steady - with certain areas. Besides, the proportion of Bengali labourers was not equally low in all areas, the exceptions were in the Budge Budge subdivision of south 24 Parganas and in the Uluberia sub-division of Howrah district.

As for the communal composition of labour force, the presence of the Muslims became marked roughly between 1890 and 1911, when they were an important part of thousands of immigrants who flocked to Bengal mills from Bihar and U.P. To a certain extent, they replaced the local Hindus. Fremantle observed in 1906¹⁰ " the proportion of upcountrymen has increased, the more energetic Musalmans (mostly hereditary weavers) having displaced the local Hindus in the weaving sheds. The 1911 census showed that the Muslims constituted 31.81 p.c of jutemill operators. The proportion remained more or less unchanged in 1921. We have no detailed data for the subsequent periods but there seems to have been no significant change."

As for the caste composition of the jute mill labour force, the census of 1911 gave a detailed breakup of the jute labour force into 71 castes and subcastes each with over 1,000 worker.¹¹ The Census of 1921 provided almost the same information.¹² Certain features stand out from the census reports.¹³

The overwhelming majority of the jute workers had rural origins and were mostly ruined artisans, landless peasants or unemployed farm labourer, They belonged to a variety of castes and subcastes and it would not be very wrong to say that migration to jute mill centres represented a sample of rural population in the emigrating areas. The most deprived sections in the countryside the lowest in the social hierarchy and the untouchables like Chamar, Muchis, Doms, Bagdis, Kewats etc and the Namasudra community among the Bengali labourers take together, formed a very high population,

more than 25 p.c of the total labour force.

Regarding recruitment of labour force

In fact, the supply of labour to Bengal jute mills was part of the much larger eastward stream of labour migrating to coalmines, plantations and factories. The fact that the wages in jute mills, particularly of the skilled workers, were higher than in mines or plantations, made it unnecessary for the jute mills any special effort to recruit labour. Apart from some instances in the early years of the industry of a Sardar or babu being sent out by the mill management to the villages to recruit labour. Apart from some instances in the early years of the industry of a sardar or babu being sent out by the mill management to the villages to recruit labour, people themselves came to the millgates for employment. And until 1937, virtually all recruitment of jute mill labour was done solely through the jobbers., locally known as "Sardars". Even after the appointment of labour officers and the opening of Labour Bureaus in some mills in 1937, the Sardars continued to maintain the pivotal position in the matter of recruitment.

In a situation of limited job availability the Sardars and the Babus took full advantage of their position. To be recruited, one had to pay 'dasturi' (commission or plainly a bribe) to the Sardar, babus and other intermediaries, the Head Sardar getting the lion's share. Any absence, even an account of sickness or pregnancy, meant fresh bribes when resuming work. Bribes had to be paid just to have one's name retained in the waiting list. Apart from these occasional bribes, regular weekly payments had to be made to the Sardars and Babus. The Sardars enjoyed great power over allotment of work, granting of leave permissions. Enforcing of work regulations, punishment, dismissal, etc. The Sardar's activities included recruitment of workers, housing them and lending them money at high rates of interest. The bribe that an ordinary coolie gave to the Sardar was not simply an economic transaction, it was also a tribute to the Sardar's authority and a sign of its acceptance by the workers. Even after a new mechanism of control over labour was established, with the appointment of labour officer and introduction of labour bureaus, the Sardari system was not altogether eliminated. Much of the basis of the Sardar's control of the workforce lay in

community, kin or some other primordial relationship and in the ideas and norms associated with them. Sardari was thus possibly an instance of pre-colonial pre-capitalist institution being adapted to the needs of industrialization in a colony.¹⁴

II.

Cotton

Traditionally, Bengal was an important handloom cotton manufacturing centre, but its share in cotton mill-textiles industry of India was much smaller compared to Bombay or Ahmedabad. It also grew at a relatively later period. In fact, it started growing rapidly only after the World war I. whereas in 1921, there were only cottonmills employing 13,000 worker, in 1938 there were 31 mills employing about 32,000 workers and in 1944, 29 cotton mills employed 43,561 persons.¹⁵ The three main centres of cotton mills in Bengal were (i) Dacca (and Khulna), (ii) Kusthia and (iii) Greater Calcutta(including 24 parganas, Howrah and Hooghly). The most important feature of the cotton mill industry of Bengal was that, by and large, it was owned and controlled by indigenous capitalists both Marwaris and Bengalis, the latter being significant only in the case of this industry in the province.

As regards the regional composition of the cotton workers, in 1906, Foley reported:¹⁶ "I have no figures of the composition of the staff of any cotton mill, but a walk around shows that the proportion of the upcountrymen is far smaller than in a jute mill". He found relatively a large number of Bengali and Orissa workers in these mills, but the census Report of 1921¹⁷ suggests that a major shift from local labour had occurred. In the case of the skilled workers, the proportion of persons born in Bengal was somewhat higher than that found in the jute industry and it was striking that only about 7 p.c of the cotton mill operatives were born in Bihar and the immigrant labour came chiefly from Orissa and united Provinces. We have no census information regarding the post 1921 changes which incidentally was a period of rapid growth of the cotton industry in Bengal. It seems, however that the percentage of local labour employed in the mills of Kusthia, Dacca and Khulna was higher than in the mills in Greater Calcutta, incidentally most of which were co-existent with the important jute mill centres.

As for the social and religious background of the cotton workers, we find from the census of 1921¹⁸ that at least one-tenth of the Bengal cotton mill labour force came from a weaving craft background (i.e. 'tantis' and 'Jugis') but this figure should go up because though the census table do not provide any specific information regarding the occupational background of the Muslim cotton mill workers, who constituted approximately one-fifth labour force in Bengal, it may be surmised that many of them came from a tradition of handloom manufacturing. Apart from labour with some sort of weaving craft background, distant or immediate, the so-called low castes like the 'kaibartas' ('chasi' and 'jalia' together), the 'pods', the 'chamars' and the 'muchis' were the other important caste/ sub-caste groups among the cotton mill operatives, each of them contributing more than 5p.c of the labour force.

As there was generally no shortage of workers, there was no separate system of recruitment. Recruitment generally took place at the gates where prospective workers presented themselves almost every morning. It was usual for the management to ask the Sardars to bring in their friends and relations to fill vacancies.

Taken as a whole, we find that the labour composition in the Bengal cotton mills was more or less similar to that in the jute mills with the exception that in the former, the local Bengali labour were much more in number but the economically unstable condition of the large number of small and medium sized cotton mills and the semi-agriculturist character of the workforce impeded the growth of solidarity and consequently of a strong trade union organization among the cotton mill workers of Bengal like the Bengal Chatkal Mazdoor Union, the apex body of the jute trade unions. In a colonial semi-feudal labour-abundant-economy and society, the working class had very little prospect of success in a labour-capital dispute without outside political support. And in an indigenous capital versus local labour dispute, there was very little chance of wider political support. The inevitable failure of the successive labour struggles in the Kushtia mills bear unmistakable testimony to it.¹⁹

III.

The Labour World of Greater Calcutta

Not only cotton mills, many other industries like iron-foundries, engineering concerns, ceramic factories and chemical works were also located in or near the industrial suburban towns where jute mills were located. Most of these industrial units were located in riverine towns. A few of these were old towns inhabited previously by middle class Bengali 'babus' while others were new towns grown out of agricultural lands. The setting up of railway lines in the Sealdah-Ranaghat route and Howrah-Bandel line changed the entire of the hinterland of Calcutta. Most of these industrial hubs were located in between the embankments of the river Ganga and the newly set up railway line. The demographic pattern of the entire region came to be changed. But still the industrial centres remained isolated and failed to change the economy of the lower Gangetic delta as a whole.²⁰

In fact, the industrial 'mohallas' remained as 'ghettos'. There was little or no interconnection or social and cultural contact between local Bengali population and the mill hands. Both lived in their own worlds. Both Amal Das's study of Howrah mills and Arjan de Han's Study of Titagarh mills show²¹ that even in the initial stages, the labourers had their associations and meetings in and around the industrial neighbourhood. Pushed out of their habitual village surroundings the workers' nostalgia for village life persisted and they had not given up their social actions and traditional recreations of village life even in their new industrial career. In order to get relief from arduous and mechanical kind of jobs, the workers required some recreations and amusements. Social and religious festivals frequently pulled them together around the neighbourhood of mills. There were occasions such as Durga Puja, Rathajatra and Holi when the Hindu millhands demanded holidays. They collected descriptions from their neighbours and shop-owners. During festivals, they organized recreations like melas, puppet shows, magic, street fighting and 'tamasha' etc in the neighbourhood of the mill. During Dusserah and Holi festivals, the Hindusthani workers assembled in their neighbourhood and celebrated the occasion in their traditional fashion. Similarly, the Muslim workers organized the Muharram and Id

festivals in their traditional fashion and demanded holidays. These religious practices of the two communities often fostered the spirit of community consciousness and rivalry among the workers.

Besides these social functions like marriage and traditional recreations like visits to liquor shops, bars and prostitute quarters frequently attracted them. Organisations such as 'Akharas' (or gymnasiums) also drew workers to enlist themselves as members. The management often feared that these organizations might be used by striking workers as their weapons in factory politics. On the other hand, in Bombay these akharas were often used by the management to break workers' strikers. However, in Bengal miles, any such link between employers and the Akharas is difficult to locate. Noted labour historians like R.S. Chandravarkar and Janaki Nair²² have shown in their studies of Bombay mills and kolar goldfields respectively the close relationship between the neighbourhood politics and labour movement. If such studies be made in case of Bengal mill-towns, similar conclusions may be drawn and new ideas about labour world may emerge.

Lord Ripon's resolution of May, 1882 embodying the basic principles of the system of local self-government marked the significant step towards the advancement of local self-government. Municipal politics centered around basically two pressure groups²³ - (i) The European mill-owners and managers and (ii) The Bengali 'bhadraloks'. Besides, these two broad groups, Prof. Rajat K. Ray brought to our notice²⁴ another group which was outside the purview of institutional politics and had no institutional means of making its influence felt in town politics until a permanent trade union organization developed among this group in the 1920's. This group comprised the laboring sections of the population. So, in the institutional politics of town life the urban labour class had very little role to play. As a result we find in the development of public utility services, sewerage and provision of drinking water, little attention has been paid to the areas crowded by the industrial labour. The picture was same in almost all mill towns of Bengal: the barrack / coolie line pattern of housing provided either by the company or mostly the private bustees' - unhygienic, filthy, disease-ridden, without any arrangement for proper light or air, latrines either totally absent or a

few in number and no privacy for women. A somewhat new interpretation to this situation, however, has been given by Dr. Soumitra Sreemani.²⁵ According to his view, the labourers who came from native villages were accustomed to excoriate in the fields and to fetch drinking water and to bathe from the same pond. So, they had little interest in the development projects of the municipalities and never really strongly demanded their implementation. They saved their meager earnings and sent remittances to native villages. The urban mill areas remained backward and problem-ridden areas throughout the colonial period. The situation changed even after independence.

Apart from the manufacturing industries, the Railways having two terminal station at Howrah and Sealdah, with railway shed and workshops and innumerable local stations and the Calcutta Tramways Company employed a large number of workers in the transport sector. A large number of workforce was also employed in the Calcutta Port and Dock. There was huge conglomeration of port and dock workers in the Hastings, Kidderpore, Metiabruz and Garden Reach. The transport workers, though had opportunities of communicating with different sections of masses, often had their own worlds to live.

IV.

Coal

Besides, the manufacturing and transport sectors, two other important segments of industrialization in Bengal were mining and plantations.

The history of the coalmines in India starts from the discovery of coal in Bengal as early as in the year 1774. The Ranigunj field (situated in Asansol subdivision of Burdwan district of Bengal) was first to be exploited. However, until 1854, only three mines were opened but with the opening of railway line as far as Ranigunj in 1858 the industry witnessed a rapid growth which was further accelerated by the extension of east India railway to Barakar in 1865. For long, the ranigunj fields remained by far the most important, if not the only source of coal production in India. However, after the discovery and rapid spread of mining in the Jharia belt in Bihar, Ranigunj was relegated to second place in the total output of coal in India in the

beginning of the 20th century. The number of coalmines in the Ranigunj belt were 226 in 1937 and 279 in 1944, with the corresponding figure of coalmines being 57,882 in 1921 and 64,491 in 1944.²⁶

There were mainly two colliery owner's organizations. Of them, the earliest, the Indian Mining Association was one of the predominant European interest. The other organization, the Indian Mining Federation, Calcutta represented mainly the Indian mining interest in the Ranigunj fields. The mines which formed the Indian Mining Association were mostly owned by large joint stock companies incorporated in England. The collieries owned by these companies were controlled by the firms of managing agents. There was lack of co-ordination and planning in the coal industry as a whole as all these companies were interested only in extracting high profits. Only 7 out of 95 joint stock companies in the coal industry listed in Investor's India Year 1919 were managed by the Indians, all by the agency house of N.C. Sirkar & co. which was so rapidly going downhill that by 1926 six of its collieries were liquidated or put under receivership. The rest of the Indian (mostly Bengali) owned mines were small and mostly proprietary leased-in-mines. The mining technology remained rather primitive. World war I brought with it huge profits to all collieries which encouraged Marwaris entrepreneurs to enter the field.²⁷ First, they set up new collieries, then they brought many small collieries from their Bengali owners, yet later they gradually increased their control over the European managed concerns by buying up ordinary shares of these companies. Thus by the early 1930's, there was a fairly significant indigenous (mostly, Marwari) presence in coal, an industry which, like tea and jute has always been thought of as the bastion and pressure of the British mercantile community.

As for the regional composition of the labour force, the great majority of the mining labourers were recruited from villages either within or around the coalbearing areas. The first reliable birth-place statistics were collected bearing the 1911 census²⁸ and these show that by far the largest population of miners were born in the coal districts themselves. In the Ranigunj coalfields slightly more than two-thirds of the miners had their place of birth in the same district (viz. Burdwan) and one-sixth came from the

contiguous districts of Santhal Parganas and ChotaNagpur of Bihar. The pattern of local predominance did not undergo any significant shift by the time of the next decennial census. According to 1921 census²⁹, in the Bengal coalfields, 56.5% were drawn from the coal districts, 7.5% were drawn from districts of Bengal other than coal districts, about 33.9% were imported from the contiguous districts of Bihar and only about 2.1% came from provinces other than Bengal and Bihar. The census surveys of 1931 and 1941 did not record the relevant birthplace statistics, but from other estimates it is clear that few changes take place before the end of the World War II. Only after the end of the World war II, the collieries seriously began to recruit labour from further afield. For this purpose, the industry created the Ranigunj Coalfield central Recruiting organization with assembly depots located at Gorakhpur and Bilaspur. By 1947, over 30,000 upcountry workers had been brought to collieries in this way.

The remote and sparsely populated areas in which coalmines were located were mostly inhabited by aboriginal and semi-aboriginal tribes who from the earliest days provided the bulk of the mining labour force. Throughout the 19th century, the mining labour force was predominantly composed of the Santhals and Bauris which were castes on the lowest rung of the Hindu hierarchy. With the rapid expansion of the coal production since the early 1890's the industry began to draw upon a wider population, though still the semi-tribal and low-caste peoples maintained their predominance. The 1911 census shows that the Santhals and Bauris taken together accounted for more than 50 p.c of the total labour force. According to 1921 Census records the Bauris and Santhals formed 59% of the unskilled and 38% of the skilled workforce.

As for the recruitment of colliery labour, two systems were followed.³⁰ In order to attract a sufficient and permanent supply of mining labour, many of the larger collieries acquired zamindari rights over the extensive areas of surface land in and around the coalfields. They could then attempt to take advantage of their position as an influential landlord to exert pressure on their tenants to provide labour. In this way, whole villages would be purchased and incorporated into this variant of the zamindari estate.

Moreover, these possessions enabled firms to offer plots of cultivate land to labour who had migrated to the mines from places further afield as well as to the landless in the estate itself as an inducement for them to settle down in the vicinity of the pits. The zamindari system was particularly responsible for the recruitment of the Santhals who subsequently became the settled miners in the Ranigunj mines. This zamindari system was the traditional system of recruitment of coal labour, but by the 1920's it had become rather obsolete because there was not much new land in the coalfields to be spared. Some collieries now resorted to non-zamindari method either directly recruiting labour through the company's own salaried recruiters or indirectly, through making contracts for the supply of labour.

A peculiar feature in the coalmining was the prevalence of the "family system". The workers mostly drawn from aboriginal tribes and other low castes, worked with their womenfolk, generally man cutting the coal and his woman carrying it. The extensive employment of the women underground was practiced especially in Bengal for long. The power of the Sardars, the zamindari rights exercised by the mine owners and the prevalence of the family system - all taken together made the position of the miners vulnerable.

In the coal region, besides the two most important coal cities - Asansol and Ranigunj (which were also important railway and commercial centres and the first one being also a subdivisional town), a number of small colliery towns like Jamuria, Ukhra, Sripur etc grew up. The entire socio-economic landscape of the erstwhile sparsely populated and barren field had been changed. The civic conditions of the mining towns however beggar descriptions. The housing of the workers in the principal coalfields, subject to regulations for a long time by the Miners Board of Health left much to be desired. These were disease-ridden, medical facilities were only in name only; malaria continued to take a heavy toll. Houses for the miners called 'Dhowrahs' were inadequate in number and poor in construction, ill-maintained, ill-planned, overcrowded, lacking privacy, ventilation and sunshine, even worse than the coolie-bustees in greater Calcutta region.

V.

Plantations

Tea is the principal plantation industry in India. Assam by far the foremost region in tea production was closely followed by Bengal whose tea producing areas included the hill areas and the plains of Terai in Darjeeling district, the Dooars in Jalpaiguri district and Chittagong. Tea production was experimentally started in the hills of Darjeeling in 1840 and in the plains of the district in 1862. The industry began to grow rapidly in the district from the 1860's. Most of the gardens were under European control. By 1947, the number of gardens rose to more than 60 in the hills and 17 in the plains. The acreage under cultivation was 47,422 and 16,899 respectively.³¹

Dooars being annexed by the British from Bhutan after the Anglo-Bhutan War of 1864-65, the tea planters of Darjeeling explored the possibility of growing tea there. Although Dooars was the most unhealthy district in which malaria and black water fever were rife, climatically it was most suitable to tea growing.³² Soon, the Dooars became the largest tea-producing area in the province. The first tea garden was started in the Dooars in 1873. Within two years, thirteen tea gardens sprang up around the area. Five years after the first tea garden was started by the British Planters, a few Bengali lawyers and clerks of Jalpaiguri formed the first Indian tea company, called the Jalpaiguri Tea company with one garden (1878). After this, many more Indian gardens, most of them comparatively small, were set up in the district. However, until 1960's, the British companies were in the majority.³³ The growth of the tea industry in the Dooars was so rapid that the acreage under tea in 1892 was over six times that in 1881. During the period between 1901 and 1951, the area under tea nearly doubled and the labour force nearly trebled. By 1951, the number of gardens and the acreage under tea was 158 and 1,34,473 respectively with 1,76,196 labourers.³⁴

Ownership and management of tea plantation (excepting the small gardens of Dooars and Chittagong) rested overwhelmingly in the hands of the Europeans, strongly united under the all powerful and monopolistic Indian Tea Association formed in 1861. It had its headquarters in Calcutta

and branches in the tea districts, such as the Dooars' Planters' Association, the Darjeeling Planters' Association and the Terai Planters' Association. Only at a much later stage, another organization called the Indian Tea Planters' Association (ITPA) was formed to look after the interests of the Indian planters.

As for the composition of the labour force, in the Darjeeling hills, the immigrants or descendants of immigrants from the neighbouring Nepal furnished almost the whole of a steady and tractable labour force. They might be regarded as a permanently settled population engaged in a hereditary occupation. In the Dooars, Nepali labourers from Darjeeling were initially employed but as the industry was developing rapidly, they soon proved insufficient and the planters had to turn to Chotanagpur and Santhal Parganas for their labour supply. Migration of the aboriginals like Santhals, Oraos and Mundas from these areas to Jalpaiguri increased rapidly. By 1920-21, a settled "alien" labour class had already emerged. Since the late 1920's, there was less new recruitment and migration diminished, partly because of the gradual development of the recruiting districts and partly because of the availability of local labour from amongst the descendants of the settlers in the tea district.³⁵ Recruitments to the Dooars was done mainly through garden Sardars. It was easier for the garden Sardars, the 'arkatis' (paid recruiters) to induce new recruits by showing all the advantages of work and the prospect of ultimate settlement on independent holdings.

As tea plantation is a semi-agricultural and semi-industrial process, generally everywhere the "family system" of production prevailed. The labourer usually brought the family and finally settled in the garden areas. Man, his wife and even children worked in the garden. The workers lived in the garden bustees which amounted almost to concentration camps having little freedom of movement. Contact with the world outside a tea garden or even with the neighbouring tea gardens or villages was strictly controlled. The workers were thus virtually reduced to the status of serf tied to the garden and in many cases, also by allotment of land as cottas on the platforms. The estate manager was virtually all in all inside a garden. He built the coolie houses, supplied rice to them when necessary, established the market

('hat') and regulated prices. On the other hand, if he wished, he could throw out a worker and his family from the garden within twenty-four hours. Bullying, flogging, cutting of wages and rations were some of the forms of brutality used by planters to tame the erring workers.

The plantation-system did not directly lead to urbanization as it was done in semi agricultural environment. But it helped urbanization in remote corners of North Bengal . In the Dooars area of Jalpaiguri district, the railway lines of the Bengal-Assam Railways went by the side or even through the tea gardens. The big railway stations or junctions had around them several gardens and the lowest railway workers - the unionized gangsmen and pointsmen came into frequent contact with the sprawling labour population. Railway station, cluster of gardens, hats / markets - all taken together, gave rise to a number of garden towns in the Dooars and the Terai regions like Malbazar, Birpara, Kalchini, Banarhat, Madarihat etc. Some garden-towns grew up also in the hilly region of Darjeeling.

Whatever might be the exact form of recruitment, (with the exception of Darjeeling hill areas to some extent) everywhere the garden workers were reduced to a semi-servile status. The Labour Investigation Committee³⁶ found that such a situation of unfreedom prevailed even on the eve of independence. Although the labour was legally free to leave his garden and seek employment in any garden of his liking, in practice it was seldom possible for him to move freely. Here was a mass of illiterate people, living with practically all relations cut off, scattered in tea gardens, segregated from outside influence, unorganized and unable to protect themselves when the employees had formed themselves into one of the most powerful and well organized associations in the country.

VI.

Concluding Observations

Thus taken as a whole, we find that with the growth of industries in Bengal at a contemporary more rapid pace towards the closing years of the 19th century, an acute shortage of unskilled local labour was increasingly felt. Relatively higher agricultural wages and the poor communications between Calcutta and most of the Bengal districts considerably restricted the

migration of the Bengali peasants to the industries situated mostly in and around Calcutta or mines or tea garden. On the other hand, road and rail connections between Calcutta and the provinces of Gangetic valley were much better. In addition, rural unemployment and underemployment seem to have been more marked in these provinces. The result was that there was a larger availability of unskilled and mobile labour from these regions for the mills and factories in Bengal than in the Bengal proper itself. Another factor was the aversion to manual labour of the people of Bengal, where the social milieu was one in which menial and industrial occupations ranked low in the scale of social aspirations. The shift from Bengali labour to non-Bengali labour, mostly from Bihar, U.P and Orissa had probably become conspicuous by 1905 when it was found that about two-thirds of the labourers in Bengal were immigrants³⁷. In 1929, the Royal Commission on Labour noted the predominantly non-local character of the factory labour in Calcutta. It seems that in all the industries of Bengal in general (and not only in Calcutta) a powerful influx of non-local labour took place from the beginning of the 20th century and this trend was never reversed. By the 1920's the labour force had become, more or less, settled in ethnic composition.

This predominantly non-Bengali composition of the factory labour of Bengal meant that from the turn of the 20th century, the industrial labour class of Bengal was formed of isolated social groups without any form of identification or contact with the rest of the population. The social alienation of the industrial labour was a greater problem in Bengal than even in Bombay where despite tensions between the Konkani and Deccani groups, the majority of the workers were recruited from the same province. In Bengal, the bulk of the workers belonging to the Hindi and Urdu linguistic communities and immigrants from Bihar and U.P. constituted an exotic group, whose basic loyalty was confined to their native villages, religion and caste and inside the factory or mill, to the Sardar who had recruited them. So, despite the economic difficulties, there was little evidence of organized agitation amongst the workers to improve their conditions. The prerequisites for united actions by the industrial workers were lacking. Only effective political mobilization from outside could have enabled them to overcome such difficulties and this was forthcoming only from the 1920's after the advent of Gandhi in the Indian political arena.

Another important aspect was the "dual nature" of the industrial working class. To what extent industrial workers in Bengal became crystallized into a "working class" in proper sense of the term is a difficult question. The Indian Factory Labour commission (1907 - 08) noted in its Report³⁸, "The habits of the Indian factory operatives are determined by the fact that he is primarily an agriculturist or a labour on the land. In almost all cases, his hereditary occupation is agriculture, his home is in the village, he regularly remits a portion of his wages there and he returns there periodically to look after his affairs and to obtain rest after the hazards of factory life. There is as yet practically no factory population such as exists in European countries, consisting of a large number of operatives, trained from their youth to one particular class of work and dependant upon employment in order to obtain a livelihood."

The Royal Commission on Labour also affirmed in its report in 1931-39 that the Indian worker remained only partially committed to industrial life with half of his mind in the village from where he had come. A high degree of labour turnover and absenteeism was cited as evidence of this. The management appears to have only accepted the discipline of an industrial society. This rural-urban dichotomy was present even at the end of the colonial period and was particularly evident in times of protracted strikes when a large number of workers went back to their native places.

Thus, we find by the 1920's quite a large wage-earning industrial labour force in Bengal - large in absolute numbers though not in proportion to total population, which further increased its numerical strength during the inter-war and the Second World War years, they had been coming to Bengal since the late 19th and the early 20th centuries but as they were of heterogeneous social occupational, ethnic and religious backgrounds with strong ties to their original roots, even at the end of the World War II, they could not be counted as "industrial proletariat" in the proper sense of the term.

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