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2.2. South Asia*

The past twenty-five years or so have witnessed renewed scholarly interest in historical studies of labour in India and other parts of the world. This revival is distinctive both in terms of its location and its central concerns. It has emerged from the countries of the South and its preoccupations are not confined to the traditional working class alone. Earlier, the major emphasis of labour history was on the core countries, such as the USA, Canada, Western Europe, and Japan. Since then, there has been a shift of focus to nation states on the peripheries of world capitalism. The reversal of location and the broadening of the scope of labour history provide a basis for innovative global comparisons. As the dualities of free/unfree labour, wage-work/non-wage work, and formal/informal labour blur, labour historians have to take into account the multiplicity of relationships, locations, and temporalities that underpin labour forms and within which the individual worker is embedded.¹ These issues are being increasingly raised and discussed by historians in many parts of the world, including South Asia. In this essay I will attempt to relate the renewal of labour studies to the changing landscapes of labour in the South Asian countries of India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh.

India

Bringing labour into the public domain

We begin with a reflection on the changing traditions of Indian labour history writing.² Contrary to the long-held perception in the Indian labour historiography that Indian labour history began in the 1880s and 1890s, there has been a perceptible change concerning the periodization of labour history. Following in the tradition

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of European labour history and orthodox Marxism that privileged the Industrial Revolution as the harbinger of modern labour, Indian labour history was perceived as beginning with the arrival of modern industry during the 1880s and 1890s. The preceding period was perceived as “feudal” or “mercantile capitalism”, and hence the “pre-history” of labour remained neglected. Jan Lucassen has questioned this binary of “modern labour” history and its perceived “pre-history” by presenting two empirically rich essays: on the Ichapur Gunpowder Factory, near Calcutta, in the 1790s, and on the Ganga Canal construction site in Roorkee, in 1848–1849. In these essays he presents an analysis of the successful collective action of the labour force during the late eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries in India. Lucassen has demonstrated that the tradition of collective labour action existed before the building of India’s railways.³ Similarly, Ravi Ahuja’s essays analyse labour relations in Madras, involving construction workers, artisan groups, transport workers, domestic workers, and watchmen/runners during the early period of colonial rule, between 1750 and 1800.⁴ Prasannan Parthasarathi’s essay offers a comparative analysis of prevailing wages in early colonial Madras city and British industry during the eighteenth century.⁵ Michael Fisher’s essay shows the employment of Indian maritime labourers on board the wooden, wind-powered European-owned vessels and with the advent and expansion of transoceanic shipping between India and Europe during the period 1600 to 1857.⁶

The bulk of writings on labour in the colonial context, however, appeared from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, with the development of modern industries such as textiles, jute, iron ore, gold and coal mining, tea, coffee and rubber plantations, and expanding infrastructural activities such as roads, railways, and irrigation systems. Two distinctly opposed approaches can be discerned in the official and nationalist writings on labour issues. The colonial state became actively involved with labour issues because of its concern with the supply of labour, beginning with the mobilization of labour for railways, plantations, and mining. The main objective of official policy was, on the one hand, to ensure a steady and adequate supply of suitable labour for the emerging industries and plantations, and, on the other, to “pro-

tect” labour. Growing labour militancy and the growth of nationalist politics during the 1920s as well as the onset of the Depression in 1929 formed the backdrop to the appointment of a Royal Commission on Labour in India, which published a multi-volume report in 1930–1931. The main focus of the report remained on large industries and plantations, though there was a slight gesture towards seasonal and unregulated factories.

Complementing analysis at the state level, the second strand of writing on labour emerged during the reformist phase of Indian nationalism. Contemporary urban intelligentsia and foreign Christian missionaries articulated their concerns about labour. The British social reform tradition influenced some of the early Indian reformers, such as Sasipada Banerji in Bengal and Narayan Meghaji Lokhandei in Bombay.\(^7\)

The nationalists adopted a more adversarial position, and Brahmo reformists such as Ram Kumar Vidyaratna and Dwarkanath Ganguly in Calcutta published *Coolie Kaha-ni* and “Slave Trade in India” articles depicting the terrible work and living conditions of plantation labour in Assam in nationalist papers *Sanjibani* and *Bengalee* during 1880s.\(^8\) The Rev. Charles Dowding, an English Christian missionary, published *Tea-Garden Coolies in Assam* in 1894, a very radical critique of the indentured regime.\(^9\)

The post-World-War-I years in India, as elsewhere, constituted a period of intense upsurge in working-class activity: Bombay, Calcutta, Ahmedabad, Kanpur, Jamshedpur, Sholapur Assam, and other regions witnessed a series of strike actions. It was against the background of these events that the condition and history of labour emerged into the public domain and the realm of state policy. The establishment of the first organized federation of trade unions (All India Trade Union Congress) in 1920, legalization of trade unions in 1926, the appointment of the Royal Commission on Labour, and an official focus on the depression generated academic research publications in labour studies focusing for the first time on the condition of industrial and plantation workers and their standard of living and welfare.\(^10\)

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8 Ram Kumar Vidyaratna’s articles were translated and presented in book form to Lord Ripon, the Viceroy, as part of a memorandum to champion the cause of labour in Assam’s tea gardens by the Indian Association. Dwarkanath Ganguly’s articles were compiled and published as *Slavery in British Dominion* (Calcutta, 1972), p. vii; Bose, “Historiography”, p. 8.


of workers’ interests and trade unionists produced accounts of colonial labour policies and of the emergent labour and trade union movement.¹¹

**Two paradigms**

Studies of labour in India became more prominent in the context of the strategies for planned economic development launched in the first decade after independence in the 1950s. To the nationalist leadership, industrialization was the preferred route for economic growth and modernization. Insofar as labour was recognized as a crucial “factor of production”, its deployment, bargaining practices, and conflict behaviour became objects of methodical scrutiny. Since the 1950s two competing paradigms have dominated labour studies in India: one was defined by theories of modernization and the other by Marxism. Despite fundamental differences, the two paradigms shared certain similar assumptions. Both saw the formation of industrial factory labour and its action and behaviour through an optic of transition. In both these frameworks, the newly industrializing countries were perceived as being in a stage similar to the early stage of industrialization in advanced countries.¹² For modernization theorists, a major corollary of this transition in consciousness was the degree of commitment on the part of workers to the industrial way of life. The “labour commitment” thesis, as it came to be termed, posited that in the early stages of the industrialization process workers remained uncommitted to industrialism because of their rural and kinship connections. A mature industrialism required the full commitment of workers through an internalization of work norms and discipline and a complete severance of their ties with the land.¹³ However, M.D. Morris’s study of the emergence and deployment of the labour force in the Bombay textile mills struck a discordant note in the modernization thesis by suggesting that the standard arguments about the cultural unsuitability of Indian labour for industrial employment had no empirical basis in historical data.¹⁴

The Marxists explained the problems of modern industry by referring to colonial constraints. The craftsmen displaced by the process of deindustrialization were pushed back into agriculture instead of being absorbed into modern industry. This partial nature of industrialization had a profound effect on working-class formation. Thus,

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M.N. Roy wrote: “The normal course of industrial development was obstructed in India. Industry did not grow through the successive phases of handicraft, manufacture, small factory, mechanofacture and then mass production. So the Indian worker has not been trained in industry. He lacks the proletarian tradition.”¹⁵ In 1940, the Marxist theoretician Rajani Palme Dutt examined the formation of the Indian working class in the crucible of colonial economic formation. He visualized the growth of working-class consciousness in the emerging anti-imperialist struggle, focusing mainly on the role of the Communist Party in imparting in the working class a revolutionary consciousness. The equation of working-class movement and consciousness with its institutions (trade unions and political party) and its leadership became the hallmark of subsequent detailed investigations into labour in India.¹⁶

A series of writings in the 1950s and 1960s by the left-wing trade union activists traced the growth of the labour movement and organization. Their focus was primarily on formal institutional history, on leaders and parties and not on the many conflicting currents and pressures from below that shaped the course of labour organization and politics.¹⁷ In these accounts, the history of labour organization appears as the gradual unfolding of a politically conscious working class. It was difficult to grapple with the complexities of the historical context in India within the limits of such teleological frameworks.

Towards social history: beyond culturalist paradigms

A problem that Marxist histories had to continuously confront was the persistence of consciousness of caste, religion, and region among workers. In this situation, class-consciousness seemed a perpetually elusive goal. It was always “emergent”, “elementary”, “embryonic”, or “incipient”, gestating in a morass of primordialism. A second related problem was the continued existence of several forms of labour that were only partially proletarianized. Given such a scenario, a pure class-conscious working class seemed illusory.¹⁸ However, the conventional framework of

¹⁶ Rajani Palme Dutt, India Today (London, 1940), ch. XII.
Marxist labour history came to be vigorously debated even as the limits of alternative modernization models were becoming evident in the 1970s.

The present resurgence of interest in labour studies in India can be traced back to certain shifts since the late 1970s. The surge of interest in popular movements culminated on the one hand in the writings of what came to be known as the Subaltern Studies group in the early 1980s and, on the other, a series of independent publications on labour. With the exception of Dipesh Chakrabarty’s work, the dominant concern of the historians of the Subaltern Studies group was with peasant movements. This was also a period when the influence of ideas drawn from E.P. Thompson’s approach to social history became manifest. Two seemingly contradictory trends in writing emerged against this background. A series of writings since the late 1970s focused on the social origins of labour and tried to understand the transformative impact of modern industries. Others critiqued reductionist approaches that characterized modern industry as an agent of change: industrial culture in India in this framework was perceived as essentially premodern.

Historians writing social histories of labour probed into the social origins of workers and their caste and community background. Among the pioneering works was Ranajit Dasgupta’s study of workers in the Calcutta jute mills, their experience of work, discipline, and protest. For Dasgupta, as for other Marxist writers of the 1970s and early 1980s, working-class culture was located within a model of transition, which assumed that pre-industrial forms of consciousness – ties of community and religion – would be gradually displaced by mature forms of class consciousness. Dasgupta’s impassioned defence of class provided the context for a very lively debate with critics of his reductionist argument.¹⁹

A critique of reductionist frameworks was powerfully articulated by Dipesh Chakrabarty. Chakrabarty carried on a sharp polemic against the dominant assumptions in labour history in India. Most writings, he argued, even those more sensitive to issues of culture, tended, in the end, to reduce culture to certain economic variables.²⁰ Chakrabarty’s radical culturalism disturbed the certainties of conventional Marxist approaches and presaged some of the later shifts in the historiography of labour. In opposition to Marxist writings that see working-class history in terms of a continuous unfolding of class identities, Chakrabarty’s account valorizes certain fixed notions of caste and community identities. While Chakrabarty critiques frameworks, which reduce culture to economic determinants, he tends to reify culture by seeing identities in terms of fixed cultural meanings.


A series of other writings since the 1980s have developed a critique of the teleological assumptions underlining liberal and Marxist historiography; yet they do not identify with the culturalist logic of Chakrabarty’s framework. A number of labour historians have engaged critically with issues of culture and community, but from a differing perspective. Notable among these are the outstanding contributions by Rajnarayan Chandavarkar and Chitra Joshi on the history of textile workers in Bombay and Kanpur respectively. Their writings have questioned the assumption that the persistence of primordial ties of community and religion, as well as the rural connection, acted as a hindrance to labour consciousness or militancy. Their work has shown that the cultural and community ties were continuously reworked in the neighbourhood, streets, living and leisure spaces of working-class areas and subject to changes and ruptures.²¹

Other studies over the past two decades have enriched and complicated notions of community and identity in the urban industrial context. Nandini Gooptu’s work on the urban poor in North India demonstrates how particular patterns of exclusion and subordination of the “labouring poor” in the interwar years created the basis for new networks of solidarity in the 1920s and 1930s. But solidarities around these movements were often fragile and fractured.²² New alignments in the cities also involved the creation of coalitions of lower-caste groups in their struggles against upper castes: in cities like Kanpur, castes considered ritually “impure” came together in opposition to Brahmanical norms of purity and pollution.²³ Yet these assertions of community involved processes of appropriation and contestation. Nair’s work on the Kolar goldfields in South India, for instance, shows how the Adi Dravidas contested Brahmanical distinctions between “pure” and “impure”; yet in trying to acquire status and respectability they tended to reaffirm many of these distinctions.²⁴ These shifts and realignments illustrate how lines of difference between communities were drawn through conflicts and confrontations.

²³ Joshi, Lost Worlds, pp. 245–256.
Working-class politics: changing frames

The shifts in historiographical perspectives over the past few decades have raised important issues concerning the nature of working-class politics. The conventional Marxist view of working-class politics was exemplified in Sukomal Sen’s 1977 work, which narrated a linear growth of trade union organizations and leadership since the colonial period. The study of organization and leadership became synonymous with the study of working-class politics as a whole. This teleological frame was seriously questioned by Chakrabarty. He problematized the conventional equation of trade union leadership with the workers’ movement and argued that both were embedded within the overarching “pre-bourgeois hierarchical culture”. Chakrabarty’s radical revisionism evoked strong debates within academic Marxist history writing.

Raj Chandavarkar’s work on Bombay textile mills located working-class sectionalism and solidarities within the peculiarities of the labour market in the city. The remarkable fact that Bombay workers could sustain eight general strikes of long duration between 1919 and 1938 was attributed by Chandavarkar not so much to the communists and their ideologies as to the micro-politics and intersecting networks in the neighbourhoods where the colonial state, employers, and the communists competed for influence with each other and local dadas, jobbers, and money lenders. The solidarities displayed in general strikes were contingent upon particular political conjunctures rather than representing the results of the unfolding of workers’ consciousness.

Moments of upsurge in Ahmedabad, Bombay, or Kanpur were momentous times in workers’ lives – times that shaped their collective memory and refigured the social space of the city. In workers’ imaginations, Kanpur of the 1930s, for instance, became “Red Kanpur”. In the present context, when former centres of industry are in decline and memories of collective solidarities and struggles like that of 1928–1929 in Bombay or 1938 in Kanpur have been virtually effaced, the recovery of such moments by labour historians has special significance. Recent work on Ahmedabad, Bombay, and Kanpur using oral accounts of workers provides some insights into what such events meant to workers, both in the past and in the transformed present.

25 Sen, Working Class of India.


28 Jan Brem, The Making and Unmaking of an Industrial Working Class. Sliding Down the Labour Hierarchy in Ahmedabad, India (Amsterdam, 2004), pp. 201–231; Menon and Adarkar, One Hundred Years; Joshi, Lost Worlds, chs 6 and 9.
While the social history of labour dominated these debates, the study of working-class politics did not disappear altogether from Indian labour history. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya’s pioneering essay on the politics of Bombay strikes from 1928 to 1929 critically analysed colonial state action, mill owners’ strategies, and the responses of workers and the communist trade unions within a finely nuanced theoretical framework that took into account the interplay of structural and ideological determinants.²⁹ Dilip Simeon’s study of the labour movement in the coal and steel industries of eastern India analysed the institutional structures of the labour movement. But it broke new ground in shifting the explanation of the ebb and flow of the movement from leadership initiatives to rank-and-file pressure.³⁰ Subho Basu’s work traversed the terrain of the labour movement in the jute mills of Calcutta, territory already made familiar in Chakrabarty’s work, in order to uncover the complexity of conflicts between European-manager-dominated local government and often unruly workers’ neighbourhoods. Workers’ politics were scarcely confined to the flimsy structures of trade unions but were shaped by collective experience forged daily on shop floors and neighbourhoods.³¹ Janaki Nair’s study of workers’ movements in the former princely state of Mysore, in Kolar goldmines, and Bangalore city similarly examines the contradictory pressures that went into the making of the labour politics of the 1920s and 1930s.³² Shashi Bhushan Upadhyay’s study of Bombay workers in the late-nineteenth and early decades of the twentieth century looks at the interface between the regional Maratha identity and trans-regional identities of religion, nation, and class.³³

The shifts in historiographical perspectives have raised important issues concerning the place of the political in working-class lives. Beginning with Chandavarkar’s 1981 essay on the working-class neighbourhood in Bombay in the 1920s and 1930s, other writings have looked outside the formal structures of organization in order to understand the political culture of the working class. Chandavarkar scrutinized the close inter-connections between the neighbourhood and the factory, arguing that spaces outside work, such as the gymnasium and the street, were crucial to the generalization of disputes that originated in the workplace. In the postwar context of the 1920s, when repressive measures by the state and mill owners restricted the activities of radical trade unionists, networks forged in the neighbourhood be-

³² Nair, Miners and Millhands.
came crucial for mobilization by communists in Bombay. These contestatory practices also tell us about the ways in which rules were created and actively redefined through worker practices. In recent times, with the decline of traditional large-scale industries and a proliferation of small workshops, such everyday forms of resistance possess greater significance. Studies of power-loom workers in South India and of diamond workers in Surat, for example, show how practices such as the giving of baki (advance pay) were often manipulated by workers to secure better terms for themselves. Recent work on the labour history of indentured labour regimes in Assam tea plantations has focused on the politics of labour and labour laws. Rana Behal and Nitin Varma have analysed the nature of labour laws, labour relations, and resistance in the indentured plantation regimes in colonial Assam.

**Indian labour in the global arena**

Yet another new area that has recently attracted the attention of labour historians is the history of India’s global workers, its maritime labour force. Ravi Ahuja’s two essays bring out the story of the lascars, the Indian seafarers employed by European-owned shipping companies, and their mobility across territorial frontiers and cultural spheres during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This South Asian seafaring labour force, he argues, was structured at the bottom of a rigidly racist hierarchy in the maritime labour market of that period. Gopalan Balachandran’s work delves deeper into the lives of Indian seafarers – their social and regional origins, experiences of living ashore in foreign ports, and their transformation into a global labour force during the course of their employment by European shipping companies. Aaron Jaffer’s work on Indian lascars covers the period from the late eighteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century, and Matthias van Rossum’s essay highlights the

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34 Chandavarkar, “Workers’ Politics and the Mill Districts”.
employment of Indian sailors on the Dutch East India Company’s ships. Jaffer focuses on the conditions of work and modes of resistance put up by Indian sailors to the punitive regimes and regulations on board the European merchant ships.

**Gender and labour**

Until quite recently there was no serious engagement with questions of gender and women’s work in labour history writing in India. At one level this was because women remained invisible in the pages of history in general, while labour historians, for their part, did little to make them visible for posterity. At another level it was because, with few exceptions, labour history in India remained, till very recently, factory-centric. An exclusive focus on the factory as the site of productive work and workers’ activity meant a neglect of sites of work outside the factory, in rural areas, and within homes.

A key issue addressed in discussions on women and work in the European context was the issue of the displacement of women from factory industries by the late nineteenth century. This question triggered an animated debate around the emergence of the “male breadwinner” in working-class families. In India the situation was different, yet many of the issues emerging from the “breadwinner” debate resonate in discussions on women and work. Samita Sen’s study of women in the jute mills of Bengal in the colonial period brings two important issues into focus: the first is the significance of ideological issues in understanding the gendered composition of the labour force; the second is the connection between rural work and women’s lives. Sen brings out the shared assumptions underlining the masculinist discourse of mill managers and male-dominated unions that legitimized the exclusion of women by valorizing ideals of motherhood and domesticity.

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The rural ties of workers have usually been examined in terms of the masculinist assumptions that denote the urban as “main” and women’s earnings as “supplementary”. The obverse – the contribution of the family in the village, particularly of women, to the reproduction of labour – is rarely recognized. Their contribution was important in sowing, weeding, reaping, winnowing – almost all operations apart from ploughing. The contribution of women within the family was in fact often critical in providing the links connecting the working-class household in the city with the village. Overall, however, Sen’s argument about the hegemonic power of ideas of seclusion is problematic. Within this logic, women marginalized from public employment retreat into the home and domesticity. The ways in which women may contest normative ideas or try to exercise their agency are not taken into account.⁴³

The idea of a “male breadwinner”, never quite an adequate category, is very dubious in today’s context. In a scenario when traditional large industries are in decline and there is an expansion of “informal” work, women’s waged work at home is the basis of subsistence for large numbers of urban working-class families. What we see today in fact points towards a “feminized” workforce, with women engaged in a range of activities in households and small industrial units.⁴⁴ What implications do these changes have for the production of gendered identities, male and female? Recent studies look at the ways in which the everyday culture of work in industrial establishments goes into the making of urban masculinities.⁴⁵ Recent writings argue that, with the decline of employment in traditional centres of industry and the erosion of spaces from which men derived their sense of masculinity in the past, there was a crisis of male identities.⁴⁶

The informal sector and the labouring poor

But by far the most significant shift in focus in the recent historiography has been in the direction of embracing the concept of workers’ history in the informal sector, for so long excluded from the purview of mainstream Marxist and liberal moderniza-

⁴⁴ These changes were grudgingly recognized in government policy. See, particularly, Shramshakti. Report of the National Commission on Self-Employed Women and Women in the Informal Sector (New Delhi, 1988).
⁴⁵ Shankar Ramaswami, “Masculinity, Respect, and the Tragic: Themes of Proletarian Humor in Contemporary Industrial Delhi”, in: Behal and van der Linden, India’s Labouring Poor, pp. 203 – 228.
tion accounts. The informal sector, initially identified with urban self-employment, was viewed as the solution to the growing crisis of employment generation through industrialization. The movement of labour from the “traditional” and agricultural sector to the “modern” industrial sector was now seen to have included a wayside stop in the urban informal sector. The dualism of a modern and a traditional sector was replaced by the dualism of a formal and an informal sector. The failure of the Bombay textile strike in 1982–1983, the massive restructuring of the textile mill industry, and the shift to power looms highlighted the accelerating process of informalization.⁴⁷

The analytical division between “formal” and “informal” sectors found expression in Holmström’s 1976 study, where the image of the walled-in citadel of the formal sector surrounded by a vast, unorganized sector was first utilized.⁴⁸ Yet the concept of an informal sector and its explicit dualism was simultaneously critiqued by Jan Breman, drawing on his longitudinal fieldwork in the Southern Gujarat region, which was then embarking on a path of rapid industrialization. Breman pointed out that the vast majority of informal workers were not labouring in urban locations but were to be found in the agrarian sector and in non-agrarian rural sites.⁴⁹

Historians have increasingly focused attention on the linkage between informal and formal labour. Chandavarkar and Joshi had pointed to the intimate links between the two. Others, such as Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, have argued for the need for a different category – the labouring poor – to indicate the permanently transitional status of workers who moved across the porous boundaries between industrial waged employment, on the one hand, and non-waged homework and self-employment of various kinds on the other.⁵⁰ While the category of “labouring poor” has the merit of incorporating forms of labour usually excluded from standard Marxist descriptions of working class, its usefulness as an analytical category that can substitute for an ideal type “working class” is an issue historians are still grappling with. Studies of informal labour have highlighted two distinct processes of informalization: from above through a dismantling of the existing formal sector, and from below, through the circulation of seasonal migrant and casual, footloose labour.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Mark Holmström, South Indian Factory Workers: Their Life and Their World (Cambridge, 1976).
Recent studies by Barbara Harriss-White, Nandini Gooptu, and Rohini Hensman have made a significant contribution to understanding the role of the state, worker resistance, and organization in shaping the worlds of informal labour.\footnote{52}

**Bondage and unfree labour: old and new**

Labour history writing, focused as it was on urban, factory labour, had consistently marginalized rural labour relations. In the 1970s a vigorous controversy on the mode of production in agriculture inconclusively debated the extent to which capitalist relations had penetrated agriculture. The debate focused on key issues such as the “semi-feudal” in labour relations and the existence of “debt bondage” in labour in large parts of rural India.\footnote{53} Major contributors to this debate were Jan Breman, Utsa Patnaik, and Sudipto Mundle.\footnote{54}

These debates on contemporary forms of “unfree” labour have parallels in the new historical studies on forms of labour unfreedom. Gyan Prakash’s provocative work viewed “debt bondage” as a construction of “colonial discourse”.\footnote{55} His radical view, which denied the existence of “debt bondage” in the precolonial period and gave primacy in its construction to colonial discourse, has in turn been contested by several scholars.\footnote{56} The legal distinction between free and unfree labour has been at the heart of most writings on histories of servitude and freedom. However, recent research on colonial labour laws has problematized the conceptual divide between free and unfree labour. One area of investigation has been around the colonial laws of indenture in plantations inside India and in overseas colonies, which immobilized labour after transporting them over long distances.\footnote{57}

Traditionally, labour...
history had seen labour law mainly as a post-World-War-II phenomena and colonial labour policy was construed as one of “laissez faire”. In stark contrast, recent important studies of labour regulation have constructed a history of state intervention in the labour market from the early colonial period in the form of the master and servant laws.⁵⁸

Emerging trends

The historiography of Indian labour has oscillated between conceptualizing the Indian experience as merely an instance of Eurocentric capitalist development and as uniquely indigenous. The renewal of labour history in recent decades has been marked by a definite movement away from this somewhat sterile conceptual straitjacket. The founding of the Association of Indian Labour Historians (AILH) in 1996 was, at least in part, a reflection of this renewal. Since its inception the AILH has sought with some success to provide a forum for intellectual interaction between labour historians from India and from developed and developing countries, as well as trade unionists and activists from other social movements. The last decade or so, in fact, has seen similar initiatives in many other countries of the south, marking what Marcel van der Linden has referred to as the “globalization of labour history”.⁵⁹

What is common to many of these associations is their attempt to break out of old Eurocentric frames and their search for other comparisons, other temporalities. The themes on which AILH conferences have focused include questions of “transition”, marginality, mobility, skill and labour process, law, labour regimes and labour markets, informality, and rural labour. The publication of essays presented at the conferences reflects the major paradigm shifts in the historiography of labour today: the turn towards a focus on the history of labour in the informal sector and the move towards a new comparative global history.⁶⁰

Active interaction between scholars has been complemented with the creation and sharing of materials to promote labour studies. In Delhi, for instance, the


⁶⁰ Behal and van der Linden, India’s Labouring Poor; Marcel van der Linden and Prabhu P. Mohapatra (eds), Labour Matters. Towards Global History (New Delhi, 2009); Sabyasachi Bhattacharya (ed.), Towards a New History of Work (New Delhi, 2014); Sabyasachi Bhattacharya and Rana P. Behal (eds), The Vernacularization of Labour Politics (New Delhi, 2016).
AILH was instrumental in setting up a specialized digital repository of documentary, visual, and oral resources on labour. These efforts have been important in energizing a new generation of scholars of labour and in creating a space for labour studies within academia.

**Pakistan**

India and Pakistan, the two newly emerging independent states in South Asia at the end of colonial rule in 1947, shared a common history of labour relations, labour laws, labour politics, and labour life during the colonial period. This equation was to change after the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 into two independent nations. At independence, the majority of Pakistan’s 75 million inhabitants were dependent upon agriculture for their livelihood. The country had inherited a small and fragile industrial base comprising only nine per cent of the total industry of the pre-partition period. The numerical strength of its working class in 1949 was estimated at 482,165, i.e. just 0.63% of Pakistan’s population were wage earners employed in factories, mines, on the railways, or tea plantations. A third of these workers were organized into 150 trade unions, with a total membership of around 190,000, most of them working on the railways. Trade unions existed for the railways, post offices, seaports, textiles, airports, and to some extent cement factories. The majority of this labour was concentrated in urban centres such as Karachi, Faisalabad, and Hyderabad in West Pakistan. Karachi, the port city and the capital, had thirty-six unions with 15,000 workers. In East Bengal a sizeable number of workers (27,000) on the tea plantations were unionized.

Aware of its meagre industrial assets and impoverished population, Pakistan’s leaders, like their Indian counterparts, decided that industrialization was the route to economic growth. To encourage industrialization and foster a class of private entrepreneurs, in April 1948 Mohammad Ali Jinnah announced a policy of industrialization. The state policy of promoting industrial development remained in vogue during 1950s and 1960s. Most of this industrial development was centred around Karachi and fostered the concentration of the newly generated wealth and industry in fewer hands. The government took direct control of several industries: arms and munitions; hydroelectric power generation; and the manufacture of railway wagons,

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61 The archives are freely accessible at www.indialabourarchives.org.
telephones, telegraphs, and wireless apparatus. Postal and telegraph services were already owned by the state.\textsuperscript{65}

The government’s commitment to rapid industrialization in the 1950s coincided with a period of “political instability” in Pakistan’s history. The inability of the civilian government of the Muslim League to hold on to power and an army coup led to the imposition of military rule under General Ayub Khan. During Ayub Khan’s rule (1958–1969) bureaucrats and ex-army officers began directly running major industrial units and continued the policy of rapid industrialization. This was an era of unprecedented growth in the wealth and holdings of Pakistan’s major industrial houses. They moved into banking and insurance, which supplied them with funds for further expansion.\textsuperscript{66}

Among the earliest labour history writings in the independent state of Pakistan is an essay by Nikki R. Keddie, published in 1957, before the imposition of martial law. This essay focused on contemporary labour in Pakistan after independence, taking up wide-ranging issues of industrial expansion, employment, labour relations, wages, absenteeism, gender, child labour, strikes and work, state labour policy, labour movements, trade unions, and living conditions in urban industrial centres.\textsuperscript{67} With the exception of Zafar Shaheed’s work on Karachi’s textile working class during the 1960s and 1970s, no subsequent scholarship has offered such an in-depth study of the labour history of the post-independence era.

**Karachi working class**

Zafar Shaheed’s participatory-observation ethnographic study is an excellent social history of labour in the Karachi textile industry and remains the most nuanced and valuable contribution to the literature on labour in and the labour history of Pakistan in the post-independence era.\textsuperscript{68} His work (which was not published until three decades after its completion) examines the nature of labour resistance and labour’s diverse ethnicity at the workplace and in Karachi’s working-class neighbourhoods during the 1960s and 1970s. This study covers one of most historic and crucial periods in Pakistan’s history, one that witnessed emerging collaboration among students, left-leaning groups, the urban poor, and labour activists in the reorganization of trade unions. In the late 1960s this joint collaboration brought about a mass civil disobedience movement aimed at dislodging Ayub Khan’s military regime. Shaheed’s study is based on empirical material and fieldwork focusing on recruitment processes, middlemen such as jobbers, professional trade union leaders, and the emerging leader-

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{67} Keddie, “Labor Problems of Pakistan”.
\textsuperscript{68} Shaheed, *Labour Movement in Pakistan*. 
ship from among the ranks of the working class.\footnote{Ibid., p. 3.} In 1972 the struggles reached a new highpoint when workers occupied a significant part of the city.\footnote{Kamran Asdar Ali, “The Strength of the Street Meets the Strength of the State: The 1972 Labor Struggle in Karachi”, \textit{International Journal of Middle East Studies}, 37, 1 (2005), pp. 83–107.}

**Labour laws and trade unions**

Among later writings on labour history, those by Ali Amjad and Christopher Candland analyse issues of legality and institutional reforms.\footnote{Ali Amjad, \textit{Labour Legislation and Trade Unions in India and Pakistan} (Oxford, 2001); Christopher Candland, \textit{Labor, Democratization and Development in India and Pakistan} (New York, 2007).} Ali’s methodology is that of the comparative study of labour laws and labour organizations in Pakistan and India during colonial rule and its aftermath. Similarly, Candland focuses on a comparative study of industrialization policies, trade union movements, and labour legislation in Pakistan and India after independence. The changing nature of labour laws and their impact on labour relations and the status of trade unions in post-independent Pakistan are presented in detail. These authors have shown that from its inception the state of Pakistan, both during civilian and martial rule, was hostile towards working-class rights and welfare. Both authors have argued that state policies favoured private-sector and government-controlled industries while enacting legislation that constrained trade union organizations, working-class rights to protest, and collective bargaining.

The key moment in the militant upsurge in labour activities is studied by Christopher Candland in another essay, where he also addresses the question of the failure of working-class solidarity, despite the successful mass mobilization of workers against the military regime during the late 1960s and early 1970s. The fault lines are attributed to religion, ethnicity, language, and the hostile attitude of the Pakistan state. He argues that ethnic, linguistic, and religious identities overlapped class solidarity.\footnote{Christopher Candland, “Workers’ Organizations in Pakistan: Why No Role in Formal Politics?”, \textit{Critical Asian Studies}, 39, 1 (2007), pp. 35–57.}

**The Communist Party of Pakistan**

There is an emerging body of historical writing on left-wing politics in Pakistan which touches upon the questions of labour mobilization and trade union organizations. Essays by Kamran Asdar Ali, Ali Raza, and Anushay Malik are devoted to the history of the formative years of the Communist Party of Pakistan (CPP) and its tu-
multuous relationship with the Pakistan state. They also provide glimpses of the left-wing mobilizations in the immediate post-independence years. The most significant contribution is the recent publication by Kamran Asdar Ali, which provides an intimate narrative of the dwindling fortunes of the Communist Party of Pakistan and of trade union organizations in the early decades of independence. It is an excellent social, cultural, and intellectual history of the Pakistan communist leadership, trade union movement, and left-wing mobilization. The book narrates the marginalization of the leftist intelligentsia and the Communist Party of Pakistan through state repression by the Muslim League government and, later, under military regimes.

While these writings provide detailed and in-depth analyses of the history of left-wing mobilization, trade union movements, and the Communist Party of Pakistan, “labour” and its politics are paid hardly any serious attention, and the labour movement essentially emerges from this narrative as an appendage of the party. The history of communist elite intellectuals is foregrounded at the expense of the perspective of worker militants and proletarian labour leaders. Indeed, there is scarcely any reference in these narratives to or a discussion of the role of the lower- or even middle-ranking leadership and workers. As in the case of orthodox Marxist narratives of Indian labour history, these studies, too, equate the working-class movement and working-class consciousness with the institutional history of trade unions and political parties.

**Sri Lanka (Ceylon)**

The British colonization of Sri Lanka (Ceylon) in the early nineteenth century created huge opportunities for British capital investment in this tropical island. British private capital opened up coffee plantations between the 1830s and 1880s, followed by tea and rubber from the 1880s and 1890s. These plantations produced tea, coffee, and rubber exclusively for the growing global market by employing large-scale migrant labour mobilized from agrarian South India. The colonial state actively supported the opening up and growth of plantation enterprise through land grants at extremely lucrative prices, building infrastructure and mobilizing large-scale cheap labour force from British South India.

In plantation-dominated colonial Ceylon the bulk of the historiography on labour history in the immediate aftermath of independence was devoted to plantations

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74 Ali, *Communism in Pakistan*.

75 Roland Wenzlhuemer, *From Coffee to Tea Cultivation in Ceylon, 1880–1900. An Economic and Social History* (Leiden, 2008), pp. 57–60.
and labour migration from South India. Studies by Kondapi, Naguleswaran, Chattopadhyaya, Roberts, Jayaraman, and vanden Driesen analysed the process of labour mobilization and the nature of labour relations, work, and living conditions under the *kangani* system on Sri Lankan plantations during colonial rule. Labour relations between capital and labour on the plantations were mediated through the evolving *kangani* system. Along with the work by Kondapi, later studies by Heidemann, Peebles, and Kurian and Jayawardena carried further the narrative on the origins, evolution, character, and politics of the *kangani* system. Roland Wenzlhuemer situates the significance of the opening of plantations and the mobilization of migrant labour from South India at the centre of his broader history of colonial Ceylon in the late nineteenth century.

In some labour history writing the push/pull factors for migration were explained by reference to the backwardness of the agrarian economy of South India and the incentive offered by better earnings on the Sri Lanka plantations. Another argument was the cyclical nature of labour migration to the coffee plantations, as determined by the seasonality of agricultural conditions in the catchment areas. The labour on the Ceylon plantations, unlike the indentured plantation regimes, was perceived to be “free” by the colonial state, planters, and their supporter because, it was argued, they were not subjected to contractual obligations. These perceptions were contested by later labour historians, who pointed to the growing incidence of indebtedness, coercion, and consequent bondage and immobility of the labour force under the *kangani* system. Equally significant was the fact of a series of punitive ordinances introduced by the colonial state confirming the master and servants laws that constrained labour mobility and perpetuated labour bondage to the employers and the *kanganis*.

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78 Wenzlhuemer, *From Coffee to Tea Cultivation*.

Labour resistance

In early historical studies of labour, the theme of labour resistance on the plantations remained elusive. Visakha Kumari Jayawardena’s pioneering work presented an in-depth analysis of individual and collective forms of labour resistance in Sri Lankan labour history. The most significant feature of her work is that, apart from the plantation sector, it also covers the history of labour movements and trade unions in urban and other industrial sectors in colonial Ceylon. The narrative of labour resistance on the plantations forms an integral part of her study, and the later scholarship further developed and elaborated this important theme in labour history writing.

She adopts the conventional Marxian framework, which considers rural and primordial ties of workers constraining the growth of working-class consciousness and politics. As pointed out earlier, for both conventional Marxism and modernization theory the optic of transition from traditional rural to urban industrialization formed the basis of the formation of the proletariat. In the case of Ceylon, Jayawardena argues that the break with rural ties was an important factor in the emergence of the urban working-class movement, which coincided with the rise in Sinhalese nationalism.

James Duncan’s excellent work traces the rise and fall of coffee production in highland Sri Lanka from the 1830s to the 1880s and shows how the plantation system was constituted through interpenetrating networks of “nature/science/govern mentality/culture”. He argues that the prevailing perceptions of race in the contemporary Western world shaped the attitude of British planters towards their labour force. European planters adopted coercive methods to manage, discipline, and regulate the everyday life of migrant labourers. Plantations in Ceylon, like plantations in other British colonies, adapted industrial methods and Western technologies of “rationalization, calculation and discipline” for the production of coffee. One important contribution of Duncan’s work is the issue of labour resistance on Sri Lankan coffee plantations during the nineteenth century.

The disconnect between Sinhalese nationalism and the migrant plantation working class and the lack of solidarity between the Sinhalese and the Indian working classes are explained in terms of growing ethnic animosity between the two, which was exacerbated by the economic downturn of the 1930s in Ceylon. Chattopadhyaya, Peebles, and Kurian and Jayawardena provide very detailed analyses of fractured relationships and ethnic hostilities between Sinhalese nationalism and...
the migrant Tamil working class, both on the plantations and in urban areas. As George Jan Leski’s study shows, during the late 1930s and early 1940s the Trotskyite political leadership was at the forefront of the opposition to chauvinistic bigotry that gripped the growing ethnic divide between Sinhalese nationalism and the Tamil working class. In particular, they stood firm in opposing any discrimination against the permanently domiciled plantation workers.83

**Trade unions**

In Ceylon, the emergent trade union politics of the 1920s and 1930s was dominated by middle-class intellectual activists, both Tamils and Sinhala, and the issue of “outsiders” in political mobilization and trade union movements came under scrutiny in writings on labour history. Given the authoritarian nature of the plantation regime operationalized through a hierarchy of planters and kangánis, which effectively curbed labour mobility and freedom of movement, the intervention of such “outsiders” in political mobilization finds special emphasis in the works of Jayawardena, Chat-topadhyaya, Peebles, and Kurian and Jayawardena. These studies have underlined the important role of the middle-class Tamil intelligentsia in plantation labour politics and trade union organization.84

**Gender, ethnicity, and labour**

Issues of patriarchy and gender, race, caste, and ethnicity impacting labour relations on Sri Lanka plantations are the focus of recent work by Rachel Kurian and Visakha Kumari Jayawardena. It covers a long span in the history of labour on Sri Lanka plantations, in two parts: the colonial and the postcolonial. The first part considers the perspective of historians, focusing on the emergence of the plantation economy; the second presents the insights of social scientists into the nature of political activism in the postcolonial period. Drawing by analogy on the history of indenture on the Caribbean plantations, they argue that the kangán labour system on the Sri Lanka plantations was more akin to slavery than to a free labour regime. It is argued that the institutionalization of economic and extra economic coercion and the nature of social hierarchies on the Sri Lankan plantation regimes were a legacy of slavery. The most significant contribution of their work is to the subject of gender and labour

on the plantations, a subject ignored by most other studies of the history of labour in Sri Lanka.\textsuperscript{85}

**Bangladesh**

At independence in 1971 Bangladesh’s Awami League government took over the industries and other establishments left behind by private capitalist owners from West Pakistan. Some of these industries, including jute, textiles, and sugar, were nationalized. Having inherited a predominantly poor agrarian society at independence, the newly formed Bangladesh state embarked upon a process of developing its economy through industrialization to eradicate poverty.\textsuperscript{86} A set of state industrial policies were announced, aiming to encourage industrial development: these included the Industrial Policy of 1973, the New Industrial Policy of 1982, the revised Industrial Policy of 1986, the Industrial Policy of 1999, followed by a number of other policies, the latest being the Industrial Policy of 2010.\textsuperscript{87}

The most important development in post-independence Bangladesh was the emergence of an export-oriented garment industry, encouraged and backed by a policy of liberalization enunciated in the New Industrial Policy of 1982. Actively supported by the state, the export-oriented ready-made garment industry grew spectacularly in urban centres such as Dhaka and Chittagong. Beginning with just a handful in the late 1970s, the number of factories grew to 3,500 by the mid-1990s.\textsuperscript{88} The most remarkable characteristic of this industry was the dominance of female labour. From an estimated 50,000 in 1980, the number of women workers grew to 225,000 by 1989.\textsuperscript{89} And out of a total of 3.6 million workers employed in Bangladesh’s garment industry in 2012, 2.8 million were women, an exception among all South Asian countries.\textsuperscript{90}

\textsuperscript{85} Jayawardena and Kurian, *Class, Patriarchy and Ethnicity*.
\textsuperscript{89} Kabeer, “Cultural Dopes?”, p. 134.
Trade unions and labour movements

Most studies on labour in post-independence Bangladesh are devoted to the issues of trade unions, gender, and labour relations in the export-oriented garment-manufacturing industry. There is a solitary contribution by Kamruddin Ahmad on the history of labour and trade union organizations in pre-independence Bangladesh (East Pakistan). A union activist in the labour movement in East Pakistan during 1950s, he was the elected President of the East Pakistan Federation of Labour. Based on personal experiences, he provided an intimate narrative of labour movements and trade union organizations and their leadership in industries including jute, tea plantations, cotton textiles, and the railways. However, his references to labour resistance in the jute industry and on tea plantations offer only sketchy details. The main focus is on the leadership and organization of trade unions.

Labour movements and trade union histories in post-independence Bangladesh attracted both scholarly and journalistic attention, with essays by Mohammed Nuruzzaman and Mesbahuddin Ahmed presenting brief accounts. Their emphasis was on the nature of labour resistance to the pro-market reforms initiated by the state during 1980s and 1990s. With the working class playing an important role in the War of Independence in 1971, Nuruzzaman asserts that the newly formed Awami League government initially adopted measures to promote and protect working-class interests. But while nationalizing key industries, the government also adopted carrot-and-stick policies to curb trade union activities by banning strikes and lockouts in those industries. The overthrow of the socialist Awami League government by the military regime of Ziaur Rahman and the consequent shift to privatization, with disinvestment and the denationalization of state-owned enterprises, brought a change in the trade unions too. According to Mesbahuddin, one immediate consequence of this was the contraction in the size of workforce in those industries, resulting in trade unions losing influence.

Nuruzzaman’s work studied the upsurge in labour resistance in Bangladesh to the privatization of industries in 1982 dictated by pro-market reforms: street demonstrations and violent activities, including lockouts, disruptions to production, and the detention of management. He argues that the spate of resistance in the industrial sector during 1980s and 1990s had the potential to halt or roll back the reform programme, but that resistance did not lead to any broad-based social coalition of workers. Despite early successes, a host of factors, including ideological differences and the internal organizational weakness of trade unions, prevented working-class solid-

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arity. Moreover, the government discouraged the formation of trade unions in the newly emergent export-oriented garment industry.⁹³

Mesbahuddin’s study focuses on the changing nature of labour laws during Pakistan control and post-independence in Bangladesh. The independent state of Bangladesh amended the existing colonial labour legislation, which contained some protective provisions for workers, covering the working environment, working conditions, compensation for accident and disability, death, discharge, dismissal, termination, retrenchment, layoffs, lockouts, and maternity. These amendments to the existing legislation in 1992 were not appreciated by the trade unions, because they were aimed at restricting their activities.⁹⁴

While these essays provide a detailed analysis of the changing political world of Bangladesh’s trade unions and allude to workers’ resistance to privatization and pro-market reforms, barely any information is given concerning that labour resistance itself – no study of any specific strike, demonstration, or movement. The activities of the trade unions are themselves assumed to constitute the labour resistance, without any specific details being provided. Edward Bearnot mentions the growing cost of living and continued low wages in Bangladesh’s garment industry leading to resistance and protests. He reports the burning of buses and forced closure of factories in 2012, when rents in Dhaka increased fourfold, but he provides no details of these acts of resistance.⁹⁵

An essay by Zia Rehman raises issues concerning the success or failure of trade union organizations in defending the rights of workers in the Bangladesh export-oriented garment industry. He argues that a combination of World Bank and local elites led to the emergence of an export-oriented ready-made garment industry as the main manufacturing sector in Bangladesh, employing large numbers of unskilled rural women. In this sector, he shows, the trade unions were unable to combat low wages, the deteriorating working and physical conditions in the factories, the lack of welfare facilities, and the physical and sexual coercion of workers. Historically, he argues, even those partially successful movements in which workers participated were the offshoots of various larger political movements opposing repressive colonial and military regimes. Therefore, though integrally related to the broad political movements, many historical peasant and worker movements lacked an independent working-class character. ⁹⁶ Similar arguments are also put forward by Syeda Sharmin

⁹³ Nuruzzaman, “Labor Resistance”.
⁹⁴ Mesbahuddin, Trade Union Movement, p. 6.
Absar in her essay on wages in the ready-made garment manufacturing industry. She has argued that Bangladesh’s trade union movement was weak and male-oriented.  

**Gender**

The significant scholarly attention given to gender issues is one the most significant features of the historiography on Bangladesh labour. This is obviously because of the predominance of female employment in the country’s ready-made garment industry. Over the years, Naila Kabeer has produced an impressive body of writing on gender and patriarchy in the history of women workers in the export-oriented ready-made garment industry in post-independent Bangladesh. Kabeer regards the growth of the export-oriented garment industry as a response to the pressure exerted by international donors and financial institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank. The newly initiated industrial policies of economic liberalization promoted private-sector participation and opened the economy up to international trade.

Kabeer argues that the garment factories created a first-generation female industrial proletariat in a society where purdah was long believed to constitute an impenetrable barrier to female labour mobility and dramatically changed the profile of female labour-force participation in the country. In just a short span of time women workers became the single largest category of labour in Bangladesh. Women’s entry into factory employment represented a radical departure in the traditional female-seclusion society of Bangladesh. Kabeer attributes this to women’s agency to decide on their participation in the labour market by renegotiating norms of purdah. She further argues that the decisions to participate in the labour market entailed a close interaction between economic incentives and cultural norms. Discussing pull and push factors, Kabeer and Absar have shown that while many women workers responded to the pull of new incentives in the labour market there were others who were pushed into factory employment by the failure of the “patriarchal bargain” and the loss of male guardians.

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99 Kabeer, “Cultural Dopes?”.

100 Ibid.

101 Ibid.; Absar, “Problems Surrounding Wages”.
Wage discrimination

Absar’s study of wages in the garment industry shows that the work process in the garment industry was organized based on a gendered division of labour. Women accounted for over eighty-five per cent of production workers in factories, working mainly as helpers, machinists, and, less frequently, as line supervisors and quality controllers. A very small minority of men worked on the factory floor as machinists or in packing, pressing, cutting, and loading. But women workers suffered gender discrimination in relation to wages, receiving less than their male counterparts. Indeed, the employers’ rationale in employing large numbers of women workers was to reduce labour costs and to have “pliable” workers who were far less likely to get involved in trade union activities and disrupt production. In a hugely competitive international garment industry, these factors were extremely important in Bangladesh.102
Suggested reading


Wenzlhuemer, Roland. *From Coffee to Tea Cultivation in Ceylon, 1880–1900: An Economic and Social History* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008).
Colonies in 1914 of:
- Great Britain
- France
- Belgium
- Portugal
- Germany
- Italy
- Spain

Mentioned in text:
- Bauxite
- Copper
- Iron
- Diamond
- Gold