

Introduction*

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The discussion of labour history in South Asia was first shaped in the early twentieth century by the hands of the members of a very limited intelligentsia who assumed an adversarial role in relation to capital and colonial state power. Many of them happened to be activists and leaders in the organizations and protest movements of the working classes. Their constituents, sections of the labouring poor, were particularly underprivileged in the general context of economic underdevelopment and low per capita GNP in South Asia.

Their structural location in the colonial socio-economic formation was significant too. During the colonial period, the main characteristic of South Asian countries (I have in mind mainly India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka) was that capitalist relations were not sufficiently generalized. There was in this respect a qualitative difference from those metropolitan areas of the world which today are called countries of the North. While in the countries of the North in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries capitalist relations defined and specified the class structure adequately if not always exhaustively, in colonial South Asia, right up to World War II and perhaps even beyond that, pre-capitalist and capitalist organization of economic life coexisted. The resulting stratification or class structure was inchoate, in the process of being formed – and the working class constituted pre-eminently an example of this incomplete transition.

Even as recently as four decades ago in India one could travel from the industrial city of Jamshedpur into the countryside to the south and virtually travel through time – one could meet industrial wage workers in a capitalist enterprise using advanced technology, and at the other end of the scale people in the hunting and gathering stage of civilization, all while travelling fewer than 300 miles from Jamshedpur to, say, the Bastar forests.

This coexistence of different production regimes which, according to one view, amounted to different stages of evolution to the capitalist mode, imparted a peculiar character to the class structure in colonial South Asia. The intelligentsia, which is to say educated urban professionals, were surrogate leaders and spokesmen of the classes with a low degree of “classness”. The low investment in social overheads by the colonial state is well-

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known – and one of its consequences was a low level of literacy, which blocked the articulation of labour demands or the rise of spokesmen from the ranks of the labouring classes. Even a casual observer will notice the marked absence of literate autodidact workers such as the British journeymen and skilled artisans one meets in the pages of E.P. Thompson or Eric Hobsbawm. The result of that low investment was the assumption of this surrogate role by members of the intelligentsia in relation to the working class in factories, mines, and plantations – and the intelligentsia were a numerically insignificant section of the total population, and, further, insufficiently definable in terms of categories of capitalism. “Outsider” leadership, i.e. leadership of labour organizations by persons of non-working-class origin and social status, was a characteristic feature of colonial South Asia.¹ So, the discourse on labour history in South Asia was initially developed by these surrogate spokesmen, representing labour and assuming an adversarial role as advocates in labour’s struggle against capital and the colonial state.

The literature on the condition and history of the working classes in the early decades of the twentieth century consisted mainly of writings of that kind. A very popular one for instance, *Coolie: The Story of Labour and Capital in India* by Diwan Chaman Lall, was a mixture of reportage, a participant observer’s report on his experiences, and historical reflections.² Leaders of the trade-union movement produced similar accounts.³ The bias in this class of writing was contested by authors who spoke on behalf of the agencies of the state which were concerned with the legislation and regulation of industry.

In 1881 the first Indian Factory Act was passed, applicable to the new factories which existed in Bombay and Calcutta and limited to the objective of preventing the employment of children below the age of nine. From the third decade of the twentieth century, Departments of Industry in the provincial governments were supposed to promote and regulate industry, so there developed a bureaucratic discourse; the spin-off was the publication of works on industrial labour by British civil servants or visiting experts.⁴ Among such writings the most influential was one which was not specifically about labour but a general work on the economic

1. S. Bhattacharya, “The Outsiders: A Historical Note”, in A. Mitra (ed.), *The Truth Unites: Essays in Tribute to Samar Sen* (Calcutta, 1985), pp. 90–100.

2. Diwan Chaman Lall, *Coolie: The Story of Labour and Capital in India* (Lahore, 1932).

3. These included R.K. Das, *Labour Movement in India* (Berlin, 1923); N.M. Joshi, *The Trade Union Movement in India* (Bombay, 1927); and B. Shiva Rao, *The Industrial Worker in India* (London, 1939).

4. See the following publications: J.C. Kydd, “The First Indian Factories Act (Act XV of 1881)”, *The Calcutta Review*, 293 (1918), pp. 279–292; G.M. Broughton, *Labour in Indian Industries* (London, 1924); R.N. Gilchrist, *Indian Labour and the Land* (Calcutta, 1932); A.R. Burnett-Hurst, *Labour and Housing in Bombay* (London, 1925).

development of India by Vera Anstey, who spent some years in India and later became an academic at the London School of Economics; this work was influential in that it was recommended as a textbook in England and India and went through six editions.⁵ The emphasis in this class of work was on the problem of getting adequate and regular supply of native labour, supposedly caused by a lack of mobility, failure to respond to wage incentives (an anticipation of what was later to be known in economic theory as the backward bending supply curve of labour), and lack of industrial discipline accounting for low per capita output. As distinct from this construction, Indian labour spokesmen underlined the difficult circumstances under which workers operated in factories, and their generally poor quality of life. In neither of these two streams of discourse did any well-researched historical perspective on Indian labour develop.

The worldwide economic depression in the early half of the 1930s catapulted studies of the condition and history of labour to the public attention. The appointment of a Royal Commission on Labour in India, which published a multi-volume report in 1930–1931, and the focusing of bureaucratic attention on the task of coping with the Depression made an impact on professional social science disciplines and led for the first time to academic research. P.S. Lokanathan's work on labour welfare, A.C. Roy Chowdhury on the standard of living, S.G. Panandikar's *Industrial Labour in India*, and Rhadakamal Mukherjee's *The Indian Working Class* are representative examples of this spurt in academic interest in labour since the Depression.⁶ About that time two interesting contributions came from abroad: one from the United States – Buchanan's perspicacious *The Development of Capitalistic Enterprise in India* – and one from England – Margaret Read's work on the conversion of the Indian peasants into factory hands, *The Indian Peasant Uprooted: A Study of the Human Machine*.⁷ In both those works the complexities of incomplete transition to capitalism are noted. On the whole the Depression was a wake-up call in labour studies.

The hegemony of European categories of thought often blocked the recognition of the specifics of the South Asian economy and the persistence of pre-capitalist labour forms, especially in Marxist writings. In his celebrated Marxist analysis of historical and contemporary India, Rajani Palme Dutt, for a long time at the top of the Communist Party of

5. V. Anstey, *The Economic Development of India* (London [etc.], 1929).

6. P.S. Lokanathan, *Industrial Welfare in India* (Madras, 1929); A.C. Roy Chowdhury, *Report on an Enquiry into the Standard of Living of Jute Mill Workers in Bengal* (Calcutta, 1930); S.G. Panandikar, *Industrial Labour in India* (Bombay, 1933); R.K. Mukherjee, *The Indian Working Class* (Bombay, 1945).

7. Daniel H. Buchanan, *The Development of Capitalistic Enterprise in India* (New York, 1934), and Margaret Read, *The Indian Peasant Uprooted: A Study of the Human Machine* (London, 1931).

Great Britain and a man of Indian ethnic origin, was content to posit a category of the Indian proletariat on classical Marxian lines, without exploring their specifics. The theory and practice of the Communist International allowed for little else.⁸

However, this tendency in thinking was not limited to communist studies of Indian labour. In the entire corpus of writing on labour history the overwhelming emphasis has always been on the industrial workforce in the organized sector, excluding the vastly greater numbers in the informal or unorganized sector – workers in construction, transport (excluding the railways, which are, of course, very much part of the organized sector), those urban poor irregularly employed in various parts of the service sector such as shops, or small-scale industry, not to mention migrant labourers who for part of the year are present in the margins of the urban labour force and for part of the year are employed as agricultural labourers. Only an exceptional researcher such as Jan Breman addressed problems, historical or contemporary, in this area of study.⁹ As late as the 1970s a labour survey of a South Indian city came up against the problem of the complete absence of data on workers in the unorganized sector which constituted, according to this researcher's estimate, about 45 per cent or even more of the labour force.¹⁰ The attention of historians and other social scientists was focused on the organized sector partly because of ready access to data. But what was probably more important – especially to those socialistically inclined – was the stereotypical image of the factory workers, which promoted their role as the advanced section of the labouring classes.

Let me elaborate on that point a little. The larger-than-life image of the industrial proletariat, as compared with the rest of the labouring poor, is due to an attribution of a “historical” role in a vision of things to come, an instrumentalist view of them as vanguards effecting a social transformation through the capture of state power. Whether indeed the industrial worker had such potential in developing colonial countries or whether, as Frantz Fanon believed, they were “in a comparatively privileged position” compared to the rest of the labouring poor and the urban sub-proletariat is a very pertinent question in the light of historical experience.¹¹ Moreover, the myopic concentration on the industrial wage-worker to

8. R.P. Dutt, *India Today* (London, 1940; repr. Calcutta, 1979). On Dutt see J. Callaghan, *Rajani Palme Dutt: A Study in British Stalinism* (London, 1993), and P. Saha, *Rajani Palme Dutt: A Biography* (Kolkata, 2004).

9. J.C. Breman, *Of Peasants, Migrants and Paupers: Rural Labour Circulation and Capitalist Production in West Bengal* (Oxford, 1985); *idem*, *Labour Migration and Rural Transformation in Colonial Asia* (Amsterdam, 1990).

10. M. Holmstrom, *Industry and Inequality: The Social Anthropology of Indian Labour* (Cambridge, 1984).

11. F. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, C. Farrington (tr.) (New York, 1965).

the exclusion of the labouring poor in non-wage work or in the informal sector may be based on a wrong reading of Marx. It is true that in his *analytical* scheme the *differentia specifica* underline the sale of labour power for wages in the capitalist mode of production (see for instance *Grundrisse* and parts of *Capital*), but as a *historical* category labour is a more inclusive term in his writings. Thus, when Marx talks of the “reserve army of the unemployed” he talks of the “labourer” generically, compounding wage workers with non-wage workers;¹² he notices labour in “domestic industry” and more importantly in the “sphere of pauperism”. Elsewhere he definitely includes not only people who are *sometimes* wage-workers, but even paupers who make up that section of the working class which has forfeited its condition of existence, i.e. sale of labour power.¹³

I would add that in criticizing this narrow focus on the factory proletariat in labour historiography (and in the agenda of some political parties) and in arguing in favour of a more inclusive concept of the “labouring poor” as belonging to non-wage and informal sectors, I am aware that the latter is a fuzzy concept. But possibly a fuzzy concept like the “labouring poor”, without sharply defined boundaries, is more appropriate to transitional economies in less developed countries where class boundaries are porous,¹⁴ where gradations shade into each other, where individuals and families are simultaneously located in more than one of the conventional class categories which counterpoise wage labour and non-wage labour. Where the transition to capitalist/wage-labour relationship is incomplete or is not sufficiently generalized, we have what is almost a “permanently transitional” situation, which calls for concepts other than the clear-cut ones of advanced metropolitan economies.¹⁵

To return to our narrative, the post-Independence period (i.e. after 1947 in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh/East Pakistan, and 1948 in Sri Lanka) saw the burgeoning of higher education and consequently of research. From the 1950s the number of institutions and the size of university faculties increased dramatically; and in the 1960s, area study programmes in North American universities promoted research on South Asia, while the new field of study called “growth economics” and the Five-Year Plans in India during the Nehruvian regime significantly expanded interest in the social sciences. Thus there occurred a rapid growth of professional

12. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, Ben Fowkes (tr.) (Harmondsworth, 1976), part 7, sections 2 and 4.

13. *Ibid.*, section 5.

14. W. van Schendel, *Three Deltas: Accumulation and Poverty in Rural Burma, Bengal and South India* (Delhi, 1991).

15. S. Bhattacharya, “The Labouring Poor and their Notion of Poverty: Late 19th and early 20th Century Bengal” (Labour and History Series. Working Paper no. 1, V.V. Giri National Labour Institute, Noida, 1998), pp. 1–33; reprinted in *Labour and Development*, 3 (July 1997), pp. 1–23.

academic research in the areas of economics, sociology, and the history of labour in South Asia.

It would be incorrect to talk in terms of a dramatic “end of ideology” in labour historiography, but from the 1950s one saw a certain trend towards de-ideologization. Partly that was the result of the appearance of professional academics, as distinct from the social and political activists whose research had earlier constituted the bulk of the literature on the subject. Frequently, anything problematic began to be framed along the lines of standard neo-classical economics. Thus C.A. Myers contributed to the supply-side explanations of economic underdevelopment in India by arguing that industry was inhibited by both the immobility of labour and its lack of industrial discipline.¹⁶ Morris D. Morris’s thesis, on the other hand, was that the lack of any correlation between wage trends and labour supply in the cotton mills of Bombay in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries indicates that labour supply was no constraint.¹⁷ K. Mukerji identified long-term trends in the jute textile industry, as did D. Mazumdar in cotton textiles.¹⁸ Amiya Kumar Bagchi addressed the question of labour-supply constraints in his analysis of private investment in India 1900–1939; he rejected that argument, along with other supply-side explanations of colonial underdevelopment.¹⁹

Historians’ contributions in the 1950s and 1960s were in the nature of institutional history, focusing on trade unions. A.S. and J.S. Mathur, V.B. Karnik, G.K. Sharma, S.C. Jha, C. Revri, and Sukomal Sen provided accounts of the growth of the trade-union movement, their chronicles varying in historical depth but uniformly limited to institutional history and rather detached from the roots of its socio-economic context.²⁰ Most of these trade-union histories merited Hobsbawm’s criticism of a similar tradition in British labour historiography: “It tended to identify class and movement, movement and organization or leadership of organization, thus bypassing social realities.”²¹ Published about this time, the only monograph on Ceylonese labour history, Visakha Kumari Jayawardena’s

16. C.A. Myers, *Labour Problems in the Industrialization of India* (Cambridge, MA, 1958).

17. M.D. Morris, *The Emergence of an Industrial Labor Force in India: A Study of the Bombay Cotton Mills, 1854–1947* (Berkeley, CA [etc.], 1965).

18. K. Mukerji, “Trends in Real Wages in the Jute Textile Industry from 1900 to 1951”, *Artha Vijnana*, 2 (March 1960); D. Mazumdar, “Labour Supply in Early Industrialization: The Case of the Bombay Textile Industry”, *Economic History Review* (2nd series), 26 (1973), pp. 477–496.

19. A.K. Bagchi, *Private Investment in India 1900–1939* (London, 1972).

20. A.S. and J.S. Mathur, *Trade Union Movement in India* (Allahabad, 1957); V.B. Karnik, *Indian Trade Unions: A Survey* (Bombay, 1960); G.K. Sharma, *Labour Movement in India: Its Past and Present* (Jullundur, 1963); S.C. Jha, *The Indian Trade Union Movement* (Calcutta, 1970); C. Revri, *The Indian Trade Union Movement 1880–1947* (Delhi, 1972); S. Sen, *Working Class of India: History of Emergence and Movement, 1830–1970* (Calcutta, 1977).

21. E.J. Hobsbawm, “Foreword”, in J. Foster, *Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution: Early Industrial Capitalism in Three English Towns* (London, 1974).

The Rise of the Labor Movement in Ceylon, constitutes an exception; although the subject of study is mainly organized trade unionism, it is contextualized within social and economic trends in Sri Lanka between 1880 and 1933.²²

From the 1970s a movement away from the narrative of the older vintage was manifested in two ways. Empirical research, often of the detailed kind expected in doctoral dissertations, revealed complexities which could not be accommodated in the older paradigm. This is exemplified by C.P. Simmons's work on Bengal coal miners, Chitra Joshi's on Kanpur cotton textile labour, Dick Kooiman's, Rajnarayan Chandavarkar's, and R.K. Newman's on Bombay millhands, and Rana P. Behal's on tea plantations in Assam.²³ After this crop of empirical research in the 1970s came a theoretical critique of the "universalist mode of thinking that constantly produces out of Marxism a master narrative of history".²⁴ The essence of the critique was that such a master narrative, a construct genealogically traceable to the European Enlightenment, presumptuously tries to explain diverse historical experiences in terms of one unilinear pattern. In the exposition of those diversities emphasis is placed on cultural discourse, a feature that characterizes the "subaltern" approach,²⁵ and also signals an affiliation claim to the postmodernist linguistic turn or culturalist approach.²⁶

Between this approach and that of the proponents of "old history" the battle remains undecided. It has been said in refutation of the culturalist approach that "economic determinism, alleged to be found in Marxist

22. Visakha Kumari Jayawardena, *The Rise of the Labor Movement in Ceylon* (Durham, NC, 1972).

23. C.P. Simmons, "Recruiting and Organizing an Industrial Labour Force in Colonial India: The Case of the Coal Mining Industry, c. 1880-1939", *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 13 (1976), pp. 455-485; C. Joshi, "Kanpur Textile Labour: Some Structural Features of Formative Years", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 16 (November 1981), pp. 1823-1837; D. Kooiman, "Jobbers and the Emergence of Trade Unions in Bombay City", *International Review of Social History*, 22 (1977), pp. 313-328; R.S. Chandavarkar, "Workers' Politics and the Mill Districts in Bombay Between the Wars", *Modern Asian Studies*, 15 (1981), pp. 603-647; R.K. Newman, *Workers and Unions in Bombay Mills, 1918-1929* (Canberra, 1981); R.P. Behal, "Forms of Labour Protest in Assam Valley Tea Plantations, 1900-1930", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 20 (26 January 1985), pp. 19-26. For some of the later results of this wave of research see S. Patel, *The Making of Industrial Relations: The Ahmedabad Textile Industry, 1918-1939* (Delhi, 1987); D. Kooiman, *Bombay Textile Labour: Managers, Trade Unionists and Officials 1918-1939* (Delhi, 1989); R.S. Chandavarkar, *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India: Business Strategies and the Working Classes in Bombay, 1900-1940* (Cambridge, 1994); C. Joshi, *Lost Worlds: Indian Labour and its Forgotten Histories* (Delhi, 2003).

24. D. Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History: Bengal 1890-1940* (Delhi, 1989).

25. *Subaltern Studies*, 10 vols (New Delhi, 1982-2000). Vols 1-6 were edited by R. Guha. The later volumes were edited by P. Chatterjee and G. Pandey, D. Arnold and D. Hardiman, S. Amin and D. Chakrabarty, and P. Chatterjee and P. Jeganathan.

26. G. Chakravorty Spivak, "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography", in R. Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies IV* (Delhi, 1985), pp. 330-363.

theories, is replaced by a sort of cultural determinism”.²⁷ Likewise, Chandavarkar’s counter-critique focuses on the homogenizing thrust of a search for a “popular culture” or a “subaltern mind”.²⁸ The explication of the history of labour, or anything else, in terms of popular or “Indian culture” may be no more than a variant of what Edward Said identified as “Orientalism”.

It would be an exaggeration to say that the culturalist approach has been widely accepted as a substitute for analysis in terms of class structure and the social conditions of labour. Nor are all historians progressing with equal rapidity towards the post-modernist void. Much of the professional output in recent decades remains anchored in their substantive concern with the “pre-post-modernist” agenda. I feel that an *ante*-postmodernist agenda is not the same as *anti*-postmodernism.

Not only in the writings of the older generation of scholars,²⁹ but also those of the younger generation,³⁰ the conceptual framework and the digests of analysis remain unaffected by the culturalist impact. The consequence of that impact has generally been a greater awareness of the cultural dimension. The limited nature of its impact on labour history may be due to several reasons. Methodologically, it is very difficult to establish hypotheses about the culture of the labouring poor in the past; the sources

27. R. Das Gupta, “Indian Working Class: Some Recent Historiographical Issues”, in Arjan de Haan and Samita Sen (eds), *A Case for Labour History: The Jute Industry in Eastern India* (Calcutta, 1999), p. 29.

28. R. Chandavarkar, *Imperial Power and Popular Politics: Class, Resistance and the State in India, c.1850–1950* (Cambridge, 1998).

29. For example, R. Das Gupta, “Factory Labour in Eastern India: Sources of Supply, 1855–1946, Some Preliminary Findings”, *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 13 (1976), pp. 277–328; *idem*, “Structure of the Labour Market in Colonial India”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Special Number (November 1981), pp.1781–1806; *idem*, *Poverty and Protest: A Study of Calcutta’s Working Class and Labouring Poor 1875–1900* (Calcutta, 1983); *idem*, *Labour and Working Class in Eastern India: Studies in Colonial History* (Calcutta, 1994); R.S. Chandavarkar, *Labour and Society in Bombay* (Cambridge, 1987); *idem*, *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India*; G.K. Lieten, *Colonialism, Class and Nation: The Confrontation in Bombay around 1930* (Calcutta, 1984); O. Goswami, *Industry, Trade and Peasant Society: The Jute Economy of Eastern India, 1900–47* (Delhi, 1991); S.K. Sen, *Working Class Movements in India, 1885–1975* (New Delhi, 1994).

30. For example, P. Mohapatra, “Coolies and Colliers: A Study of the Agrarian Context of Labour Migration from Chota Nagpur, 1880–1920”, *Studies in History* (New Series), 1 (1985), pp. 13–42; N. Basu, *The Political Parties and the Labour Politics, 1937–1947* (Calcutta, 1992); S. Basu, “Workers Politics in Bengal 1890s–1929: Mill Towns, Strikes and National Agitation” (Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge, 1994); A. Das, *Urban Politics in an Industrial Area: Aspects of Municipal and Labour Politics in Howrah, West Bengal, 1850–1928* (Calcutta, 1994); D. Simeon, *The Politics of Labour Under Late Colonialism: Workers, Trade Unions and the State in Chota Nagpur, 1928–1939* (Delhi, 1995); J. Nair, *Miners and Millhands: Work, Culture and Politics in Princely Mysore* (Delhi, 1998); P. Ghosh, *Colonialism, Class, and a History of the Calcutta Jute Hands, 1880–1930* (Hyderabad, 2000); and, for Bangladesh, A.Z.M. Iftikhar-ul-Awwal, *The Industrial Development of Bengal, 1900–1939* (New Delhi, 1982).

used by the cultural historian emanate from literate elite groups and “reading against the grain” of such sources does not always take one very far. Features attributed in this elite discourse are aggregated as “popular” culture, disregarding internal diversities. All this merits historians’ attention, but as yet little work founded on historical evidence has emerged in the area.

One area where current research displays its cutting edge is women’s and gender studies. There was little substantial research on women workers until recent decades, when a surge in activity took place.³¹ Research now ranges from general studies of working women,³² gradually acquiring a more nuanced approach to the specific local situations of women workers, to a more intensive study of resulting particularities. For instance, Arjan de Haan examines female labour participation in jute mills, and the formation of identities, emphasizing as agents for them the purposeful behaviour of the participants, rather than either culture, be it popular or traditional, or the systemic needs of capitalist/colonial structure.³³ Samita Sen has researched the role of women workers in jute mills, 1890–1940, to explore the interrelationship of gender, class, and communalist/nationalist identities; she underlines the role of gender in wage determination and generally in the development of the working class.³⁴ There are, of course, many more contributions in this area which address the contemporary situation but lack a historical perspective.³⁵

There have been alarm signals from Marcel van der Linden in *International Review of Social History* (1993) and from Ira Katznelson in *International Labor and Working Class History* (1994)³⁶ warning of a general decline of interest in labour history. I shall not for the present try to answer the question of whether that decline is due to some of the developments in historiography I have touched upon – the “fragmentation” of labour history, the de-ideologization which cut off labour history

31. P. Sengupta, *Women Workers of India* (Bombay, 1960).

32. See for example N. Banerjee, *Women Workers in the Unorganized Sector: The Calcutta Experience* (Hyderabad, 1985); *idem*, “Working Women in Colonial Bengal: Modernization and Marginalization”, in K. Sangari and S. Vaid (eds), *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* (New Delhi, 1989), pp. 269–301.

33. A. de Haan, *Unsettled Settlers: Migrant Workers and Industrial Capitalism in Calcutta* (Hilversum, 1994).

34. S. Sen, “Motherhood and Mothercraft: Gender and Nationalism in Bengal”, *Gender and History*, 5 (1993), pp. 231–243; *idem*, *Women and Labour in Late Colonial India: The Bengal Jute Industry* (Cambridge [etc.], 1999).

35. A. Basu, *Two Faces of Protest: Contrasting Modes of Women’s Activism* (Berkeley, CA [etc.], 1992); L. Fernandes, *Producing Workers: The Politics of Gender, Class and Culture in the Calcutta Jute Mills* (Philadelphia, PA, 1997).

36. Marcel van der Linden, “Editorial”, *International Review of Social History*, Supplement 1 (1993), pp. 163–173; Ira Katznelson, “The ‘Bourgeois’ Dimension: A Provocation About Institutions, Politics, and the Future of Labor History”, *International Labor and Working Class History*, 46 (1994), pp. 7–32.

from the mainstream of political discourse about labour in civil society or the state, the exclusion (characteristic of labour history until recently) of large masses of the labouring poor in underdeveloped countries, and the focusing of attention on the minuscule industrial wage worker section. The question to address is: “Where do we go from here?”, in the present era of globalization.

First, let us remind ourselves how an interest in labour history developed in many parts of the world in the 1970s. An Indian historian, in a presidential address at the Indian historians’ national professional organization in 1982, pointed to the wave of interest in “people’s history”, “history from below”, and the history of the working class in the 1970s.³⁷ “People’s history is a term which might be retrospectively applied”, Samuel wrote in 1981, “to those various attempts to write an archive-based ‘history from below’ which have played such a large part in the recent revival of English social history”.³⁸ Le Roy Ladurie’s complaint against economic history, which was “history without people”, pointed in the same direction, as did Jean Chesneaux’s critique of the “occultation” of the history of the oppressed, caused by the oppressors’ and the state’s “control over the past”.³⁹ In England alone, according to a bibliography published in 1980, the number of books and articles on the British labour movement published since 1945 exceeded 4,000.⁴⁰ That apart, history from below appeared in different guises as new research interests were created – by Hobsbawm in social banditry, by Chevalier in outcasts and dangerous classes, by Laslett in the quotidian family, by E.P. Thompson in the proto-industrial working man, by Rudé in the crowd as an actor on the stage of history, and so on. In the countries of the South one heard similar voices. Rodolfo Stavenhagen in Mexico called for the “de-elitization” of the social sciences.⁴¹ Issa G. Shivji of the “Dar-es-Salaam school of history” in Tanzania called for a new history to replace the historiography which “leaves the large mass of our people out of history”.⁴² An obscure manifesto issued by the Centre de Estudios de La Realidad Puertorriqueño asked, “What of the history of the historyless, the anonymous people?”⁴³

I shall argue that in South Asia and in many countries of the South in general this effort to find the history of the “historyless” had a special

37. S. Bhattacharya, *History from Below: Presidential Address, Modern History Section, Indian History Congress, 1982* (New Delhi, 1982).

38. R. Samuel, “Editorial Preface”, in *idem* (ed.), *People’s History and Socialist Theory* (London, 1981), pp. xvi, xv–xxxiii *passim*.

39. J. Chesneaux, *Pasts and Futures* (London, 1978); E. Le Roy Ladurie, *The Territory of the Historian* (Chicago, IL, 1979).

40. H. Smith, *The British Labour Movement* (London, 1980).

41. R. Stavenhagen, *Between Underdevelopment and Revolution: A Latin American Perspective* (New Delhi, 1981).

42. I.G. Shivji, *Class Struggle in Tanzania* (New York, 1976).

43. A.Q. Rivera, *Workers’ Struggles in Puerto Rico: A Documentary History* (New York, 1976).

significance. In the wake of political decolonization an evaluation began of the construction of the past in the hands of colonial historians on the one hand and nationalist historians on the other. The nationalist paradigm began to be questioned in India. Where was class struggle in the narrative of the Indian people's struggle against British rule? In so far as nationalist historiography was an ideological effort to define and establish national unity in cultural terms, was there a hidden agenda of cultural domination?

And not only in India; consider the debate between Amílcar Cabral, writing of Guinea, and a Tanzanian historian. "What commands history in colonial condition", wrote Cabral, "is not class struggle [...]. In the colonial period it is the state which commands history."⁴⁴ Against this it was said that this would reduce all of history into "nothing but the history of the colonial state."⁴⁵ In fact, in India this kind of explicit challenge to the nationalist historiography came rather late in the *Subaltern Studies*. Implicitly the challenge had already been posed in the Marxist re-evaluation of the colonial and nationalist tradition in historiography. At any rate, the conjuncture of the interest in history from below in the North and the critique of the older paradigms of history in some countries of the South was the fertile ground on which seeds of labour history produced a crop of new research. What fed this new interest was an urge to recover the people's history. The further labour historians have moved away from that agenda, the more they have lost their audience.

Does the process of globalization since the 1980s present labour historians with a new agenda? At its interface with the South Asian historiography of labour what does "global labour history" connote, if the concept is not merely a label, referring to spatial coverage? Implicitly the question has been touched upon in three ways. First, in the history of India's participation in the international labour market during the nineteenth century in the form of the migration, under the auspices of metropolitan capital, of South Asian labourers to plantations overseas under the indentured labour system; then in the examination of the concept of proletarian internationalism in the Marxian paradigm and its variants from the 1920s in South Asia; and third, in recent decades the question has been noted in a phenomenon brought about by globalization, namely the restructuring of labour both in developed and underdeveloped countries in a new phase of world capitalism. However, in none of these areas has sufficient attention been given to the conceptual basis of re-thinking labour history in global terms.

From the point of view of South Asian labour studies the significant

44. A. Cabral, *Revolution in Guinea* (New York, 1970), p. 56.

45. Shivji, *Class Struggle in Tanzania*, pp. 55–56; for an elaboration of the discussion in the text regarding globalization and labour, see S. Bhattacharya, "International Flows of Unfree Labour", in K.S. Jomo (ed.), *Globalization under Hegemony: the Changing World Economy* (New Delhi, 2006), pp. 195–226.

aspect of a global agenda of research is the possibility of comparative studies straddling national and cultural borders. I suggest that there are certain homomorphies in the colonial social formations in the past and the underdeveloped countries of the South today. On account of these homomorphies, comparison of South Asian socio-economic experiences with those of many countries of the South could be illuminating. I have discussed the special characteristics of the class structure in South Asia consequent on its incomplete transition to capitalism, especially in the colonial period. Marxist Africanists have puzzled over this issue for a long time. Mahmoud Hussein identified an incomplete proletariat in Egypt because they were in an “obstructed transitional stage”.⁴⁶ Shivji observed that Tanzania had no European or “classical types of class division”.⁴⁷ Mahmood Mamdani in Uganda noted that “class formation is a process” that had not produced a true class.⁴⁸ Richard Sandbrook observed that the proletariat in Kenya had not emerged in a “clearly differentiated” form.⁴⁹ Ali A. Mazrui developed a term, “trans-class ambivalence”, to cope with the problem of locating migrant labour in an “underdeveloped class structure”.⁵⁰ Gavin Kitching, researching Kenya, made the drastic suggestion that instead of class concepts only a “concept of exploitation” be employed.⁵¹

To take another example of similarity: as in South Asia, in African countries it has often been observed that trade-union leadership belonged to “outsiders”, non-manual middle-grade employees or clerks; while leaders coming from the rank and file of the working class were rare. Pre-eminent examples are Sekou Touré in Guinea, Tom Mboya in Kenya, and Joshua Nkomo in Southern Rhodesia.⁵² Moreover, there are interesting parallels between Indian trade-union history and the history of mutual-aid societies or *mutualidades* transforming themselves into *sociedades de resistencia* and into trade unions in Latin American countries.

Another kind of parallelism to be studied comparatively is in the area of identity politics – the interweaving of communal and class identities. While the Hindu–Muslim issue has been studied in the social and political

46. M. Hussein, *Class Conflict in Egypt, 1945–1970* (New York, 1973), p. 39.

47. Shivji, *Class Struggle in Tanzania*, p. 18.

48. M. Mamdani, *Politics and Class Formation in Uganda* (New York, 1976), pp. 10–11.

49. R. Sandbrook, *Proletarians and African Capitalism: The Kenyan Case, 1960–72* (Cambridge, 1975), p. 191.

50. A.A. Mazrui, “Casualties of an Underdeveloped Class Structure”, in W.A. Shack and E.P. Skinner (eds), *Strangers in African Society* (Berkeley, CA, 1979), pp. 261–265.

51. G. Kitching, *Class and Economic Change in Kenya, 1905–1970* (New Haven, CT, 1980), p. 4.

See also G. Arrighi and J.S. Saul, *Essays in the Political Economy of Africa* (New York, 1973), which reflects similar concerns and lines of thinking.

52. W.A. Warmington, *A West African Trade Union* (London, 1960), p. 123; B.H. Millen, *The Political Role of Labour in Developing Countries* (Honolulu, HI, 1963), pp. 27–29; E.M. Kassalow, *National Labour Movements in the Post-War World* (New York, 1966), pp. 236 ff.

world of Indian working classes, the eminent anthropologist Max Gluckman looked at a similar problem many years ago in a different terrain, “problems arising from the African industrial revolution”: tribal identities among immigrants to the industrial towns were retained/discarded/reinvented, for he said “it is possible for men to dichotomize their actions in separate spheres”.⁵³ These and many other areas of congruence suggest that the patterns of development in labour history in the countries of the South need to be studied in a comparative way as a means of developing a broader perspective.

If, in the coming years, global labour history is to mean something more than aggregation, we have to apply our minds to the necessity of developing a comparative approach towards pattern congruences and diversities, within an agenda of recovering the history of the oppressed who are “historyless”.

53. M. Gluckman, “Anthropological Problems Arising out of the African Industrial Revolution”, in A. Southall (ed.), *Social Change in Modern Africa* (London, 1961), pp. 67–82.