THE 'WORKING CLASS' IN A PRE-CAPITALIST CULTURE:
A STUDY OF THE JUTE WORKERS OF CALCUTTA, 1890-1940.

by

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This thesis examines the problems of protest, solidarity, organization and class consciousness in the history of the jute mill workers of Calcutta in the period 1890 to 1940. The jute workers were a very large labour force, numbering well over 250,000 in the years mentioned, who were involved in several strikes and other militant acts of protest against their employers. Yet they never formed strong and enduring trade unions and their sense of class-solidarity remained remarkably fragile, often giving way to internecine conflicts of religion or ethnicity. It is argued here that none of these problems can be reduced to purely political, technical or economic explanations. In particular, the thesis examines the relationships of power and authority that the workers were involved in both inside and outside the jute mills. The consciousness of the Calcutta jute workers is shown here to be of a pre-bourgeois nature and this, it is contended, presents special problems in the development of labour-capital relationship or of class consciousness among the workers in the Calcutta jute industry. The history of this group of industrial labourers thus provides grounds for reflection on Marx's theory of the working class which takes a hegemonic bourgeois culture for granted.
This thesis is my own composition.

Dipesh Chakrabarty.
'A painting is a sum of destructions.'

- Picasso.
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The hare of labour history was started for me ten years ago by Barun De, my teacher at the Indian Institute of Management in Calcutta. The race has eventually taken a somewhat different course from the one he initially envisaged, but he has always been a source of encouragement even when our views and opinions on the subject have differed. It was his lectures at the Management Institute that first awakened in me an interest in history, a subject that had always seemed dull and boring at school. I have found the experience of thinking and writing about history an immensely rewarding one, and for this I remain grateful to Barun De who willingly took upon himself, ten years ago, the rather unrewarding task of making a historian of me.

In Australia, it was my good fortune to work under the supervision of Anthony Low who has been extremely patient and understanding with the rather slow emergence of this study. His gentle but sharp criticisms and his insistence on clarity of expression have helped me to keep my thoughts in line by forcing me to clarify my own ideas to myself.

I have also learned a great deal from Ranajit Guha and Partha Chatterjee, two people with whom I have shared many intellectual convictions and some hundreds of hours of discussion as well. Their influence on my work would be obvious to anyone acquainted with their recent writings.
Several friends in Australia, India and elsewhere have helped me with their encouragement and criticisms. Special mention must be made of Roger Stuart and Stephen Henningham who gladly provided a captive but responsive audience for several of my draft chapters. I have also benefited from the comments of Robin Jeffrey, John McGuire, Meredith Borthwick, Brij Lal, Pauline Rule, Katherine Gibson and Merrilyn Wasson. In Calcutta, I have had very good friends and stern critics in Gautam Bhadra, Amiya Bagchi and Rajat Ray. My one-time colleagues at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences were always forthcoming with ideas and criticisms. Of them, Ranajit Das Gupta deserves to be specially mentioned. I have had several intellectual differences with him but he has always handled them in a most friendly spirit. In Delhi, I had brief but stimulating discussions with Sumit Sarkar, Tanika Sarkar, Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, Chitra Joshi and Neeladri Bhattacharya. Several discussions with Stephen Gourlay in London were also of help. In the later stages of my work, I received many useful comments from my friends in the Subaltern Studies group. To all these people, my heartfelt thanks.

My search for source materials was made easier by the kindness of several people. Nabaneeta Deb Sen helped me locate the private papers of K.C. Roy Chowdhury, a trade-union organizer of the 1920s. These papers were eventually made over to me by their custodian Basudha Chakrabarty to whom I remain much indebted. The authorities of Thomas Duff and Company, Dundee - especially their Secretary, J.G. Smith - kindly allowed me to consult their old records without which this study would have been a lot poorer. Sarit Roy and S.K. Chatterjee of the Indian Jute Mills Association were most helpful in letting me use their library and records. Grateful thanks are also due to the staff of the...
West Bengal State Archives, Calcutta, the National Archives of India, New Delhi, the India Office Library, London, Centre for South Asian Studies, Cambridge, Dundee Central Library, Dundee, Dundee University Library Archives, Menzies Library, A.N.U., for all their assistance in making this study possible. Lakshmisree Sinha, Raghab Banerjee, Narayani Bhadra and Rudrangshu Mukherjee helped me in my search for material at different stages of my work. I thank them sincerely for their help. I must also record with gratitude the general support I have received from the members of the South Asian History Section, A.N.U. - from Margaret Hall and Margaret Carron in particular - throughout the course of this study.

I also thank Sayandev Mukherjee and Catherine Daniels for their hospitality in London; Henry and Barbara Daniels for being my hosts in Cambridge; and Udaytapan and Krishna Das Gupta for making my stay in Delhi so comfortable.

Rosemary Smith typed my drafts with interest and care. My friend Leona Jorgensen did a cheerful and enthusiastic job of typing the final version. I would have taken even longer to complete this study if I had not been under pressure to keep up with her pace.

Finally, I must mention the invaluable support I have received in all these years of research and writing from my parents and sister in Calcutta and my wife, Kaveri, in Canberra. But to thank them formally would be to behave like a 'Westernized Indian'.
ABBREVIATIONS USED

B.P.  Benthall Papers
C.S.A.S.  Centre for South Asian Studies, Cambridge
C.S.S.S.C.  Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta
Com.  Commerce
Edn  Education
Genl  General
I.E.S.H.R.  The Indian Economic and Social History Review
I.O.L.  India Office Library
K.C.R.P.  Papers of K.C. Roy Chowdhury
N.A.I.  National Archives of India
Misc.  Miscellaneous
Poll  Political
R.C.L.I.  Report of the Royal Commission on Labour in India (London, 1931)
T.D.A.  Archives of Thomas Duff and Company
W.B.S.A.  West Bengal State Archives
If Marx gave the working class a special place and mission in history, it is also clear that he situated this class within a framework of bourgeois relationships. The figure of the worker invoked in his exposition of the category of 'capital' was that of a person who belonged to a society where the bourgeois notion of equality was ingrained in culture. Thus Marx considered labour to be a 'moment' (i.e. a constituent element) of capital, and capital, according to him, 'is a bourgeois production relation, a production relation of bourgeois society'. The labourer of Marx's assumption had internalized and enjoyed 'formal freedom', the freedom of the contract (which brought legal and market relations together), and he enjoyed this not just in abstraction but as 'the individual, real person'. Until this was ensured and so long as pre-capitalist, particularistic ties made up and characterized the relations of production, capital, as Marx understood it, was 'not yet capital as such'. This is why Marx thought that the logic of capital could be best deciphered only in a society where 'the notion of human equality has already acquired the fixity of a popular prejudice', and hence chose the historical case of England as the one most illustrative.
of his argument. Indeed, as we now know from historians in our times, the 'notion of equality before the law' was an essential ingredient of the culture with which the English working class handled its experience of the Industrial Revolution. This of course does not mean that everything about the culture of the English working class was bourgeois. Bourgeois society, Marx said, was 'itself a contradictory development' where 'relations derived from earlier [social] forms' were still to be found in 'stunted' or 'travestied' conditions. What however made the society distinctively bourgeois was the predominance of bourgeois relationships over pre-bourgeois ones.

Marx's discussion of the labour-capital relationship as it operated within the capitalist organization of work thus cannot be placed outside his assumption of a hegemonic bourgeois culture. This assumption, it will be shown in later chapters of this work, is a crucial one in Marx's understanding of the working class. On it rests his notions of 'industrial discipline', 'capitalist authority' and such like ideas which he used in analyzing the labour process in a capitalist factory. In other words, it is a key assumption in Marx's discussion of the power-relationship between labour and capital, and since 'power' or 'authority' cannot be thought of without linking it to 'consciousness', it can also be argued that a hegemonic bourgeois culture is an indispensable aspect of the social framework within which Marx locates his idea of working-class consciousness.

I propose to illustrate this argument here by looking at the issues of 'discipline', 'authority', 'protest', 'solidarity' and 'organization' in the case of a particular working class - the jute-mill workers of Calcutta - which was not born into a 'bourgeois society', but belonged
rather to a culture that was largely pre-capitalist. I shall seek to demonstrate how the predominance of pre-bourgeois relationships seriously crippled these workers in respect of their capacity to constitute themselves into a class by developing the necessary kinds of solidarity, organization and consciousness.

This is not — and I must stress the point — an effort to see culture in a causal relationship to history. If anything, what we present here is more a negative argument than a positive one. It is an argument against the primacy that is religiously accorded to the 'economic' in many Marxist historical writings and analyses of society. In the particular case of Indian history, it also means opposing the Indian nationalist view of history since the 'primacy of the economic' has for long been an inherent characteristic of the nationalist thought that developed in India under conditions of colonial domination. In fairness to all however it should be emphasized that while we refuse to see the culture and the consciousness of workers as being ultimately determined by their economic and material conditions, the question of the determination of history by economic forces — even if only 'in the last instance' — remains an unresolved one within Marxism, the writings of Marx and Engels on the subject being open to opposed interpretations. The present work is thus also intended as a contribution to an on-going debate within the Marxist movement.

II

The particular history I use here to work out some of the general propositions outlined above is that of the jute workers of Calcutta
between 1890 and 1940. The terminal dates selected refer mainly to the period for which I have examined the available historical documents but the argument presented here may well apply to years not covered by them.

There was a stage in the history of Calcutta when the city owed its economic importance and fame to the jute mills that - thanks to British enterprise in India - lined the two sides of the river Hocghly both north and south of the city. 'To write about Calcutta without saying a word about jute', said a tourist-guide to the city in 1906, 'would be as bad as to deprive the lamb of its mint sauce'.[^1] Started in 1855, this industry by the 1910s was the most important jute industry in the world, consuming more raw jute than the 'rest of the world' put together.[^2] The chief advantage that the industry had over its rivals in other countries was its proximity to the source of its raw material. India, and Bengal in particular, had a virtual monopoly in the production of raw jute. In 1945-46 India produced 97 per cent of the total world-supply of raw jute and by far the greater part of it was produced in Bengal, eastern Bengal alone accounting for 'nearly 60 per cent of the total production of jute in the whole of India'.[^3] According to one estimate, Bengal produced more than 88 per cent of the jute grown in India between 1922 and 1931.[^4] Bengal was thus the main producer of jute, and jute manufactures - mainly cheap packing and wrapping material - being largely meant for overseas markets, most of the Indian jute mills came to be set up within a very narrow geographical region around the port-city of Calcutta. 'In 1940', writes T.R. Sharma, '95.5 per cent. of the jute looms in India were located in Bengal and all the jute factories containing these looms were situated in a small strip of land about 60 miles long and two miles broad, along both the
LOCATION OF JUTE MILLS IN THE HOOGHLY RIVERAIN (1946)

- Jute mills

Bansberia
Halishahar
Naihatia
Chandranagore
Konkinara
Shamnagar
Sheoraphuli
Barrackpore
Serampur
Tittaghor
Rishra
Agarpara
Bally
Howrah
Shibpur
CALCUTTA
Baliaghata
Bowria
Budge Budge
Uluberia
Birlapur

Source: Sharma, _Location_, p. 88.
banks of the Hooghly, above and below Calcutta. The main centres of the Calcutta industry are shown in the map provided here.

The Indian jute industry was thus much more localized, geographically speaking, than the other important industry of India, the cotton textile industry. Moreover, individual jute mills employed a larger number of workers than did individual cotton mills. 'While the average number of workers employed in the cotton industry [was] about 1,150 per establishment in 1929, the average number employed in the jute industry per establishment [was] nearly 3,635 in the same year'. The jute industry therefore brought together a very large number of people and put them all within a narrow geographical area under broadly similar conditions of life and labour. At the peak of the prosperity of the industry, in the 1920s, this was a labour force well over 300,000 in number. Even in the 1930s, when the industry suffered a depression, the number of people employed by it remained substantially greater than 250,000 (Table 1).

As Table 1 shows, most of the jute labourers were adult males, women on an average forming about 16 per cent of the labour force between 1921-30 and 13.64 per cent in the decade that followed. Ranajit Das Gupta, who has made a detailed study of the supply of labour to the Calcutta jute mills, notes that before the 1890s the bulk of the labourers were Bengalis. Before long, however, streams of migration set in from other provinces of India - mainly the United Provinces (U.P.), Bihar, Orissa, Madras and the Central Provinces - and the majority of the jute workers in the twentieth century belonged to the category of 'migrants'. A census was taken of the jute-mill labourers in 1921. By this time, as Das Gupta says, 'the formation of the jute labour force [had been]
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>No. of factories</th>
<th>No. of adult males</th>
<th>No. of adult females</th>
<th>No. of children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1912</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>145,389</td>
<td>31,329</td>
<td>23,007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1913</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>158,261</td>
<td>34,010</td>
<td>24,106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1914</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>167,858</td>
<td>36,800</td>
<td>25,909</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1915</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>181,445</td>
<td>40,674</td>
<td>26,646</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1916</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>191,036</td>
<td>42,145</td>
<td>27,603</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1917</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>192,667</td>
<td>41,395</td>
<td>27,320</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1918</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>199,977</td>
<td>43,278</td>
<td>27,709</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1919</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>201,009</td>
<td>43,112</td>
<td>28,628</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>207,255</td>
<td>44,545</td>
<td>28,521</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>207,908</td>
<td>44,705</td>
<td>29,235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1922</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>239,660</td>
<td>51,495</td>
<td>28,267</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1923</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>242,652</td>
<td>54,801</td>
<td>28,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1924</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>252,107</td>
<td>55,511</td>
<td>27,823</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1925</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>256,312</td>
<td>52,827</td>
<td>26,474</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1926</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>253,935</td>
<td>53,678</td>
<td>20,785</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1927</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>253,681</td>
<td>52,935</td>
<td>19,249</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1928</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>260,342</td>
<td>53,678</td>
<td>17,879</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1929</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>267,717</td>
<td>54,670</td>
<td>17,278</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>264,417</td>
<td>52,114</td>
<td>11,646</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>222,573</td>
<td>42,254</td>
<td>3,462</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1932</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>212,505</td>
<td>40,294</td>
<td>1,515</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1933</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>208,246</td>
<td>37,337</td>
<td>1,134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1934</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>213,894</td>
<td>36,932</td>
<td>915</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>225,372</td>
<td>37,749</td>
<td>278</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1936</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>233,481</td>
<td>38,261</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1937</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>249,737</td>
<td>37,997</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1938</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>242,342</td>
<td>36,683</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1939</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>243,496</td>
<td>37,699</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>248,046</td>
<td>36,640</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>251,388</td>
<td>35,255</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1942</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>252,799</td>
<td>35,083</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1943</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>249,125</td>
<td>34,759</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1944</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>231,121</td>
<td>36,005</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The census gave the following picture of the areas of origin of the jute workers (Table 2).

### TABLE 2

Areas of Origin of Jute-Mill Workers in Bengal, 1921

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Province</th>
<th>Percentage of total (280,854)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bengal</td>
<td>24.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bihar</td>
<td>33.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orissa</td>
<td>10.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.P.</td>
<td>23.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madras</td>
<td>4.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other parts of India</td>
<td>2.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside India</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Das Gupta, 'Factory Labour in Eastern India', p. 298, Table 7. The percentage figures have not been rounded off to add up to 100.

The Indian censuses for 1911 and 1921 also gave some information regarding the caste-backgrounds of the workers. The details have been reproduced in Das Gupta's study. His analysis shows that the bulk of the labourers were low caste people and 'untouchables', 'cultivators with little or no land, members of traditional labouring and service categories and artisans from the declining crafts' of northern India. The western districts of Bihar (Gaya, Patna, Shababad, Saran and Muzaffarpur), the eastern districts of U.P. (Azamgarh, Ballia, Ghazipur, Benares and Jaunpur), Cuttack and Balasore in Orissa, Ganjam in the Madras Presidency were the main supply areas for jute labour in Bengal. In terms of their
religious composition, about 30 per cent of the jute workers were Muslims in 1929 and a little more than 69 per cent Hindus.\textsuperscript{21}

Though one of the largest working classes in the country, the jute-mill workers were also among the lowest paid of the industrial workers in India (see Table 3). This was reflected in their dismal poverty and in their problems of housing, health and chronic indebtedness. Their wages were often not enough to support their families and most jute workers - it is difficult to say just how many - left their families at 'home' in the countryside and took long leaves to visit them as and when their means permitted.\textsuperscript{22} The 'majority of the [jute] workers' then, as a government report put it in 1946, '[had] some connection with lands in their villages'. This however did not 'always mean that they own[ed] the land'. More often than not, 'instead of receiving income from agriculture, they have to meet certain incidental expenses regarding farming being done in the villages by their relatives', apart from having to provide money 'for certain conventional, although nonetheless obligatory expenses, such as marriages and funerals', when the workers had 'no option except to borrow money to meet these obligations'.\textsuperscript{23}

In the slums around the jute mills of Calcutta there thus lived thousands of unfortunate human beings whose cheap labour served very well the needs of the mill-owners but whose capacity for bargaining a better deal out of the latter remained always very low. The history of these people may therefore appear to provide an excellent subject for political-economic analysis. What was the labour market like? What were the 'needs' of 'capital'? What was the role of the colonial state? These and other similar questions have usually engaged the attention of scholars who
TABLE 3
Average monthly money wages of workers in different centres, 1900 to 1939 (figures in Rs.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Average monthly money wages of workers in Bombay cotton mills</th>
<th>Average monthly money wages of workers in Ahmedabad cotton mills</th>
<th>Average monthly money wages of workers in Calcutta jute mills</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>12.29</td>
<td>11.35</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>12.58</td>
<td>11.35</td>
<td>12.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>1902</td>
<td>12.59</td>
<td>11.35</td>
<td>12.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>1903</td>
<td>12.59</td>
<td>11.35</td>
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<tr>
<td>1904</td>
<td>12.59</td>
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<td>12.7</td>
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<td>1905</td>
<td>12.59</td>
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<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1906</td>
<td>12.59</td>
<td>12.44</td>
<td>12.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>1907</td>
<td>14.36</td>
<td>12.59</td>
<td>12.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>1908</td>
<td>15.36</td>
<td>12.76</td>
<td>13.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>1909</td>
<td>15.46</td>
<td>13.33</td>
<td>13.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>15.46</td>
<td>13.45</td>
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<tr>
<td>1911</td>
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<tr>
<td>1912</td>
<td>14.11</td>
<td>13.45</td>
<td>13.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>1913</td>
<td>14.21</td>
<td>13.45</td>
<td>14.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1914</td>
<td>16.37</td>
<td>13.45</td>
<td>14.5</td>
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<td>16.75</td>
<td>13.45</td>
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<td>16.78</td>
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<tr>
<td>1924</td>
<td>32.75</td>
<td>33.44</td>
<td>19.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1925</td>
<td>32.75</td>
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<td>34.56</td>
<td>33.80</td>
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</tr>
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<td>14.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1934</td>
<td>35.37</td>
<td>35.69</td>
<td>14.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>27.25</td>
<td>33.46</td>
<td>14.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1936</td>
<td>27.25</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1938</td>
<td>32.13</td>
<td>32.98</td>
<td>19.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1939</td>
<td>35.37</td>
<td>35.00</td>
<td>19.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

have studied this particular group of labourers. These concerns are understandable, for political and economic factors are of undoubted importance in the history of any working class. But a problem arises when they are seen as the most important determinants of a working-class history. One is left with no clues as to what role the workers themselves, as the willing subjects of their own history, played in it; or what role the bosses played, as human beings endowed with particular kinds of mentalities, in determining the nature of that history. It is not a question of reducing the Marxian concept of 'relations of production' to inter-personal relations, but of emphasizing that production-relations are relations after all, and as Marx once said, relations can only exist in ideas, in consciousness. And the logic of consciousness, we argue, cannot be derived from a techno-economic argument or from considerations about the nature of political institutions in colonial India.

Economic, technical or political factors, on the other hand, do not operate in a cultural vacuum. Behind the jute industry's demand for cheap unskilled labour (or its problems of industrial discipline) lay the culture of the 'bosses' - a deeply entrenched mercantilist outlook and the cultural milieu of the British Raj in India. This culture did not even always act in the best 'economic' interests of the industry. So was the case with the jute-mill labourers. Their notions of authority, their modes of protest, the problems of their organizations, the weakness of their solidarity - all reveal, on inspection, the existence of a pre-bourgeois culture and consciousness which, in combination with the so-called 'economic' and 'political' factors, impaired their capacity to act as a class. This is what eventually leads us to emphasize the importance, in Marx's discussion of labour-capital relationship, of his assumption regarding a hegemonic bourgeois culture.
The subsequent chapters of this study will reflect these concerns. Chapter 2, which takes a long look at the history of the industry, documents its mercantilist spirit. Chapter 3 describes the working and living conditions of the workers, conditions that are usually seen as having a determining influence on working-class consciousness. We on the contrary argue that questions regarding the consciousness of the workers are built into the very structure of our knowledge of these conditions. The following three chapters, 4, 5 and 6 respectively, look at the problems of organization, protest and solidarity in the jute workers' history and attempt to relate these to the issue of consciousness. We sum up the argument finally in a brief concluding chapter.
Chapter 1

NOTES


4. Marx, *Capital*, I, p. 60. Admittedly, Marx made this statement with reference to the problem of deciphering the 'secret of the expression of value'. But then one has to remember that for Marx capital is self-expanding value and labour a moment of capital. For these and related points also see I.I. Rubin, *Essays on Marx's Theory of Value* (Montreal, 1971).


7. The point is developed in Chapters 3 and 5 below.

8. Here and elsewhere in this work, the expression 'working class' is used in a designative manner i.e. without any connotations of class-consciousness.

9. See the discussion on Nehru in Partha Chatterjee's forthcoming book *Nationalist Thought*.

10. The crisis of Marxist theory on the question of 'determination' would be obvious to anyone familiar with the current debate and literature on the subject. A particularly interesting contribution is Alvin W. Gouldner, *The Two Marxisms: Contradictions and Anomalies in the Development of Theory* (London, 1980).


18. ibid., p. 281.

19. ibid., p. 315.

20. ibid., p. 292.


A trader's mentality was what characterized entrepreneurship in the jute industry of Calcutta. 'In the working of a jute mill there [were] three distinct operations', said the Indian Investors' Year Book in 1911: 'the buying of raw jute, its manufacture into fabrics, and the sale of those fabrics'. Of these three operations, buying and selling were considered 'the most important', requiring 'the exercise of much judgement and foresight', much more than the process of manufacturing did. The main products of the industry - jute bags called hessian and sacking - had remained the same for years and were to continue unchanged in the years to come. Crude and simple in their structure, these bags were produced by a technology that was essentially mechanical in nature and was easy to operate. The industry was guided by the belief that a 'good' management of costs and prices was the key to economic success. So long as they kept their products cheap, exploited successfully the virtual monopoly of Bengal in the production of raw jute, procured cheap labour and captured foreign markets - reasoned the leaders of the industry - their profits would remain assured. To help maintain the level of profits, the industry also developed a cartel-type combination in the Indian Jute Manufactures (later Mills)
Association (I.J.M.A.) which frequently arranged for restriction of output by the members of the industry in order to match demand. I.J.M.A. thus represented the unity of the industry on which its restrictive trade practices were based.

The very founding of I.J.M.A. in 1884 marked the end of a period in the history of the industry. Between 1855, when the first jute mill in Bengal was started, and the 1890s, the industry had foundered from one crisis to another which were caused by a small and uncertain market. After the 1890s and up to the end of the First World War, the quasi-monopolistic policies of I.J.M.A. and the opening up of distant markets brought unprecedented prosperity to the Calcutta jute mills. After 1920 however the policies of the industry ran into trouble as advances in the chemical sciences and textile technologies made it possible to produce economic and better-quality substitutes for jute. Unfortunately for the Calcutta industry, its mercantilist economic philosophy had by then turned into a dogma. The leaders of the industry refused to see the problem in terms of technology or quality of output and clung more ferociously than ever to their age-old policies of price-manipulation through restriction of output. This created further problems as new companies, owned and managed mainly by Indians, entered the industry in the late 1920s and refused to join hands with I.J.M.A. This in turn severely affected the internal unity of the latter making any cartel-like arrangements harder to implement.

The details of this history are set out below in terms of the three phases mentioned above - the initial uncertainties of the industry, its recovery with the widening of markets and the resultant prosperity up to the First World War, and the crisis afterwards. What follows is not a
strictly economic analysis of the industry; readers interested in such analyses may turn with profit to some of the works used and cited here. Our aim is to highlight the strong element of mercantilist spirit inherent in the economic calculations of the industry. Many of the problems of jute-mill labourers followed from policies dictated by this spirit.

II

The early history of the Calcutta jute industry cannot be separated from that of the industry at Dundee in Scotland. The Calcutta industry started as an off-shoot of the latter and some of its early problems stemmed from the fact of being a late-starter. The Dundee industry was at least twenty years older.

A few words about the Scottish industry may be in order. After a chequered industrial career in the eighteenth century, when she produced coarse woollens, shoe buckles and tanned leather, the town of Dundee on the river Tay came to develop the linen industry as her most important manufacture in the second half of the eighteenth century. There were three other 'linen centres' in Great Britain - Belfast, Leeds and Inverness - but they differed from Dundee in that Dundee produced fabrics of the coarsest kind, both of flax and hemp. This meant that, unlike the other three centres, Dundee operated in a market for cheap products, where survival depended on keeping prices low. Faced with a rise in flax and hemp prices early in the nineteenth century - especially in consequence of the French Revolutionary Wars (1793-1801) and the Napoleonic Wars (1804-1815) - Dundee entrepreneurs started looking around for a cheap
'substitute for hemp in the manufacture of cotton bagging [i.e. bagging for raw cotton]' and for an 'adulterant of flax tow'. They tried tow and sunn before settling upon jute in the 1830s. It was this use of jute for adulterating flax that gave both Dundee and jute a bad name in the early nineteenth century when some of the Dundee flax and hemp spinners felt constrained to guarantee their products '"free from Indian jute"'.

In 1825-26 Thomas Neish, a Dundee merchant, persuaded the Dundee flax spinners, Messrs Bell and Balfour, to try spinning jute with their machinery. The experiment was unsuccessful. Circumstances however soon combined to place jute in a more favourable position. There was a recession in the hemp bagging trade in 1831 followed by a failure, in 1834, of the Russian flax crop on which Dundee's dependence was total. In 1838, Dundee feared 'that there might be a war with Russia arising out of tension at the outbreak of the first Afghan War' in the event of which the flax supply would run out once again. All this led a few more merchants and spinners of Dundee and its neighbourhood to take a more serious interest in the jute fibre. The shift may be seen in the fact that while in 1828 the amount of raw jute imported by Dundee manufacturers was only 18 tons, the figure rose to 300 tons in 1833. By then a large part of the flax machinery had been adjusted to jute, and 1833 saw the beginnings of the 'mechanical manufacture of jute yarns and fabrics'. In 1835 'pure jute yarn' was put up for sale for the first time, and 'within a few years jute appeared in the European market as a competitor of flax and hemp'. Soon after this the Dutch government placed with Dundee merchants 'what were then regarded [in 1838] as large orders for all-jute bags' for transporting coffee from the East Indies. The experiment was considered 'completely successful'.
Linen however was still the more important product of Dundee and 'in 1851 Dundee imported 40,000 tons of flax'. But a Dundee factory inspector reported the same year that 'Dundee seemed prosperous and that an increase in the cost of flax, which was reducing the profitability of flax-spinning, was being compensated for by an increased production of a new fabric - jute'.

The fate of the linen trade was sealed by the Crimean War of 1854-1856 which shut off the supply of flax to Dundee, and jute took its place. What placed the industry on a firm footing was the American Civil War. Lancashire's loss was Dundee's gain. Jute assumed the place of cotton, and 'while the war lasted, jute packing and baggings were used very extensively in America for normal needs and to meet the insatiable demand of the war'. A Dundee merchant wrote later of this period that 'during the American War little mills grew into big ones; big ones doubled their power, and new ones rose up everywhere. There never were such times'. And a Forfarshire man remarked: 'The money didna only come in shoals, but in barrowfuls'.

Such popularity of jute, however, soon attracted competitors into the trade. The French set up their first jute mill at Ailly-s-Somme in 1843, though their industry was not a serious threat to Dundee till 1892 when the French government imposed tariff duties on imported jute products. The German jute industry was started in 1861 and was 'firmly established' by 1879. It had a rapid growth through the nineteenth century and imported more than 21% of India's raw jute exports by 1914. Belgium and Austria started their industries in the 1860s, while Italian hemp mills began to process jute in 1885. Dundee however retained her lead till the first decade of the twentieth century.
These developments had an important bearing on the growth of the Calcutta industry. By the time this industry came into being (in the 1850s and '60s) there already existed a world-market for jute manufacturers in which the Dundee industry predominated. The growth, behind tariff walls, of other European jute industries in the late nineteenth century would have only made the world-market even harder to enter. The first few mills in Calcutta therefore turned to the market that India traditionally served with her handloom products of jute - the network of country ports in India and some coastal markets in South-East Asia, mainly Burma. The first jute mill in Bengal set up in 1855 at Rishra even had 'a number of hand frame looms' and chose its location precisely because the neighbouring town of Serampore was 'a noted centre for hand spun jute and hemp', where 'labourers possessing knowledge of hand-spinning and weaving were available in good numbers'. Another factory, the Gourepore [Gouripur] Jute Mill, was started in 1862 with the express purpose of competing 'with the native weavers in the Indian markets', for 'at that time', as a 'Dundonian' was to put it later, 'there was no rivalry between Dundee and India'.

One feature of the early history of the Calcutta jute industry was thus the displacement of the older artisanal production. From a position of near-total predominance in the 1850s, the traditional industry was relegated to absolute unimportance by the 1870s (see Table below) and disappeared altogether from the customs house statistics after the 1880s.

For the first thirty years in the industry's career, i.e. 1855 to 1885, most of its products were sold in the country and coastal market that the handloom industry traditionally served. These markets were small and uncertain so that profits remained a function of 'exceptionally good
TABLE 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Export from India (in 000s)</th>
<th>Approx. Percentage share of</th>
<th>Total Export from India (in 000 yards)</th>
<th>Approx. Percentage share of</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Gunny Bags</td>
<td>Gunny Cloth</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Power loom</td>
<td>Handloom</td>
<td>Power loom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1877</td>
<td>32859</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1878</td>
<td>26407</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7297</td>
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</tr>
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<td>1880</td>
<td>55909</td>
<td>96.5</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>11322</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1881</td>
<td>52386</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10766</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1882</td>
<td>42073</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10840</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


TABLE 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Coastal trade as percentage of total export of jute products</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1850</td>
<td>70.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1882</td>
<td>49.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1885</td>
<td>59.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>49.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1895</td>
<td>29.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>19.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1905</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: For column 2, Dundee Advertiser, 17 September, 1883; other columns derived from Wallace, Romance (1908 edn), pp. 10, 59.
business and high price gunnies'. The precarious position of the industry is indicated by the history of some of the oldest mills. The first of them, for instance, came to depend so heavily on the 'fairly good profits' it made off the fortuitous boom produced in the Bombay cotton market by the American Civil War that the termination of the war caused it to collapse as no alternative marketing outlets could be found to match its scale of production. 'Several pioneer shipments having turned out disastrously', this company was 'wound up' and its property put up for auction.

The dependence on the 'traditional' market for handloom products had another implication: there was little pressure on the mills to standardize their products. Consequently, entry into the world market for manufactured jute was even more difficult than it would have been otherwise. D.R. Wallace, a pioneer historian of the industry, wrote thus of the problem:

We have now [c.1870] got to five mills with about 950 looms at work. Up to this time there was very little export trade in gunnies beyond Burma. It was not found necessary to be particular about regularity in weights or counts of the two or three qualities of bags in use ... But now it became necessary to seek foreign outlets. The Borneo Co. made the first serious attempt about 1868 by shipping 400 bales of their 2\(\frac{5}{8}\) lbs. twills as 2\(\frac{1}{2}\) lb 3 bushel twill bags to the United Kingdom. The result was disastrous. The bags averaged on arrival anything from 2 lbs to 3 lbs. the shotting varied from 7 to 10 per inch and the result was a claim of a pound per bale.

There are two points that this quotation makes. One is about the lack of standardization of the product, which came as a result of dealing in coastal markets. But it also indicates that the coastal markets were already proving
a little too small for the industry. 1870 is cited by Wallace as the year 'when production, by the advent of new mills, outran the local and neighbouring country demand, and compelled the industry to invade foreign market with their goods'.

'At the present moment', wrote Elija Helm in 1875,

there is reason to conclude that ... the jute manufacturers of Bengal have been overdone. The production is large and increasing, and the difficulty of finding profitable outlets for the manufactured product is constantly becoming greater.

The smallness and uncertainty of the market encouraged a spirit of speculation both in the promotion of the first few mills and in their management. Floating and selling off a jute mill was often seen as a more profitable proposition than running it in the interest of the shareholders.

Naturally, quite a few of the early entrepreneurs were essentially fortune-hunters who had no long term interest in the industry. George Ackland, for instance, the founder of the first mill in 1855, a one time 'middy' in the East India Marine Service, turned his attention to jute only to make good a loss he had suffered in Ceylon. That accomplished, he was out of the scene by 1867. The Baranagar Jute Mill, which was set up by the Borneo Company in 1859, was sold to the Baranagar Jute Factory Ltd in 1872, after the former owners had got back their capital 'twice over'. An observer from Dundee commented that 'the price which was paid by the Baranagar Company was £384 000, a figure far beyond what the mill could have been built for, and fully £125 000 more than the concern was worth'. The high price was not justified by the value of the mill. It was meant 'to enable the firm [Borneo Co.] to adjust their accounts with an outgoing partner'.
The 'quick money' mentality is also evident in the history of another of these early mills, the Asiatic Jute Mill, or the Soorah Jute Mill as it was called later. This mill was built in 1874 by Charles Smith, a small mill-owner in Dundee. Smith's attention shifted to Calcutta when he faced business difficulties in Scotland; but investing in Calcutta was only a way of repairing his financial losses. He 'did not even wait to see the mill start, but took his profits from the firm of Jews who had financed him in the venture and retired'.31 This 'firm of Jews' - Cohen & Co. - in their turn stopped all payments due to their creditors in 1878 and simply absconded from the trading scene of Calcutta; it was revealed that 'they had largely helped themselves to the manufactured goods and were indebted to the Company in over Rs 20,000'.32 Yet another attempt by an Armenian trader to set up a jute mill in the late 1860s came to naught because 'he lost all his capital in speculation'.33

The person who most embodied the spirit of the times was Richard Macallister. At one time a 'bus conductor in Philadelphia', he came out 'to the Tudor Ice Company about 1869' and, as Wallace put it, 'with Yankee instinct decided to have a hand in the golden pie'.34 In the early 1870s, when the gunny bag trade was seemingly, if briefly, prosperous, when 'it was only necessary to issue a prospectus of a jute mill to have all the shares snapped in a forenoon',35 Macallister teamed up with 'the manager of a large bank' in Calcutta and formed R. Macallister & Co.36 This company floated a number of mills in rapid succession: The Fort Gloster Cotton Mill (1872), The Fort Gloster Jute Mill (1873), The Oriental Jute Manufacturing Company (1874) and the Rustomji Twine and Canvas Factory Company United (1875). R. Macallister & Co. were in the trade for only six years. In those six years they made enormous profits.
They sold the Fort Gloster Jute Mill for Rs 13,00,000, the Oriental Jute Manufacturing Co. for Rs 18,00,000 and the cotton mill for about the same price, (the figure for the twine factory being unknown). If the proceeds made on the cotton mill were any guide - and bearing in mind the popularity of jute mill shares in those years - the company would have profited by at least 40 per cent on each of these ventures. Besides, R. Macallister & Co. also got themselves appointed as the Managing Agents of these mills 'for five years certain at a remuneration of 3% of the gross sales ... and an allowance of Rs 500 a month for office establishment in Calcutta'.

Unsurprisingly, none of the Macallister mills were well managed. The twine and canvas factory - the idea 'not proving sufficiently remunerative' - was soon converted 'into a jute mill' - with very little thought, it would appear, as the 'spinning and preparing machinery' were reported to be 'all more or less intended for flax, and [were] too light for jute'. A Dundee correspondent wrote in 1880: 'The concern was never worked at anything but a loss, and is now in liquidation, and when the last advices left Calcutta it was to have been exposed to public roup on the 1st March last'.

The directors of the Oriental Jute Manufacturing Company admitted in 1879 that the mill 'cannot work to a profit, burdened as it is with debts'. In 1880, the mill was stopped 'with a view to liquidation and reconstruction of the Company', when it was eventually taken over by Bird & Co., and renamed the Union Jute Mill. Fort Gloster Jute Mill also had a very 'spasmodic' career. After a prosperous first year the mill soon tasted trouble, which only deepened with the trade crisis of
1875. On top of this, the shareholders and creditors had to bear the additional burden of their traumatic discovery, in 1878, that Richard Macallister had suddenly 'disappeared' from Calcutta 'on urgent private affairs' and that his firm had declared itself bankrupt. The later revelation that Macallister had also 'misappropriated' Rs 33,370 from the funds of the mill, and that 'the reserve fund, Rs 40,000, [had] also disappeared and [that] in fact, it never had any existence except on paper', twisted the knife.41

A spirit of speculation thus reigned supreme in the flotation and management of these early mills, often to the detriment of the interests of the shareholders. The mills in the seventies were typically set up in years of temporary boom, and shareholders were drawn in by the immediate prospects of enormous dividends. It is this that explains the lumpy nature of the growth of the industry in this decade (Table 6).

### TABLE 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>No. of mills set up</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Up to 1872</td>
<td>5 mills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1873</td>
<td>4 new mills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1874</td>
<td>7 new mills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1875</td>
<td>1 new mill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1877</td>
<td>2 new mills</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The initial dividends were sometimes attractive but their attractiveness was itself a symptom of the speculative mentality, as they were often
given away in a spirit of total neglect of the financial health of the mills.

That in the ordinary course of working the mills would require serious repairs and replacements did not occur to any one, and no allowance of any kind was ever made from time to time for depreciation, and the consequence is that many of the mills are now [1880] burdened with debenture debts, they having no funds wherewith to pay for the renewal of and replacements in the mill, when such became absolutely necessary. 

A typical example was Rishra Mill which was made into the Calcutta Jute Mill in 1872. For a couple of years both profits and dividends were very good (20 per cent), but with the trade depression of the mid 1870s the mill found itself in a deepening crisis.

Large repairs and replacements were urgently required, and as all the gross profits had been paid away in dividends (the words "depreciation", "wear and tear" not then finding places in the Indian millowners' vocabulary), it became necessary to raise money on debenture mortgages, and first £30,000 and then £10,000 were borrowed on the security of mortgage debentures bearing interest at 10 per cent. This, of course, had the effect of virtually raising the capital from Rs 12,00,000 to Rs 16,00,000 without any corresponding increase in the size of the mills. Since 1874 the company had declared no dividend, and the Rs 200 shares, which at one time were selling at Rs 290, can now be picked up easily at Rs 40.

The problem was of such a general magnitude that even in 1880, when the practice of having 'reserve' and/or 'depreciation' accounts was more common than before, six of the eleven Calcutta-owned mills had little or no such funds. 'The result of this mismanagement has been a very serious decline in the value of all Jute stock, and, with exception of two concerns, the scrip of all the Calcutta-owned companies have depreciated
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Mill</th>
<th>Paid-up Capital (Rs)</th>
<th>Reserve, Wear and Tear (Rs)</th>
<th>Debentures &amp; Pref. (Shares (Rs))</th>
<th>Other Liabilities (Rs)</th>
<th>'Present' (1880) Market Value (Stock Exchange Quotations) (Rs)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>12,00,000</td>
<td>6,554</td>
<td>4,00,000</td>
<td>1,59,803</td>
<td>1,80,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gourepore</td>
<td>12,00,000</td>
<td>1,98,954</td>
<td>nil</td>
<td>1,16,965</td>
<td>7,44,000</td>
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<td>Seebpore</td>
<td>15,00,000</td>
<td>32,155</td>
<td>nil</td>
<td>1,51,228</td>
<td>4,50,000</td>
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<td>Hourah</td>
<td>14,00,000</td>
<td>2,52,072</td>
<td>3,00,000</td>
<td>2,49,164</td>
<td>8,82,000</td>
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<td>Asiatic</td>
<td>3,99,900</td>
<td>3,058</td>
<td>nil</td>
<td>61,397</td>
<td>59,985</td>
</tr>
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<td>Balliaghata</td>
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<td>nil</td>
<td>3,30,500</td>
<td>3,865</td>
<td>33,300</td>
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<td>4,00,000</td>
<td>4,62,115</td>
<td>3,20,000</td>
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<td>Oriental</td>
<td>19,00,000</td>
<td>nil</td>
<td>96,500</td>
<td>3,84,242</td>
<td>1,90,000</td>
</tr>
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<td>Fort Gloster</td>
<td>14,00,000</td>
<td>nil</td>
<td>2,00,000</td>
<td>2,00,615</td>
<td>13,86,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Budge Budge</td>
<td>14,40,000</td>
<td>3,40,000</td>
<td>nil</td>
<td>2,18,339</td>
<td>4,06,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baranagar</td>
<td>40,00,000</td>
<td>3,40,000</td>
<td>nil</td>
<td>3,90,373</td>
<td>22,00,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>150,06,400</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>68,51,285</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Loss to shareholders = Rs 81,54,755

Source: JMB, p. 86.
to an enormous extent', wrote the correspondent from Dundee whom we have quoted before. 44 (Table 7.)

TABLE 8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Mill (1880)</th>
<th>No. of looms</th>
<th>Cost of block (Rs)</th>
<th>Cost per Loom (Rs)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>260</td>
<td>14,64,909</td>
<td>5632</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gourepore</td>
<td>224</td>
<td>11,12,472</td>
<td>4970</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seebpore</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>13,93,072</td>
<td>5572</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Howrah</td>
<td>275</td>
<td>15,27,150</td>
<td>5918</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asiatic</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>3,99,812</td>
<td>5330</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balliaughata</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>4,69,302</td>
<td>4693</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kamarhatty</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>10,20,885</td>
<td>5053</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oriental</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>18,97,595</td>
<td>5421</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fort Gloster</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>13,62,176</td>
<td>5448</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Budge Budge</td>
<td>320</td>
<td>14,24,299</td>
<td>4450</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baranagar</td>
<td>516</td>
<td>39,61,970</td>
<td>7619</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: JMB, p. 88.

Behind this state of affairs lay the speculative spirit in which the mills were floated. Much of the initial paid-up capital raised was spent in buying the mills from their vendors, so that the mills often started with not enough working capital. The Oriental Jute Manufacturing Company, for instance, was bought from R. Macallister & Co., at Rs 18,00,000 out of a total paid-up capital of Rs 19,00,000. 45 And promoter-speculators like Macallister hiked up the cost-price of a jute mill much above what could be considered an economic price for the period. The mills as a result often started with too much of their money invested in their stocks. The correspondent of the Dundee Advertiser estimated in 1880
that 'a mill of 300 looms, with all needful accommodation, could be put up for Rs 4000 per loom, and, if this assumption is correct, no mill whatever its size, should be worth more than Rs 4000 per loom'. But the eleven Calcutta-owned mills for which he could collect the information had their cost figures as above (Table 8). The correspondent remarked that 'this would work out on the above an average cost of Rs 5,673 per loom; and as two mills only are above this average, it seems to follow that the average is too high'.

III

New and bigger markets had to be found and secured for the Calcutta industry before it could overcome the competition from Dundee and realize the benefits of its two 'natural' advantages, cheap labour and proximity to the source of raw jute. But this called for determined enterprise and, above all, contacts in the already established world-market for finished products of jute. There is an element of irony in the fact that the eventual supremacy of the Calcutta mills (over their Dundee counterparts) owed a great deal, initially at least, to their Dundee connections. The Samnugger Jute Factory Company Limited (1874), which is credited with having done for the Calcutta industry 'more than all the other companies put together' in their search for new markets, was floated by four businessmen in Dundee - Thomas Duff, J.J. Barrie, and 'the brothers Nicol[1] of A. and J. Nicol[1]'. In the early 1880s, the four men held between them sixty per cent of the shares of the Samnugger Jute Mill and the Titaghur Jute mill (1883).
Duff, Barrie and the Nicolls appear to have all come from middle ranking trading or manufacturing families of the town, and they all had, either individually or through their families, connections in the textile trading world. While these connections were important, it was their involvement in the Calcutta industry that made them prominent in Dundee. The Nicolls were one of 'the oldest members of Dundee's textile trade', yet when Alexander Nicoll died in 1909, he was remembered not for his doings in Dundee but as 'one of the pioneers of the great jute industry on the banks of the Hughli'. Joseph J. Barrie, who rose so high as to be made President of the Dundee Chamber of Commerce in 1887, started his career in a modest way as an apprentice to a firm of flax merchants. He gradually worked his way up and became a clerk with Messrs George Armistead & Co., a Dundee trading firm; in the 1860s he was their 'market man'. At this time he resigned and 'began business on his own account, in which he proved very successful'. In 1874 he became a partner of Thomas Duff to promote the Samnugger Company. Thomas Duff, the key man in the Samnugger story, was born into an old artisan-manufacturing family with long and established connections with flax and jute. His father Daniel Duff, 'machine maker and flax spinner, South Tay street works, Dundee', was known as 'the inventor of the jute teaser or devil, the softening elephant'. Daniel Duff himself had some ideas about starting jute spinning in Calcutta. Thomas Duff's elder brother Robert Duff was a gunny broker who made over his business to Thomas Duff in 1855. It was as a jute merchant that Duff came to be closely associated with R. and J. Henderson & Co. in whose Liverpool and London offices he had worked before. So when the Hendersons persuaded the Borneo Company to start the Baranagar Jute Mill near Calcutta in 1859, Thomas Duff was the person selected to be in charge of the mill. 'Mr. Duff's success in
India was so marked', commented the Dundee Year Book after his death, 'that after 8 years' residence in the East he returned home with ample competency, and built a large jute mill at Barking, in Essex'. But, as Wallace said of him, 'like the old horse, he smelt the battle from afar'. He sold his mill and joined hands with the Nicolls and Barrie to start the Samnugger Company.

Thomas Duff's company did not go for the local and the coastal markets that other Indian mills normally served. Instead it managed to break into the Australasian market very early in its career. And once they got an opening into the Australian and New Zealand markets for cornsacks, woolpacks and hessian bran bags, the mill agents, without any organised combine, nursed this outlet by turning out and stocking bigger and bigger quantities of the goods in anticipation of the seasonal orders ... The 'Frisco central hessian wheat pocket demand was fostered in a like manner.

D.R. Wallace, from whose account of the history of the industry this quotation comes, was at pains to emphasize the importance of the inherited Dundee 'connections' of the company to the success of their first few raids on foreign markets:

They were particularly fortunate in their selection of an expert to conduct their business in the agents' office. This gentleman, Mr. W. Smith, had forged his way from office boy in Messrs Cox Brothers, Lochee, to a confidential position with the firm. He was endowed with indomitable assurance and when he came to Calcutta had nothing to learn in the devious ways of jute. Backed by the practical experience and business connection of the home board in foreign markets, this company did more than all the companies put together to invade foreign markets.
The phenomenal success of the Samnugger Company in these new markets in years when many of the other mills were struggling to survive must have set an example to the latter. 'In 1880', reported Sir John Leng, a Dundee M.P. who visited Calcutta in the winter of 1895, 'there was a great collapse in the industry consequent upon overproduction and the Calcutta mills not having made a market for their produce, for up to this time the demand was principally local'.\textsuperscript{53} In this crisis that had been building up since 1875 - when 'the other mills languished or went to the wall' - the Samnugger Jute Mill with its overseas markets paid a steady dividend of 10 per cent. per annum, besides building up a huge reserve fund, enabling them to present their shareholders with 40 per cent. bonus shares in a baby mill, the Titaghur, floated in 1883, which has grown to rive its father's bonnet.\textsuperscript{54}

If anything, as the following table suggests, Wallace probably underestimated Samnugger's prosperity in those years. The annual report of the company for 1881 described its reserve and depreciation funds as exceeding, 'very considerably', 'the excess expenditure on Bdgs., Plant, Boats &c.', and 'over and above, the subscribed and fully paid up capital of the company' (Table 9).

Such an object lesson in profit-making did not fail to have its effect on an industry desperate for profits and markets. Before long, other mills were also in the race for overseas outlets, and by the late '80s 'had made a fair progress' in this direction.\textsuperscript{55} One very important development of this period was the formation in 1884 of the Indian Jute Manufactures' Association, later called the Indian Jute Mills Association or I.J.M.A. The association was set up with the sole object of regulating
TABLE 9

Samnuggar Jute Mills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Financial Year</th>
<th>Gross Profit (£-s-d)</th>
<th>Reserve, Wear and Tear, and Insurance funds (£-s-d)</th>
<th>Cumulative Reserve and other funds (£-s-d)</th>
<th>Dividends (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1877</td>
<td>26623-3-11</td>
<td>10767-7-4</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1878</td>
<td>31257-7-11</td>
<td>7632-7-1</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1879</td>
<td>22409-13-1</td>
<td>7009-13-1</td>
<td>259616-7-6</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1880</td>
<td>31879-12-7</td>
<td>13254-12-7</td>
<td>39171-0-1</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1881</td>
<td>59841-7-6</td>
<td>36216-7-6</td>
<td>74387-7-7</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1882</td>
<td>70538-1-1</td>
<td>39038-1-1</td>
<td>114425-8-8</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: T.D.A., Minutes of the annual general meetings of Samnuggar Jute Factory Company Limited for the relevant years.

Production of the industry so as to match demand. The idea had been mooted before. It was said in 1880 that 'if all the mills were to go on the single shift or short time movement the production would no doubt be sensibly diminished, and ... a rapid advance in the prices would naturally follow', but the problem had been a lack of unanimity among the mills. A continuing gap between demand and production, coupled with the realization that the overseas markets would yield good profits if only Bengal's supply of raw jute and cheap labour could be carefully exploited, soon made the mills wiser. On 10 November 1884 the I.J.M.A. was founded and the next year 'under an elaborate voluntary indenture, the Associated Mills agreed ... to work short time'. The Calcutta agent of Thomas Duff and Company, one of the anxious architects of the short-time-working movement, assured his Home Board in December 1885 with the telegram: 'Agreement completed commencing February second week'. His Home Board's response - asking him 'not to sell beyond about
a month forward in the anticipation that the reduced production will strengthen the market\(^5\) - was as much an instruction as a statement of a point of view that was soon to become an article of faith with the industry and I.J.M.A. Throughout the period under discussion, I.J.M.A. sponsored and led several short-time movements in the industry, all in the belief that 'reduced production [would] strengthen the market'.

These efforts soon bore fruit. By the late 1880s the Calcutta mills received 'regular orders' from the United Kingdom for flour and salt bags, and had also 'annexed' the 'Egyptian Diara contract' and 'Levant orders for grain sacks and other twill goods'.\(^6\) By the early twentieth century, they had found new, steady and extensive markets in Australasia, the United States, South Africa, and the countries of South America. In 1913, for instance, of the total export of bags by the Calcutta mills, Australia took about 30 per cent, while of the cloth export, 60 per cent went to the United States.\(^6\) The United States' import of jute manufactures from India in that year constituted 82 per cent of the country's total consumption, the rest coming from the United Kingdom. The progress that the Indian industry had made in the 1900s may be gauged from the fact that as late as 1897 India had supplied only 32 per cent of the total American import of manufactured jute goods, while the United Kingdom provided the balance.\(^6\) The extent of change in the Australian market, which was once a preserve of Dundee's, is also reflected in the following figures for 1911 (Table 10).

Once the Calcutta mills established themselves as a major source of cheap and coarse jute bags these markets were to stay for a long time with the Calcutta industry. On an average, Australia took 19 per cent
TABLE 10

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jute bags and sacks imported into Australia in 1911</th>
<th>Percentage imported from India</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type</strong></td>
<td><strong>Quantity (in doz.)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corn and flour packs</td>
<td>813123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bran, chaff and compressed fodder packs</td>
<td>259193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potatoes, onions and coal packs</td>
<td>28798</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ore packs</td>
<td>40368</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wool packs</td>
<td>957047</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: [Anon.], 'Jute', *Agricultural Gazette of New South Wales*, vol. 24, Pt 8 2 August 1913, p. 668.

every year of the total export of gunny bags from India between 1920-21 and 1929-30, and America, 66 per cent of the cloth exports between 1896 and 1930.\(^{62}\)

The Dundee industry fell into increasing difficulties after the 1880s when rising tariff barriers in Europe and the competition from Calcutta effectively narrowed the market for Dundee products. In 1900, 'no exports of jute manufactures were recorded as being sent from Britain' to Italy and France, and the amount sent to Germany was a mere 1.3 per cent of that exported in 1878.\(^{63}\) As one observer put it:

in the 1880s and 1890s, the Dundee manufacturers, increasingly shut out from their established Continental markets, were simultaneously losing their extensive export outlets in Asia, Australia, and along the western sea-board of the American continent, to the Calcutta industry.\(^{64}\)
The intensity of Calcutta's competition forced Dundee to specialize after the First World War in finer products like carpet backing, leaving the market for coarser goods like hessian and sacking to the Calcutta industrialists. A dramatic demonstration of Calcutta's supremacy came in May 1919 'when ... the Angus Jute Works in Dundee were sold and the whole machinery transferred to Calcutta', causing, understandably, 'considerable surprise and resentment among the unemployed in Dundee'. That the rivalry between Dundee and Calcutta, and the consequent decline of Dundee, never quite assumed the shape or importance of the Lancashire-Bombay conflict has been put down by A.K. Sen to 'three factors':

First of all, it [the Dundee industry] was still [in the 1890s] a relatively unimportant part of the British economy, and the influence of Dundee was less than that of Manchester. Secondly, by this time the group of Scots who had been investing large amounts in Indian jute mills had become an influential force in itself ... [Thirdly] Indian jute goods exports were by the '90s playing a crucial part in the settlement of Britain's dollar purchase ... [i.e.] in the settlement of British balance of payments. Since this fact was considerably discussed [in Dundee and elsewhere], this too must have played its part in not allowing to develop in the case of the Indian jute mills the type of social ethos that developed against the Indian cotton industry.

As the market for the products of the Calcutta industry widened and stabilized - though not without some short-lived crises in the '80s and the early '90s - the old spirit of recklessness in the management of funds gave place to a more confident outlook. Towards the middle of the 1890s even the companies owned in Calcutta, which had earned for the industry the notoriety of the earlier period, showed signs of financial health in their dividends and reserve fund figures. Referring to the latter, Sir John Leng remarked: 'Figures like these are enough to make
home manufacturers' mouths water. In the home textile trades for the same period of years such returns have been unheard of and unknown. On his return to Dundee, Sir John warned the Dundee Chamber of Commerce that the 'time will probably never return when the jute industry in Dundee will advance again with leaps and bounds, and when large fortunes will be realized in a few years in a very rough and easy way'. Indeed, by 1908, Dundee's intermittent outcries against some practices of the Calcutta millowners and managers appeared to the latter as 'nothing more serious than harmless wails from their small competitor on the Tay'.

The tone of that statement speaks for itself; Wallace's book, from which it is quoted, is in itself a testimony to the growing sense of complacency that the Calcutta industry developed in the twentieth century.

IV

Wallace's book The Romance of Jute was published twice - once in 1909 and then again, in a revised and updated form, in 1928. The differences between the two editions are indicative of the change of mood in Calcutta jute circles. The first edition ended on an optimistic note - it envisaged a future that 'would appear to be good ... for the Calcutta mills'. But its optimism was still cautious. The 'scandals' of the nineteenth century were still there like unhealed scars; so the 'dedication' of the book carried a reminder of the 'early seventies of the last century' when 'Jute Mill Management' deserved the 'trenchant and businesslike criticism' they received from their friends from time to time. By the time Wallace came to write the second edition he was close to retiring. The memories of the 'early seventies' had faded. Wallace had
seen the Calcutta industry pass through a phenomenal boom during the First World War when, according to one observer, in spite of large increases 'in the reserves and depreciation funds, the level of profits reached was incredible'. 'The ratio of net profits to paid up capital of the jute mill[s] ... was 58 per cent in 1915, 75 per cent in 1916, 49 per cent for 1917 and 73 per cent for the first half of 1918'. The importance of trench warfare in the War created a huge demand for sandbags and the fall in India's export trade gave the industry an almost captive supply of raw jute. As the following figures for five individual jute mills suggest, the profits-rates of the years 1918-19 remained unsurpassed for most periods in the history of the industry (Table 11).

Wallace wrote the second edition of his book when the industry was still gathering the fruits of the harvest it had reaped during the War. By 1925 the Calcutta mills consumed 'more than five times as much jute as the Dundee industry' and 'the reserve funds of the mills in almost every case' exceeded their capital. The Capital of 3 April 1924 - the mouthpiece of the Bengal Chamber of Commerce - looked at the profit figures for the industry for 1913 to 1923 (given below, Table 12) and remarked with unconcealed glee, 'What a wonderful decade it has been!'.

The industry now developed a new sense of its own history. The murky past of the 1870s and 80s was forgotten, and the story of Calcutta's jute industry since 1855 was now seen as 'one of uninterrupted progress'. The mood of the Scottish entrepreneur in Calcutta became highly self-congratulatory. The speech Sir Alexander Murray, Chairman of I.J.M.A. in 1917, made that year at the annual general meeting of the association contained an unusual display of statistics and rhetoric. We may take note
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Samnugger North</th>
<th>Samnugger</th>
<th>Titaghur No. 1</th>
<th>Titaghur No. 2</th>
<th>Victoria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1916</td>
<td>170.04</td>
<td>144.30</td>
<td>137.42</td>
<td>146.09</td>
<td>136.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1917</td>
<td>132.39</td>
<td>122.68</td>
<td>114.01</td>
<td>119.49</td>
<td>123.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1918</td>
<td>394.40</td>
<td>327.49</td>
<td>305.73</td>
<td>305.35</td>
<td>303.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1919</td>
<td>242.00</td>
<td>208.73</td>
<td>202.15</td>
<td>203.63</td>
<td>197.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>195.53</td>
<td>184.72</td>
<td>183.10</td>
<td>184.68</td>
<td>181.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>59.81</td>
<td>44.45</td>
<td>48.45</td>
<td>50.80</td>
<td>50.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1922</td>
<td>94.90</td>
<td>67.57</td>
<td>68.60</td>
<td>71.09</td>
<td>74.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1923</td>
<td>114.75</td>
<td>86.71</td>
<td>86.46</td>
<td>90.70</td>
<td>97.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1924</td>
<td>90.74</td>
<td>76.81</td>
<td>69.69</td>
<td>69.25</td>
<td>82.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1925</td>
<td>66.06</td>
<td>34.85</td>
<td>49.50</td>
<td>46.22</td>
<td>63.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1926</td>
<td>50.43</td>
<td>40.65</td>
<td>39.14</td>
<td>40.37</td>
<td>49.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1927</td>
<td>78.73</td>
<td>69.04</td>
<td>66.54</td>
<td>68.77</td>
<td>76.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1928</td>
<td>104.73</td>
<td>90.82</td>
<td>86.01</td>
<td>91.15</td>
<td>97.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1929</td>
<td>90.77</td>
<td>71.99</td>
<td>71.63</td>
<td>72.76</td>
<td>83.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>69.28</td>
<td>52.82</td>
<td>46.80</td>
<td>51.20</td>
<td>56.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>46.19</td>
<td>36.39</td>
<td>33.65</td>
<td>38.06</td>
<td>39.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1932</td>
<td>45.62</td>
<td>32.49</td>
<td>30.17</td>
<td>35.42</td>
<td>36.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1933</td>
<td>57.27</td>
<td>36.77</td>
<td>39.45</td>
<td>43.18</td>
<td>48.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1934</td>
<td>55.41</td>
<td>31.43</td>
<td>37.67</td>
<td>40.44</td>
<td>48.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>41.38</td>
<td>31.93</td>
<td>31.76</td>
<td>31.03</td>
<td>38.93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: T.D.A., Computed from the Confidential Monthly Financial Statements for the individual mills for the respective years.
### TABLE 12

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Profits before paying debenture interests (Rs)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1913</td>
<td>24597553</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1914</td>
<td>9618614</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1915</td>
<td>42148960</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1916</td>
<td>64871041</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1917</td>
<td>42392573</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1918</td>
<td>122925767</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1919</td>
<td>116453696</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>125382066</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>49586033</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1922</td>
<td>35835863</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1923</td>
<td>49533808</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: *Capital*, 3 April 1924.

of both of these elements, for the statistics give us a good idea of the growth that the jute industry had enjoyed in its recent past and the rhetoric tells us of the spirit of complacency that this growth had generated. Both aspects are important to our story. Since 1879, Murray pointed out, the loomage capacity of the mills had increased by 500 per cent while the export of raw jute had just 'doubled and no more'. In 1879 there were '4,946 looms ... giving employment to 27,000 hands', while 'the latest returns show 39,000 looms and 812,421 spindles at work in India, giving employment to 254,000 hands'. Besides, the export of gunny bags had increased 'over 500%', and that of gunny cloth by an unbelievable 22,000 per cent. 'Is not that a record to be proud of, gentlemen?', Sir Alexander asked his audience and answered it himself with another rhetorical question:
To increase the jute manufacturing industry from 10,000 looms to 40,000 in the comparatively short period of 20 years, to provide the necessary capital, to secure the required machinery, to recruit and train 175,000 new mill workers, and all the time to have the satisfaction of knowing that we are enriching Bengal, improving the standard of Indian labour and earning a fair return on our capital, what better results can be looked for by the most ardent protectionist or free trader?

'Don't these figures speak for themselves?', Sir Alexander continued. 'Don't they show the sound basis of which the jute manufacturing is established, so far at least as this country's trade is concerned?'.

The reworked text of the second edition of Wallace's book was coloured by this prevailing mood of robust confidence. 'For all time' to come, it seemed to Wallace in 1927-28, the mills should be 'in a position to weather ... the fluctuating dangers of market' so long as they followed the I.J.M.A.'s price - manipulative policies of restricting production to meet the demand. These policies, Wallace reckoned, were 'a factor for good to the trade'. The revised 'dedication' of the book in this late edition no longer carried any references to the uncertainties of the last century. Instead, so strong was Wallace's optimism now that he broke into poetry:

The writer who'll be West, before
Some future scribe takes up the score.
Yet still, what'er the Ebb may bring
The tang of Bengal jute shall cling.
Hardly had the ink dried on Wallace's paper when world-events plunged the Calcutta industry into a period of serious trade-depression from which it never really emerged in the years that followed. What the depression revealed was how unfortunate the industry's sense of complacency had been. Contrary to the beliefs of many jute pundits of the day, the crisis demonstrated how unstable and unsound the basis of the industry had become in the years after the First World War. The following Table summarizes the industry's situation in the nineteen thirties (Table 13).

As the Table indicates, the beginning of the slump in the jute industry coincided with the world-wide depression of the early thirties. Jute bags were often called 'the brown paper' of world trade, and it was natural that a fall in the volume of that trade should reduce the demand for manufactured jute. But this was not the whole story. In 1937, the volume of 'world trade in materials ... was actually higher by 8 per cent than in 1929'. Yet the profits of the industry had dwindled seriously, and manufactured jute fetched a much lower value on the market than before. These facts point to more permanent changes occurring in the structure of the demand for jute products.

In an article published in 1934, R.W. Brock, a former editor of Capital, analyzed some of these changes. 'A more serious factor' than trade-depression, according to Brock, was competition. Competition came from two sources, the first of which were the jute mills abroad, mainly in Europe. Under tariff protection, these mills prospered in the twenties.
TABLE 13
The Jute Industry in the 1930s

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Index of Investment (1)</th>
<th>Index of Profit Index (2)</th>
<th>Index of Net profit as percentage of paid-up capital (3)</th>
<th>Index of consumption of raw jute by the mills (4)</th>
<th>Index of avg. rate of dividend on ordinary shares (5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1928</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
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<tr>
<td>1929</td>
<td>101.9</td>
<td>85.6</td>
<td>104.2</td>
<td>104.4</td>
<td>75.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>104.7</td>
<td>37.9</td>
<td>67.2</td>
<td>110.9</td>
<td>37.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>109.9</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>78.9</td>
<td>21.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1932</td>
<td>110.7</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>73.7</td>
<td>18.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1933</td>
<td>113.0</td>
<td>19.8</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>75.4</td>
<td>26.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1934</td>
<td>108.6</td>
<td>34.4</td>
<td>23.0</td>
<td>90.2</td>
<td>34.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>110.4</td>
<td>39.8</td>
<td>36.0</td>
<td>96.1</td>
<td>23.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1936</td>
<td>110.4</td>
<td>39.8</td>
<td>36.0</td>
<td>96.1</td>
<td>23.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1937</td>
<td>114.3</td>
<td>25.9</td>
<td>33.6</td>
<td>104.7</td>
<td>23.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1938</td>
<td>121.1</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>125.4</td>
<td>15.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1939</td>
<td>122.4</td>
<td>48.8</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>107.7</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The French jute industry increased its consumption of raw jute from 357,000 bales in 1923-24 to 613,000 in 1928-29. The German jute industry became one of the largest purchasers of Indian raw jute in the 1920s; the annual average export of raw jute to Belgium shot up from 1000 bales in 1914-18 to 174000 bales after the war; the Italian industry also achieved 'international prominence' about this time. Even through the world depression of 1930-34, the effects of this competition were visible.
In 1933-34, the volume of raw jute exports from India was 27 per cent more than in 1931-32, 'the most acute period of the depression', while 'the export of jute manufactures ... remained practically constant at the extremely depressed figure of 1931-32, which ... marks a fall of about 30.8% as compared with 1929-30'.

A much graver threat however came from the prospect of effective competition from substitutes for jute products. This competition, Brock reported, 'has developed along two lines'.

(1) the increased adoption of bulk-handling of grains is progressively eliminating jute sacks as containers for grain in transit;

(2) the substitution of jute by paper, and to a lesser extent by cotton, for the making of bags.

These developments had 'affected the demand for jute goods principally in the United Kingdom, South Africa, Australia, and America'. Both paper and cotton interests had recently carried out extensive campaigns in favour of their products; cotton was further helped by its 'low price ... recently, its lightness and the consequent saving in freight, its greater strength and more attractive appearance, especially from the point of view of retail trade'. With respect to paper, 'the principal loss' had been the cement trade 'of the United Kingdom, South Africa, America, Germany and Denmark.

A conservative estimate places the loss to the jute industry of Bengal involved in the change-over to paper in the United Kingdom and South Africa alone at upwards of twenty million cement bags per annum. Wide hessians have been displaced largely in the Australian dried-fruit trade by a product known as "Sisal-Kraft" ... In the United States cotton
Bagging is gaining in use and popularity...
Agitation in favour of bulk handling of grain is active in the United States and Australia and has recently extended to Argentina. In Egypt, government is banning the use of jute for cotton baling, while in Australia the abandonment of jute woolpacks, in favour of some Australian alternative material..., is under active consideration.

Behind the rise of paper or cotton (and other fibres) as likely substitutes for jute lay the advances made after the First World War in the application of chemical research to textile manufacturing. "Following the war", explained S.G. Barker, a British textile scientist invited out to India by I.J.M.A. in 1934, "there came a period when... the modern implements of war, that is, the means of prosecution of chemical warfare, cordite, nitrocellulose and the like, together with the large factories and plants which had been constructed to produce them during the War period, had to be utilized and brought upon a peace basis". Thus grew up a whole range of chemical engineering industries which, in the words of E.J. Hobsbaum, were 'entirely based on scientific knowledge'. Their technical progress, unlike that in the case of nineteenth century factories, was 'a function of the input of scientifically qualified manpower, equipment and money into systematic research projects'. By the early 1930s enough of this progress had percolated into textile industries other than jute to make effective substitutes of jute possible. "Probably no other branch of textile manufacturing has made such advance as the application of chemical and other finishes to fabrics. This is more or less a direct consequence of the development of synthetic fibres on chemical lines". So S.G. Barker wrote in a paper prepared in 1938, and added that 'in this regard, jute materials have, as yet, had very little attention'. Sir Alexander Murray, who chaired the meeting at the Royal Society of Arts where Barker's paper was read, admitted that...
This great industry ... has hitherto done no scientific research. It is a pity, but it is true ... I believe we have lost markets thereby. Take the cement industry, for example. It may be that if we had possessed a scientific research department we need not have lost that trade ...  

Yet it was not as though the Calcutta jute circles were unaware of the possibility of substitutes. In 1917 I.J.M.A. 'circulated to all [its] members ... a series of extracts and notes regarding possible substitutes for Bengal jute'. And one of the conclusions it had itself drawn from the experience of the war was that paper 'undoubtedly ... provide[d] a workable substitute for jute under certain conditions'. Why then was the industry so unresponsive to the challenge posed by scientific and technical progress?

Speaking in 1938, Sir Alexander Murray blamed it on an 'ostrich-like policy' - 'Manufacturers have been content to take the proceeds and not worry about the future'. But this criticism was prompted only by the crisis of the thirties. To someone of Wallace's generation, or even to the same Sir Alexander in 1917, the future had seemed hardly worth worrying about. Over the years the jute industry had come to recognize its strength in the cheapness of its products (deriving from the cheapness of labour and raw material) and in the policy of curtailing outputs that I.J.M.A. followed throughout its own career. The experience of the First World War seemed to confirm this view. The fabulous profits of the times were made in the context of a very slow rise in labour wages, raw jute prices and in the number of mills in the industry. These profits, the Capital of 3 April 1924 smugly concluded, were proofs of 'the advantages attaching to a semi-monopoly'. As late as 1930, when the depression and
competition had already struck the industry badly, the I.J.H.A. chairman still saw this aspect of the industry as a point of strength:

But when all these adverse conditions are detailed, we must remember our unique position, we are the only textile industry in the world which can control production to meet demand. Jute is only grown and harvested in Bengal and 60% of it is manufactured within a radius of 30 miles of this room at much less cost than anywhere else in the world, and we should not hesitate to take advantage of our fortunate position to ensure there should be no loss in manufacture.\(^6\)

This 'semi-monopoly' was based on a small range of rather simple products. Both before and long after the war, the industry produced only four types of goods - hessian, sacking, canvas and twine - all meant for 'rough uses upon which the vagaries of fashion or the finer points of textile science has little or no influence'.\(^5\) This lack of variety in output and the coarseness of products meant a relatively stagnant technology. 'Hessian, sacking or canvas has not called for any large alteration in machinery', Barker reported in 1935.\(^6\) In the course of carrying out an investigation into the technical problems of the industry in 1934, Barker found a very old outlook at work. The Scottish entrepreneur in Calcutta, like his predecessor in Dundee in the 1830s, had always regarded jute 'as a cheap edition of a long fibre like flax for manipulative purposes'.\(^7\) The technology employed to manufacture jute was simply a variation of the old flax technology which, being a rather simple proposition in mechanical engineering, did not require a highly skilled and expensive labour force.\(^8\)
At the bottom of Wallace's or Murray's complacency, then, there was a deeply-entrenched economic outlook which counterposed the cheapness of products and price-manipulative practices (like short-time working arrangements) to scientific and technological progress. This is why, as the Indian Investors' Year Book explained in 1911, the jute mills themselves saw the task of manufacturing as requiring much less thought than buying and selling of jute. The industry acted with this mercantilist reflex when it faced the danger of substitutes: 'cheap jute' became its rallying cry. 'Our trade, the basis of which is after all the cheapness of the article we produce' was the ever-recurring refrain of many speakers at the annual I.J.M.A. meetings throughout the 1910s and 20s. Jute was described as a commodity whose principal claim to popularity is its cheapness: raise the price still further against them [European consumers] and you may be sure that the first effect will be to stimulate the search for a substitute, and one of these days Germany will find one and your industry will be in danger of following the path of indigo.

The point was repeated like a chant at later meetings of the I.J.M.A. The industry assured itself in 1917 that 'it require[d] a remarkably cheap substitute' to compete with jute. What the chairman of the Association said the following year on possible competition was in the same vein: 'The principal factor in the success of jute has been its comparative cheapness and we should use our utmost endeavour to keep it as cheap as possible'. The point was repeated by R.N. Band, the chairman in 1925, who strongly recommended 'cheap jute' as the weapon with which to fight substitutes and grain elevators then turning up on the market. 'We know it for a fact', he said, 'that suitable substitutes for jute can
be grown at a price in several parts of the world, all of which have hitherto proved a commercial failure owing to high cost of labour and the difficulty of extracting the fibre'. The lesson therefore was that the 'prices of our manufactures' had to be kept low so as not to encourage the manufacture of substitutes.\textsuperscript{104}

The implications that the survival strategy of the industry had for its labour force are examined in the following chapters. We may briefly note here that the results were not very happy for the Bengal peasantry either.\textsuperscript{105} The industry employed several means to ensure a supply of cheap raw jute. It put constant pressure on the Bengal government for increasing the area under jute cultivation, and often the government was only happy to oblige.\textsuperscript{106} The industry was helped by the total absence of any organization, economic or political, among the cultivators of jute who were distributed (according to an estimate in 1939) in 19 different districts of Bengal and over six million individual and small plots of land.\textsuperscript{107} Further, by following an ever-changing and arbitrary system of grading the quality of the loose jute that they purchased, the mills often got a better deal than the peasantry.\textsuperscript{108} And finally, the mills always carried big stocks of jute in order to depress the price of the raw jute on the market. As the official history of Bird and Company, one of the biggest managing agents in the Calcutta industry, put it: 'by carrying large stocks of jute they [the mills] were enabled to buy their raw material when the price seemed most favourable'.\textsuperscript{109}

The policy of producing low-quality, low-price goods left the industry vulnerable in one important respect: its products suffered badly from a lack of standardization. Because of its neglect of the
scientific aspects of its own manufacturing process, the industry had no knowledge of the chemical nature of its raw material and depended for its classification of bad jute from good on purely outward characteristics like 'colour, shade and lustre'. On the other hand, since jute was an agricultural product, its quality varied from year to year, depending on the 'degree of maturity at the time of harvest, time and conditions of retting, water facilities, amount of labour available etc.' The industry's classification of its own goods therefore carried a 'wide margin of tolerance'.

Every year, as a result, the industry heard complaints about the unreliability of its products. We cite here only two examples that are representative. In May 1914, Ralli Brothers, leading exporters of jute and jute products, issued the following circular to the Calcutta mills:

We have to draw your attention to the deterioration in quality, the numerous weaving faults, over-damping and under-shotting of gunnies produced by the Calcutta mills ... That a gradual lowering in quality has been going on during the past seven or eight years is generally admitted, but the sudden drop in quality and the innumerable weaving faults that have arisen is, to say the least, alarming.

And in 1925, I.J.M.A. felt it necessary to draw the attention of its members to a letter it had received from A.F. Bemis, Chairman, Bemis Brothers Bag Company, a dealer in jute goods.

Let me repeat [Bemis said] the big factor for each mill to aim for in developing merchantability is uniformity of product. The big outstanding obstacles to success in this field are the uncontrollable and crude nature of jute fibre and the relatively crude nature of jute machinery. Behind these two obstacles I am sure you Scotchmen will take refuge ... [But] Do you know that the strength of single strands of
the best 8lb. jute warp yarn undressed from the same spindle will vary roughly 50 per cent. up and down from the average, say, from 4 lbs to 12 lbs? Low grade hessian weft might vary from 2lbs to 14 lbs. The result is that in the same piece of cloth you get strength variations in good makes of 25 per cent. above and below the average and in the poorer makes 40 or even 50 per cent. The variation just cited would be increased by atmospheric and seasonal differences.\(^{113}\)

'Whilst the going was good and there was little competition', as Barker put it in a note of 1934, the industry could afford to overlook these problems.\(^{114}\) The industry faced a demand curve of almost unitary elasticity, and cheap jute and price-manipulation guaranteed success. When 'Indian mills reduced output, prices rose, and profit margins increased'.\(^{115}\) But with improved fibre science permitting cheaper and more reliable paper and cotton bags, and grain elevators allowing bulk-handling of goods, the elasticity of demand changed in favour of substitutes. Quality now became an important issue in the market and I.J.M.A. admitted in 1934 that 'jute goods have to a large extent lost their former advantage of cheapness'.\(^{116}\)

The Calcutta jute industry's refusal, in the twenty years between 1914 and 1934, to come to grips with the scientific problems of its manufacturing process thus displayed the mercantilist spirit of the people running it. They did not try to obtain the technology that was being developed overseas, nor were they interested in creating an independent research-wing of their own. Also, the fact that 'jute goods practically sold themselves'\(^{117}\) even into the 1930s may have only strengthened their complacency. The industry had never had to seek orders for its products in the past, and up until 1934, I.J.M.A. had no 'organised system of
following up the uses to which its products are ultimately applied, and ... it ... made no endeavour either to keep in touch with the consumers'.

Immediate financial gains were seen as the test of correctness of business policies. 'Some of us have been taunted that our only desire is to make money and that we pay no attention to competition overseas', observed R.B. Laird, the I.J.M.A. chairman in 1930.

We plead guilty to the charge [he said]. The jute mills of Bengal were not built to satisfy any economic conditions, they were built to pay dividends to their owners, let us get that undeniable truth firmly fixed in our minds, and all our troubles will vanish, as mist before the Sun, as Lord Melchett once remarked. He believed in profits as the only motive force ... which makes the wheels go round.

That is our confession of faith, we are not frightened to make money, as our friends who taunt us for our mercenary outlook seem to be, and no bogey of foreign competition will make us renounce our faith.

This was no doubt a bold statement of the 'faith' which guided I.J.M.A. and its members. The tragedy was that it had become obsolete by the 1930s. This became abundantly clear when S.G. Barker, the British textile scientist mentioned before, carried out his investigation into the technical aspects of Calcutta jute mills in 1934. Barker's report placed the entire technological and organisational basis of the industry under question. A thorough overhauling of the technology and diversification into finer-grade products were his recommendations. But Barker's report came twenty years too late. And probably too suddenly, given the slow, nineteenth century reflexes of the industry. As late as 1930 the chairman of I.J.M.A. had been overly confident: 'Figures are available to prove that so far as India[n] Jute Mills are concerned foreign competition is
practically non-existent'. Huge sums of money had been spent in ways dictated by this old mode of thinking; the call for restructuring the industry in a few years' time was now bound to appear 'uneconomical'.

I.J.M.A. started a small research department in the late 1930s but it was not important till after the Second World War. None of the more thorough-going prescriptions of Barker were implemented. 'Whatever happened in the past', reasoned two ideologues of the industry in 1936, 'it is a fact that if new manufacturing methods and processes are now developed suddenly, their outcome would be nothing short of the necessity of replacing practically all the existing machinery by new ones'.

It must be realised that the changeover from old machinery to new types has taken place slowly and gradually in other industries and it can hardly be expected that it would pay to create a research organisation and change practically the entire machinery for the sake of certain improvements and some economy, the results of which could never be in proportion to the magnitude of the required capital investment.

Given this mode of reasoning, the only option left to I.J.M.A., in the 1930s was to carry on with its 'cheap jute', production-curtailment and other mercantilist policies in an effort to recreate the earlier advantages it enjoyed before as a semi-monopoly'. Its first reaction, in 1929, to the news of competition was to 'adopt the policy of increasing production' in order to 'kill' the rivals through a glut in the market for jute goods. This policy soon proving ill-conceived and resulting in the first general strike in the industry, I.J.M.A. adopted other traditional means of retaining its superiority. The mills reduced their working hours to 40 per week from 1931 and agreed to keep 15 per cent of their looms sealed. In March 1931 they 'dismissed close on 60,000 workers
in carrying out this policy'. Thus instead of taking note of the more serious implications of Barker's diagnosis, the Calcutta industry chose to treat the problem of substitutes, in essence a scientific-technological problem, as a cost-problem and hence as a price-problem for the industry. In November 1935 I.J.M.A. still maintained to the Government of Bengal 'that the substitutes [could] only gain ground if jute products [became] relatively dearer than substitutes ...'.

VI

Three factors made the traditional policies of I.J.M.A. particularly ill-suited for the 1930s. Firstly, in the depressed conditions of the period, unity among different jute mills was hard to maintain. Secondly, a number of new mills that were set up in the 1920s refused to collaborate with I.J.M.A. And thirdly, this period saw intense racial conflict between Indian businessmen (who owned most of the shares of the old mills and managed some of the new ones) and the established European (mainly Scottish) managing agency houses. To facilitate discussion we shall deal with these factors one by one and then bring them together at a later point in the chapter. Suffice it to say here that these developments combined to produce a serious crisis of trust and confidence among the jute mills which made I.J.M.A.'s task of working as a 'semi-monopoly' enormously difficult.

This task had never been easy. The Association had of course been successful, on many occasions since 1885, in getting the industry to accept its short-term working arrangements but such agreements were neither easily
produced nor easily implemented. Individual managing agencies looked on each other with vying, competitive eyes. Their mills were often differently placed with regard to such variables as labour supply, loomage capacity, reserve funds, trading orders, etc. A trade crisis therefore always contained a potential, and sometimes real, threat to the 'unity' of I.J.M.A.

The substantial degree of economic concentration that existed within the industry no doubt contributed to the strength of I.J.M.A. The four biggest managing agencies in the industry - Messrs Bird and Co., Thomas Duff and Co., Andrew Yule and Co., and Jardine Skinner and Co., - controlled, between them, 41 per cent of the total number of looms in 1912, 46 per cent in 1925, 49 per cent in 1928 and 55 per cent in 1936. In the 52 years of the existence of I.J.M.A. upto 1938, they had supplied 29 of its 52 chairmen and in 1937 controlled about 48 per cent of the votes in that body. 'It seems clear', wrote a partner of Bird and Company in 1935, 'that if our group, Yule group, Inchcape group and Thomas Duffs are of the same mind, we can go a long way towards influencing or controlling the policy of the Association'. The industry was also integrated through multiple and interlocutory directorships often held by a relatively small number of individuals whose interests spanned across several mills and managing agencies.

But in spite of these factors, agreements pushed through at I.J.M.A. meetings were often difficult to implement. The history of I.J.M.A. is marked by an intense 'individualism' on the part of its members. A minimum-selling price agreement of the Association in 1890, designed 'to improve the mill sale sheets' in the face of a temporary depression, ran
into such trouble. 'All sorts of ruses to get round the minimum scale were adopted' and 'wily business dodges' became the order of the day.\textsuperscript{130} The Calcutta agent for Thomas Duff and Company found the 'scramble' among the mills for orders 'very sickening'. 'I can give you instances', he wrote to his Board, 'of some Mills booking orders at Association rates, but making the broker a present of a cheque to be handed to the buyer'.\textsuperscript{131} Such 'wily business dodges' were so characteristic of the managing agencies that their own commercial magazine \textit{Capital} once remarked 'that these were three kinds of men, good men, bad men and jute men'!\textsuperscript{132}

In 1912-13 the problem of disunity among the managing agencies assumed such proportions that 'an American organiser had to be imported in order to tell the Jute Mills Association the simple truth (which they all knew before he came) that they should organise their Association on a stronger basis'.\textsuperscript{133} Even in the prosperous 1920s and into the depressed 1930s, the competitive spirit remained a problem to deal with. In 1930, for example, the Association noticed that the production-figures of individual mills were frequently at variance with their stated loom-statistics. Disturbed by this observation, the Association decided to have the looms of its member mills counted by two reputed firms of chartered accountants. 'The result', in the words of R.N. Gilchrist, 'was astounding'.

For several years ... there had been an agreement that no Association mill should extend its loomage (with certain exceptions), and the enumeration by an independent authority showed a total of 58,639 looms, as against 40,898 in 1921, and 52,929, as the previously officially registered number of looms, including [the exceptions] ... [Thus] the Association mills had for years been flagrantly breaking their own agreements ... [They] themselves had dishonestly and surreptitiously added about 11 per cent. to their productive capacity against their own agreements ...
But this was not the only type of dishonesty practised. Time stealing was as common as loom piracy... The appointment of two firms of Chartered Accountants to check the number of looms in itself was an unpalatable confession of weak morality.\textsuperscript{134}

Undoubtedly, the 'weak morality' of its members left I.J.M.A. weak as an organisation. As the chairman of the Association admitted in 1925, 'the Association had no power to control its members'. The Association could draw up an agreement but 'it must be left to the members to see that the agreement was observed'.\textsuperscript{135} Without the dramatic prosperity that the First World War gave the industry, internecine quarrels between mills would have paralyzed I.J.M.A. quite early in its career, as it almost did in 1912-13 when the Association had to bring in an overseas consultant to cure its own internal problems. A year later however, before any of the recommended organizational reforms could be seriously considered, came the First World War with its 'unheard and undreamt of' profits. Here again, as in so many other respects, the war proved only a mixed blessing for the industry and its organization. For while it helped the I.J.M.A. on to its feet, it was no cure for its inherent weaknesses. The former spirit of mistrust and competition remained; the super-profits of the war-time and the '20s only made them more bearable. As Gilchrist explained, 'The old intense individualism of the mills did not matter now.'. 'Money poured in so fast that almost literally the owners did not know what to do with it', apart from distributing 'enormous dividends' and building up 'huge reserves'. Even 'loom piracy' (i.e. surreptitious additions to loomage capacity), a well known practice in the industry, did not cause as much worry as before:
indeed, [said Gilchrist,] it was regarded as something of a joke. No action was taken as long as trade was favourable; exposure had to wait for bad times.\textsuperscript{136}

As conditions worsened from the late twenties onwards, the fissures within I.J.M.A. surfaced once again and the Association found it more and more difficult to maintain discipline among its members.

These old problems of internal unity of I.J.M.A. were compounded by the establishment, after the First World War, of a number of jute mills under Indian management. These mills came to be known as the 'non-Association' mills as they refused to become (or stay) members of I.J.M.A. and abide by its rules of short-time working. When the I.J.M.A. mills agreed to work only 40 hours a week in 1931, these mills worked for 81 hours upsetting the calculations of I.J.M.A.

The non-Association mills had good 'economic' reasons for the policies they adopted. R.N. Gilchrist thus explained their behaviour:

They are attempting to do their best, within the law, to earn a return on their capital. Their investment was made in the knowledge that there was an Association of manufacturers which prescribed the commercial policy of its members. They knew they need not join the Association or if they did they could resign from it. Soon after their investment was made, trade conditions deteriorated. They could not make money under the Association rules: they therefore had to resign and make their own policy. They had no reserves, no special standing for the purposes of credit [unlike the I.J.M.A. mills]. They simply had to make money or go to the wall.\textsuperscript{137}

Gilchrist's point that these mills had 'no special standing for purposes of credit' should be carefully noted because it is of importance
to our story. For there were other mills established in the post-war period - e.g., Meghna, Craig, Waverley, Nuddea etc. - whose reserves and dividends were much smaller than those of the pre-war mills.¹³⁸

But they were set up and managed by old and established European managing agencies already belonging to I.J.M.A. 'On general grounds', Gilchrist remarked, 'one might have expected a division of interests into pre-war and post-war [mills], but the truth is that the bigger brothers have carried the younger children on their backs ... Thus the pre-war Gourepore sponsored the post-war Nuddea, the pre-war India the post-war Megna, the pre-war Alliance the post-war Craig and Waverley, the pre-war Ganges the post-war Bansberia'.¹³⁹ These mills therefore did not pose any threat to I.J.M.A., they remained tied to the latter through their European managing agencies. The problem of the non-Association mills was precisely that they were all owned and managed by newly set-up Indian managing agency houses (most of them by Marwaris), except for the American Ludlow Jute Mill which declined to join the Association ostensibly on anti-Trust grounds.¹⁴⁰

The fact that the non-Association mills were mostly Indian-managed may give their conflict with the European-dominated I.J.M.A. the appearance of yet another confrontation between imperialism and nationalism.¹⁴¹ There are problems, as we shall see, with this characterization. Yet the racial element in this conflict is important for the purpose of understanding the problems of the industry in this period. The confusion and distrust created by racism certainly contributed to I.J.M.A.'s inability in the thirties to impose any discipline on its members.
The racial conflict between Indian (mainly Marwari) and Scottish businessmen in the jute industry was aggravated by a particular historical feature of the situation. While Scotsmen managed most of the mills and had an almost exclusive control over managerial positions, the capital they managed was for the most part Indian and became increasingly so after the First World War. 'Out of a total capital of £10 000 000 sunk in jute mills in India' in 1912, 'only about one-eighth [was] from Dundee and District'.\textsuperscript{142} The capital was largely raised in India - initially, as A.K. Bagchi has shown, mainly from European civilians and armymen residing in India, and later from Indians as well.\textsuperscript{143} The Marwari Association of Calcutta claimed in 1922 that 'Indians held not less than 60\% of the shares in jute mills'.\textsuperscript{144} By 1937 the figure was somewhere close to 67 per cent.\textsuperscript{145} This is also seen in the place of registration of the companies.\textsuperscript{146} Of 20 jute mills running in Calcutta in 1880, only 4 were registered in the U.K.\textsuperscript{147} In 1921, the number was 7 out of 65.\textsuperscript{148}

The reasons for the unwillingness that established Scottish capital historically displayed over the question of direct investment in the Calcutta industry are difficult to determine. But the 'last period of heavy investment' in the Dundee jute mills was the year 1873, and the rise of the Calcutta mills 'coincided with a return of prosperity in the United States' when 'Dundee financial circles transferred their investment interest ... across the Atlantic'. In 1873 Sir William Reid, the then Vice-Consul for the United States in Dundee, promoted the Oregon and Washington Trust Investment Company Limited which was financed by 25 of
the major Dundee financiers. The original Board of the company had such men on it as 'Thomas Bell and William Lowson, merchants; James Neish, solicitor; Thomas Couper, Shipowner; Thomas H. Cox, manufacturer; and John Leng, newspaper publisher'.

It also seems quite possible that the early 'scandals' of the Calcutta jute industry left the important Dundee financiers and industrialists unenthusiastic about investment in that direction. Thomas Cox who was a senior partner of Cox Brothers, Dundee and who specialized in finance and investments is a case in point. In 1872, a year before he decided to invest in the American company mentioned above, he turned down a proposal to invest in a jute mill in Calcutta which he thought would only be a 'very heavy financial burden on the business'. This is what Thomas Cox wrote to his brother Henry about the proposal in 1872:

We note what you say about engaging in a spinning and manufacturing company at Chandernagore. After giving this matter due consideration, we concluded to advise you to get out of it in the best way you can. We see no great objection to your managing the mercantile part of it if you think you can accomplish it, but we would decidedly advise you against investing money in it. In such a climate, the deterioration and difficulty of keeping up a jute mill must be very great. No doubt the Borneo Co. saw it was time to get part of their immense place realised. Our Mr Williams was told by Mr Ferguson, one of the partners of George Henderson and Co., that the Barnagore [mill] at that time - 10 years ago - had never remitted any dividends home and we see Duff got out of it in as easy a way as he could.

Thomas Cox's views were apparently shared by other Dundee investors. The special correspondent of the Dundee Advertiser who reported in detail on the financial state of individual jute mills in Calcutta in his book The Jute Mills of Bengal (1880) ended his series of reports by saying:
'our advice just now to people desirous of investing capital in the jute manufacturing trade at Calcutta is similar to that of Punch to those about to marry - "DON'T".\(^{152}\)

While Scottish capital did not flow out to Calcutta in any large measure, Scottish enterprise did. The British Association of Dundee found in 1912 that the 'overseers, managers and mechanics in the Indian jute mills [were] almost wholly recruited from Dundee'.\(^ {153}\) By the time of the First World War, the composition of the Dundee middle class had been perceptibly affected by fortunes made in Calcutta. An economic study of the town as it was in this period observed: 'Undoubtedly some of the new middle-class mill owners had emerged from the artisan class by means of a period of employment in Calcutta'.\(^ {154}\)

This domination of jute mill management by Scotsmen was not based on the proverbial Scottish enterprise alone. It was also based on a degree of clannishness. The Scottish managers and supervisors of the Calcutta jute mills did not owe their position to any special skills or qualification, as Bagchi has duly noted,\(^ {155}\) but to their 'connections'. One William Ure, who was interviewed by Sir Edward Benthall of Bird and Company for employment with them in Calcutta, had no special qualifications 'apart from a course in Book-keeping' that he had taken 'through the International Correspondence people'. Benthall even noted that 'he [did] not read, except in the winter, when he [read] chiefly thrillers'. But what made him eligible were that he knew 'Anderson in Hooghly Mill and the two Golds in Birds' and that his father was 'Cashier in the Victoria Mill'. Besides, he had always 'wanted to go to India as does every young man in Dundee ...'. He was, Benthall said, 'just the normal type we take on in Calcutta'.\(^ {156}\)
This clannishness could easily give rise to racism. The Marwari Association of Calcutta complained to the Indian Fiscal Commission of 1922 that 'the European [mill] managers did not buy jute through Indian traders'. The complaint was voiced also to the Bengal Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee of 1930 which was told of the considerable 'difficulty' that Indian traders of jute in Calcutta had to face 'in disposing of their stocks to the mills'. The mills did not recognize their marks and names and compelled them 'to sell through European firms of brokers'. The practice was old and established. A Dundee gentleman visiting Calcutta in 1894 noticed 'a grave defect in the management of the Indian mills', which arose 'from the presence in the jute trade of Dundee men as sellers and brokers'. 'These men have friends or relations among the jute mill agents, who naturally place confidence in them and employ them in preference to others'. The Indian jute brokers had to 'obtain a Dundee partner in order to qualify to enter the magic ring'.

The story of the rise of the Marwaris in this European-dominated business world of Calcutta deserves a much richer and fuller account than can be provided here. According to Thomas Timberg, 'more than one-half' of the jute balers in 1900 were Marwaris. By 1907 they had started direct shipping of jute overseas and in 1909 formed their Baled Jute Association. Before the first World War some Marvari merchants 'acquired a large number of "pucca" or expert-oriented jute presses', which were 'formerly a European preserve'. In 1917, the most important Marvari firm Birla Brothers opened a branch office in London; by 1920 they were 'one of the top three exporters of raw jute' from Calcutta. During and after the war the Marwaris also entered the export trade in hessian and gunnies, and started speculation in jute mill shares, the value of which increased by 'three times' between 1915 and 1926.
The nineteen-twenties also saw a very large increase in future trading in raw jute - and later in hessian as well - by Marwari merchants. Known as the operations of the fatka (lit. bubble) market or the bhitar bazar (lit. inside or secret market), such speculative trading in jute was started in Calcutta about 1911-12 by one Jewanmal Bengani, a Marwari dealer in raw jute:

as the number of ... speculators increased, an "exchange" was formed at 68 Cotton Street in the year 1912, where dealings in 25 bales or its multiples used to be carried on. There was no question of delivery [of jute] and only difference used to be paid. When the great war broke out and the jute trade was temporarily disorganised ... this "exchange" had to stop its operations. With the return of confidence by 1916, a limited company, styled the Calcutta Pat Association Limited, was started for those speculative deals.

A temporary short supply of raw jute in 1925-26 helped the Calcutta Pat Association to do some brisk business till the government closed it down in 1926 under a Gambling Act 'on the complaint of a few parties who had suffered loss on this market'. Significantly, ten of the eleven men convicted in this connection were Marwaris. Soon after the suppression of the Pat Association, a new organization called the East India Jute Association was formed with a view to running a futures market in jute. All its leading members were Marwari balers and shippers of jute, the Birlas heading the list. There were also two other, less formal, exchanges - called Gudri and Katni - where the units of transaction were kept small in order to accommodate small-time speculators whose ranks swelled as the trade depression of the late twenties deepened, adding to the profits of the balers who sold in these markets. 'It cannot be substantiated', wrote M.N. Roy in his 1934 pamphlet we have referred to
before, 'but the report goes that the drivers of motor cars, ... and the numerous Biri and panwallas, and Darwans occasionally buy and sell 5 bales in the Katni'.

While enriching themselves in the jāthā market, the Marwari balers, following the lead of the Birlas, also reached out for the foreign market in jute where their performance impressed even their competitors. 'The enterprise and efficiency of the modern Marwari Baler', wrote Benthall in a long note in 1935, 'cannot be appreciated abroad and this applies particularly in the case of large operators of the type of Cotton Agents (Birla Brothers) and Surajmal Nagarmall'.

I understand that a] number of [Marwari] Balers are frequently in communication now a days with their direct connections abroad by phone. They do not confine their operations to the London market but are directly represented in such markets as Dundee and New York, and there is a distinct tendency to encourage Continental business directly through Hamburg. In this connection the activities of Khubchand Sethia here on the London Market are a special feature particularly as regards Russian business which seems to have gone completely past us sometimes.

Marwari incursion into the jute industry was thus only an aspect of their overall success in the world of Bengal jute. Here again the Birlas were among the leaders. In 1918-19 they set up their Birla Jute Mill which was followed soon by the Hukumchand Jute Mill, belonging to the Sarupchand Hukumchand family. By 1926-27 several other Indian traders made their way into manufacturing, the more prominent among the new mills being Premchand Jute Mill owned by Janakinath Roy, Gagalbhai Jute Mill belonging to the Mafatlalls, Hanuman Jute Mills set up by Surajmall Nagarmall, Agarpara Jute Mill owned by B.N. Elias and Company and Haji Adamji Davood
Jute Mill owned and run by Haji Adamji Dawood and Company. By 1932 these were joined by some other smaller mills, e.g., The Calcutta Jute Manufacturing Company Ltd, Kedarnath Jute Mills, Shree Ganesh Jute Mill, Kathiar Jute Mill (owned by Hardutroy Chamaria and Sons) and the Swadeshi Jute Mill.¹⁶⁸

The appearance of the Indian 'intruder' on the scene naturally did not please the entrenched European businessman. 'The Indians are determined to get into the industry' was Benthall's grim comment on the margin of a letter he received in December 1928 from a Marwari firm of 'Stock and Share Brokers and Dealers'.¹⁶⁹ A month earlier his partner M.P. Thomas had described the Indian mills as 'our new and undesired competitors'.¹⁷⁰ Benthall himself wrote in 1929: 'These people ... are hopeless gamblers, it will be to the good of India if they retire from the scene'.¹⁷¹

A special target of European hostility was G.D. Birla, the most up and coming of the Marwari entrepreneurs. Thomas reported to Benthall in December 1928 that Birla 'has had more to do with encouraging New Mills than any one [else]'. 'If he can't get us by kicking us out he will try to get us out by unfair competition.'¹⁷² Even when he was away in England Benthall worried about competition from Birla. 'In Calcutta', reads his diary for 10 February 1929,

the Birla party continued their efforts to control the jute trade and at the moment have paralysed the export business by [selling at] Rs 6 below the Calcutta packing cost and bearing the phatka while the forward position here commands a ruppee premium for each month.
In the privacy of his personal diary Benthall's hostility was frank and unconcealed:

It is his [Birla's] policy (on a 5 year basis) to establish himself as the leading figure in the trade and it may be necessary to form a combine against him. A plan is being is hatched. Both in jute and gunnies his advance has been tremendous ... It is a sign of the times: we must dig in our toes and fight for our position.173

Indeed, the signs of the times were too obvious to be overlooked. By the middle of the twenties, the Marwaris were being openly assertive about protecting their business interests. This can be seen in the letters written by Marvari shareholders to the editor of the Capital complaining of arrogance on the part of some European managing agents of jute mills or in the references in Benthall's diaries to 'Bajoria's attacks' on Europeans at shareholders' meetings.174 In 1926 the Marvari businessmen formed the Indian Chamber of Commerce at Calcutta with G.D. Birla as its President and took a leading role in the founding of the all-India organization of Indian employers, the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI).175 The following year they founded the East India Jute Association which soon evoked opposition from European businessmen in Calcutta and elsewhere.176 About this time Birla also managed to become 'the only Indian member' of the London Jute Association.177 It was in these years that reports of Marwari traders like 'Choudhri Chhajuram' buying 'considerable number of jute shares' led Benthall to make the unfriendly remark, 'The Indians are determined to get into the industry'. In February 1929 Benthall was still 'considering means of giving the Birla party a slap in the jute market' and was not pleased
1926-30 appear to have been the years when relations between Indian and Scottish businessmen in Calcutta reached a very low point. The peculiarly marginal position of the Scotsman in the world of Bengal jute - his domination being based more on enterprise and clannishness than on capital-investment - perhaps contributed to the intensity of the conflict. Once when asked by Benthall in 1929 if 'he hadn't been insulted' by 'Scotchmen' while negotiating the sale of jute to a Calcutta mill, G.D. Birla gave the rather sarcastic reply, 'not more than usual'. The hostile exchanges were by no means confined to the verbal. In March of the same year, while Birla tried to reach the Viceroy's ear with complaints about 'racial discrimination' by the Europeans in the jute trade, Benthall had the following to note about Birla's jute mill near Calcutta:

he [Birla] has had five fires in four months at his mill - due to his Indianisation policy and refusal to employ Scotsmen. Jute gone to dust and burnt: more burnt to cover up the delinquencies and then finally a fire in the finishing house (affecting also 150 looms) which [even] if he recovers from the Ins-Coys. will about square the rest.

It is a small monument to the racism of the day that Benthall held the Marwaris squarely responsible for these jute mill fires. 'These people [the Marwaris] carry racial hatred to [an] extreme' was his only gesture at apportioning blame.
Racism of course could easily be stretched into 'imperialistic' and 'patriotic' feelings on the two sides. G.D. Birla later recalled how he had always 'smarted' under the 'insults' he suffered in dealing with 'Englishmen who were my patrons and clients': 'I was not allowed to use the lift to their offices, nor their benches while waiting to see them ... and this created within me a political interest ...'. Yet the Scottish-Indian conflict in the jute industry never quite became an all-out war dividing the industry into two clearly defined, mutually opposed, ethnic interest-groups. The problem of unity that I.J.M.A. faced in this period would have been much less complicated had this been the case. In reality, the lines of unity and division in the industry ran in bewilderingly different directions, often across and within the warring races. The Scots and the Marwaris were, after all, interested in the same industry, often in the same mill, with the Marwaris as substantial shareholders in the twenties and the Scots providing the crucial managerial element. Each group stood to profit from the other's activities. To a managing agency firm like Bird and Company even the rival, non-Association mills were potential fields for their business activities. For all his anger at 'vilification of us by Narayandas Sajoria to sundry Assembly members', Benthall was too good a businessman to lose sight of this. 'Adamji will not be friends ...', he noted with genuine regret on 7 March 1929. 'There is now no chance of obtaining his mill agency if hard times come ...'. Hence 'we must not make the same mistake ... and I must continue friendly relations with other new mill owners e.g., Magneeram Bangur, Mafatlall, Surajmull Nagarmull etc.' He even took care to write to his arch-enemy Birla in December 1928 emphasizing his 'trust' in 'friendly relations'. The tie-up of economic interests between a colonial capitalist like Benthall and a 'nationalist' businessman like Birla comes
out clearly in the following extract from Benthall's diaries. It was written on 26 September 1930 when relations between the two races were far from cordial.

The most significant feature of the last few months has been the crash in Jute and Gunnies which has taken Birla far down with it. There is doubt whether he will survive: he owes us money at the end of October but if he fails after that we will be delighted ... Even if he does not go, he should not be the danger that he has been, but without the support of B[irla] we may not get the tariff on paper. So I hope he survives, that he doesn't sell his shares or if he does, that they go into other Indian hands.\textsuperscript{185}

The opposition between Scottish and Marwari interests was weakened also by serious divisions among the Marwaris themselves. Some of these divisions were caused by religious and cultural questions that had arisen in the community as a result of its contact with western ideas and institutions. The inevitable conflict between the 'orthodox' and the so-called 'westernizers', a familiar theme in the history of British India, seriously occupied the Calcutta Marwaris in this period, and such was the irony of the situation that G.D. Birla, the eye-sore of the European businessman in the city, was seen by the 'orthodox' Marwari as the leading 'westernizer' of the community.\textsuperscript{186} These ideological issues, along with individual trade rivalries, often divided the Marwaris against themselves, creating strange alliances in a 'race war' that otherwise might have been total. Thus it was not only the Scotsmen who would have been 'delighted' to see Birla go down - 'so will [be] most of his own community!!!!', wrote Benthall.\textsuperscript{187} The 'Swarajist' connections of a Bajoria or Birla could be countered by what Benthall thought was 'inestimably more valuable, the support of the orthodox Marwaris'. It is interesting to note that in the 'open war' that Benthall privately and
unilaterally declared on Bajoria in the pages of his diary the combatants mentioned on his side were all Marwaris - 'three of the principal loose jute balers i.e., Hari Singh, Lohia and Surajmull Nagarmull', the last named being also the owner of one of the rebel mills. Indeed, Benthall received much of his 'secret' news about the business moves or the social situation of the Birlas from rivals within their own community - a 'Sheokissen at Goenka's garden party tonight', or a 'Swedayal Ramjeedas' of the firm of 'Tarachand Ganshyamdas' would often volunteer the information. And as if to add to the confusion of this picture of 'war of all against all' Birla and Benthall had their own private parleys where it would now be Birla's turn to speak ill of the Marwaris 'by whom I was surrounded ... particularly ... Bunga and Chokhany'.

Thus what the European-Marwari competition produced in the end was an atmosphere of suspicion and mistrust in the jute circles of Calcutta where men now saw each other as playing ambiguous games. Benthall's private correspondence gives indications of how people felt in such circumstances. Mungneeram Bangur, an important Marwari shareholder of jute mills, for example, left some of the senior officials of Bird and Company extremely unsure of his motives. M.P. Thomas wrote to Benthall in December 1928 that he suspected Bangur of being 'up to some dirty work': 'I think he is keen on putting up a mill himself. He denies it and laughs, but I feel there is something in it'. Benthall himself was utterly confounded and angry that Bajoria should play such games with him. To all appearance, Bajoria behaved like a sworn enemy of Benthall's. He 'vilified' the Europeans in the Bengal Legislative Assembly. He also fought Benthall at shareholders' meetings of the Titaghur Mills with the help of men like 'Mookerjee or Banerjee' who, Benthall wrote, 'was briefed for Rs 16/-
to speak on their behalf and who offered for Rs 32/- to speak on our side'. But what left Benthall breathless was that Bajoria should also 'at the same time ... protest his friendship to me by the gift of a Benares cloth!'. 'Such a man is he!', exclaimed a disgusted Benthall.\(^9\)

VIII

We can now pick up the main thread of our story and see how the problem of racism and Indian competition affected I.J.M.A. The magnitude of the competition offered by the non-Association mills was as such not very large. They controlled about 2000 looms as against I.J.M.A.'s 57,387 in 1932.\(^9\) But even so, the situation posed a serious problem of 'discipline' to I.J.M.A. at a time when this was badly needed. I.J.M.A.'s plan of retrieving the earlier monopolistic supremacy of the Calcutta industry through production and price agreements called for a certain degree of cohesion among different mills and their owners. This was where Indian competition hurt most. By producing an atmosphere of mistrust and suspicion it added to the complexity of I.J.M.A.'s task, already made difficult by the depression.

'I will be glad when the matter is finished', M.P. Thomas of Bird and Company wrote to Benthall in November 1928 regarding a move for a fresh working-time agreement that he had been spearheading within I.J.M.A. 'The position this morning is that with the exception of Birla, Angus, Barry and Gillanders, all have signed ... it's been a dickens of a worry, and the market has been mad, reacting hysterically to every fresh rumour'.\(^1\) The confusion created by the Indian competition and the feelings it aroused
in different quarters compounded the problem. Four Indian mills that had joined the Association briefly 'during the first half of 1930' left while the I.J.M.A. mills worked only 40 hours a week with 15 per cent of their looms sealed under an Association agreement. So feeble was the solidarity within I.J.M.A. now that even the prospect of the small competition that these four mills offered threw the Association into complete disarray. The Association now swallowed its much-vaunted principle of 'non-interference of Government in industry' and involved the Governor of Bengal, Sir John Anderson, in coercing the non-Association mills into a temporary truce.  

The Association admitted its organizational weakness in the petition in which it requested government intervention. It said

The attraction of trebling production and thereby reducing overhead costs by 30 per cent is likely to prove irresistible to a few of the associated mills, and to all non-associated mills, and it is altogether certain that resignations from the association will be handed in very soon. The situation at the present moment is that, if measures are not taken by Government ..., the ability of the association [I.J.M.A.] to regulate [production] must disappear within a few months.  

The internal problems of I.J.M.A. in the thirties were also evident in a proliferation of rules and by-laws designed to 'tighten up' its organization. In the past the association had always depended to some extent on the informal social control that a small group of ex-patriate Scotsmen could exercise on itself. A 'word of honour', though often somewhat indifferently kept, served I.J.M.A. well enough in its better-off days; no policing of the members had been necessary. With Indians
breaking into the industry at a time when the trade took a turn for the worse, such informal control soon however proved inadequate. Working-time agreements had to be backed up throughout the thirties by an elaborate set of rules and, on occasions, governmental authority. To someone like Sir Alexander Murray the change from the earlier days of 'informality' was too marked for it to go unnoticed. 'They [the mills] have all signed agreements for five years', he said in 1949, 'which have been renewed for another five years, with rigorous rules and by-laws. I was the chairman of the Mills Association in Calcutta in 1913 ... and at that time there were no rigorous rules and by-laws by which to get people to work four days, or five days, or to get down hessian and sacking looms ...'.

I remember once having to persuade members that the time had arrived for a short-term agreement. I get on fairly well until I came to an old Scotsman who had a grievance of some description. In the course of earlier discussions he had said: "I will not sign any more short-time agreements". Eventually he agreed ... [but] said: "No, we will not sign this agreement, but have you ever found me letting you down in any way? I can assure you my word is as good as my bond." I said "Thank you very much" and got up and walked out before he could qualify that in any way.186

In the middle of the trade crisis, suspicions, bitterness and race conflicts of the 1930s such informal arrangements were no longer possible.

The more desperately the Association pursued its elusive goal of monopoly in the 1930s, the more deeply the Calcutta industry became embroiled in its own contradictions. I.J.M.A.'s policy of restricting output ran up against the opposition of the mills that refused to join the association, which in turn endangered I.J.M.A.'s own fragile unity. I.J.M.A. hoped, on the one hand, to undercut 'substitutes' and foreign
competition through the cheapness of its products; on the other hand it wanted to deal with the competition from the non-associated mills by forcing them to buy their jute dear. This meant a price-war over raw jute and frequent fluctuations in jute prices as a result of interested manipulation. Such fluctuations, on the other hand, encouraged 'substitutes' which enjoyed a comparative price stability.¹⁹⁷

The market [wrote G.B. Morton of Bird and Company to Benthal in August 1935] undoubtedly fears the results of conflict between outside and Association Mills and this is undoubtedly part of the reason for uncertainty and may be the root of the trouble. Association Mills hold large stocks of cheap Jute and therein lies their strength in a conflict. To reduce the price of jute is to reduce this advantage, so it is [in] the interest of the outside Mills to get Jute prices down and keep them down. It will suit them also to have small margins now between cost and selling prices whilst restriction of hours still places Association Mills at a disadvantage ...¹⁹⁸

Unsuccessful in its attempt to eliminate competition through either restriction of output or manouevring of jute prices, I.J.M.A. decided in 1937 to 'crush' the non-associated mills 'out of existence' by glutting the market. 'Their object was to spoil the market so that every mill would be incurring losses'. The strategy boomeranged. The 'outside' mills were generally smaller in size and their cost-structure saved them from heavy losses, while the price of jute manufactures plunged 'to [a] very low figure' and the Association mills suffered.¹⁹⁹

Besides, what I.J.M.A. had not taken into account was a growing volume of 'excess capacity' that had been accumulating in its affiliated mills over the years, adding to their costs. High profits during and after the First World War had drawn more and more capital into the industry.
Even after the depression the trend continued as the industry continued to offer dividends from its large reserve funds. In 1935, the Government of India, when approached by the industry for the grant of protection, pointed out that compared to the years 'immediately preceding the war' the capacity had been 'increased by an addition of about 60% to the number of jute mills and of about 90% to the number of looms and of about 60% to the number of spindles'. The Jute Enquiry Committee of 1939 reported that while the 'total loomage of the jute mills in 1932 registered an increase of 11.3 per cent over the quinquennial annual average of the years 1927-31, ... the average consumption of raw jute by Associated mills had increased by only 1.8 per cent during this period'.

The productive capacity continued to increase uninterruptedly till, at the end of 1938, the total loomage had increased by 9.4 per cent over the figures for 1932. The consumption of raw jute during this period had fallen by 15 per cent.

Such excess capacity was bound to affect profitability especially as the price obtainable for jute manufactures fell and as the price could not be put up for the fear of substitutes, which revealed once again the dilemma of the industry.

IX

The story of entrepreneurship in the Calcutta jute industry is thus one of an old trading outlook persisting in the face of several changes in the political and economic environment of the industry. The outlook was an anachronism in a post-First-World-War era of close alliance between scientific research and industrial success. Barker's investigations
into jute mill technology gave the industry a moment of introspection but that moment was brief. In the perception of the people who mattered, the report came too late in the day. Nor do all of its implications seem to have been comprehended. Instead, the industry sought to face its new problems with its old strategies. These did not work very well in the changed circumstances. It is true that the crisis of the thirties shook the industry out of its earlier mood of complacency but the old habits of thinking died hard. In 1932 the I.J.M.A. chairman John Sime evinced a very different mood for poetry than that displayed by Wallace in 1928. 'Let us not deceive ourselves', said Sime, 'conditions are changed and changing rapidly', and he went on to quote Shakespeare:

Not poppy nor mandragora nor all the drowsy syrups of this world can ever lull us back to that sweet sleep that we had yesterday.²⁰²

Sime's love of Shakespeare was not matched by the accuracy of his quotation, but his choice of metaphor was apt. The Calcutta jute industry had chosen to sleep through scientific and technological changes in its rival industries for twenty years. Even when it woke up in the thirties it still behaved like a Rip Van Winkle of the industrial world and spent more than a decade looking for its old position in a trading structure that no longer existed. This anachronistic nature of the industry - the trading mentality that guided its economic policies and technological choices - was to have a profound influence on the history of the labour force it created, especially in matters of discipline, authority and, consequently, workers' protest as well. While this was by no means the only influence shaping that history, it was an important one and is considered in more detail in the chapters that follow.
Chapter 2

NOTES


4. ibid., p. 35.


6. For some details see Colin Gibson, The Story of Jute (Dundee, [1959?]), p. 12.


21. JMB, p. 4.


25. ibid., p. 18.


29. ibid., p. 18.

30. JMB, p. 22.


32. JMB, p. 73.


34. ibid., (1928), pp. 31-2.

35. ibid., p. 30. The 'stimulation' was largely due to 'the demand during the famine years for bags to hold the rice supplied to the famine-stricken districts'. See 'The Calcutta Jute Mills' in the Dundee Year book [hereafter DVB] 1887 (Dundee, 1888), p. 129.

36. JMB, p. 28.
37. ibid., pp. 30, 62 and W.B.S.A., General Dept, Industry and Science Branch, May 1876, A Nos 28-31. The latter gives Rs 18,000,000 as the paid up capital for the cotton mill. Hence, going by the figures for their other factories given in JMB, I have assumed the selling price to have been about Rs 17,00,000.

38. JMB, pp. 28-30. The profit on the cotton mill was Rs 7,00,000 of which Richard Macallister got the 'lion's share'.

39. ibid., p. 66.


41. JMB, pp. 30-32, Wallace, ibid.

42. JMB, pp. 4-5.


44. ibid., pp. 84, 86.

45. ibid., p. 301.

46. ibid., p. 88.

47. Wallace, Romance, (1928), pp. 36-7.

48. T.D.A., Minutes of the Tenth Annual General Meeting of Samnugger Jute Factory Company Limited, held in Dundee, 28 March 1883, and Minutes of Ordinary General Meeting [of the same company], Dundee, 26 March 1884.
49. The biographical details cited here about Barrie, Duff, and Nicoll are taken from obituaries published in VVB 1894 (Dundee, 1895), p. 77, VVB 1896 (Dundee, 1897), pp. 76-7, and VVB 1909 (Dundee, 1910), p. 71, respectively.


51. ibid., pp. 43-4.

52. ibid., pp. 36-7. Emphasis added.


56. JMB, p. 12.


58. T.D.A., Minute Books of the Board of Directors, meeting dated 16 December 1885.


60. See figures given in 'The Indian Jute Industry', Agricultural Gazette of New South Wales, vol. 25, Pt 7, 2 July 1914, pp. 578-79.


63. Saul, *Studies*, pp. 159-60.


68. Leng, 'The Indian Dundee', p. 91. This also gives the relevant figures for the Indian mills.

69. 'The Indian Jute Industry', address by Sir John Leng reprinted in *DV8 1896*, (Dundee, 1897), pp. 91-5.


71. ibid., pp. 2, 62.


77. Wallace, Romance, (1928), p. 94.

78. ibid., pp. 48-9.

79. ibid., p. 2.


85. ibid., p. 537.
86. ibid.


90. ibid., p. 479.


97. ibid., p. 42.
98. ibid., p. 41. The history of adaptation of flax technology to jute manufacturing is told in detail in Woodhouse and Brand, A Century's Progress, passim.

99. See note 1 above.

100. The quotation is from I.J.M.A. Report, 1912 (Calcutta, 1913), p. iii.


120. ibid.


124. ibid.

125. Bhatter and Nemenyi, *The Jute Crisis*, p. 18. A rise in the volume of export of jute manufactures in 1936-7 may have further encouraged *I.J.M.A.* in taking this view; see Sougata Mukherjee, 'Some Aspects'.


134. ibid., Gilchrist's note of 22 April 1932.


136. Same as in note 134 above.

138. ibid., gives the relevant figures.

139. ibid.

140. The Benthall papers are a most useful source for the history of this conflict.

141. For example, see Modern Review, vol. 72, August 1942, 'editorial'.

142. British Association, Dundee, Handbook and Guide to Dundee and District (Dundee, 1912), p. 120.

143. Bagchi, Private Investment, pp. 159, 263.

144. ibid., p. 278, n. 47.

145. ibid., p. 192.

146. ibid., p. 161.

147. Figure taken from JMB.


151. Dundee University History Department Archives, card collection on Cox Brothers, card titled 'Spinning in India?'

152. JMB, p. 87.


156. C.S.A.S., B.P., Box 10, Note from Benthall to G.B. Morton, 7 Sept. 1935.


163. ibid.


166. C.S.A.S., B.P., Box 10, Note dtd 25 June 1935.


169. C.S.A.S., B.P., Box 1, letter from Mokandlall dtd 13 Dece. 1928.

170. C.S.A.S., B.P., Box 1, letter from M.P. Thomas dtd 15 Nov. 1928.

171. C.S.A.S., B.P., Box 7, Diary 1929-33, entry for 7 March 1929.

172. C.S.A.S., B.P., Box 1, letter dtd 12 Dec. 1928.

173. C.S.A.S., B.P., Box 7, Diary 1929-33, entry for 10.2.29.

174. See letter of Mugneeram Bangur, Mokandlal and others in Capital, 12 Nov. 1925 and C.S.A.S., B.P., Box 7, Diary 1929-33, entry for 6 May '29.


178. C.S.A.S., B.P., Box 7, Diary 1929-33, entries for 19.2.29 and 7.3.29.

179. As above, entry for 6 May 1929.

181. C.S.A.S., B.P., Box 7, Diary 1929-33, entry for 7 March 1929.


183. C.S.A.S., B.P., Box 7, Diary 1929-33, entries for 7 March 1929 and 18 April 1929.

184. C.S.A.S., B.P., Box 1, Benthall's letter to G.D. Birla, 4 Dec. 1928.

185. C.S.A.S., B.P., Box 7, Diary 1929-33, entry for 26 Sept. 1930.

186. An account of this conflict is available in Timberg, *Marwaris*.

187. C.S.A.S., B.P., Box 7, Diary 1929-33, entry for 26 Sept. 1930.

188. C.S.A.S., B.P., Box 7, Diary 1929-33, entries for 19 Feb., 6 May, 17 June and 9 Aug. 1929.

189. C.S.A.S., B.P., Box 1, M.P. Thomas to Benthall, 12 Dec. 1928; Box 7, Diary 1929-33, entries for 18 Apr. and 6 May 1929.


200. C.S.A.S., B.P., Box X, '[GOI] Memorandum relating to the question of controlling the output of Manufactured Jute in Bengal' [1935].


Chapter 3

OF CONDITIONS AND CULTURE

I

When the Government of India appointed a committee in 1946 to enquire into the conditions of the jute mill workers of Calcutta, the committee found that there was 'very little literature available' in regard to the subject.¹ These conditions, in other words, had not been investigated before with any degree of thoroughness. Today, this creates a special problem for the historian, for any projected history of the conditions of this working class is soon bedevilled by the problem of paucity of sources. True, some of this scarcity of documents can be explained by the characteristics of the Bengali intelligentsia who seldom, if ever, produced social investigators like, for instance, Henry Mayhew. Some of it may also be explained by the non-literate nature of the working class. A problem however still remains. What is puzzling is the relative poverty of the information in the documents of the state - especially documents that needed the co-operation of employers, the factory inspectors' reports, for example - which compare rather badly, say, with the apparent richness of similar English documents that Marx, for one, put to such effective use in the first volume of Capital.
To find a way out of this impasse, we shall treat the problem of 'paucity of sources' as constituting in itself an important problem in the very history we are trying to understand. We will therefore read the available documents on jute workers' conditions for both what they say and their 'silences'. We will look at the conditions of production of these documents and in this way we hope to be able to make their 'silences' speak. For, as we argue below on the basis of our reading of Marx, an attempt to analyze these silences invariably takes us into questions of culture and demonstrates a point central to our overall argument: that a theoretical understanding of the working class needs to go beyond the political-economic and incorporate the cultural.

The discussion in the first volume of Marx’s *Capital* raises the possibility of a relationship between the day-to-day running of capitalism and the production of a body of knowledge about working-class conditions. Marx in fact presents us with the elements of a possible theoretical approach to the problem. Even at the risk of appearing to digress, it may be worthwhile to go over that theoretical ground once again, as the rest of this chapter will use that discussion as its own framework. Perhaps it should also be emphasized that what we are borrowing here from Marx is essentially an argument. Marx used the English case to illustrate his ideas but the specifics of English history do not concern us here. We are not reading Marx as a historian of England and this is not an exercise in comparative history.

As is well known, Marx used the documents of the English state for the wealth of detail they usually offered on the living and working conditions of the English proletariat. But Marx also noted in the
process that the English state's interest in closely monitoring the conditions of labour had an extremely useful role to play in the development of English capitalism. 'This industrial revolution which takes place spontaneously', wrote Marx, 'is artificially helped on by the extension of the Factory Acts to all industries in which women, young persons and children are employed'. This the Acts achieved in two important ways. First, they sought to make 'the conditions of competition' between different factories uniform: Marx referred in his discussion of the Factory Acts to the 'cry of the capitalists for equality in the conditions of competition, i.e. for equal restraint on all exploitation of labour'. Secondly, by regulating 'the working day as regards its length, pauses, beginning and end' - that is, by making 'the saving of time a necessity' - they 'forced into existence' more developed and complex machinery and hence, by implication, a more efficient working class.

For the Factory Acts to secure these aims, however, the state needed to ensure that the knowledge generated by the administration of the Acts was not influenced by the narrower considerations of any particular industrialist. Individual masters, it is true, were often in 'fanatical opposition' to the Acts. But the very fact that Marx derived a lot of his details of the 'cruelties' of early capitalism directly from factory inspectors' reports speaks of the 'political will' that the English state was capable of mustering, the will that allowed it to distance itself from particular capitalists and yet serve English capitalism in general.
Marx's discussion clarifies some of the conditions for this success. The 'political will' of the English state did not fall from the skies. While Marx did see the Factory Acts as 'that first and meagre concession wrung from capital' by the government and the working people, he also noted that important sections of English industrialists were in fact themselves in favour of the Factory Acts, their humanistic impulses often spurred on by the forces of competition. Competition was the key to the demand for 'equal restraint on all exploitation of labour'. 'Messrs. Cooksley of Bristol, nail and chain, &c., manufacturers', Marx noted, 'spontaneously introduced the regulations of the Factory Act into their business' (emphasis added). The Children's Employment Commission of the 1860s explained why: "As the old irregular system prevails in neighbouring works, the Messrs. Cooksley are subject to the disadvantage of having their boys enticed to continue their labour elsewhere after 6 p.m.". Marx also gave the instance of one 'Mr. J. Simpson (paper box and bag maker, London)' who told the Commission that 'he would sign any petition for it [legislative interference] ...'. Summarizing such cases, the Commission said:

It would be unjust to the larger employers that their factories should be placed under regulation, while the hours of labour in the smaller places in their own branch of business were under no legislative restriction ... Further, a stimulus would be given to the multiplication of the smaller places of work, which are almost invariably the least favourable to the health, comfort, education, and general improvement of people.

Even if competition in the economy is regarded as instrumental to the autonomy of the English state, one still has to explain why the factories, in the first place, produced the necessary documents without
the state having to do much policing. Marx's answer lies in his discussion of the industrial discipline that the capitalist system of manufacture involved. In the process of 'disciplining' the labour force, the interests of individual capitalists and those of the state meshed, since, in England, the pressure towards discipline arose both from within and from without the factory. If one effect of the factory legislation was to produce 'uniformity, regularity, order and economy', within 'each individual workshop', these were also produced internally, according to Marx, by the capitalist division of labour: 'continuity, uniformity, regularity, order ...' are also the words that Marx used to describe discipline.

Discipline, in Marx's discussion, had two components. It entailed a 'technical subordination of the workman to the uniform motion of the instruments of labour'; hence the need for training, education, etc. Secondly, it made supervision - 'the labour of overlooking' - an integral part of capitalist relations of production. The supervisor or the foreman was the executor of the 'private legislation' of capital, the 'factory code in which capital formulates ... his autocracy over his workpeople'. The supervisor thus embodied the authority of capital, and documents representing factory rules and legislation - e.g. attendance registers, finebooks, timesheets - became both symbols and instruments of his authority. Supervision, so crucial to the working of capitalist authority, was thus based on documents and produced documents in turn. In Marx's words:
The place of the slave-driver's lash is taken by the overlooker's book of penalties. All punishments [in capitalist production relations] *naturally resolve* themselves into fines and deductions from wages.®

(emphasis added)

The every-day functioning of the capitalist factory, therefore, produced documents, hence knowledge, about working-class conditions. This was so because capitalist relations of production employed a system of supervision - another name for surveillance - that, in the language of Michel Foucault, 'insidiously objectifies those on whom it applied'.^ It was thus in the nature of capitalist authority that it operated by forming 'a body of knowledge' about its subjects. In this it was different from, say, pre-capitalist domination which worked more by deploying 'the ostentatious signs of sovereignty' and could do without a detailed knowledge of the dominated.^

In pursuing Marx's ideas on the relationship between industrial discipline and the documentation of the conditions of workers, we thus end up with the notion of 'authority'. Marx was quite clear that the supervisor represented the disciplinary authority of capital over labour; but 'authority', in Marx's hands, was never a one-sided affair. Quite early in his discussion on capital, Marx wrote: "A ... cannot be "your majesty" to B, unless at the same time majesty in B's eyes assumes the bodily form of A ...'. Or a few pages later:

Such expressions of relations in general, called by Hegel reflex-categories, form a very curious class. For instance, one man is king only because other men stand in the relation of subjects to him. They, on the contrary, imagine that they are subjects because he is a king.
A particular form of authority or a system of power then implies a particular cultural formation producing and supporting it. As discussed in Chapter 1, the labourer of Marx's assumption belonged to a culture characterized by the 'formal equality' and the 'formal freedom' of the 'contract', in this case the contract of the wage. The disciplinary power of capital embodied these very notions. If our exposition of Marx's ideas is correct then it would mean that such power was rooted as much in the factory codes that capital legislated out of its own needs as in the culture of the working man over whom the authority was exercised. The point seems important in a further respect. By assuming a particular kind of culture on the part of the worker, Marx assigns the working class a place, an active presence, in the whole process of disciplining by supervision and record-keeping. And this he does, not just for moments of protest when the working class is obviously active and shows its will, but even when it does not protest and is seemingly a passive object of documentation and knowledge.

Marx's argument can thus be used in two ways. It can be used as a measure of how different capitalism in colonial Bengal was from the one described by him. There is also another question he helps us raise. The Calcutta jute mill workers, being mostly migrant peasants from Bihar and U.P., did not have a culture characterized by any ingrained notion of 'human equality' and were thus very unlike the workers of Marx's assumption. Their's was largely a pre-capitalist, inegalitarian culture marked by strong primordial loyalties of community, language, religion, caste and kinship. Since, in Marx's argument, the question of documentation of conditions of work within a factory was linked to
the problem of 'disciplinary authority', and that in turn was linked to the question of working-class culture, the cultural specificities of the Calcutta working class raise a whole series of problems. Were relations of production within a Calcutta jute mill still characterized (in spite of differences in working-class culture) by the disciplinary authority that Marx described? The answer would appear to be in the negative. What then was the nature of 'supervision' in a Calcutta jute mill? Did it behave like a huge apparatus documenting the conditions of labour? Did it have a bearing on the problem that a historian of the working class faces today: paucity of 'sources'?

The following sections will pursue these questions. They have two objectives. They aspire to draw a picture, however incomplete, of the conditions of the jute mill workers of Calcutta in the period mentioned. At the same time, they seek to account for the gaps in our knowledge and argue that the gaps are as revealing of working class conditions as any direct reference to them. They provide therefore a history both of our knowledge and of our ignorance. And since knowledge of labour conditions ultimately relate to the problem of discipline and authority within the factory, the culture of the workers must occupy a special place in the history of such knowledge.

II

Government interest in working-class conditions in India is of relatively recent origin. It was only after the end of the First World War that the conditions of Indian workers became an object of knowledge for the Government of India. A Labour Bureau was set up in May 1920 'to collect all available information on labour conditions in
India, and classify and tabulate it'. One important factor contributing to this development was the establishment of the International Labour Office (I.L.O.) immediately after the war. The Indian government had been an 'active participant' in the process of the formation of the I.L.O. and was pledged to its goals. A second important factor was one internal to the Indian political scene. The conclusion of the war and the subsequent period of nationalist agitation had seen trade unions mushroom all over the country on a scale previously unknown. This was accompanied by a countrywide outburst of labour unrest. With the Russian revolution still fresh in its memory, the Government of India's reaction to these developments was coloured by its fear of Bolshevism. 'Labour is growing more conscious of its own wants and power', the Government warned its provincial heads in 1919, '[and] it is showing signs of a capacity for organization'. By its militancy, therefore, labour was drawing upon itself the gaze of the Government.

What distinguished this new outlook on labour from the traditional law-and-order view of the state was a desire to reform the conditions of labour and thus change the nature of the workforce. In an impressive range of labour legislation considered (and partly enacted) in the twenties and afterwards, the Government of India sought to take a direct role in structuring the situation of the working classes. The amended Factories Act (1922), the Workmen's Compensation Act (1923), the Trade Unions Act (1926), the Trade Disputes Act (1928), the Maternity Benefits Bill (1929), the Payment of Wages Act (1933), etc. were all aimed at creating a working class different from the traditionally held image of the industrial labour force in India. The worker was henceforth to receive a new 'legal' personality, more welfare, and even
some official help in organizing into trade unions (naturally, of a non-communist kind). Introducing a bill for the 'registration and protection of trade unions', the Government of India wrote to the local governments in September 1921 that 'in so far as the [trade union] movement makes for the organization of labour, and for the steady betterment of the conditions of labour ... every facility should be offered for its development along healthy lines'.

The Government's concern for a 'steady betterment of the conditions of labour' was sustained and animated by a recently-acquired vision of a burgeoning industrial growth in India. The war had left the Government in a 'developmentalist' mood from which sprang the arguments regarding working-class conditions.

There are indications of a considerable expansion in the near future in the number and size of industrial establishments. Moreover, machinery and power are being employed in factories to a much larger extent than before. Mines are being worked at greater depths ... The transport industries are developing.

With these words the Government pleaded in August 1921 the case for creating a system of rules for compensations to be awarded to workmen injured in accidents in the course of work. The argument was elaborated during the discussion that followed. The Government of India explained that the 'growing complexity of industry ... with the increasing use of machinery' required a more efficient labour force than had hitherto been available. It was therefore 'advisable that they [the workers] should be protected ... from hardship arising from accidents', because this would not only increase 'the available supply
labour' but also produce 'a corresponding increase in the efficiency
of the average workman ...'.

'Efficiency', in this logic, was a function of working-class
conditions. The Government noted in 1919 that while there was 'a keen
and increasing demand for factory labour' in India, there was 'little
apparent desire on the part of the labourers to increase their
efficiency', and - more to the point - 'little prospect of their being
able to do under present conditions' [emphasis added]. Improving
efficiency meant improving these 'conditions', and they included not
only 'education, housing and social welfare' but also such aspects as
the 'comfort' and 'spare time' of the worker.

The efficiency of workers is closely connected with
their education, and their standard of comfort; the
shortening of hours may not prove an unmixed good, if
the workers are not put in a position to make a proper
use of their spare time.

The argument was broader than it might appear at first sight. For it
was not only a question of giving the workers 'spare time', but of
structuring that 'spare time' as well, of ensuring that the workers
made 'proper use' of it. It was thus that the Government's eyes fell -
for the first time in Indian history - on several aspects of the worker's
life that had so far been held to be beyond the ken of capital. Issues
of indebtedness, the 'monetary reserve' of the worker, his wages, food,
health, home life - all came under the scrutiny of the Government.

'Efficiency' produced its own code of ethics which opposed the image
of the vigorous and healthy worker to that of the overworked and
fatigued:
They [the Government of India] believed that the longer interval [of rest] is desirable in order to enable the worker to maintain his vigour, and that its enforcement should ultimately prove beneficial to the employer. There are grounds for believing that the absence of sustained work, characteristic of many factory employees in this country, has been due ... to the fact that the hours fixed did not in the past allow sufficient opportunity for the rest necessary to prevent fatigue.26

It was only in the context of this search for an 'efficient' working class that working-class conditions became an object of knowledge in India. How did the Government of India propose to produce and gather this knowledge? Provincial governments were equipped with new departments who were meant to perform this task. For instance, under pressure from the Government of India, the Bengal Government established in July 1920 the office of the Industrial Intelligence Officer, later named the Labour Intelligence Officer, whose duty it was to 'maintain a proper watch over the industrial situation', and 'in particular to investigate and report on labour conditions and the facts and causes of labour disturbances'.27 The Government of India also realized that much of this knowledge would have to be generated within the factories and that the provincial staff of factory inspectors might need to be employed on collecting and monitoring the information. Since 'leisure', 'rest', 'fatigue', 'spare-time', etc. were some of the key concepts supporting the Government's notion of 'efficiency', control over the labourer's working hours naturally emerged as a problem of the highest importance. The attendance registers maintained by individual factories and the factory inspectors' reports now came to be regarded as crucial documents from the Government of India's point of view. With this end in view, the Factories Act was amended in
1922 with a new section 35 which required the manager of a factory 'to maintain ... [an attendance] register of all persons employed and of their hours of work ...'.

III

The conditions of jute mill labour in Bengal were never as fully documented as the Government of India wished. The inaccuracies in the attendance registers of the jute mills were witness to this failure; the Chief Inspector of Factories admitted to the Royal Commission on Labour in 1929 that 'the records given in such registers [did] not represent the true conditions ... of ... labour'. The labour office of Bengal, moreover, suffered from a peculiar bureaucratic malaise, the history of which only indicates that the Bengal Government never shared the Government of India's enthusiasm for knowledge of labour conditions. For one thing (as the Labour Commissioner of Bengal recalled in 1939) the office was set up with 'no immediate purpose of having a large investigating office, with cost of living indices and other standard concomitants of an organized labour office'. Besides, so low was the priority of his office in the eyes of the Bengal Government that when 'the first Retrenchment Committee' reported in 1921, 'the Labour Office seemed bound to go'; but 'instead of abolishing it, the [Bengal] government changed its character'. To economize, the Labour Intelligence Officer was saddled with various other responsibilities and his investigative functions suffered badly in consequence. He was placed 'in charge of the Commerce Department, and later of the Marine Department'. He was made responsible for the administration of all the
labour laws that were to come in the 'twenties, as well as for other legislative measures only 'partly concerned with the welfare of labour, e.g., the Boilers Act and the Electricity Act'. The Labour Intelligence Officer thus became, in his own words, 'an ordinary secretariat officer' who had little time to investigate the conditions of labour.

With the growing volume of office work and the addition of one duty after another, the Labour Intelligence Officer found it impossible to continue his personal investigations regarding every strike, and also to some extent, his visits to factories ...; although, as far as possible, he continued these visits up to 1929 when the enormous increase of work due to the advent of Whitley Commission tied him completely to his desk.31

The atrophy of the Labour Office was not a matter of simple bureaucratic mindlessness. What calls for analysis is precisely the 'mind' of this bureaucracy. To this 'mind', any interest in labour conditions beyond that called for by the immediate needs of capital or of law-and-order, was suspect. 'For some peculiar reason', wrote a rather frustrated Labour Commissioner in 1935, 'in Bengal, interest in labour matters or desire for knowledge of labour developments is read as sympathy for the labour point of view'.32

The 'reason' for this suspicion is not difficult to see. The Government of India's 'desire for knowledge of labour developments' assumed that the investigating authority would be capable of maintaining a degree of independence from the point of view of particular capitalists. The Government wished to stand above the 'unevenness' of such particular views. For example, in insisting on 'uniform rules' for fines or accident-compensations, the Government of India argued that the question
of the 'welfare of the working classes' could not 'any longer be left to the uneven generosity of employers'.\textsuperscript{33} Such 'neutrality' by the state threatened to rupture the almost 'natural' unity that had existed in Bengal for years between the provincial government and owners of capital (specially those represented by such powerful organizations as the Bengal Chamber of Commerce and I.J.M.A.).

This 'natural unity' had received its fullest expression in the nineteenth century when the moral order of the day had been unashamedly pro-capitalist and when the Government of Bengal plainly considered it its duty 'to do all it can to afford moral support to the [jute] millowners' in the face of labour unrest.\textsuperscript{34} In the 1890s even the meagre provisions of the first two Factories Acts of India were seen by senior officers of the Government of Bengal as 'needlessly harrassing to the [mill] managers'.\textsuperscript{35} A factory inspector who once insisted on age-verification for all jute-mill child-workers in his jurisdiction was sharply pulled up by the Chief Secretary of the Government of Bengal. 'Inspectors', he was told, 'by making the [medical] examination of every child compulsory, would give to owners or managers of factories the maximum of trouble, and to the government the maximum of expenses without conferring any compensating benefit on the majority of the children employed'.\textsuperscript{36}

It would not be very profitable to see this merely as an instance of ruling-class hypocrisy. The evidence yields more value when treated as an expression of ruling-class outlook on conditions of labour. The Bengal officials were not just displaying their lack of respect for the factory laws; underlying their statements was also the conviction
that the labour conditions themselves did not leave much to be desired.
To most of the factory inspectors, therefore - contrary to the aims
of the factory legislation - the conditions always seemed satisfactory.
A typical example of their attitude is to be found in the report of
the working of the Factories Act in Bengal for the year 1893. The
'general conditions of the [mill] operatives' were found 'very
satisfactory', they said; the coolie-lines were 'well laid out',
their work was 'not arduous', the water supply was 'good', the latrines
were 'well kept', the children were 'thoroughly healthy', their work
'in no way detrimental to them', and the arrangements for medical care
of the workers was 'satisfactory'. Even the 'fact' that 'five or ten
per cent' of the children were 'weak, feeble in growth and stunted
for their age' could not be attributed, it was said, 'to the work they
perform in the mills, as about the same proportion of undersized and
weakly children may be observed among the outside population'.

To such an official 'mind', labour conditions deserved investigation
only when they posed law-and-order problems. A Government of Bengal file
discussing a sudden outburst of working-class unrest in the jute mills
in 1894-95 gave some attention to the question of housing of labour.
But the concern here was merely with issues of public control and no
more. The Lieutenant Governor of Bengal invited I.J.M.A. to
'co-operate with the [Bengal] Government in improving both direct
control [i.e. policing] over the mill-hands in case they should break
into violence, and also indirect control which will make acts of
violence less likely by bettering the conditions of the employees':
His Honor therefore confidently invites the co-operation of the mill-owners to provide comfortable and well-ordered homes for mill-hands, and thus avoid such conditions as those at Samnagar and Titagar, which offer temptations to the disorderly and make control difficult.

But the amount of improvement desired in the 'conditions' was severely limited. Too much 'bettering' of conditions might make the task of control harder. 'Rice is very cheap, and this makes them [the labourers] independent', was the diagnosis of a police officer in the same file, who quoted jute mill managers' views in support of his own: 'Experienced mill managers seem to think that ... when the labour market becomes once more over-stocked, as they said it will be, mill hands will grow less independent, and matters will quiet down to their normal state'.

In taking a law-and-order view of labour conditions, then, the state incorporated within its own outlook the point of view of capital.

Much of this nineteenth-century spirit can be read off twentieth-century documents as well, especially those coming from the years before the First World War. There was for instance the Civil Surgeon of Serampore who thought (in 1909) that 'the mills in Hooghly need no legislation for the well-being of the operatives'; or the factory inspector who felt (in 1910) that he was 'legitimately entitled to place the telescope to his blind eye' if he came across 'a child of seven or eight years sewing or hemming a gunny bag in the vicinity of the mother', even though the law demanded 'the Manager ... be prosecuted for employing a child under nine'; or there was the even more striking case of C.A. Walsh, the Chief Inspector of Factories, boldly declaring in 1912: 'I see no poverty in the quarters surrounding
the great [jute] mills at Khardah, Titagarh, Shamnagore, Kankinara, Naihati, Budge-Budge or Fort Gloster'.

The tone of the official pronouncements changed somewhat after 1920, thanks to the efforts of the Government of India and of nationalist and radical politicians who espoused the cause of labour. 'The increasing solidarity of labour' entered the calculations of the Government of Bengal and the realization dawned upon it that 'industrial disputes will in future form an integral part of the industrial life of this province'. Yet this did not mean any 'epistemological shift' in the status of the 'conditions of labour' question. It never acquired any priority over the question of control. The Industrial Unrest Committee of 1921 recommended that the Bengal Government set up machinery for investigating strikes but made it clear that the machinery proposed 'must be designed for the purpose of alleviating unrest ... rather than for a detailed investigation of current labour conditions'. It was the same 'disease' that had warped the career of the Labour Office in Bengal. The periodic reports the Labour Intelligence Officer sent up to the Government of India were, it was admitted, 'nearly always' the view of the local police - 'merely thana officers' views', as Donald Gladding, a senior official of the Bengal Government, once described them. 'Neither superior police officers nor Magistrates go about seriously to find out the truth by questioning the workmen on the one hand and the employers on the other - and this', Gladding insisted, was 'polite and correct'.

The factory inspectors' reports bore ample testimony to this absence of a spirit of investigation. A good example is the treatment they gave to the question of the 'health' of the workers. This was an
important question from the Government of India's point of view, carrying obvious implications for the dietary conditions, the standard of living, the wages-situation and the efficiency of the worker. None of these latter considerations, however, ever influenced the Bengal factory inspectors. For years, their reports carried a section called 'General Health of the Operatives' where the workers' health was always described as 'good' if there had been no epidemics. 'The general health of operatives has been good', said the Factories Act report for 1928, 'no outbreak of disease in epidemic form having been reported during the year'. Why was health a question of epidemics, and not one of diet, nutrition or standard of living? The following quotation from the factory inspection report for 1921 suggests the answer:

The Naihati Jute Mills at Naihati, Baranagar Jute Mills at Baranagar, [etc.] ... reported a shortage of labour in the month of August last owing to outbreaks of malaria and influenza. The shortage ... was not serious and the general health of the operatives ... has on the whole been satisfactory.

Or, to put the argument in an even more precise form, as did the report for 1923:

The general health of operatives during the year ... has been comparatively good, no shortage of labour on account of epidemic diseases or sickness having been reported by the mills.

At heart, this was the employer's argument. In the jute mills, health-care for workers was essentially aimed at prevention of epidemics. Information regarding diseases treated free by the doctors of twenty-three jute mills in 1928 was collected by the Government of Bengal for
submission to the Royal Commission on Labour. It is interesting to observe that none of the diseases treated were of nutritional origin: chief amongst them were cholera, small-pox, malaria, enteric fever, relapsing fever, kala-azar, dysentery, diarrhoea, pneumonia, tuberculosis of the lungs, and respiratory diseases, 'other than infectious'. Clearly, most of them were infectious diseases or water- or food-borne diseases, capable of affecting a number of people at the same time, specially under conditions of over-crowding. In other words, attention was confined to diseases that were potentially epidemic. It was epidemics that caused large-scale absenteeism and thus affected production; besides, they respected no class-barriers. Speaking to I.J.M.A. in 1918, Alexander Murray, then chairman of the Association, referred to a proposal put up by mills 'in four different municipalities up the river ... to spend anything up to Rs 100 per loom' in improving workers' housing, and remarked that he could 'imagine no more profitable investment from a mill labour point of view'. Supporting this view, he said:

In proof of this I might refer to the experience during the influenza epidemic last year of the mills with which I am most closely associated. Our mill doctors' reports show that the hands living in the bazar suffered far more severely than those living in the mills' own coolie lines. At most of our mills the production for the week ending 20th July, which witnessed the epidemic at its worst, was anything from 15 to 30 per cent. below normal. But in the case of one of our mills which houses nearly all its labour in its own lines, the drop was only 5 per cent. ... Clearly, to Murray, as to the jute industry, the measure of the severity of epidemics was the drop in production. Epidemics therefore became
the most important issue whenever the employers turned their minds to the question of the health of the workers.

One implication of such an outlook was that large areas of working-class life remained out of view. Once again, the health question illustrates the problem. As a result of the recommendations of the Royal Commission on Labour, an investigation was carried out into the condition of women workers in jute mills in 1931-32. The investigating doctor discovered several diseases that had never found their way into the records of the mill dispensaries. She noted that many of the working-class children had 'a tendency to rickets, shown by slight bending of the legs and bossing of the forehead'. This was 'probably due to deficiency of vitamin D in the food'. While many children looked 'fine' in the first year of life', a 'healthy appearance was less common' after that age. Venereal diseases were 'said to be wide-spread', yet there was 'no evidence on the subject'. In the lines of one mill, she came across a young girl 'obviously dying of a pernicious type of anaemia', but 'she was having no treatment'. 'In the lines of another mill', she found 'a woman suffering from a severe degree of osteomalacia, unable to walk. This is a very great danger in childbirth and with careful treatment can be cured or greatly relieved'. She noticed 'several cases of children reduced to almost extremity'. Another time she saw 'a woman obliged to stop her work for blindness and suffering great pain in her eyes [which] ... would have been susceptible to treatment'. But a certain kind of 'blindness', in these cases, was what characterized the employer's outlook. The investigating doctor remarked: 'None of these cases were known to the mill doctors, who always accompanied me when I visited the lines'.

Thus, in claiming as their own a view of labour conditions that really belonged to the owners of capital, the documents of the Bengal Government reproduced something else as well: the 'optical errors' of that vision. Significant aspects of working-class conditions remained hidden from it. This was what in the end undermined the Government of India's project for 'knowledge' of these conditions. The Government of Bengal lacked the political will necessary to distance itself from the employers in the jute industry. This was well known even to the Government of India who, however, never felt powerful enough to force anyone's hand. On 13 September 1928 Lord Irwin, the Viceroy, wrote to the Secretary of State:

We had a discussion in Council this week on the contemplated enquiry into labour matters ... no Local Government except Bengal had any objection to our announcing now that such an enquiry would be held; but the Bengal Government entered a strong protest ... Bengal have on other occasions lately shown a disposition to act as a brake in questions of this kind; for example they stood alone in adopting an uncompromising attitude in respect of maximum wages, and they were nearly alone in pressing for the circulation of the Trade Disputes Bill when we asked if Local Governments would agree to our pushing on with it.

Irwin's conclusion was significant: 'The influence of the employers - and particularly the European employers - is strong there [in Bengal], and they were not likely to receive the news of an enquiry with joy'.

It would once again be wrong to see this 'influence' as a conspiracy of state and capital against labour. Its expressions were too aboveboard and direct for it to be treated as such. It is better seen as part of the existing political culture. In deciding, for instance, if commercial
bodies like I.J.M.A. should be approached directly with the recommendations of the Industrial Unrest Committee (1921), Sir J.H. Kerr, a member of the Governor's Council, wavered:

We must walk warily [he wrote] ... Sir Alexander Murray warned me specially that the Jute Mills Association would have to be led, not driven, and I think we should be safer in leaving the matter in his hands.\textsuperscript{51}

Kerr felt frightened even to start an office like a Labour Bureau with some pretension towards investigation of labour conditions. 'The term bureau frightens people', he wrote; 'I would not start anything in the nature of a Bureau even on paper without consultation with employers'.\textsuperscript{52}

So keen was the Government of Bengal in its desire to avoid any confrontation with the owners of jute mills that factory inspectors were actually encouraged to leave all 'controversial' matters out of their reports. Further, capitalists themselves sometimes had a direct role in weeding out statements unfavourable to their interests. The report for 1923 had to be redrafted because of objections from industrialists like Alexander Murray. As the Labour intelligence Officer explained:

Normally the Chief Inspector of Factories sends in his report to Government without previous sanction, but last year owing to a number of controversial paragraphs being inserted, the report was first unofficially examined. The report had ultimately to be reprinted as strong objection was taken by Sir A. Murray and others to the remarks of the Chief Inspector. There is nothing objectionable in the report [now being] put up, but I have toned down some of the remarks ...\textsuperscript{53}
Even the attendance register that the 1922 Factories Act required the factories to maintain was modified in Bengal to suit the convenience of the jute mill managers. It was made into a less detailed document than it could have been and as a result, admitted the Chief Inspector of Factories in 1930, it became 'a type of register satisfying the view of the employers [in the jute industry] but futile and inadequate for ensuring establishment of the provisions of Chapter IV [relating to working hours] of the [Factories] Act ...'  

Thus if working-class conditions in the jute mills never quite became an object of knowledge in the way envisaged by the Government of India, the 'failure' occurred at two levels. The industry never produced the necessary documents; and the Government lacked the political will to carry out its own investigations.

IV

The question of the lack of a 'political will' on the part of the Government of Bengal, its inability to force any issue on I.J.M.A. or the jute industry, can be partly comprehended as a negative illustration of Marx's argument. I say 'partly' because some of the spirit of co-operation prevailing between the state and capital must have derived from the tight racial bonds that existed between European employers and the British bureaucracy in colonial Bengal. But one also has to note that the industry (or any sections of employers) never created any pressure on the Government to equalize 'the conditions of competition' between different mills. 'Conditions are different in
different [mill] centres', said I.J.M.A. to the Royal Commission on Labour. 'One mill provides housing accommodation for all their workers whereas another mill provides none whatever. One mill provides good water, another provides no water.' An official of the Government of Bengal was to use much stronger words in 1929:

Perhaps in no industry in the world, situated in such a circumscribed area, is the wage position more inchoate. The mill groups under different managing agents work under wage systems which have developed many local idiosyncrasies during the long and short years of their existence. Even in mills under the same managing agents there are differences which to persons not acquainted with the position would seem incredible ... In ... groups of mills situated close to each other and under different managing agents, the wage-rates in individual mills are kept, or are supposed to be kept, strictly secret.\(^5\)

Yet the jute industry was always content to let all this be; there never arose any significant demand for the standardization of wage rates. At the instance of the Royal Commission, I.J.M.A. decided in 1931 to set up a sub-committee to look into the latter problem. The committee admitted in its report the following year that 'nothing can be done in the direction of general standardisation [of wages] for all the mills' as there were 'circumstances which preclude any immediate steps being taken'.\(^5\) The report ended with extremely cautious recommendations for slow and gradual standardization of rates for mills 'in the same districts', but very little came of this. A confidential report on 'Jute Mill Labour Conditions' written in October 1945 by J. Lee, the Senior Labour Officer of I.J.M.A., referred to the lack of standardization of wage-rates as a continuing problem:
Over the last year I have collected statistics of wage-rates paid in the mills and these have all been transferred into a rate paid as "pies per hour" ... I prepared a list of all occupations, and then gave the maximum rate paid as well as the minimum. The differences in many occupations was very great, and in itself, was ... a good case for wage-standardization.\textsuperscript{59}

The lack of standardization of wages remained a problem even in the 1950s.\textsuperscript{60}

Why was it that the jute industry, notorious for the feelings of rivalry that mills often harboured against one another, was happy to carry on with an 'inchoate' wage-position? Several answers suggest themselves. To consider outside competition first, the relationship between the Calcutta and the Dundee industries was never one of straightforward competition - as between Bombay and Manchester. With Dundee branching off into finer products for survival and Calcutta providing a big employment market for Dundee technicians and managers, the pressures of that potential competition eased off a great deal after 1914-19. The kind of uproar that Dundee industrialists often caused in the 1890s over labour conditions in Calcutta,\textsuperscript{61} became a matter of the past in the twentieth century. At the same time, the state of organization of the Calcutta jute mill workers was too weak for them to exert any effective pressure on the wage-question. Thirdly, the 'individualism' of individual (or a group of) mills was something that I.J.M.A. accepted as the price of its organizational unity, which the industry saw as crucial to its overall prosperity. And fourthly, one must take into account the concentration of economic power within the industry; this must have gone some way towards mitigating any spirit of competition between mills.
There were, however, two other factors which were perhaps more important than those mentioned above. Paradoxical though it may sound, the expenditure incurred by the mills per capita of their respective labour force might have varied in fact far less than the discussion on wage-rate differences suggests. In other words, it is possible that the 'conditions of competition' between mills remained more or less at a par and thus made state intervention superfluous. It will be interesting, in this respect, to depart from the practice of calculating bonuses and wages by themselves and try instead to study these along with other expenditures on labour, e.g. housing, sanitation, water-supply, health-clinics, etc. Since the amounts spent under these latter heads also varied from mill to mill according to differences in the volume of labour supply, employers who paid lower wages might well have ended up by spending more on housing etc. and vice versa. It then seems quite possible that the average amount spent per unit of labour worked out to be roughly the same for different mills, so that the disparities in the 'conditions of competition' did not matter very much.

The point cannot be statistically verified here, detailed information on wage-rates and other matters being extremely hard to come by. But there is some evidence to suggest that the industry had developed certain informal means for equalizing 'labour conditions' between the mills (specially those close to one another) or at least for keeping the 'inequalities' well within 'tolerable' limits. For one thing, it was hard to keep the information about wages a secret however much the managing agents might desire this. 'The total earnings [for different occupations] are not necessarily kept secret', the Government of Bengal told the Royal Commission on Labour, and the piece-rates or bonus rates
could easily be 'ascertained by spy-work in the bazar'. Further, the worker's idea of a 'fair wage' often involved a principle of parity with those paid by mills in the neighbourhood. Localized strikes therefore often tended to bring local wage-rates in line with one another.

Even more important perhaps was the fact that managers could effectively create an informal climate (and pressure) of opinion which also had a homogenizing influence on labour conditions. When an American firm, the American Manufacturing Company, started a jute mill in Calcutta in the early 1920s, it was said that 'the Directors in the States ... sanctioned large amounts to be spent on sanitation and welfare of workers, as they were accustomed to such outlay in connection with their jute mills in the United States'. Yet the eventual amount spent turned out to be much less than that sanctioned, for the managers of the other jute mills had objected.

In many cases they [the Directors] would have been willing to go much further than they had actually gone e.g. to give electric light in the workers' houses, as well as a plentiful installation outside in the lines, but had been told that this had never been done here. So at present electric light is limited to the durvans' houses.

It is significant that this mill ultimately settled for the 'district rate' of wages and followed 'the custom in jute mills in the district' in respect of accident-compensation. It also 'modelled' its leave-rules (or their absence) on those at the 'neighbouring jute mills'. And while the 'agents had been willing to put in as good a drainage system as possible', the actual 'type copied was that used by the other Calcutta Jute Mills'.63
A lack of standardization in wage-rates therefore did not necessarily reflect a competitive situation among the mills regarding their labour conditions. Any effective pressure from international competitors was also conspicuously absent. The Bengal Government's views on labour conditions were therefore governed solely by its relationship with capitalists in the jute industry, and in this relationship, the latter always predominated. What the state therefore reproduced in its documents was the blinkered vision of capital.

V

But that leaves us with the more crucial question: why was the 'vision' of capital 'blinkered'? Why did the jute mills fail to produce the daily records that the Government of India had asked for? Or to put the question differently: why were the attendance registers kept in such a state that they did not 'reflect the true conditions of labour'? Once again, Marx's argument is useful. To understand the lack of documentation at the level of the factory we have to turn to the problem of 'discipline'. A discussion of 'discipline' has to begin by considering the nature of work and technology in a jute mill, for discipline is, in the first place, a question of training and skills, the 'technical subordination of the worker' to the motion and requirements of the machine. Discipline of course also involves supervision, but we shall take that up later.

Work inside a Calcutta jute mill involved mechanical processes broadly similar to those in a nineteenth-century cotton mill, except that
jute was a rougher material than cotton and the humidification necessary for cotton was not needed for jute. After the raw jute had been sorted and batched as it came into the mill, it went through a process of softening and preparing for the eventual spinning and weaving of jute. Softening included passing the jute 'through a softening machine consisting of fluted rollers under heavy pressure when simultaneously an emulsion of oil and water ... [was] applied', the oil being necessary 'to facilitate the succeeding process of manufacture as jute fibre contains no natural lubrication'. After softening came the preparing stage which included three distinct operations: carding, drawing and roving. The object of carding was 'to break down long stalks or strips of fibre into a continuous broad ribbon of fine fibres' and to lay the fibres parallel to one another. The carding process involved the use of two machines - the breaker card and the finisher card. The former 'breaks and hackles the stalks of [the] fibre' to make it into a broad ribbon 'termed sliver in the trade'. About twelve such slivers were then fed manually into the 'finisher' card 'where the carding operation is continued on finer scale'. The carded slivers were still not uniform or straight and were therefore subjected to processes called drawing and doubling, where the aim was to obtain 'a greater length of [uniform] fibre for the same unit of weight'. The operations of drawing and doubling were 'combined into one machine called [the] drawing frame'. Drawing thinned out the sliver, doubling counteracted it by combining 'two or more such drawn out slivers into one at the delivery end of the machine'. The last of the preparatory processes was roving, the object of which was to draw out the slivers even further, according to the spinning requirements, while strengthening them by giving them a partial twist. The twisted sliver was called 'rove'. The next step
was spinning, where yarns were made by spinning frames which drew out further the rove, spun it, and finally wound it on spinning bobbins. Warp yarns were harder twisted than weft yarns. Winding followed next and 'the yarn forming the warp of the cloth ... [was] wound round ... bobbins into the form of comparatively large rolls, thereby obtaining a greater continuity in length'. The yarn for the weft in the cloth was wound into "cops" fitting exactly into the shuttles employed in weaving. Warp yarn, saturated with a starchy material to prevent breakage in weaving, was then 'drawn on to large beams' (the 'beaming' process) and placed at the back of the loom for weaving. The final stages in the manufacture constituted the finishing process, where the woven cloth was passed through the heavy rollers of a calendering machine for ironing and eventually cut and sown into bags. The bags again were 'made into bundles of 25 or 30' and packed by a hydraulic press.

The technology accompanying these processes had been 'perfected' in the nineteenth century. S.G. Barker, who investigated the technical side of Calcutta jute mills in the 1930s and whose findings we have discussed in the previous chapter, found the technology so stagnant that he likened the industry to a gramophone needle: 'It runs in a groove and plays a nice tune. If either needle or record gets worn, new ones are demanded'. The 'groove' in Barker's description referred to the lack of diversification of products in the history of the industry and to the crude and rough nature of what was produced. This, as we know, he saw as a fundamental factor behind the technological stagnation of the industry. In Barker's words:
Jute being a cheap material producing fabrics for rough usage ... the machinery and technique in India became standardised upon an elementary mechanical basis. Simplicity of operation without the necessity for textile science, since changes in output were practically non-existent ... soon led to the mass production of the limited range of Indian jute products becoming almost automatic. The conversion of Jute fibres into fabrics therefore became a mechanical engineering proposition, a position largely maintained to this day. The mechanical influence was greatly enhanced by conditions in India, since spare machine parts and renewals were difficult to get from home. Thus each mill or group was equipped with an efficient mechanics' workshop, which not only maintained the machinery in excellent order but even extended to the construction of duplicates of existing looms, etc. Again the simplicity of the machine principles facilitated this ... Machinery in the mills in general, therefore, has had a long working life, perhaps too long.67

The industry considered this technology so adequate for its purpose that it placed very little premium on the scientific and technological training of its workers and its superior technical staff. Barker was surprised to discover many large and crucial gaps in the technical knowledge of the Scottish managers and assistants - gaps which they usually filled up with that rather undefined human quality called 'experience'. The softening process contained a number of 'unknowns' like 'temperature, moisture content and distribution in the [jute] pile' as well as the optimum pressure between the rollers, 'the actual value for which seemingly ... [had] no criterion but experience'. He was also struck by 'the lack of finality in technical knowledge of the carding process'. The same went for drawing and doubling, where 'the ideal roller pressure' and 'the size of flutings for Jute ... [had] been determined by experience'. For the process of roving, the list of things unknown was formidable. 'Roller covering and pressure, surface speeds, spindle speeds, the flyer mechanism, the distribution
of fibre length in the rove, the degree of levelness along its length, fibre control and, in addition, the factors concerning twist and the form of bobbins were all yet 'to be studied'.

Barker's correspondence with some of the mill managers on technical problems dramatically revealed the low priority that the industry gave to technical education. Technical issues were often treated merely as matters of the 'experience', 'opinion' or personal judgement of the people concerned:

From my experience [wrote one manager to Barker] I have found that certain makers' machines are suitable for one class of fibre, while others are suitable for a different class ... A number of people favour pinning with light pins whilst [others] prefer a coarser pinning with a corresponding heavier pin, again only a matter of opinion.

Another point which allows a certain latitude to be taken is roller speeds and ratios, but to my mind this item is not nearly as important as pinning and setting.68

If the manager's knowledge of the machinery had such a glaring 'lack of finality' about it, one can imagine the want of understanding that separated the worker from the machine. This is not to say that the machine did not in any way affect the worker's life in the factory. The mechanical processes in a jute mill were continuous with one process feeding another, and the work was heavier and noisier than in a typical cotton mill.69 The continuous motion and speed of the machinery was something that the worker had to adjust to. 'Continuous and even flow' of the jute sliver was the responsibility of the labourers working on the softening, carding, drawing and roving machines.70 'The work of feeding the breaker cards', for instance, was 'heavy' and needed 'constant attention'. The finisher card required the co-operation of
three women at a speed matching that of the machine: 'one arranges 
the slivers side by side at the feed end, one takes delivery at the 
other, and one carries'. In the spinning department, the shifting of 
bobbins must be done quickly for with bulky material such as jute, the 
bobbins fill fast and require frequent changing, which necessitates 
stopping the machine'. But as the payment of the managing agents and 
managers often depended on the output, such stoppages were seen as time 
lost and therefore had to be as brief as possible. Pace also characterized 
the work in piece-rated departments like weaving or sack-sewing where the 
worker's earnings depended on how much, and hence how rapidly, he could 
produce.

The 'subordination' to the machine that the worker suffered in the 
jute mill, however, was not very 'technical'. The worker did not come 
to terms with the machine on the basis of even an elementary understanding 
of its working principles. The story here is poignantly told in the 
nature of the accidents which occurred in the jute mills. Many of the 
fatal ones resulted from the workers attempting to clean the machinery 
while it was still in motion or from their (especially the women's) 
loose-fitting clothes being caught up in its moving parts. Accidents 
of this kind revealed the emphasis that the mill managements placed on 
continuous running of the machinery, the laxity of factory-rules (e.g. 
about dress) and the little value attached to a worker's life, but also 
the worker's incomprehension of the running principles of the machinery. 
In fact, the worker's relationship to the machine, instead of being 
mediated through a technical knowledge, was mediated through the 
north-Indian peasant's conception of his tools, where the tools often 
took on magical and godly qualities. A religious outlook rather than
'science' determined this relationship, with the difference that in a jute mill, the labourer's tools were far more powerful and malign than the peasant's implements and were capable of taking lives at the shortest notice. The vivid details of the following report from the 1930s bear witness to this religious consciousness:

In some of the jute mills near Calcutta the mechanics often sacrifice goats at this time [autumn: the time of the Diwali festival]. A separate altar is erected by the mechanics of each of the four or five departments in the mill. Various tools and other emblems of their work are placed upon it, together with heaps of sweetmeats and decorations. Incense is burned during an entire day and ... the buildings are effectively filled with smoke. Towards evening a male goat is thoroughly washed, decorated with proper colors and flowers and prepared for a parade and final sacrifice. The little procession, made up principally of the goat and a band, then marches through the grounds and up and down the aisles of the department to the altar. The animal is fed as many sweets as he will accept, and is then decapitated at one stroke by a long knife and sword. With proper ceremony the head is deposited in the river, in this case ... the sacred Ganges, while the meat is retained for a feast in the evening ... The factory and the power-machine have been readily adopted and given due place in religious ceremony.74

It is of course not being claimed here that this religious outlook of the workers would have vanished only if they were given a scientific knowledge of the machinery. The fact that modern Indian 'holy men' have always counted a good number of Ph.Ds in physics among their camp-followers should act as a sufficient deterrent against any such view. The point is that the man-machine relationship inside a factory always involves culture and a techno-economic argument overlooks this. Relevant here is also the point that the Calcutta jute worker's subordination to the pace and requirements of the machinery was not effected through training and education. It was not, in that sense, a case of the 'technical subordination' of Marx's
description. The mills in fact were largely averse to the idea of giving their workers or their children any education at all. In 1929, the I.J.M.A. said to the Royal Commission that it did not think that to provide education was a 'duty' of the employers. But their deeper attitudes were revealed in 1914-15 when the Government of Bengal, acting under pressure from Delhi, made some money available for the education of working-class children in the jute mill areas and was forced by I.J.M.A. to confine such education only to those children who were not yet old enough to work in jute mills. And the lessons, insisted the mill-owners, had to be confined to the teaching of 'the three "R"s' and nothing beyond.

The argument that I.J.M.A. put forward to the Government (and one that was accepted by the latter) explained the 'reason' for their lack of interest in workers' education:

> The character of the education must not be such as to draw the children away from the profession which they would adopt if they were allowed to continue illiterate ... it must not render them unfit for cooly work.

Literacy, in other words, was irrelevant to work in jute mills. The reason for this, according to the employers, was that the work was easily learned and required no rigorous training. Indeed, the bulk of the labour force was made up of totally unskilled labourers (called coolies) employed without exception on manual work. The Census of 1921 found that of a total of 280,854 workers in the Calcutta jute mills no less than 156,633 (i.e. over 55 per cent) were engaged in work involving no machinery at all. Even of the work that involved the use of machinery
it was said in 1937 by jute mill owners themselves that 'up to spinning ... most of the work is mechanical or routine and can be easily learnt, and labour for these departments is plentiful; winding, weaving and [machine] sewing required skilled labour'. How 'easily learnt' was explained in 1906 by the Chairman of I.J.M.A. who spelt out the different amounts of time that was needed to train in the different occupations in a jute mill:

Coolie['s'] [work] ...................... [one] week
Women['s'] [work: mainly preparing and hand-sewing] ....... [one] week
Shifter['s'] [work] ...................... [one] week
Spinner['s'] [work] ...................... Graduate from shifters; may be a year or more on shifting
Weaver['s'] [work] ...................... A year to be first-class workman.

This 'learning', again, was purely experiential. It was pointed out by several witnesses to the Royal Commission that there was no apprenticeship system in the jute mills. I.J.M.A. said in its evidence that 'the bulk of the work in the mill is unskilled, and where training is necessary, as for instance in the spinning department, this is obtained in the course of actual employment, by the efforts of the worker himself'. On the preparing side, 'a few weeks at any of the machines ... [was] long enough to make the worker proficient'. Weaving needed 'skilled' work 'but, generally speaking, weavers become proficient very quickly'. Even mechanics, joiners, blacksmiths had no system of formal training: '[they] ... start as boys, and are paid a nominal wage until they become of use'.

...
The informality of the jute mills' system of recruitment and training - two important features of industrial discipline - was the subject of comment in 1945 in a note on 'Apprenticeship to Jute Mill Weaving Departments' prepared by the newly-formed Labour Department of the I.J.M.A. 'Notwithstanding that the Jute Industry has prospered and expanded upon the output of its many looms', the note said, 'there has never been established any common method of selecting recruits or of teaching young workers the business of weaving'. Worse still, such informal training as the worker could receive by watching or helping others was often a matter of breaking factory-rules or legislation: '[the] knowledge of power loom weaving could only be gained by the efforts of the novice himself in time spent, usually surreptitiously, beside a friendly weaver already employed in a mill factory'. What permitted such a state of affairs to continue was the stagnation in technology which reflected, as we have seen, a lack of diversity in the products of the mills and their rather crude nature. This, again, was commented on in the note:

Of recruits who had any specialised tuition in weaving there were none, and there are very few today ... No lasting improvement of quality or quantity of outturn could possibly result from this system, and it is probably true that the operative himself is no better equipped technically to turn out good fabric today than was his grandfather fifty years ago. Pride of craftsmanship has not been fostered, nor have any efforts been made to improve or widen the outlook of the operative who frequently never attains greater proficiency than is needed for operating a loom weaving [only] one type of fabric.  

This discussion helps explain why the owners in the jute industry took a rather selective view of working-class conditions. Given the easily-learned nature of jute mill work, individual workers remained
highly replaceable so long as the supply of labour was adequate. The
task of structuring a labour force was therefore largely a supply-
proposition to the mills and not a question of skill-formation, training
or efficiency. An 'ample supply of [cheap] male labour', and not
efficiency, was what was always seen as an important key to the prosperity
of the mills. It was in fact a concern with the supply of labour that
often produced a certain atmosphere of laxity of rules within a jute
mill. As the factory inspector explained in his report for 1893:

A number of men, women and children can at most times
of the day be seen in the grounds of the large [jute]
mills, either asleep under the trees or shady parts
of the building, taking their meals, bathing or
smoking in a special shed ... built for the purpose.
The question might suggest itself to some ... as to
why so many are able to leave their work at all times
of the day when in the Home Mills everyone is kept
under lock and key. The answer is simple but a very
striking one. There are 100 per cent. more hands
employed in every Jute Mill in Bengal than is required
to work a similar sized mill in Dundee.

The mills obviously found it cheaper to carry with them an amount of
excess labour (to meet contingencies like epidemics and absenteeism)
than to invest in a healthy, vigorous, efficient working class. As late
as 1929, the Indian jute mill worker was half as efficient as a worker
in Dundee. I.J.M.A. explained that this was not because 'the work
[in India] is unduly hard'. Nor was it caused by the 'climatic
conditions', but 'simply because this has been the custom so far as
the Calcutta jute mills are concerned'.

In the eyes of the employers, then, certain aspects of working-class
conditions gained priority over others and received more attention. And
the knowledge produced as a result of this attention bore an unmistakable
stamp of the employers' concern about the supply of labour. The 'areas of origin' of the workers, for instance, became an object of investigation, especially at moments of inadequate supply of labour. Hence the availability of such information. Foley's report of 1905, itself a document on labour-supply, gave evidence of this. J. Nicoll of I.J.M.A. told Foley that 'he had experienced some difficulty [in procuring labour] in his three Jute Mills in 1902, and had therefore caused a census to be made that year, showing the districts from which the hands came', and it was this data that Foley reproduced in his report. But Foley also noted that such information was not collected except in times of labour scarcity. The average jute mill manager, who was 'usually a kindly Scot from Dundee', was 'generally ... unable to say from where his hands come, and if told the information would convey no meaning to him'. Foley's impressions are confirmed by a 1921 report on 'The Conditions of Employment of Women Before and After Child-Birth in Bengal Industries' by Dr D.F. Curjel of the Indian Medical Service. Of the twenty-five jute mills Curjel visited, none was able to offer any information about the number of children born to their female workers. Curjel was struck by the manager's lack of interest in working-class conditions. The manager of the Soorah Jute Mill 'did not concern himself with conditions affecting lives of his workers'. She found the manager of the Lawrence Jute Mill 'rather vague as to [the] class of labour employed', and he 'seemed to take little interest' in their conditions. The manager of the Union Jute Mill who 'had been in charge 6 months' told Curjel that 'he had been too busy to think about the health of the workers'. This lack of interest was once again reflective of capital's view of labour conditions: they mattered only if and when they affected labour supply. 'It is interesting
to find', Curjel noted after talking to the manager of the Howrah Jute Mills, 'how little managers know of the origins of the labour employed in their mills. As long as the sirdars produced the required number of workers, it does not concern them from what district it is drawn'.

Even more telling was the reception that Curjel had from the manager of the Ballighata Jute Mill. The manager 'would scarcely discuss' the subject of labour conditions with Curjel. He said 'he did not concern himself with the workers' lives'. 'He took no interest in modern labour questions [and] "thought it all useless"'. Curjel notes why this was so:

The manager who had been in this mill for many years, did not appear to be the very least interested in conditions affecting his workers, so long as he got the labour.91

Thus it was that in the jute mills of Calcutta the employers' vision of labour conditions developed its particular blind-spots: the worker's health became a question of epidemics and not one of nutrition; in this connection sanitation became a matter of interest but not the worker's general standard of living;92 and while areas of 'origin' of labourers became on occasion a subject of documentation and research, the individual worker remained largely undocumented almost throughout the period under consideration.93 The political economy of the jute industry thus goes a long way towards explaining why the mill-managers were not particularly careful about the proper maintenance of records relating to conditions of labour.
The selectiveness with which the industry treated the question of labour conditions meant that the factory-documents covered a narrow range of issues, touching upon only a few aspects of the workers' lives. But apart from the narrowness of their scope, there was yet another problem that the authorities faced in handling these documents: their unreliability. This is why the attendance-registers of jute mills were described in 1930 as not reflecting 'the true conditions' of labour. Factory inspectors, courts of justice trying cases involving jute-mill workers, the managers of the mills - all complained of this. 'You will admit', J.A. Murray of I.J.M.A. was asked by Sir Victor Sasoon of the Royal Commission on Labour, 'that it must be very difficult for the management to be sure that the attendance books that come before them are accurate?' 'It is difficult', Murray agreed. The extent of the 'difficulty' was underscored in the Factory Inspector's report for 1927 where he quoted a letter 'from a Subdivision Officer' as only 'an example of the value' of such documents. The letter read:

In connection with a bad-livelihood case one *** said to be the clerk in charge of the attendance register of the *** Jute Mills, was summoned on behalf of the defence as witness. He gave sworn testimony that the undertrial prisoner *** had attended the mill from the 10th to 13th January 1927 and had drawn Rs 4-11 as wages. He stated that he had noted the attendance personally. It transpired, however, that the said *** was arrested by the Police on 30th December 1926 in connection with a dacoity case and since that day he was continuously in the Jail lock-up to the end of February 1927. The entries in the attendance register must be false entries ... The attendance register has been kept in a very slovenly manner and there are many unattested corrections and many entries are in pencil.
Similar remarks were made by the Subdivisional Officer of Serampore who tried the 'Time Babu' of the Champdany Jute Mill in 1913 for employing a child on a basis of a cancelled medical certificate.

I would point out [he said] that the provisional certificate shown to me does not bear any doctor's signature, and appears to be merely a blank form filled up by an unknown person. This suggests a lack of supervision, specially as I was told [that] this was the customary practice.  

The problem of unreliability of documents then takes us back to a question already highlighted in our discussion of Marx's argument - the nature and quality of supervision inside the mills. The 'subordinate supervising staff' in the jute mills were of two classes. 'In the first class there would be the more or less educated babu who has never been a mill operative himself'. Initially appointed as an apprentice, the babu was soon promoted to supervisory work under a Scottish assistant. The duties of the babu were to 'check attendances, to keep attendance registers', to prepare wage books and 'generally assist in the supervision and work of the department'. Below the babu was the sardar who was both a supplier and supervisor of labour and was often of the same social origins as the ordinary worker himself. The Government of Bengal pictured the sardar thus:

The immediate employer of a worker is his sirdar. The sirdar gives him his job and it is by his will that the worker retains it ... The sirdars are the real masters of men. They employ them and dismiss them, and, in many cases, they house them and can unhouse them. They may own or control the shops which supply the men with food. The operative, too, pays his lump or recurring sum to the sirdar to retain his job. His life, indeed, at every turn is coloured by sirdarism.
The I.J.M.A. described the sardars and the under-sardars as constituting 'the lower subordinate supervising staff of the mills'.

The sardar assisted the babu in the latter's task of maintaining factory-documents. The process was explained in the conversation that took place between Victor Sassoon and J.A. Murray during the proceedings of the Royal Commission on Labour:

Sassoon [S]: Is the only check as to attendance after men are at their machines?
Murray [M]: That is right.
S: Tokens[designating shifts] are not taken at the gate and put on their machines?
M: No. The check is taken after the workman is at the machine.
S: The baboo walks round the machinery and puts down the number of people he happens to see working at the machines or probably the sardar tells him are present?
M: He is supposed to check up each worker individually.
S: But I take it the sardar tells him who is there and he takes the word of the sardar to a great extent?
M: That may happen.

As the Government of Bengal's description of the sardar will have made clear, sardari was primarily about supervisory workers making money at the expense of the ordinary worker through such means as moneylending, bribery etc. Sardars 'dismissed labour and engaged fresh hands just at their pleasure', the I.J.M.A. complained to the Royal Commission, and 'each man who signed on had to pay for the job'. In this the sardar often acted in league with the babu.
It is easy to see that the 'corruption' of the sardar and the babu would have necessarily imparted a perverse character to the mill-documents relating to working-class conditions - wage-books, attendance-registers, fine-books, shift-tokens, medical certificates etc. This at any rate was the burden of the official complaints. One example that the authorities often gave to support their contention was the way the medical certificates of child-workers were treated in the mills. In point of law, these certificates were meant to protect the health of the working class by preventing the employment of under-age children. But the practice of each child-recruit having to bribe the sardars and the babus made this impossible of attainment. As the Chief Inspector of Factories explained to the Royal Commission:

> The sirdar produces the children and, in many cases, allows them to be employed whether they are fit, certified or not, and he being illiterate cannot satisfy himself as to the correctness of the entries in the register. He must, however, keep the spindles going, if not directly to maintain continuity of production, to maintain his receipts on a child capitation basis.\(^{102}\)

This apparently led to a fairly rapid turnover of children from individual mills, a process that contributed to the 'unreliability' of documents. Captain O'Connor, the Senior Certifying Surgeon of Factories, Barrackpore District, wrote: 'The principal reason why children migrate from mill to mill is that they are forcibly turned out by sirdars for pecuniary gain'. The result was that it became 'quite normal ... for a child to have a certificate in each of a number of mills in a district', and a child 'whose certificate is cancelled for not being produced' could 'easily be re-certified under another name'.\(^{103}\) Colonel Nott, the Civil Surgeon of
Howrah, reported a case in 1913 in which the same child applied to him on the same day for certificates in two different names, one Muslim and the other Hindu - Pir Mohamed and Banojowah. Enquiries revealed that he had done it at the sardar's instruction.  

A similar phenomenon could be observed in the case of adult labour as well. 'When checking registers', wrote the Factory Inspector in 1930, 'a woman under examination may give two or three names with a certain amount of persistence'. The manipulation of the attendance-registers (and other documents) by sardars and babus invariably led to an inflation of the wage-bill. 'You may have 10 per cent of the names on your books', the Royal Commission suggested to the manager of the Caledonian Jute Mill, 'who actually do not exist as far as working is concerned and that money goes somewhere?' 'Yes', replied the manager, 'it is divided between the baboos and the sardars and the man who is doing the two men's jobs'. Another manager admitted in his evidence that about 7½ per cent of his labour force were probably such ghost workers. The Chief Inspector of Factories however thought these figures to be underestimates. While 'theoretically' and 'according to the register', the multiple-shift mills carried 22 or 25 per cent more labour than in single-shift mills, the Inspector knew that in reality it was 'considerably less than 10 per cent'.  

A study of the process of 'supervision' within a jute mill - i.e. a problem that Marx saw as central to the question of documentation of the conditions of work - turns on the problem of 'corruption' of the supervisory staff. Why was 'the labour of overlooking' in a Calcutta jute mill riddled with 'corruption'? How does one account for the widespread practices of falsifying documents?
VII

One could obviously and easily develop a 'needs-of-capital' type argument in response to these questions. It could be argued, for instance, that the sardar existed only because he served the 'needs of capital' in the jute industry and that his so-called 'corrupt' practices - recruiting workers for bribes, housing them, lending them money at high interests - constituted a kind of service to capital in a labour market that the industry had done very little to structure.

There is a body of evidence that supports this view. The mills, it would appear, were prepared to tolerate the 'corrupt' practices of the sardar as he was considered indispensable. Even though the I.J.M.A. bitterly complained to the Royal Commission about sardari 'corruption', they nevertheless insisted that 'you [could] not do without sardars'.\(^{109}\) The financial outlays made by the mills on wages to be paid to the labourers clearly allowed for a certain amount of leakage through sardari corruption. Admittedly, this was not true of the (relatively) high-wage, piece-paid department of weaving; here 'a check [was] made by calculating the total production of each section of the department, so that the total amount actually earned by production must equal the amount to be paid out'.\(^{110}\) In weaving, therefore, sardari extortion of ordinary workers took the form of bribery, money-lending etc.\(^{111}\) But in every other department the wage-policy followed the simple aim of keeping the 'corrupt' practices of the sardar and the babu (e.g. inflating the wage-bill by employing 'ghost workers') under control rather than attempting to abolish them altogether.
In each department throughout the works ... a complement is drawn up, showing the number of hands it requires to run satisfactorily; and against this number is shown the amount in wages that such departments are bound down to.\textsuperscript{112}

There is also evidence suggesting a direct complicity, in some cases, of the Scottish overseers and managers of the mills in the 'corrupt' acts of the sardar and the babu. The Kankinarrah Labour Union (formed in 1922) 'once exposed a case of bribery when Rs 3000 had been paid for the position of a Head Sardar'. The President of the union, K.C. Roy Chowdhury, noted in his diary that 'the money had been received by a friend of the manager of the [jute] mill concerned'.\textsuperscript{113} His diary also had the following entry which is even more revealing:

Sen, the Head Babu of the Union [Jute] Mill, informed me today that numerous false tickets [tokens] are distributed every day at their mill. This means that tokens are distributed in the names of people who have not actually done any work. The money is then divided between the sardars, the Head Babu and the European overseer sahib. Bima sardar reportedly even supplies the weekly groceries for the overseer sahibs free of any cost.\textsuperscript{114}

How did all this suit the 'needs of capital'? Why were the owners of capital in the jute industry prepared to overlook, and at best contain, this 'corruption' rather than stamp it out? Obviously, the sardar in his role of labour-supplier was important to the industry's view of its own interests. The Chief Inspector of Factories explained this in 1913:

All mills have to rely on the Sirdars and Time-Babus of their various departments for the supply of labour, [and therefore] the Manager has either to overlook irregularities practised by these men or to deal strictly with them and face a shortage [of labour] which results in a reduced weekly outturn in tonnage of gunnies, and seriously affects his position with the Managing Agents.\textsuperscript{115}
But as we shall see, finding inexpensive ways of controlling labour was a problem of even greater concern to the industry than simply the problem of labour-supply. This is why the *sardar* remained important even when the supply of labour was adequate. To understand why this was so, we have to look at the nature of the demand for labour that the industry created and the way it proceeded to meet that demand.

A plentiful supply of labour was considered necessary for the progress of the industry. Between the years 1895 and 1926, when the industry enjoyed an almost uninterrupted period of prosperity and expansion of output, the number of workers employed in the mills grew from 73,725 to 338,497. The supply of labour had to be adjusted to the I.J.M.A.-devised strategy of short-time working which frequently imposed weekly 'idle days' on the mills as a way of reducing output (to match temporary fluctuations in demand) and wage-bills. From 1913 onwards, the mills kept changing 'from four to five days a week or from five days to six days a week and so on at different intervals', sometimes changing 'twice or three times a year'. But as the mills offered no incentives for long-term service, a temporary closure of a mill often meant a temporary loss of labour. The problem was an old one, but assumed critical importance in the prosperous years of 1895-1926 when individual mills always wanted to conserve labour for days when they might be called upon to expand output. The means devised to meet this end was the multiple shift system whereby the labour force was worked in three or four shifts during the day and into the night. Between 1913 and 1926 more than 90 per cent of the jute mills worked on this system. The main advantage of the system was not economy. An 'abundance of labour or surfeit of it ... [was] a necessary concomitant of multiple-shift employment', as that was the only way it could be
ensured, at least on paper, that the workers did not work beyond the legally allowed hours. There was for instance an elaborate relief-system for weavers which necessitated employing extra 'daily-weavers'. It was generally agreed in 1929 that a multiple-shift mill carried 25 to 30 percent more labour (at least on its books) than a single-shift mill. But therein lay its advantage, a reduction in the risk of a bottle-neck developing in labour supply should the trade ever demand an increase in output.

By an accident of history, the industry's search for an ample supply of labour took place at a time that saw enormous increases in emigration of labour from Bihar and U.P. and other regions into Bengal. 'Twenty years ago', Foley wrote in 1905, 'all the hands [in jute mills] were Bengalis. These have been gradually replaced by Hindustanis from the United Provinces and Bihar ... so that at present in most of the mills two-thirds of the hand are composed of up-countrymen'. And once the flow started 'from upcountry', it flowed - as the Royal Commission on Labour was told - 'very strongly'. The situation was considered so satisfactory by 1895 that an official enquiry committee formed to investigate the question of labour supply to the Bengal coal mines felt that 'there was no necessity' to conduct any 'exhaustive enquiry into the subject of labour supply for jute mills'. Nor did the mills particularly press for one. Foley was 'somewhat astonished' in 1905 to find that large increases in demand for jute mill labour between 1895-96 and 1903-04 had been easily met in spite of 'no recruitment on any systematic method ... at all' and without any 'material' rise in wages. Even the problem of seasonal shortage of labour - e.g. during harvesting months - that Foley and other early observers of the industry
often commented on seems to have lost its importance in the later years. In their memorandum dealing with 'methods of recruitment' I.J.M.A. said to the Royal Commission in 1929 that 'labour is in good supply all the year round'. When asked about the seasonal shortage of the 'olden days', the I.J.M.A. representatives remarked that even those conditions had changed after 1914: 'the fact remains that since 1914 labour has never been scarce'.

Evidence of the industry's sense of satisfaction regarding supply of labour may also be seen in certain significant changes in the geographical location of the mills. In the early days, when the mill-hands were local - i.e. 'mostly Bengalis' - an 'isolated site' for a mill was 'recognized as an advantage, the hands ... living in the neighbourhood'. In those years 'it was considered by the mills a matter of life and death to prevent a rival company settling down in proximity to their labour supply'. The first two years of the Victoria Jute Mill built in 1885 on the riverbank opposite the Samnugger Jute Mill were marked by what Wallace called 'the celebrated land dispute' between the two mills. 'We are a little short of hands this week', ran a typically complaining letter from the Samnugger Mill to its directors in 1887, '... and this may affect us. The Victoria [Mill] has taken up all our spare hands ... [and] we do not have so many to fall back on and that injures us a bit'. The Hastings Mill's rather 'unremunerative' decision in 1894 to work day and night by electric light was 'said to have been suggested by a rumour that another ... firm contemplated putting up a large Mill near Hastings, whereupon the proprietors of the latter thought they might as well find employment for all the hands in the neighbourhood ... by running 22 hours, instead of from daylight to dark'. As labour became
'chiefly immigrant' and came of its own in abundant numbers, the situation soon reversed itself. Mills were no longer located in isolation from one another. Instead, noted Foley, 'it is considered now [1905] ... an advantage to have a site in a centre, such ... as Kankinara, where immigrant labour congregates'. This explains why the number of mills on the 24 Parganas side of the river Hooghly - where Kankinara, Jagaddal and other centres of immigrant labour were located in very close proximity to one another - eventually grew much faster than the numbers in other districts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>No. of jute mills in the year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1880</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hooghly</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Howrah</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 Parganas</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: For 1880, The Jute Mills of Bengal (Dundee, 1880); for 1896, John Leng, 'The Indian Dundee' in his Letters from India and Ceylon (Dundee, 1896); for 1911 and 1921, Census of India 1921, Vol. V, Pt 1, p. 403.

A significant aspect of this migration of labour from U.P., Bihar and other places into Bengal was that it enabled the industry to replace Bengali workers by their 'cheaper', up-country substitutes and this at a time when the industry was looking for ways of saving expenses. The I.J.M.A.'s move in 1886 to reduce wage-expenditure by short-time working was in fact preceded by 'most of the Mills ... taking action
Just how large these reductions were is suggested by a letter that the Dundee directors of the Titaghur Jute Mill received from their Calcutta manager towards the end of 1885. The letter reported, to the directors' delight, 'that the wages at the works have now been reduced Rs 1000 per week below what used to be paid, which the Directors considered very satisfactory and creditable to the Manager'. The prolongation of working hours with the introduction of electricity into the mills about 1895 also seems to have caused a decline in the Bengali component of the labour force. Whatever the specific factors aiding these changes in the social composition of the jute-mill working class, the result was that by the 1920s the labour-force was of a predominantly migrant character (see Table 15 below).

It is important to emphasize that the industry provided little service in helping these migrant workers to settle down in the city and in thus developing a permanently stable labour-force. The reason for this inaction lay in the very mercantilist spirit in which the jute mills handled their economic affairs. In the minds of the entrepreneurs in the industry, as we have seen in the last chapter, profit was firmly linked to the idea of 'cheap products'. It was thought that their cheapness gave these products - sacking and hessian of a very crude quality - a competitive edge over any natural or synthetic substitutes. Hence the insistence within the industry on keeping their products crude and cheap - a policy which resulted in a stagnant technology and an unskilled labour-force. A cheap product had to be produced at a low cost, and the availability of cheap labour in eastern India was seen as a definite advantage in this regard. Thus developed the
**TABLE 15**

Areas of origin of jute-mill workers, 1921-41  
(figures in percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Bengal</th>
<th>Bihar</th>
<th>Orissa</th>
<th>United Provinces</th>
<th>Madras</th>
<th>Central Provinces</th>
<th>Others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>24.1</td>
<td>33.4</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>23.1</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1928</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>37.1</td>
<td>(inc. Orissa)</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1929</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>(inc. Orissa)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>43.1</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Figures have been rounded off to the first decimal place.)

Sources: Ranajit Das Gupta, 'Factory Labour in Eastern India: Sources of supply, 1855-1946 - Some Preliminary Findings', The Indian Economic and Social History Review, Vol. XIII, No. 3, p. 297, Table 6, except for the column for 1928 which is derived from W.B.S.A., Com. Dept Com. Br. April 1930 A7-12. The 1921 figures apply to the whole of the labour-force and the 1928 figures relate to 25 jute mills. The 1929 figures are very approximate, and the 1941 figures were drawn from a sample survey of mill workers in the Jagaddal area and hence are not representative of the whole working class.

labour-intensive nature of the industry, where labour alone accounted for about 50 per cent of the cost of converting raw jute into the finished material (Table 16).

The bulk of this 'labour cost' was constituted by wages. Given their concern for keeping down the prices of their products while using labour-intensive methods of production, the owners of the jute mills were reluctant to spend on any individual labourer anything beyond such
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Labour cost as percentage of the costs of conversion (figures relate to different mills)</th>
<th>Remarks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1880(^a)</td>
<td>45&lt;br&gt;40</td>
<td>Figures for two mills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 1900(^b)</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Figure for a hypothetical Calcutta mill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1927(^c)</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Figure for one mill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1937(^d)</td>
<td>49.6&lt;br&gt;55.4&lt;br&gt;50.7&lt;br&gt;49.5</td>
<td>Figures for four mills</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: for (a), The Jute Mills of Bengal (Dundee, 1880), pp. 20, 47; for (b), Archives of the Modern History Department, Dundee University, Card Collection on Cox Brothers, card entitled 'Cost of Mill and Factory' (c. 1900); for (c), D.H. Buchanan, Capitalist Enterprise, p. 250; for (d), C.S.A.S., B.P., Box 13, 'Paul' to Edward Benthall, 20 Sept. 1937, Enclosures.

minimum necessities as wages. And even the wages paid were single-worker wages; they were not enough to support a worker's family. According to an estimate of 1929 the 'average income' of a jute mill worker was Rs 5 per week, while it would cost him at least Rs 7 to maintain a family of himself, his wife and, say, three children.\(^{140}\) The increase over the years in investment in workers' housing was extremely tardy. An 1897 survey of about 73,000 of the Bengal jute mill workers showed only 13.5 per cent of them living in company-built coolie-lines. The rest
had had to make their own arrangements.¹⁴¹ Thirty years later in 1929 when the mill labour-force had increased to 339,665, only 30 per cent of the jute mill labour were housed by the mills, according to the Bengal Chamber of Commerce and I.J.M.A.¹⁴² Stability of labour was obviously not in itself a crucial concern to the industry - semi-skilled or unskilled workers being highly replaceable - so long as the supply of labour remained abundant.

One can also see this in the extremely underdeveloped nature of the factory-rules that were in operation in the jute mills. The service-rules, for instance, had been left largely uncodified. Graded wage-systems (with provisions for regular increments), pensions, provident-funds, sickness-insurance, leave-rules - all the usual inducements for long-term service and stability - were conspicuous by their absence. Leave as a rule was without pay and the amount of pay due to a worker during his or her sickness remained 'a matter for the manager's discretion'.¹⁴³ Sickness insurance was considered 'impossible'¹⁴⁴ and so were provident funds and pensions. When the workers of the Fort William, the Howrah and the Ganges jute mills went out on strike in February 1937, the Secretary to the Government of Bengal concluded that they could not have had any 'serious grievances' as their leaders asked for 'such obviously impossible terms as provision of provident funds and pension'.¹⁴⁵

For such an uncared-for and poverty-ridden working class, the sardar performed functions that ideally should have been performed by the employers, such as supplying work, credit and housing. R.N. Gilchrist, the Labour intelligence Officer of Bengal, thus pictured the average migrant worker in 1930 'as he sets out from his village to find work':
The sirdar may oblige him with his fare and a little money to buy food on the way... The sirdar may advance him a little more money, for a job may not be immediately available, and he may also direct him to live in certain quarters and to buy his rice at a certain shop. The day when there is a vacancy comes, and the sirdar may say: "Your pay on the books of the mill is twelve rupees a month, but I have incurred some expense for you. Usually when I give a job, I require thirty rupees down and one rupee a month for two years. You have no money to give me as a lump sum, so you will pay me two rupees a month for as long as I secure you a job. If you do not, I cannot be certain your job will last". The grateful youth... gratefully accepts... As he grows older and wiser, he gradually finds out that the sirdar owns the house in which he shares a room with six others and for which they all pay rent, and that he also owns the shop where he buys his rice.146

This of course was part of the 'corruption' that the industry and the government complained of. The sardari practices undoubtedly constituted a kind of secondary exploitation of ordinary workers by their supervisory or superior colleagues.147 But it could be legitimately argued that the employers allowed such 'corruption' to exist because it saved them the expense of investing in institutions otherwise typical of capitalist control of labour. Sardari control was cheaper than housing, healthcare or an articulated body of rules guiding the conditions of work.

VIII

A 'needs-of-capital' type argument then tells us that the sardar existed along with his invariably 'corrupt' practices mainly because they were allowed so to exist. They suited the strategy of capital. This is an important consideration but it does not go far enough for the purpose at hand. Most important, it does not answer the question that
Marx helps us to raise: what was the relationship between the sardar's authority and his 'corruption'? As we have seen, it was sardari 'corruption' that ultimately distorted the documents which the supervisors in a jute mill were required to produce and keep. The nature of supervisory authority in the Calcutta jute mills was thus significantly different from the one discussed in Marx's argument. For Marx, the supervisor's authority in capitalist relations of production manifested itself in the keeping of time-sheets, fine-books, attendance-registers, wage-rolls etc. Such maintenance of documents implied a keeping of the wage-contract between capital and labour. And the notion of the contract took us back to Marx's specific assumptions regarding working-class culture, assumptions that informed his category of 'capital'. Our jute mills, however, presented a very different picture. The supervisory authority of the sardar (or of his accomplice babu) produced unreliable, falsified documents. One could in fact go further and argue that falsifying documents was integral to the operation of the power and authority that the sardar wielded over the ordinary coolie. What appeared to the state as 'corruption', 'abuse', breaking of the rules, etc. was precisely the form in which the sardar's authority was manifested. Or to put it in another way, it was an authority that was incompatible with any bourgeois notions of legality, factory codes and service-rules.

We would be mistaken, for example, to see the bribe that the ordinary coolie gave the sardar simply as an economic transaction. The bribe was also a sign, a representation, of the sardar's authority and its acceptance by the worker, which is why an act of refusal to pay the bribe was seen as a gesture of defiance and exposed the worker to
a degree of anger, vendetta and violence from the sardar that was often out of proportion to the amount of money involved. K.C. Roy Chowdhury's diaries mentioned the not untypical case of one Abdul, a worker of the Hukumchand Jute Mill, who was stabbed by the followers of a certain sardar called Sujat for having refused to pay the latter his dastoori, or customary commission. The nature of the sardar's authority and power is visible in the details of the following letter that some twenty-eight workers of the Budge Budge Jute Mill once wrote to a Bengali barrister in December 1906:

We have to get permission for leaves from the Sahib. But we have to pay bribes to the babu and the sardar at the time of the leave; further, they take bribes from us every month and also when the Durga Puja season approaches. If we refuse to pay them they get the sahib to fine or dismiss us on false charges of bad workmanship. Till recently we felt compelled to meet their unjust demands. But as prices ran very high last year at the time of Durga Puja, we expressed our intention to pay them a little less than in earlier years. At this the Head Sardar Haricharan Khanra has been going around instigating the Assistant Babu Atul Chandra Chattopadhyay to collect even more parbani [gifts customarily due at times of religious festivals; parbani = religious festival] than usual. The two of them have even advised the in-charge Panchanan Ghose, a nice gentlemen otherwise, to force us to pay a much larger parbani this year. When [in protest] we stopped paying any parbani whatsoever, they got the sahib to fine us on cooked up charges ... But, in truth, we are not guilty.

A large part of the sardar's authority was then based on fear: 'we felt compelled to meet their unjust demands'. So great was the fear of the sardar's vengeance that several of the workers interviewed by the Royal Commission strenuously denied having paid any bribes for their employment. But their denial lacked the force of conviction. Sorju, an under-sardar of the Anglo-Indian Jute Mill, admitted that there
was bribery 'in every department' of the mill but claimed that there was none in his own. Kalil, a weaver in the same mill, said that he had heard 'that sardars take Rs 5 or Rs 10 but so far as I am concerned I did not pay anything'. Harilal, a spinner in the Titaghur Jute Mill, insisted that he 'did not pay any bakshish for getting my job' while he thought it possible that 'other people might be paying bakshish to the sardar'. A Madrasi female worker of the Howrah Jute Mill told her interviewers that she got her employment only after promising the sardar two rupees from her 'first wages'. On the statement being read out to her, however, she retracted it. 'It is probably true', remarked the interviewers.

It is of course undeniable that much of this fear of the sardar derived from the employers allowing him to 'dismiss and engage fresh hands just at [his] pleasure' (to repeat the words of I.J.M.A.). Babuniya, a Bihari female worker of the Titaghur Jute Mill, thus expressed her fear to the Royal Commission:

> When I was first entertained I had to pay Rs 4 bakshish to the sardar who appointed me. Each time I return back from the village I have to pay the same amount as bakshish to the sardar. I also pay him 2 as. every week. My husband paid Rs 6 when he was first appointed. He pays 4 annas a week to the sardar. If we refuse to pay the sardars we will not get work. Every worker pays a similar amount to the sardar.

Another important element in the sardar's domination was the use of naked physical force. For the ordinary worker, as we have noted, there was always 'the fear of being beaten'. The child-workers, it was said, would not normally speak up against the sardar for this very
reason. Narsama Kurmi, a female worker of the Howrah Jute Mill, was 'obliged to leave' Howrah as 'she had trouble with a sirdar'. She returned only after 'she found [that] the sirdar who annoyed her [had] gone'.

Like all domination, however, the sardar's domination was not based on fear alone. There was always an undercurrent of tension between the sardar and the ordinary worker and pushed beyond a certain point, the worker could become openly hostile. To be effective therefore the sardar's authority also needed legitimacy and acceptance. Fear had to be balanced by respect. In fact, according to R.N. Gilchrist, the typical jute-mill sardar was more respected than feared. 'The sirdar [is] a man of considerable importance', Gilchrist wrote. 'He is ... respected, perhaps even feared'.

What made the sardar's authority effective? Our tentative answer would be 'culture', the culture to which both the sardar and the worker belonged. In essence this was a pre-capitalist culture with a strong emphasis on religion, community, kinship, language and other primordial loyalties. The evidence on this point is not direct but is extremely suggestive. It seems significant, for instance, that all the words used by the workers (and others) to describe sardari extortions - extortions summed up in the legalistic expression 'corruption' or 'abuses' - were words of pre-capitalist, pre-British origin: dastoori, bakshish, batta, parbani, salami, etc. Dastoori, the most widely used of these words, came from the word dastoor which meant 'custom' or 'tradition'. Even the word sardar in its meaning of 'labour supplier' - though literally it meant 'a headman' - was in vogue in the late eighteenth century and
perhaps even earlier. Besides, the sardar's mode of operation had certain crucial pre-capitalist elements. He usually recruited on the basis of the often overlapping networks of community, village and kin. The Government of Bengal wrote:

Sirdars in the jute mills, engineering works, and other concerns recruit in their own native villages and surrounding areas; hence there is a tendency for people from the same village or the immediate neighbourhood to congregate in the same industrial area in Bengal.

Much of the basis of the sardar's social control of the workforce lay in the relationships of community, kinship, religion etc. and in the ideas and norms associated with them. For example, it was usual for important up-country sardars to build temples or mosques for the workers under them. On this depended a lot of the sardar's prestige and authority. Mosques in jute-mill areas are even today named after important sardars and stand as monuments to their one-time enormous presence. 'Manbodh sardar ki musjid', 'Birbal sardar ki musjid', 'Ishaque sardar ki musjid' are, to give a few instances, the names of three working-class mosques that exist today in the Kankinara area. Sardari thus seems to have been an instance of a pre-colonial, pre-capitalist institution being adapted to the needs of industrialization in a colony.

The sardar then embodied contradictory elements of authority. He owed his formal position of being a foreman to the managers and owners of capital and, in that sense, was a functionary in the capitalist production system of the jute mills. He was also different from the traditional village headman of north India in that 'sardar-ships' could be bought and sold on the market. Yet he was not quite the industrial
foreman of nineteenth-century Western Europe whose role 'became increasingly technical' as time passed. Sardars were selected not for any technical ability but for 'the authority which they display[ed] over their fellowmen' even before becoming sardars. 'Tumko apnā sardar kā hukum manna hoga' ('you will have to obey the orders of your own sardar') was one sentence that the Scottish managers and assistants in the mills were expected to learn in order to use it in dealing with a refractory worker. The sentence brings out the ambiguity of the sardar's authority. His hukum (order) was obviously subordinate to yet another imperative ('You will have to'), that of the manager, the representative of capital. But the word hukum (with connotations of hukumat or sovereignty) - once again an ancient word familiar to the north Indian peasant - would have had long and deep resonances within the worker's consciousness and culture.

In this situation, legally required factory documents on working-class conditions were largely irrelevant to the exercise of the sardar's authority which was rooted not in capitalist but in pre-capitalist modes of domination. The sardar ensured obedience to his hukum through means that were either 'illegal' or that fell outside the rule of law. His was not the 'disciplinary authority' that Marx outlined in his argument. When the Government of India grafted a disciplinary apparatus of documentation on the culture that supported (and sometimes resisted) the sardar's domination, these documents found their own place and meaning within that culture: as additional vehicles of the sardar's power and authority. The sardar now proved his power by bending rules and falsifying documents. Hence the phenomenon of 'false fines',
'cooked up charges', 'wrongful dismissals', etc. The very nature of this authority entailed, that is, 'unreliable' documents.

IX

We may thus repeat our principal argument. An attempt to write a history of the conditions of the jute mill workers of Calcutta on the basis of documents coming from the state and the owners of capital invariably reveals certain gaps in our knowledge of these conditions. Insofar as that knowledge has a history, the gaps have a history too. It was the same history that produced both the knowledge - enshrined in archival documents - and the gaps which also the same documents reveal. An examination of this history (with the aid of an argument borrowed from Marx) takes us into a closer study of the political economy of the industry and the nature of the 'industrial discipline' operative within the mills. Questions relating to the latter lead us to investigate the issues of 'supervision' and working-class notions of 'authority', and hence into the realm of culture and consciousness. We shall pursue these notions further in the chapters that follow. The problems of organization, militancy and solidarity in the history of the jute-mill working class will refer us back to these very questions.
NOTES

1. S.R. Deshpande, Report on an Enquiry into Conditions of Labour in
 the Jute Mill Industry in India (Delhi, 1946), p. vi.


3. ibid., pp. 474, 476-9, 490.

4. ibid., pp. 480, 482-4.

5. ibid., pp. 488-91.

6. ibid., p. 503.

7. ibid., p. 345.

8. ibid., pp. 423-4.

9. Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison
 (Harmondsworth, 1979), p. 220.

10. ibid.


12. ibid., p. 57, n. 1.
13. This is discussed in more detail later in this chapter and in the ones that follow. See also my 'Communal Riots and Labour: Bengal's Jute Mill-Hands in the 1890s', Past and Present, May 1981.


16. See for example W.B.S.A., Home Poll Confdl, 405(1-3)/1919.


23. ibid.


31. ibid.

32. ibid.


36. ibid.


39. W.B.S.A., Genl Dept Misc. Br., August 1910 A33-86; August 1911 A18-63; and Medical Dept Medical Br., January 1914 B287-95.


52. ibid.


57. ibid., Vol. 5, Pt 1, p. 141.


60. See Raghuraj Singh, Movement of Industrial Wages in India (Bombay, 1955), pp. 223-5.


64. This description is based on the following sources: C.S.A.S., B.P., Box 18, Note entitled 'Indian Jute Industry' (n.d. [1940s?]), and N.C. Saha, 'Inside a Jute Mill', Jute and Gunny Review, February-March 1950, pp. 139-43.

65. ibid.: 'The principle of these [carding] machines is a rapidly revolving cylinder armoured with pins whilst smaller pinned rollers revolving at a slower speed are placed parallel to this cylinder and retard the fibre, thus promoting the combing action'.


67. ibid., pp. 41-2.

68. The quotations in this paragraph are from ibid., pp. 26-7, 30-1, 33, 36. Emphases added.

70. See Report of the Central Wage Board for Jute Industry (Delhi, 1963), Appendix 17.


73. The factory inspection reports for different years have material supporting this observation.

74. D.H. Buchanan, Capitalist Enterprise, p. 409. The practice of worshipping machine-tools seems to have been wide-spread among factory workers in eastern India. The author of this study remembers being present, as a child, at some of these ceremonies at a small engineering factory in Calcutta. The Jamshedpur steel-industry workers had their annual day of 'Hathyar Puja' (tool-worship) when 'tools and implements attained the status of deity'. 'Bedecked with flowers, the giant cranes and travelling derricks clanked to their appointed tasks; caparisoned with blossoms, the locomotives snorted about on the sidings; streaming garlands, the wheelbarrows squeaked from coalpit to furnace.' Lillian Luker Ashby (with Roger Whatley), My India (London, 1938), pp. 287-8.


76. W.B.S.A., Genl Dept Edn Br., March 1913 A69-85; January 1914 A31-36; April 1915 A172-75.

78. Census of India 1921 (Calcutta, 1923), Vol. V, Pt 2, Table XXII, Pts IV and V. This Census report defined all work involving machinery as 'skilled work'.


80. Foley, Report, Appendix.


82. ibid., Vol. 5, Pt 1, p. 280.

83. ibid., p. 298.

84. This and other quotations in this paragraph come from I.J.M.A., Labour Department file on [confidential] Circulars and Notes of the Committee, 1945-46: Note on 'I.J.M.A. Apprenticeship Scheme'. Emphasis added.


87. R.C.L.I., Vol. 5, Pt 1, p. 304.

88. Foley, Report, Appendix.

89. ibid., para. 23.

91. ibid.


93. For example, up to 1924 the jute mills did not keep any records of the home addresses of individual workers. The Workmen's Compensation Act made such records necessary (see R.C.L.I., Vol. 5, Pt 2, p. 21). Up to 1937 the mills did not keep any employment cards bearing the service-histories of individual workers. These were to be introduced in 1937 at the instance of the Bengal Government but not properly till 1948. See Report of the I.J.M.A. for 1937 (Calcutta, 1938).


98. ibid., p. 153.

99. ibid., pp. 280-1.

100. ibid., Vol. 5, Pt 2, pp. 144-5.

101. ibid., p. 142.
102. ibid., Vol. 5, Pt 1, p. 92.

103. ibid., pp. 333-4.


106. R.C.L.I., Vol. 5, Pt 2, pp. 142, 144-5.

107. ibid., p. 143.

108. ibid., p. 195.

109. ibid., p. 150.

110. ibid., Vol. 5, Pt 1, p. 281.

111. ibid., Vol. 5, Pt 2, p. 120.

112. ibid., Vol. 5, Pt 1, p. 281.


118. The Jute Mills of Bengal (Dundee, 1880), p. 48, mentions the case of Seebpore Jute Manufacturing Co. Ltd whose directors decided to continue working 'rather than temporarily close the mill and lose
the workpeople', even when they were faced with a depressed 'bag market'.

119 For a good description of the multiple shift system, see W.B.S.A., Com. Dept Com Br., January 1929 B261-8.

120. See R.C.L.I., Vol. 5, Pt 2, pp. 168-9, 195. Between 1926 and 1929 half of the mills transferred to the single-shift system as a result of the trade position worsening. After 1930, all the mills were working single-shift. ibid., Vol. 5, Pt 1, pp. 81-2.


123. ibid., Vol. 5, Pt 1, p. 15.

124. Foley, Report, para. 28.


127. Foley, Report, paras 18, 21-4.


129. Foley, Report, para. 26. The early mills like Fort Gloster, Gourepore, Budge Budge, Kamarhati etc. all followed this policy: see The Jute Mills of Bengal, pp. 27, 35-6, 43, 45, 68, 81.

131. ibid.


133. Wallace, Romance, p. 47.

134. John Leng, 'The Indian Dundee' in his Letters from India and Ceylon (Dundee, 1896), p. 79.


137. ibid., Minutes for 21 October 1885.


143. ibid., Vol. 5, Pt 2, p. 155.

144. ibid., Vol. 5, Pt 1, pp. 283-5.

145. W.B.S.A., Home Poll Confdl, no. 60/1937.

146. R.N. Gilchrist, Indian Labour and the Land (Calcutta, 1932), pp. 6-7.
147. The words 'sardari practices' are used here in a generalized sense to designate activities not only of the Head Sardars but of the under-sardars and some other workers as well. In an industry devoid of any structuring of skills or promotions, exploitation of the fellow worker was one important way of material advancement. The more ambitious and the luckier worker often followed the sardar's example of being a money-lender or a landlord to the less fortunate. Sardari is thus best treated both as a real institution and as a working-class ideal of success. See R.C.L.I., Vol. II, Pt 2, pp. 358, 365.


151. ibid., p. 78.


154. ibid., Vol. V, Pt 1, p. 333.


156. R.N. Gilchrist, Indian Labour, p. 6.

157. See, for example, the use of this word by Krisnakanta Nandy in his account-books of 1787-8 in S.C. Nandy, 'Krisnakanta Nandy's Book


159. This information comes both from my field-investigations and from K.C.R.P., Bengali diary no. 3, entries for 25.8.29 to 28.11.29.


162. *R.C.L.I.*, Vol. 5, Pt 1, pp. 280, 298. 'Capability, efficiency, services' were the other qualifications required.

Most observers of labour conditions in the jute industry agreed that there was an urgent need for working-class organization. Even the Government of Bengal, who could hardly be suspected of pro-labour sympathies, were moved to remark in 1929 that the industry was 'full of anomalies, which could never exist were there a properly organized jute workers' union'.\footnote{Yet a striking feature of the history of the jute workers' movement was the absence, relatively speaking, of strong and enduring trade unions. A government enquiry in 1945 revealed that only about 18 per cent of the} Besides, with the jute mills situated in very close proximity to one another, the industry often seemed to provide an ideal basis for a strong trade union movement. The government described this labour force in 1933 as 'perhaps the largest and the most compact group of workers with identical interests in the world'.\footnote{Yet a striking feature of the history of the jute workers' movement was the absence, relatively speaking, of strong and enduring trade unions. A government enquiry in 1945 revealed that only about 18 per cent of the} The Bengal Labour Commissioner too wrote in the same vein in 1935: 'Nowhere in the world are there better territorial conditions for labour organisation than round about Calcutta. The jute mills are concentrated in a narrow range of, say, 20 miles north and south of Calcutta ... [and] employ about 300,000 persons'.\footnote{Yet a striking feature of the history of the jute workers' movement was the absence, relatively speaking, of strong and enduring trade unions. A government enquiry in 1945 revealed that only about 18 per cent of the}
workers - some 47,697 of a total of 267,193 - were members of any 
unions."* This was an uncertain estimate; 'it is important to remember', 
cautioned the author of the report, 'that membership figures of Trade 
Unions are not always very reliable'.^ An important trade union leader 
was to sound an even more cautionary note a few years later. Speaking to 
a convention of the All India Trade Union Congress (A.I.T.U.C.) held in 
Calcutta in 1952, Indrajit Gupta, the General Secretary of the Communist 
dominated Bengal Chatkal Mazdoor Union, reminded his comrades of 'the 
harsh reality that the overwhelming majority of them [the jute mill 
workers], perhaps 95%, [were] not organized in any trade union' at all.° 
Both Gupta's conclusion and that drawn in the official report of 1946 
were the same. 'There is no doubt', the latter said, 'that Trade Unionism 
in the jute mill industry ... is in an extremely weak condition'.^ 'No 
healthy tradition of trade unionism has yet developed among the jute 
workers', was the view put forward by Gupta.®

II

The persistent weakness of jute workers' organization has been seen 
as somewhat paradoxical, given the history of their long-standing 
grievances and their tradition of militant and sometimes well-organized 
strikes." This militancy was especially marked in the 1920s and afterwards 
when strikes became much more frequent than before. In analyzing some 
eighty-nine strikes - twenty-seven of them in jute mills alone - that 
ocurred in the Calcutta industrial area during the second half of 1920, 
the Committee on Industrial Unrest did not think it necessary 'to go 
back further than the 1st July 1920' as strikes were much less common
in the past. 'Before that time [1920]', said the Committee, 'a certain amount of industrial unrest had been evident in Bengal as in other parts of India, but in Bengal strikes had not been resorted to on any large scale as a means of enforcing the demands of the workers'. Their opinion was echoed by the Director of Industries, Bengal, in an article he wrote in 1921. He described the 'epidemic of strikes' that broke out in Bengal in 1920 as 'unprecedented in the history of the province', as strikes 'had appeared only in isolated cases' in the earlier period when 'the demands had more commonly been non-economic in character'. Between 1921 and 30 June 1929, there were 201 recorded strikes in the jute industry, far surpassing the numbers in the preceding decades.

It was not just the higher frequency of strikes, however, that made the authorities take notice of them; the authorities were also sometimes worried by their longer duration. A strike in the Fort Gloster Jute Mills in 1928 was described by the government as 'the most protracted strike in the industry' till then. It lasted from the 17th July to the 31st December 1928 and was soon followed by a general strike that began in July 1929 and ran till the end of September. One 'notable' feature of this strike, the government thought, was its 'magnitude': 'never before in the history of the jute mills in Bengal had anything of the nature of a general strike been attempted'. The strike presaged the shape of things to come. After a temporary period of lull - 1930 to 1933 - working-class militancy reached a peak once again in the mid-1930s, culminating in a second general strike in 1937.

What this militancy reflected in the first place was certainly a heightened sense of grievance on the part of the jute mill worker. The
Royal Commission on Labour (1929) was told by a jute mill manager who had been around for about thirty years that 'there was not so much discontent [before] as there is today'. A.C. Roy Chowdhury, who carried out on behalf of the Commission an enquiry into the standard of living of the jute mill workers, reported that he had heard 'much discontented talk on the subject of low wages and lack of accommodation'. Further, the Commission itself came across some particularly sharp expressions of workers' grievances over wages and living conditions. 'Upon this [wage]', said Kamala, an Oriya woman employed by the Howrah Jute Mill, '... two people cannot live'. Mangrul, a young boy from Patna working at the Titaghur Jute Mill, was equally forthright. 'Formerly I was well fleshed', he said, 'but now I am weak as I do not get enough food'.

What made for such 'discontented talk' by the workers? Partly, no doubt, their conditions, which seem to have taken a turn for the worse in the late 'twenties and 'thirties. From about the mid-1920s, as the industry experienced the beginnings of a trade depression, it moved towards a policy of reducing its wage-bill. An early 'sign of the change' was the decision of the Reliance Jute Mill in 1923 to switch over to the single-shift system of work, resulting in the dismissal of 'over 2,000 workmen' and an important strike. 'There is no doubt whatsoever', wrote R.N. Gilchrist, the Labour Intelligence Officer of Bengal, 'that the condition of the industry at the moment is giving the Managing Agents furiously to think', and some of them were now 'coming round to the view that perhaps it would be more economical to work 5 or 5½ days a week on the single shift in preference to the multiple shift system'. By 1927, the workers had begun to feel
the pinch of the employers' policies. About one-third of the recorded strikes in the jute mills that year were due to 'the recently introduced change in the system of shifts'. The Government of Bengal informed the Government of India that 'in each of these disputes there invariably was a complaint on the part of the workmen concerned that the change, which was accompanied by the lengthening of the working week, resulted in a decrease in their weekly earnings'. The same complaint provided the 'economic basis' to the general strike on 1929. When the employers tried to explain the strike away by attributing it to 'the machinations of [political] agitators financed by Marwari "Hessian" merchants', Sir David Petrie of the Government of India's Intelligence Bureau retorted by pointing to the 'economic basis' of the strike, which 'did not seem to be disputed by anyone'; this basis lay, in Petrie's words, in 'an increase in the weekly working hours without any corresponding adjustment of wages'.

To these grievances were added those of unemployment and actual reduction in the wage-rates in the 1930s. About 60,000 workers were laid off in 1930-31, and this was followed by wage-cuts. As one government official wrote in August 1932,

The majority of the mills are working for 40 hours a week spread over four or five days. Many operatives are now paid as little as from Re 1-10 to Rs 2-1 a week. In the present economic depression of the industry there is no possibility of any increase in the rates of wages ...

The decline in the bargaining position of the working class in these years is reflected in the stagnant money-wage figures for the industry. They are in strong contrast to an apparent increase in productivity. In addition, the figures for the remittances (money-orders) sent by the workers to their villages suggest a significant
drop in their earnings. The average value of such money-orders fell by nearly 17 per cent in the 1930s compared to the average for 1922-29 (see Appendix).

There was thus enough in the jute mill workers' conditions to make them feel discontented. But we should not fall into the trap of thinking that working-class militancy was rooted in conditions alone or that the conditions by themselves were sufficient to generate such militancy. The persistence and volume of labour unrest in the 1920s and '30s have also to be understood as signalling a growing propensity, on the part of the workers, to protest and challenge the employer's authority. The 1929 general strike, for instance, surprised the government by the 'apparent ease with which the jute mill workers were brought out' by the organizers of the strike.23 'One thing is certain', Sir Edward Benthall privately remarked in his diary immediately after the strike, 'the best paid labour struck as easily as the less well paid'.24 It is indeed this growing presence, among the workers, of a will to resist the employer that makes their lack of organization seem truly paradoxical.

Given the problems of documenting the consciousness of the jute mill workers, their will to resist and question the authority of their employers can be read only in terms of the sense of crisis it produced among the people in authority. 'Labour has come to a dim realisation of its own importance', discerned a concerned government official as early as 1924. 'This is not yet overt', he said, 'yet, as every mill manager will bear out, labour cannot be handled as it was in the old days. It now requires delicate management. Brutality, bullying, unfairness, all quickly lead to trouble - usually strikes.'25 The
old argument of the government - that the strike was 'a private matter between the masters and the men' - was found no longer tenable as the force and magnitude of the general strike of 1929 compelled the government to abandon such fine considerations and intervene in settling the dispute.

In the 1930s, the 'private' authority of the individual mill manager was increasingly viewed as an inadequate agency for controlling working-class unrest. This may be seen in the direct and enlarged role given to the Labour Commissioner of the Bengal government in 1937 in monitoring labour disputes in individual jute mills. The institution of Labour Officers that the I.J.M.A. created in 1937 was another attempt to create a new means of control. In addition, the I.J.M.A. now set up its own Intelligence Service to receive timely 'warnings of developments and of the general trend of opinion' among labourers. 'The idea ... [was] to have paid spies in every mill or group of mills who [would] give information to the Intelligence Officers'. Some individual companies even created their own labour officers, and Benthall's description of the physical construction of the office proposed for their own man, Col Spain, bears a distinct imprint of the wariness with which the employers now viewed the mood of the workers. Spain's office was to be given a 'bolt hole at the back in case labour control[led] him instead of the reverse'.

We intend to provide him with an office in Titaghur Bazar on a piece of Kinnison land with an unobtrusive means of entry through the back into Titaghur [Mill] compound in case at any time a hasty retreat becomes desirable.
'The average cooly', wrote an angry jute mill manager in 1937, 'has his point of view and thinks we are exploiting him all the time, which is borne out by the fact that they believe the most ridiculous things told to them by the outside agitators in spite of all we have done to try and convince them of the truth of affairs'.\textsuperscript{34} This naïve but important statement can serve as a measure of the growing sense of hostility and distance that formed an important element of capital-labour relations in the 1930s. The intensity of this hostility is inscribed in the currency that the word 'dalal' (an agent or stooge of the employer) acquired in the 1930s as a working-class term of abuse and in the strong emotions it aroused. Some of the Muslim League trade unionists and workers who tried to combat the influence of the Communist leader A.M.A. Zaman among the jute mill workers of Hooghly in 1937 learned this at much cost to themselves. Mohiuddin Khan, one of their leaders, bitterly complained to his mentor, H.S. Suhrawardy, how labourers belonging to his union had been 'intimidated, threatened [and] molested' by the followers of Zaman. One of his 'Dalhousie [Mill] Union worker[s]', he said, had been 'assaulted by one Subhan of the Dalhousie Jute Mills'; his supporter, Mati Sardar of the Northbrook Jute Mills, had been 'chased [away] by some mill-hands'; and his follower Syed Habibur Rahman's life was in such danger that 'the poor man ... slept inside [his] room bolted from within and was literally boiled in this oppressive weather'. At the Champdani Jute Mill, an effigy of yet another worker of his union, Nurie, was 'taken round the mill by the partisans of Mr. Zaman ... [and was] spat on and beaten with shoes'.\textsuperscript{35} Interestingly, Khan's own explanation of what caused such working-class hatred and anger to be unleashed against his men suggests the strongly negative appeal of the word 'dalal' to at least some of the labourers in the mills:
The supporters of Mr. Zaman ... abused and insulted us. [They] shouted that the Dallals had come and that nobody should listen to them [us] ... [Zaman] incited the mob to beat the dallals if they ever set their feet in Champdany.\textsuperscript{36}

If the mere labelling of someone as a 'dalal' (i.e. as an agent of the employer) could trigger off such a violent response towards him, we can imagine how charged the atmosphere must have been with a spirit of hostility towards the owners and the managers of the mills and a cordial hatred of anyone seen acting in their interests. To be sure, this does not fully describe the consciousness of the workers - a pro-employer Suhrawardy otherwise would not have had any followers at all; but for any understanding of the history of jute workers' organization, this aspect of the workers' consciousness cannot be overlooked.

III

We can now formulate more clearly the apparent paradox in the history of the jute workers' trade union movement: so much militancy, yet so little organization! The 'harsh reality' was not simply that the 'overwhelming majority' of the workers had not been unionized. An even greater problem was that the unions that had been formed appeared inherently unstable. Throughout the 1920s and '30s, the government continued to describe trade unionism in the jute mills as being 'still in its infancy'.\textsuperscript{37} Or, to slightly vary the metaphor, the trade union movement in the jute mills appeared to have been born spastic.
One important symptom of this 'spasticity' was the spasmodic nature of jute-mill unions. Each outburst of labour protest, especially from the 1920s, resulted in some kind of organization. Once the outburst spent itself, however, the organization as a rule disintegrated. As the Government of Bengal put it to the Royal Commission on Labour, 'in almost every strike some sort of labour body was formed, usually after the strike broke out', but such unions remained entirely ephemeral. The Kankinarrah Labour Union, one of the oldest (1922) in the jute industry, complained in its submission to the Commission that while membership of the union 'grew very rapidly during strikes or temporary excitements', it also fell 'equally rapidly after the termination of disputes'.

The pattern can be traced for the entire period under study. The 'widespread unrest' among the jute workers during the anti-partition movement in Bengal (1905-08) coincided with the founding of the Indian Mill-Hands' Union, organized by the Swadeshi leader A.C. Banerjee. As the unrest continued, the union 'gradually extended the field of its activities, and by the end of 1907 ... was coming to be known by the more ambitious name of Indian Labour Unions'. The enthusiasm it generated among the workers is revealed in the letters they wrote to Banerjee during these years. In these letters they expressed their feelings of 'undying gratitude' to Banerjee for the 'infinite good' he had done them by establishing this trade union. But the organization faded away once the period of working-class unrest came to an end. To quote the historian of the Swadeshi movement: 'When the labour movement [in Bengal] revived immediately after the [1914] war, it was led by men of a new generation, and its Swadeshi pre-history was hardly ever recalled'.
An idea of 'progress' obviously stirs within that optimistic word, 'pre-history', but we would be wrong to suppose that the Swadeshi experience of trade unionism was superseded and made irrelevant by a future that embodied 'progress'. A longer view of jute workers' trade unionism would produce a distinctly contrary impression. The Swadeshi experience would then appear to have only foreshadowed the future developments. For example, some twenty odd jute mill unions were formed by the Khilafatists during the industrial unrest of 1920-21; six of these were outright 'abolished' within a few months of their formation, while the rest were described by the government in August 1921 as 'rather nebulous concerns'. The newly-formed Bengal Labour Federation which controlled some of these unions was stated to be 'collapsing' by the middle of 1921. The Howrah Labour Union and the Central Jute Mill Association (Howrah) were two unions whose 'existence and activities [had been] deposed to by their respective Secretaries before the recent [1921] Committee on Industrial Unrest', yet in a few months' time the District Magistrate advised the government that 'the local police report that the associations [were] both dead and [had] no members [was] correct'. Trade unions had also been established among the jute workers of Barrackpore and Garden Reach (24 Parganas) in 1920. In 1921, the police described them as being 'in a moribund state', and Donald Gladding, an official in the Industries Department of the Government of Bengal, was reluctant to include them in his list of trade unions for that year 'because they are almost certainly of a very frail and nebulous character'.

The groundswell of labour protest in the jute industry during the two general strikes of 1929 and 1937 was accompanied by the same
phenomenon: quick flourishing and wilting of trade union organization.
The strike of 1929 was preceded, as we have seen, by a growing volume of unrest in the mills over changes in working hours and wages. This unrest surely helped in the establishment of trade unions in some of the jute mills in the Chengail-Bauria region of the Howrah district. It also helped to revitalize the Bengal Jute Workers' Association at Bhatpara (24 Parganas) that had been formed in 1925. In both these areas, the leadership of the unions was in the hands of a group of young Bengalees, committed by their ideology to the cause of the working class. With the strike movement gathering momentum in the jute mills,

the organizations at Bhatpara under Kali[das] Bhattacharjee and Gopen Chakravarti and those at Chengail and Bauria under Radharaman Mitra, Bankim Mukherjee and later Kishori[ral] Ghose amalgamated under a central organisation called the Bengal Jute Workers' Union with its head office in Calcutta.

The Bengal Jute Workers' Union (B.J.W.U.) gave leadership to the general strike of 1929. As the strike began and while it lasted, the organization of B.J.W.U., 'began to extend' and branches were opened at Bhatpara, Champdani, Shibpore, Chengail, Budge Budge and Titagarh. The popularity and fame of the union spread fast among the working classes of Calcutta. In the words of one of the organizers of the union:

The Bengal Jute Workers' Union stood right at the centre of working-class movement in Bengal at this time [April 1930]. Its success in leading the general strike of three and a half lakhs of jute mill workers in 1929 had awakened the entire working class to a new state of consciousness and generated a new enthusiasm among them ... it [B.J.W.U.] enjoyed such fame that workers from any factory would rush
to this union to seek advice regarding their own struggles. It was under the leadership of the organisers of this union [B.J.W.U.] that strikes were conducted by the workers of the ice factories in Calcutta, of the Gramophone Company and of Stuart Motor Company.  

Such popularity and spread notwithstanding, the Bengal Jute Workers' Union was to lose its vitality very soon. An intelligence report of 1934 said:

After the strike [of 1929] a split occurred between Miss Prabhabati Das Gupta [the acknowledged leader of the strike] on the one hand and Kali Sen on the other ... Two unions came into existence; one controlled by Miss Prabhabati Das Gupta which gradually died out and the other controlled by the communists under Bankim Mukherjee and Kali Sen ... It is not a powerful organisation.

When some 60,000 jute mill workers were 'rendered idle' (to use the euphemism of the I.J.M.A.) in 1930-31, the jute workers' lack of any organization strong enough to resist the onslaught was painfully clear. The most that the retrenched workers could do was to go back to their villages.

The thirties, too, do not fall outside the pattern. The police authorities of Calcutta reported in 1934 'a steady flow' of communist teaching ... by leaders of trade unions', many of whom were now using 'Communist slogans and ... language characteristic of that movement'. In May the next year, the Labour Commissioner of Bengal drew the attention of the government to 'the rapid development of labour organisations in the last few months'. The following few years saw another round of confrontation between labour and capital in the jute industry, the high
point of which was the general strike of 1937 that lasted from 'early February until the middle of May' and that involved a good majority of the workforce - at least some 77 per cent.\textsuperscript{57}

Once again, trade union organization flourished dramatically and sixty-seven jute mill unions were registered with the government in the years 1937-38.\textsuperscript{58} During the general strike of 1937, many of these unions formed themselves into one central executive body, the Bengal Chatkal Mazdoor Union, which was affiliated to the A.I.T.U.C.\textsuperscript{59} While the outburst of trade union activity of the 1930s may look like a 'definite advance' over the previous situation,\textsuperscript{60} the similarities with the past are too strong to be ignored. The Bengal Chatkal Mazdoor Union, formed to function as 'a single, centralised union', was described by one of its organizers in 1952 as 'never [having] functioned as such'.\textsuperscript{61} When the A.I.T.U.C. leaders returned to trade union work among jute workers in 1943, they had only sixteen unions with a meagre strength of 3,000 members altogether, an insubstantial minority in a 250,000-strong labour force. Abdul Momin, an important Communist trade union leader to whom we owe this information, admitted to his comrades in 1943 that none of the communist-led trade unions formed 'before the war' could be considered 'powerful'.\textsuperscript{62} The situation remained unchanged for some time to come. Both Gupta and Deshpande, as we have seen, have discussed the languishing state of the trade union movement among the jute workers even after the war and the coming of independence.
The paradox of 'strong militancy but weak organization' has been usually resolved by an implicit or explicit argument about the workers' lack of education. Organization was weak, or so the argument has run, because the structural and other features of the workers' conditions deprived them of any opportunity to acquire an understanding of trade union discipline and functioning. The effort therefore has been to understand why the workers remained 'ignorant', and persistently so, in spite of two or three decades of attempts to educate and organize them. Depending on their convictions, different authors have emphasized different factors - economic, social or political - to explain this 'ignorance'. Obviously, the answers differ in terms of their ideological contents and emphases, but one broad fundamental agreement runs through the entire body of the existing discourse on jute workers' organization: that to organize was to educate.

To the politically conservative trade unionist, this was simply a question of making the workers literate. K.C. Roy Chowdhury, the President of the Kankinarrah Labour Union, once cited the 'widespread illiteracy of the [Indian] working class' as an important reason why 'unions [had] failed to satisfy'.63 His union told the Royal Commission on Labour that 'illiteracy [was] the main cause of labour's helplessness':

It is the conviction of the organizers of this union ... that the plant of constructive trade unionism will not take root for many years to come until and unless the soil is weeded and workers receive primary instruction.64
Almost identical were the views of government officials. If 'the
Indian labourer' was 'notoriously difficult to organise in trade unions',
as R.N. Gilchrist put it in 1924, the reason lay in their lack of
education, without which no permanent unity of the working men was ever
possible. 'Only education', wrote Gilchrist, 'and the mutual tolerance
bred of education will soften the differences [of language, religion,
etc.]'. "Living in close contiguity in circumscribed areas, and service
under one master, may lead to temporary unity ... but continuous and
sustained common action is as yet out of the question'. The Government
of Bengal pointed to the same relationship between education and
organization in their memorandum to the Royal Commission in 1929:

On the [jute mill] employees' side, the organization
at present is in an infantile stage, and little more
can be expected till the workers have some measure
of education ... With education and proper guidance
he [the mill worker] will inevitably build up an
organ to express his obvious community of interest
with his fellows ... It is in the interest of
employers and community at large that the basis of
this organization should be well and truly laid.

To the more radical authors, however, 'education' has meant the
'political education' of the worker and not simply the question of his
literacy. One of the earliest Bengali-language tracts on trade
unionism, Trade Unioner Godar Katha [The Fundamentals of Trade Unionism],
published in 1934, had as its aim the correction and improvement of the
prevalent ideas of the labouring classes. 'So many rival ideas have now
entered the field of trade unionism [in Bengal] that the workers have
problems in discovering the correct path, and the friends of the rich
can come along and put all kinds of ideas into their heads'. Hence, the
author said,
Every worker must read this book and explain its contents to ten others. He should organize his friends into a study-circle and meet three times a week to discuss in depth such issues as the sufferings of the labourers, the ways of the exploiters etc. 

True to this spirit, the Bengali communists who went about organizing jute workers in the 1920s, '30s and '40s told them stories about Lenin and the Russian revolution, read out to them radical journals, and started conducting 'study circles' among them. Imparting 'political education' to the worker was seen as the key to a strong trade union movement. Indrajit Gupta's suggestion in 1952 that 'serious attention' be given by communists 'to cultural and social activity' among jute mill workers 'through libraries, night schools, schools for workers' children, drama and music groups' was inspired by the same consideration.

The figure of the 'ignorant' worker (even if this 'ignorance' is defined in strictly political terms) has thus been central to all existing explanations of the problems of working-class organization in the jute mills. Factors such as the 'linguistic heterogeneity' of the jute workers (or the absence of 'a single means of communication' among them), their 'linguistic separation' from the Bengali community, the 'structural peculiarities' of this labour force, their 'amorphous, undefined and generally unskilled' nature', their 'half-pastoralist, half-proletarian' outlook, and, of course, the suppression of left-wing trade unions by the state have all been mentioned with varying degrees of justification to explain why the jute mill workers never grew out of their 'ignorance', political or otherwise.
It is not our purpose to contest the validity of these individual propositions, though some are obviously more true than others. The 'linguistic separation of the majority of workers from the surrounding Bengali community', for instance, was indeed a problem that trade unionists had to reckon with. Abdul Momin writes in his reminiscences of the 1929 general strike that even when the strike spread from Alambazar to Titagarh with 'lightning speed' and several people volunteered to help in the organization of the strike, language remained an important problem: 'Not all our volunteers could speak Hindi and in no other language could propaganda in favour of the strike be carried out in most of the [mill] areas'. Given the necessary will, however, a solution was soon found to the problem. Before long, many trade unionists mastered the art of speaking Hindi. Momin mentions the following among the leaders of the 1929 strike who could make speeches in fluent Hindi - Bankim Mukherjee, Kali Sen, Bakr Ali Mirza, Prabhabati Das Gupta, Sachidananda Chatierjee, Moni Singh, Swami Biswanand, Shroff Nand Kishore Sharma and himself. Besides we should also remember that the leaflets distributed by B.J.W.U. during the strike were after all printed in 'several languages'.

A more seriously crippling factor for the left-wing trade unions were the repressive measures that the state often adopted in dealing with them. The frequent use by the government of the section 144 of the Indian Penal Code to extern leftist leaders from their areas of activity was clearly aimed at minimizing the level of their contact with the working class. The common sense of purpose that united the mill managers and government officials in this effort proved a particularly formidable obstacle to trade-union activity. P.D. Martyn of the Indian Civil Service
saw 'something of life as it [was] lived in the huge jute mill suburbs' when he served as a Sub-Divisional Officer at Barrackpore early in the 1930s.

While there [he wrote] I played my part in coping with a strike with 60,000 operatives out of work. Coping with the situation included the passing of orders prohibiting the entry of certain agitators from Calcutta into the area. What struck me at the time was how helpful the jute mill managers (Scots to a man) were during these troubles.80

For us then the question is not one of disputing the statements made by individual scholars who have attempted to explain the weakness of jute workers' organization. Taken by themselves these statements contain a certain measure of truth and many of them do point to important factors that may have retarded the growth of unions in the jute industry. What we are concerned with here is the point at which these different and apparently dispersed statements meet. In the final analysis, they all seek to explain why the workers remained ignorant of 'trade union discipline and functioning' and enumerate the factors that supposedly deprived them of such education. The task of organizing is then seen in this entire discussion as essentially an exercise in making certain types of knowledge (literacy, self-awareness etc.) available to the workers, i.e. in educating them.

It is here that I feel we can use the existing statement of the 'paradox' of jute workers' organization to open up a deeper paradox that this one already contains. There is something fundamentally problematic about viewing organization simply as a matter of political education for the worker. To do this is to sidestep certain important
issues of culture and consciousness that are raised when we examine more closely the problem of working-class organization. Even within the framework of Marxist theory it is now recognized that the Leninist project of inserting a body of 'intellectuals' between the working class and the 'theory' is fraught with ambiguities. This is only more so in a society entangled in a variety of pre-capitalist relationships. Besides, it would surely be a very elitist view of working-class history that did not ask if the 'educator' himself needed some educating as well!

V

The cultural issues alluded to in the previous paragraph relate to questions of power and authority. Indeed, it may be argued that to raise the point about the jute mill worker's ignorance of 'trade union functioning and discipline' is to raise these issues. For, what is 'organizational discipline' if not a way of resolving questions of power and authority within organizations?

For the purpose of analysis here, the important point is that there are certain assumptions about culture - not just of the workers alone but of their leaders as well - inherent in the concept of 'trade union discipline'. Ideally speaking, the proper functioning of a stable, broadbased trade union requires a bourgeois culture. As Gramsci once said, trade unions are organizations based on 'voluntary' and 'contractual' relationships; their emphasis on membership, subscription and other procedures of organizational discipline is based on the assumed existence
of such relations. Trade unions also embody a principle of representation that manifests itself in elections. The trade union, properly conceived, is thus a bourgeois-democratic organization and is organized in the image of the bourgeois-democratic government. In the same way as the latter represents the 'people' - through 'voluntary' and 'contractual' relationships - the trade union represents its members and through them, the class. Gramsci made the point clearly and forcefully while discussing the nature of trade unions and political parties: 'These are organisations born on the terrain of bourgeois democracy and political liberty, as an affirmation and development of political freedom ... They do not supersede the bourgeois state.'

In theory, then, the elected representative of the worker is his equal and is chosen as a representative precisely because he stands in a relationship of 'equality' - the equality of the 'contract' - to those represented. He does not owe his capacity to represent to any prior position of privilege and authority; his is not, in other words, the figure of the master. This is the crucial question on which trade union democracy turns and it must be set in contrast to that other kind of political representation that Marx once talked about with respect to the peasantry: 'They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented. Their representative must at the same time appear as their master, as an authority over them ...'

If all this seems too theoretical and too much to expect in concrete historical situations, let me make two points. The model is always a useful measure of the reality. Secondly, and this is perhaps a more important point for the historian, the concept of trade-union democracy
explained above was precisely what all organizers of labour aspired to realize. The notion of democratic representation was fundamental to all discussions on the question of organizing the jute workers. Listen for example to the anti-communist, pro-employer Labour Minister H.S. Suhrawardy arguing to the jute mill owners in 1937 that the 'mere availability' of mill managers was not enough to ensure sufficient contact with the working class:

Contact between employer and employee should be made through the medium of the elected representative of organised labour and so that this might be possible the existence of trade unions was absolutely necessary.  

And now to the Communist Indrajit Gupta in 1952:

Of course, organisation [of jute workers] must mean something more than mere formal enrolment of union membership ... The point is to function the unions democratically.

and

the essence of trade union democracy ... means, concretely, that the executive committee of the unions must be regularly functioning bodies, properly elected by the members, participating in the day to day life of the union.

Democratic functioning ensures that the unions will never suffer from a "shortage" of cadres, nor become dependent on a handful of leading officials or "organisers". On the contrary, it will encourage a regular flow of rank and file militants to come forward to discharge the multifarious jobs, ranging from manning the union office and collecting subscriptions to distributing leaflets, pasting up posters, addressing meetings etc.
This ideal, however, was hardly ever approximated in reality. Trade union organization in the jute mills remained extremely incoherent all through the years under consideration. By 'incoherent' I do not simply mean the 'traditional gap' or tension that exists in 'every political party or trade-union ... between the rank-and-file ... and the leaders'. Such tension existed in the jute mill unions too. For example, despite their claims 'to represent all jute mill workers on the river', the Bengal Jute Workers' Union 'was unable [in 1929] to control workers in some important areas'. The 'excellent intelligence service and organisation' that the 'agitators' displayed during the general strike of 1937 was impressive enough to win praise in the most unlikely places, but the leaders nevertheless found it difficult to contain the militancy of their followers in every case. 'The result was', wrote a government official, 'that the Shibpore Mills came out much earlier than ... was wanted and proved a great embarrassment to the plans [of the leaders].'

By themselves, these cases do not exhaust the definition of 'incoherence', since it is possible for organizations to maintain a certain degree of coherence and discipline in spite of such tension between the leaders and the rank-and-file. In our case the problem of incoherence went much deeper, for even at their liveliest, unions of jute mill labour were never organizations based on a relatively disciplined body of workers subject to such institutional controls as membership rights and obligations, subscription rules, union constitutions or even regular meetings. 'The very sight of a subscription book', wrote K.C. Roy Chowdhury in his diary, made the workers feel 'uneasy and suspicious'. In his submission to the Royal Commission in 1929 as the President of the Kankinarrah Labour Union he further added that 'the
Roy Chowdhury's comments are confirmed in a report by Thomas Johnston and John F. Sime who visited the Calcutta mills in 1925 on behalf of the Joint Committee of Dundee Jute Trade Unions to 'enquire into the conditions of the Jute Workers in India'. The authors found the Calcutta jute mill unions seriously crippled by acute financial and other problems of organization.

There are, on paper, some three or four Unions among the [Calcutta] jute workers, but with one exception they are quite useless, have no paying membership, and serve no purpose unless to advertise some politician as honorary president. The honorary presidents, we believe, pay for the notepaper and headings, and that is all there is to the Unions. The 'one exception' that Johnston and Sime mentioned was the Jute Workers' Association founded at Bhatpara by Kalidas Bhattacharya. Bhattacharya was a Bengali bhadralok with terrorist connections who had lost his employment with a jute mill for organizing and encouraging strikes. He was described by the Dundee delegation as 'an able, intelligent workman who ... [had] the root of the matter [trade unionism] in him', and his Association, it was said, was 'definitely making an effort to remedy workers' grievances'. Yet of a nominal membership of 'only 3000' not more than 400 to 500 paid any subscriptions and, despite low union fees, the organization suffered from severe 'monetary limitations'. It was 'largely financed and inspired ... by an interesting and self-sacrificing little lady, Mrs. Santosh Kumari Gupta'. The monetary problems of the Bengal Jute Workers' Association were to continue in the future when the union reportedly received financial aid 'in the shape of a monthly donation of Rs 100 from the Dundee Jute
Workers Association' up to 1927 and perhaps even a bit later. In the 1920s, Sime often received letters from trade unionists in India requesting monetary help during strikes in the jute mills. 'We had an appeal from Kalidas Bhattacharji in November last year and sent a donation of thirty pounds (£30) to him', mentioned Sime while responding to another request for help during a 'prolonged stoppage in the Howrah district' in February 1929. That this 'appeal' from Bhattacharya in November 1928 was not the first one of its kind is further suggested by the following letter that Sime wrote to him in June that year:

Your cablegram duly received was placed before my Committee and I am instructed to cable at once a grant of Twenty five pounds (£25) towards the Wellington Jute Mills strike fund ... Enclosed please find copy of the "Dundee Free Press" to which I gave the contents of your cablegram thereby giving the matter publicity.

This persisting problem of finances, caused partly by the absence of a subscription-paying rank-and-file, was only an index - though perhaps the most obvious one - of the deep organizational maladies that afflicted the nature of trade unionism in the jute mills of Calcutta. After all, it is remarkable how the general strike of 1929 was conducted without the executive committee of the Bengal Jute Workers' Union meeting even once during the strike. Moreover, no worker was ever a subscription-paying member of the union as its leader, Prabhabati Das Gupta, was to admit later. She called it 'a peculiar labour movement' as the union 'never had any subscription or anything'. B.J.W.U., however, was not unique in this respect: the Government of Bengal thus summed up the experience of trade unionism in the 1920s:
After the war, unions of some kind developed with almost bewildering rapidity, because in every strike some sort of a labour body was formed ... Such bodies had no constitution, no regular membership, and their power to control workers ... was extremely problematical.\footnote{102}

While the thirties and later decades marked some advance in certain directions - seen mainly in the growing popularity of radical ideas in the political circles of Calcutta - a crucial problem remained unresolved. It was the trade-union leaders' 'failure', to use Indrajit Gupta's words, 'to translate their growing mass influence into organisational terms'.\footnote{103}

This 'failure' is well illustrated by the case of A.M.A. Zaman, the Communist labour organizer of Hooghly whose growing 'mass influence' we have had occasion to document before. During the industrial unrest of 1936-37, Zaman formed a jute-mill union which got itself registered in 1936. In September 1937 however the General Secretary of the union went to the court to complain of severe organizational irregularities. He described the union as a 'great fraud' and said that while as the General Secretary he was responsible for 'all correspondence', subscriptions, and for depositing the subscriptions raised in some bank 'in the name of the union', he found that in practice all of these rules were honoured only in their violation. 'Offices were opened and subscriptions ... raised through collectors but never deposited in any Bank'. He was 'shocked' to see 'receipts being granted' by unauthorized persons while he was kept 'in the dark'. And when he 'insisted on accounts and explanation', 'the accused No. 1 [i.e. Zaman] ... put it off on flimsy pretext from day to day ... and ... wanted your petitioner to resign from the post of the General Secretary giving a back date'.\footnote{104}

Such inchoateness of organization was to plague jute workers' trade unionism
for a long time to come. To quote Indrajit Gupta once again, as he put it in his report of 1952:

With one or two exceptions, the organisational structure of our unions also [i.e. in addition to those of other political parties] is most unsatisfactory. The pattern is common to jute - periodical mass meetings and bustee or gate propaganda, irregular collection of subscriptions, and very nominal office work.¹⁰⁵

If the organization of jute workers' trade unions was so inchoate, how did they resolve questions of power and authority without the aid of organizational discipline? Or to put the question in another way, if it was not submission to organizational discipline that bound the rank-and-file of a union to itself, what did? The answer would seem to be: the power of the leader, the so-called 'representative' who, as in Marx's description of the French peasantry, always turned out to be the 'master' himself. The specific form in which this power expressed itself was to be seen in the personal loyalty, often temporary, that trade union organizers could elicit from the ordinary mill-hands. In contemporary trade union parlance, the word used to describe this style of leadership was 'zamindari'. Apparently, the style was endemic; Momin mentioned it to be so in a report to the Communist Party in 1943.¹⁰⁶ Of the different political parties that came together to form one A.I.T.U.C. union for the jute mills in 1937 - 'Congress, Socialist, Communist, Forward Bloc and other left labour workers' - it was said that 'a sort of territorial division of "spheres of influence" existed, with a particular leader exercising, as it were, "zamindari rights" in his particular trade union area'.¹⁰⁷
One important characteristic of such power was of course its capacity to render organizational discipline redundant because it was by nature independent of the niceties and rigours of any such discipline. This sometimes created serious problems for organizational unity, as factionalism at the top could easily split the followers. The Congress-sponsored Indian National Trade Union Congress (I.N.T.U.C.) experienced this in the early fifties when they failed to set up 'a single central Congress-led [jute workers'] union because of the rivalries of the different groups within the West Bengal Congress itself'. Their 'individual unions (area-wise, mill-wise, and even more than one in the same mill) remained', wrote Gupta, 'as the "zamindaries" of different leaders and groups', and could only be 'loosely put together into the Jute Workers' Federation'.

Sometimes, however, the same force of loyalty allowed a particular leader to be influential even if that influence took no firm organizational shape. A good case in point is again that of Zaman, if only because it is easier to document. As we have seen, Zaman's organization among the mill-hands of Hooghly went to pieces at the height of his popularity. But in no way did this diminish his influence. In July 1937, Zaman was convicted 'on charge of rioting during ... [a] strike at the Wellington Jute Mill in Rishra'. The workers, 'about 4,800 in number', risked their employment and 'came out on receipt of the news', such was Zaman's popularity with them. Even in September 1937, when Zaman's union had suffered splits, mill managers, it was said, were 'afraid of proceedings being drawn up against the miscreants [i.e. Zaman's followers] as they believe that under such circumstances their respective mills might go on strike'. The personal nature of Zaman's control over workers comes out in the following description of events:
On 1.7.37 ... a worker was surrounded in his house by Mr. Zaman's partisans who would have assaulted him had he not given in to ... their demands. That very evening a meeting of Zaman's partisans was held and orders for getting all shops closed to those who had obeyed the orders of the Manager, Angus Jute Works, were passed as it was announced [that] such was Mr. Zaman's wish.\textsuperscript{111}

Or consider the case of Sibnath Banerjee, the Socialist leader of workers in the Shibpur-Ghusury Salkea areas of Howrah. After some fifteen years of trade-union work his authority still derived, according to Indrajit Gupta in 1952, from a display of 'considerable personal initiative' and an exercise of 'direct leadership'.

They have one central union - the Howrah Zilla Chatkal Mazdoor Union which has no organisational form. Its activities revolve entirely around the person of Sri Sibnath Banerjee, whose claim to renown rests on his long years of labour activity in Howrah. It is out and out a one man show.\textsuperscript{112}

We must not see these as isolated examples or cases of individual failures. The tradition of 'zamindari' leadership was strong and old. A.C. Banerjee, the Swadeshi trade unionist active around 1905, was a good example of this spirit. Even though his trade union activity spanned only two or three years, Banerjee felt that his 'influence with the millhands was so great and discipline so complete that he could make them do whatever he liked'.\textsuperscript{113} During the 1929 strike, a 'Barrackpore pleader, Babu Narendra Chatterjee ... very quickly gained ascendancy over the workers' of the Alliance, Craig, Waverley and Meghna mills. 'The managing agents ... said that after they had granted the concessions which the workers had demanded, the workers refused to go back to work, unless they received a definite order from this pleader'.\textsuperscript{114} Chatterjee
was soon made the Vice-President of the Bengal Jute Workers' Union even though 'his name had never previously been mentioned in any labour connection whatsoever'.

He had no knowledge of the jute industry and had never previously been known to have any business connections in Bhatpara, yet certainly for no ascertainable reason ... and without any official position in any union ... he seemed to get control over a considerable body of men.\textsuperscript{115}

The 'Naren Babu incident', the government pointed out, 'is not uncommon in local labour politics'. Not infrequently it happened that 'some persons entirely unknown ... even to the majority of workers suddenly assume[d] leadership during a dispute'.\textsuperscript{116}

The truth of the government's statement is borne out by the case of Prabhabati Das Gupta, the most important leader of the 1929 strike. When the strike began, 'Miss Das Gupta was entirely unknown' to the 'average jute mill worker'.\textsuperscript{117} Soon afterwards however the government described her control over workers as 'absolute'. The workers called her 'Mataji' or 'Maiji' (Mother) and would go by whatever her wishes were. Das Gupta herself was only too aware of this. As she once put it to the government, 'she only has to lift her little finger and the workers would obey'. The government had 'no doubt' that this was true.\textsuperscript{118} Das Gupta herself later recalled that 'wherever I went I was welcomed by the slogan \textit{Mataji ki jai, Mataji ki jai} [hail the mother]. That was my reward'.\textsuperscript{119} And her rival trade unionist K.C. Chowdhury admitted in his diary that
Both male and female workers - at least those living in Kankinara, Titagarh and Champdany - looked upon Miss Das Gupta as their "Maiji" [mother]. They would do anything to carry out her orders, and would not even listen to any other organisers of her union.¹²⁰

Mark how independent such authority was of 'discipline' or organization; they would appear to be irrelevant to its mode of functioning. Indeed, one of the aphorisms that Das Gupta's friends sought to popularize among mill workers was, 'unions may come and unions may go but Dr. Prabhabati will remain for ever'.¹²¹ This is the important point for us - that what has so far been viewed simply as an absence of trade union discipline or training reveals on closer inspection the presence of alternative systems of power and authority.

VI

The ideal, democratic principle of representation based on 'voluntary' and 'contractual' relationships was thus never realized in the trade unions of the Calcutta jute mill workers, and representatives instead became masters. Unions were run as though they were the leaders' 'zamindaries'. One could in fact go further and argue that in the eyes of the millworkers, being a master was a condition of being a representative. Only masters could represent. To see this purely as a function of the worker's ignorance is to overlook the necessarily two-sided character of the relationship. One is reminded of Hegel's discussion (in his Phenomenology) of the master-slave relationship, where the master's dominance is dependent on the slave recognizing him as the master, that is to say,
on the slave's will to serve. In referring to the bhadralok trade union leaders as 'masters', then, we do not intend to portray the working class as a passive instrument of the leaders' will. At issue is the question of the worker's own will, his own consciousness, his shrewd realization that under the circumstances he could sometimes best exercise his power by choosing to serve. The relation therefore was pregnant with tension and had its own moments of resistance as well. One only has to remember that for all the loyalty the leaders could elicit from the workers, Prabhabati Das Gupta was once 'abused and insulted' by a number of jute workers towards the end of the first general strike, that Latafat Hossain once had his union-office burned down by a group of angry workers, and that Sibnath Banerjee was greeted by the workers in Howrah with suspicion and insults when he first approached them for votes in 1937\textsuperscript{122} to give but three instances of overt tension between the workers and their leaders.

Sumit Sarkar has rescued from the private papers of the Swadeshi labour organizer, A.C. Banerjee, a very instructive letter that gives us some insight into the nature of the leader-worker relationship and tells us how the workers perceived the 'oppression' they faced at work. Some twenty-eight workers of the Budge Budge Jute Mills wrote it to Banerjee in December 1906.\textsuperscript{123} They had to 'pay bribes to the babu and the sardar ... every month and when the Durga Puja season approached'; refusal to pay bribes led to unjust fines or dismissal 'on false charges of bad workmanship'.

Till recently [they added] we felt compelled to meet their unreasonable demands. But as prices ran very high at the time of Durga Puja last year, we expressed our intention to pay them a little less than in earlier years. At this the Head Sardar
Haricharan Khanra has been going around instigating the Assistant Babu Atul Chandra Chattopadhyay to collect even more parbani [customary dues] than usual. The two of them have even advised the in-charge Panchanan Ghose, a nice gentleman otherwise, to force us to pay a much larger parbani this year. When [in protest] we stopped paying any parbani whatsoever, they got the Sahib to fine us on cooked up charges ... But, in truth, we are not guilty.

We have used this letter in the last chapter to document the nature of supervision in jute mills. I quote it once again to draw attention to an additional interesting aspect which lies in its collection of concrete details. It is obviously a long and detailed list of sufferings. Significantly, however, the workers who wrote the letter called it only 'a brief description' and expressed their 'desire to describe in even greater detail' their sufferings to Banerjee, if and when they met him in person. We must understand this 'desire', for in it lay the nature of the relationship we are seeking to explore. Why did the workers want to display their sufferings to men like Banerjee, to give such 'cruel publicity' to the pains their bosses inflicted on them? Or perhaps I should rephrase the question: what could be the relationship that permitted of pain being made into an object of display?

Michel Foucault has discussed this problem in a different but relevant context. 'Can pain be a spectacle?' he asks, and answers:

Not only can it be, but it must be, by virtue of a subtle right that resides in the fact that no one is alone, the poor man less so than others, so that he can obtain assistance only through the mediation of the rich ... if others intervene with their knowledge, their resources, their pity.\(^{124}\)
The poor man making a spectacle of his sufferings was, and still is, a familiar sight in societies marked by pre-capitalist cultures. In explaining the quality of life in medieval Europe, the Dutch historian Huizinga said: 'Then, again, all things in life were of a proud or cruel publicity. Lepers sounded their rattles and went about in procession, beggars exhibited their deformities ...'.\textsuperscript{125} He could have written this of Calcutta today. 'Every time I emerged from my hotel in Calcutta ...', wrote Claude Lévi-Strauss of his brief stay in that city in the 1950s, 'I became the central figure in a ballet which would have seemed funny to me, had it not been so pathetic. The various accomplished performers made their entries in turn: a shoeblack flung himself at my feet, a small boy rushed up to me; whining, 'One anna, papa, one anna!', a cripple displayed his stumps, having bared himself to give a better view ...'.\textsuperscript{126}

To see in all this only a 'single obsession', hunger - as Lévi-Strauss did at first - is to miss the essential element of power in this relationship between the rich and the poor. The relationship involved the will of both, and this was what allowed such culturally-defined elements as supplication, pity, compassion etc. to circulate within the relationship. If the uninviting sight of a beggar in Calcutta made Lévi-Strauss shrink away from it, this was because he could feel the 'acute tension' (mark the metaphor of force) that instantly developed between him and the beggar. Lévi-Strauss' language here clearly refers to power and not to the physical fact of hunger alone. By his supplication, says Lévi-Strauss, the beggar 'willed' him 'to be even more impressive and powerful...' and became 'an instrument of power by working on the material of compassion and pity.'
Once we grasp this, we understand why the Budge Budge Jute Mill workers desired to describe their sufferings in 'even greater detail' than they had in their letter. They saw Aswini Banerjee, a barrister and trade-unionist, as a resourceful 'babu' who would respond to the plight of the 'coolie' only if his compassion was sufficiently aroused. 'We write to you about the oppressive acts of our superiors at work and pray for an urgent redress. We hope you will save us soon from their despotism', was how the letter ended.

One is indeed struck by the number of times the babu-coolie relationship surfaces in the middle of working-class protest and trade union activities. The terrain is admittedly difficult for the historian, and not only because the jute workers were predominantly non-literate. The written word that the historian relies on is in itself a rather poor conveyor of this relationship, as it usually presents only a fragment of reality. In real life, however, as any Bengali would know, the babu-coolie relationship would have been represented many times over in many different ways - in manners of speech and dress, in body language expressive of hierarchy, indeed in the entire range of the semiotics of domination and subordination (and hence resistance) that the culture would have made available to both the jute mill worker and his bhadralok trade union representative. While much of this would normally escape the historian's attention, a careful interrogation of the available documents yields considerable evidence of the existence of this feudal bond between the 'babu' and the 'coolie'.

The historian for instance does not have to strain his ears to catch 'the voice of the poor' in the clamour of protests that went up in the
Calcutta jute mills from time to time. Echoes reverberate even in the most elitist of sources. 'In those days, i.e. about 1922-23', writes K.C. Roy Chowdhury in his diaries,

the workers preferred rich people as their [trade union] leaders. They were pleased to see the leaders come to meetings in their own motor cars. They had the mistaken idea that only the rich could successfully fight [for them] with the wealthy and big millowners. The sardars thought that trade union leaders who were themselves big advocates or barristers would fight for them in the court of law, free of charge.  

K.C. Roy Chowdhury called himself in his diaries 'A Friend of the Workers', but it is interesting to see how in his imagination the figure of the worker merged with that of the poor. For all his enthusiasm for socialism and strikes, the working class is often transformed in his prose into *daridra Narayan*, the Hindu god Narayan in the shape of the poor. The working class or even 'socialism' could all be served from notions of 'pity'. The sentiment was well expressed by a fictitious character called Mrs Guha (presumably modelled on the contemporary trade unionist Santosh Kumari Gupta) in Roy Chowdhury's play *Dharmaghat* (The Strike) when she remarked, 'Poor workers! There is not a single soul to listen to their complaints and tales of woe'.

'After all it was helping the poor people', said Prabhabati Das Gupta, reminiscing in old age about the first general strike of jute mill workers, which forced the mill owners and the state alike in 1929 to recognize her as the workers' representative. 'We were not doing trade union movement, we were helping the poor people'. 'So', asked she, explaining the absence of trade union membership and subscription, 'why
should we have money from them?' One may choose to dismiss this evidence as rationalization with hindsight or see it only as an instance of the mellowing, with age, of a once-radical spirit. But what does one do when the babu-coolie relationship comes refracting through the practice of trade unionism even at the height of working-class protest? The leaflets put out by the leaders of the Bengal Jute Workers' Union during the 1929 strike illustrate the point. True, they spoke of 'oppression in the jute mills', of the worker's labour filling 'the bellies of the rich', described 'truth and right' as being on the worker's side, and recommended organization and unity. Yet their language was densely inhabited by the babu's stereotype and assumptions regarding the coolie's helplessness and ignorance.

Brethren - This is a very critical time ... So beware! It is said that some pleader has advised to the effect that your wages would be realized by action in the court. You are very simple folks, so you have been enmeshed in the plan of an ordinary pleader ... Ask the pleader to mention this matter to us, we shall give him the right answer.

Necessarily then at the other end of the relationship stood the leader in her larger-than-life-size appearance - 'Mother Provabati', 'Mataji', 'the father and mother of the poor', as she was described in her union's pamphlets. And wherever she went was 'welcomed by the slogan Mataji ki jai ...'. 'That was my reward', she said, the reward of the dominant: 'Practically, the whole of labour was under my control'. By now we know this voice: the representative invariably turned out to be a master, as only masters could represent.
'Invariably?', one may still object. 'Your examples so far have been A.C. Banerjee, K.C. Roy Chowdhury and Prabhabati Das Gupta - people who were themselves somewhat elitist in their own minds. What about the generation of socialists and communists who followed them, men who tried to become one with the workers instead of wanting to dominate them, men who won the leadership of the jute workers' struggles in the 1930s and the '40s, and whose faith in socialist ideologies remained unflinching to the very end of their lives?'

Before proceeding to answer our hypothetical interlocutor, let us fully acknowledge the transformation that socialist ideologies brought about in the Bengali bhadralok's understanding of the problems of the working classes in Bengal. In the nineteenth century the bhadralok viewed the working classes as a problem of morality, and the blame for some of the social problems created by the growth of factories fell squarely on the workers themselves. This view sometimes manifested itself in a middle-class desire to see an improvement in working-class morals. The Brahmo social reformer Sasipada Banerjee was the most notable example of this trend. More commonly, however, labourers were seen simply as a social nuisance, an 'annoyance', as a police report of 1896 put it, to 'the quiet people' of the middle classes. The same report carried several references to bhadralok complaints regarding the 'unruly', 'noisy' and 'rowdy' character of the mill workers. Towards the end of the century, as industries expanded and Bengali labourers were replaced by migrants
was further reinforced by the addition of the traditional contempt that the *bhadrálak* had for the *méra*, a derisive Bengali term for any native speak of Hindi. A poem written about the turn of the century by a Bengali Brahmin school-teacher - who lived in Bhatpara and saw that sleepy village change beyond recognition with the establishment of jute mills and municipal offices, and with the influx of migrant labourers - will illustrate this well. The poem is unremarkable for its literary qualities but captures in its bluntness the essence of *bhadrálak* perception of an immigrant and indigent working class:

Well done, Bhatpara Municipality!
Gone are the old jungles and bamboo-groves
Of Kankinara and Jagaddal,
Their places taken by palaces and bazars,
Slums of *meruas*, factories and their sprouting chimneys.
The bazars now bustle with the ghostly *meruas*
Buying and selling in their strange Hindi.
On holidays,
They loaf about the town in groups,
Drunk,
Singing songs that sound like the howl of dogs.  

It would be tedious and unrewarding to list here the racial prejudices of the Bengali *bhadrálak*; suffice it to say that the importation of socialist ideas, however vague, did much to change many of these consciously-held attitudes. There developed a new ideological interest in the working people in the 1920s and it became a common practice to use words like 'worker' or 'labour' (or their Bengali or Hindi translations *srámajibi, sramik, mazdur*) in naming middle-class organizations and journals. The existence in the 1920s and later of parties like the Labour Swaraj Party (1925), the Workers' and Peasants' Party (1928), the Labour Party (1932), etc. testify to this new ideological development in the *bhadrálak* political scene. By the late 1920s some of this spirit had
even spilled over into the sacred world of Bengali literature. Tagore's irritated comment in 1928/29 - 'Do we enter a 'new era' in literature simply because so many writers [today] write about the coal-miner or the panwali?' - celebrates this new presence of the working class, if only negatively.142

To the Bengali bhadralok, the workers still presented a picture of moral degeneration, but in contrast to the nineteenth-century view, this 'degeneration' was now assigned a cause (largely economic) outside of the worker's own morality and consciousness. The jute-mill worker, the Amrita Bazar Patrika said in 1928, was 'something less than a human being', but this condition was not of his own doing. This was a significant departure from the point of view of, say, Sasipada Banerjee. 'The modern industrial system' and the greed of the capitalist were now seen as the 'cause' of the worker's moral problems:

Condemned to life in slums, ... working long hours in closed and stuffy atmosphere and victims of all allurements held out by easily available grog and drug shops, and ... deprived of the humanising influence of family life, he [the jute worker] is converted into something less than a human being ... [This] condition of life ... is incidental to the modern industrial system generally but ... in very few industries the disproportion between profits and wages is so striking as in this [the jute industry].143

The same understanding informed K.C. Roy Chowdhury's play Dharmaghat (The Strike) which was staged in Calcutta in 1926. The 'moral degradation' of the worker, the 'stinking, unhealthy hovels around the jute mills at Naihati' are all explained in this play in terms of capitalist neglect and exploitation. 'It is in the interests of the rich capitalist to treat the workers like beasts', says Shirish, who is by no means a radical character in the play.144
On this ideological ground was bred in the twenties and thirties a generation of *bhadralok* politicians whose commitment to their own ideological construct, the working class, was beyond question. Gopen Chakravarty, a Moscow-returned communist, gave a dramatic demonstration of the commitment in 1926 when he joined a jute mill in Bhatpara 'as a machineman in the steam room at Rs 14 a month'.

Even this was not enough [he said in an interview] - so I rented a small cubicle in the jute line and lived with the workers ... and told [them] ... stories about [the] Russian revolution, Lenin and workers' raj, I also read out news from *Pratap* run by Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi and also from our *Ganavani*.

Gopen Chakravarty was not alone in showing such exemplary zeal for organizing the working class. Much of the political experience of the Bengali left in the '30s and afterwards can be written up - as indeed has been done sometimes - as stories of heroism and courage of men like Chakravarty. The impact of their commitment and activities is to be felt in the politics of West Bengal even today. 'The memory haunts', as a sensitive Bengali intellectual has recently written,

> the memory of early dreams, oaths devoutly undertaken, careers forsaken, temptations thrust aside. For those who took to socialism, there was ... a question of acute choice, one's convictions cut athwart one's class interests. They gladly made the transition. Forsaking homes and old loyalties, they fanned into the countryside to organise the poor peasants [and] pioneered the trade union movement in Greater Calcutta's jute belt ...

Yet I will insist that even these people, for all their sacrifice and commitment, remained imprisoned in the babu-coolie relationship insofar as the nature of their contact with the working class was concerned. Let me demonstrate this by analysing a document that was authored by the
very same people as our hypothetical interlocutor referred to, the committed, self-sacrificing socialist-minded organizers of labour.

In January 1937 the manager of the Fort Gloster Jute Mill came upon a leaflet going around among his workers who were soon to vote in the coming provincial elections. This was the first time that the Bengal Legislative Council would have its Labour Members elected and not nominated. The leaflet in question aimed at persuading the workers to vote for Sibnath Banerjee. Banerjee, a Socialist, was then the President of the All India Trade Union Congress. His candidature was supported by the Communist Party and the Congress, and he actually won the elections.

The document therefore was about representation. It asked the workers to elect their representative. A crucial task before the authors of the leaflet was to prove this identity of the representative with the class he would represent. Here of course there was an obvious problem. Banerjee was a member of the *bhadralok* community and therefore a babu. And so were the other contestants. How then could he represent the 'coolies', and why was his claim in this regard better than anybody else's?

Faced with these problems, the leaflet began by introducing a real/spurious distinction between 'representatives' of labour.

Friends, if we are to have [our] ... grievances redressed, we must make, on the one hand, all the labour organisations more powerful, and on the other ... see that the real labour representatives are sent to the Council ... Friends, you will be glad to know that there are eight seats for the Labour constituency[ies]. For these eight seats, if we can send real representatives of labour ... then their interests are safeguarded. [Emphasis added]
But how could a 'babu' become a 'real' representative of the 'coolie'? More importantly, how would he make this 'reality' visible to the worker when all the usual signs of _bhadralok_ existence set him apart from the working class? Our leaflet's answer was: by suffering himself, by making 'sacrifices' in the interests of the workers. 'Real' representatives are 'men who have devoted [emphasis added] their lives for the welfare of labourers'.

To safeguard the interest of labourers, Comrade Banerjee has been to prison for many times. He was one of the accused in the Meerut Conspiracy case, and was in the lock-up for 2½ years, but [was] afterwards honorably acquitted. A few days back he was fined Rs. 200/- by the ... High Court for delivering speeches to the Calcutta Corporation workers. From the above facts it is evident that there is nobody like Comrade Banerjee for upholding the cause of the labourers. If there is any man with real [emphasis added] sympathy for the labourers, then it is ... Comrade Banerjee.

The point was also made in another such leaflet published on behalf of Sibnath Banerjee. This other leaflet too 'quoted and glorified the sentences of imprisonment and fines that had been passed on him', and then asked the labourers, "'I have been prepared to suffer this for your sake, am I not the man for you?'".148

So the display of 'sacrifice' - i.e. a demonstration of the willingness to share the poor man's suffering - was what made Banerjee better qualified to represent the workers. The claim to being a 'real' representative of the working class was thus based, in this argument, on the respect traditionally due in Indian society to the figure of the renouncer. It was a moral claim that arose from an old feudal system of
morality. There was in fact very little in common between this morality and the 'rationality' of the Leninist theory of representation. As is well known to any reader of What Is To Be Done? (1902), the Leninist 'representative' based his claim to represent the working class not on moral grounds but on his (supposed) access to superior, 'scientific' knowledge (i.e. theory) that was denied to the workers by their own conditions.

Besides, an appeal to the idea of sacrifice was really an appeal to the power that flowed from inequality. In order to be able to make sacrifices, one needed to possess; he who did not possess could not sacrifice. The glory of the renouncer belonged to the 'possessor'. To talk of sacrifice was thus to talk of possessions, and hence of power. In the leaflet under discussion the authors needed to underscore as it were just 'how much' Banerjee had given up to become a 'real' representative of the workers. So they told the workers:

Sibnath is an educated man and has been to Europe, and for the last ten years he has been serving the labourers, leaving many high posts formerly occupied by him. Friends, please vote for Sibnath without any hesitation. [Emphasis added]

But an 'educated man' who 'has been to Europe' and had held 'many high posts' was not a coolie or a worker but a babu. And the logic of identification-through-sacrifice ends up making this clear. The discourse thus silently subverted from within its own claims about democratic representation, and the babu-coolie relationship reappeared in the very act meant to cause its disappearance. Gopen Chakravarty, the Moscow-returning Communist mentioned earlier, may have thought that the workers
accepted him as 'one of them', but they still called him the 'Union Babu'. So it is not surprising that in spite of his ideology and sacrifices - in fact it was precisely because of his sacrifices that Sibnath Banerjee's union assumed no 'organisational form' for years and remained an 'out and out one man show', his 'zamindari'. Even a 'real' representative turned out to be a master.

VIII

Since we do not mean to suggest that the Bengali followers of Lenin were insincere people who made a rather cynical use of the concept of 'sacrifice' only in order to manipulate the 'ignorant' workers, we need to ask another question: why was an idea steeped in feudal morality so central to a discourse that was self-consciously socialist?

There was clearly more at work here than historians have cared to admit or explore. The solution to the paradox of jute workers' organization is usually sought in economic (or 'structural') explanations or in arguments about political repression by the colonial state. Yet, surely, no amount of economic reasoning or evidence of state-repression will ever explain why even the socialist message of democratic representation was ultimately translated and assimilated into the undemocratic, hierarchical terms of the babu-coolie relationship; nor will they tell us why Banerjee's pamphlet addressed to the working class spoke so compulsively of his education, overseas trips and 'successful' career.
Perhaps a helpful distinction to make here would be between ideology, a body of conscious ideas (like Marxism), and culture, the 'signifying system through which necessarily a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored'. Ideologically, the Bengali left was committed to developing trade unions based on the democratic, contractual and voluntary procedures of organization that their theory of trade unionism entailed. In the culture of everyday life, however, they, as babus, related to the coolies through a hierarchy of status. Their education, their appearance, the language they spoke, the work they did, could all act as indicators of their authority and superiority over the coolies. The deployment of a system of visible status-markers that divided people into hierarchical categories of status and power had always been an important function of the culture to which they, the bhadralok, and the workers belonged. 'The working people', said Sasipada Banerjee in the nineteenth century, 'are in this country held as low, and as not important members of the society'. Years later, a young Sibnath Banerjee was to find the 'tattered clothes, bare feet, dirty appearance and the foul language' of the jute mill workers positively offensive to his bhadralok sensibilities. The bhadralok clerks of the Burn Iron Works in Howrah staged a historic walk-out in September 1905 when the management asked them to record their attendance by the same 'new mechanical system' as the coolies were required to use. An attempt in 1923 by the Scottish manager of the Anglo-India Jute Mill to hold a meeting of all of his employees to discuss a welfare scheme met with a very similar fate. 'The babus ... refused to come to the same meeting as coolies, even if the latter sat on the floor.'
It was these culturally-given relationships of power that entered the field of trade unionism as well. In terms of their theory, the Bengali trade unionists no doubt aspired to build bourgeois-democratic organizations. In reality, however, they formed organizations based on 'loyalty', where authority did not flow through a grid of rules and procedures but derived directly from hierarchy and status. Photographs that I have been able to obtain of a May Day rally in Calcutta in 1934 clearly show the distinction between babus and coolies. The leaders were obviously the babus. Dressed differently from the coolies, they all sit around a table while the coolies sit expectantly on the ground, and, being literate, the babus do the paper-work necessary for organization (see the photographs attached). If this seems like stretching a point, let us recall what Indrajit Gupta, the C.P.I. trade unionist, was honest enough to admit in 1952. 'Ever since he can remember', said Gupta, 'the jute worker has understood by "union" nothing more than an office situated outside the mill and some union "babus" whose job is to write occasional petitions and hold gate, bustee or mass meetings'. The photographs only illustrate the point.

By refusing to see these obvious signs of the feudal concerns of their own, everyday culture, and by seeing the cultural only as an instance of the economic, the Bengali left remained trapped, ironically enough, within the same culture they would have liked to see destroyed. Ideology, in this case, was not enough to erase the ties of power encoded in the culture. These ties derived from an older, feudal paradigm of power, and if we are to talk about a paradox in the history of jute workers' organization, then this is where the paradox has to be located: at the intersection of ideology and culture.
## APPENDIX

### TABLE 17

Average value (in Rs) of money-orders sent by jute-mill workers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Post-office</th>
<th>Period I 1922-1930</th>
<th>Period II 1931-1937</th>
<th>Fall (%) from Period I to Period II</th>
<th>Average fall in value (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Angus</td>
<td>18.13</td>
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Source: I.J.M.A. Reports for the respective years (except the one for 1927 which I could not locate) and Wallace, Romance (1928), p. 108. The post-offices selected here are those whose figures, according to Wallace, 'may be taken [to represent] almost wholly jute employees' money.'
May Day rally in Calcutta, 1934.
May Day rally in Calcutta, 1934.
Chapter 4

NOTES

1. R.C.L.I., Vol. 5, Pt 1, p. 159.


5. ibid., p. 34.


7. Deshpande, Report, p. 35.


9. This is how the problem has been formulated in a recent study of left politics in Bengal. See Tanika Sarkar, 'National Movement and Popular Protest in Bengal, 1928-1934' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Delhi, 1980). The 'paradox in working-class organization' is seen here in 'the absence of regular unions and the workers' indifference to long-standing joint work on the one hand and the remarkable discipline and organizational ability in the face of tremendous odds of the short-term strike committees on the other'
(pp. 155-6). It is also said in this work that the 'conditions of jute workers explain the long tradition of militancy and conflict with the management' (pp. 144-5).


13. ibid.

14. ibid., Vol. 5, Pt 2, p. 188.


17. ibid., Vol. 5, Pt 1, p. 77.

18. N.A.I., Ind. and Lab. no. L-881(4) of 1923.

19. N.A.I., Ind. and Lab. no. L-881(18) of 1927.


27. See R.C.L.I., Vol. 5, Pt 1, p. 133; N.A.I., Home Poll Confdl no. 257/1 and K.W. of 1930.


31. C.S.A.S., B.P., box 13, 'Paul' to Benthall, 1 Sept. 1937.

32. C.S.A.S., B.P., box 13, Benthall to 'Paul', 28 Sept. 1937.


34. C.S.A.S., B.P., box 12, 'Paul' to Benthall, 21 July 1937, enclosures.


36. ibid.

38. R.C.L.I., Vol. 5, Pt 1, p. 143.

39. ibid., p. 273.


47. ibid.


49. For details, see Gautam Chattopadhyay, *Communism and Bengal's Freedom Movement*, I (Delhi, 1970).


54. See W.B.S.A., Home Poll Confdl no. 150/1931.


56. W.B.S.A., Home Poll Confdl no. 392(1-3)/1935.


58. W.B.S.A., Com. and Labour, April 1939 A14-16.

59. Gupta, Capital and Labour, p. 45.


61. Gupta, Capital and Labour, p. 45.


64. R.C.L.I., Vol. 5, Pt 1, pp. 262-3.


68. See W.B.S.A., Home Poll Confdl nos 161(29-67)/1934 and 33/1940.


70. W.B.S.A., Home Poll Confdl nos W-40/1940.


74. Sarkar, 'National Movement', pp. 156, 158.


78. ibid.


83. ibid.


89. C.S.A.S., B.P., box 11, M.P. Thomas to Benthall, 30 June 1937.

90. W.B.S.A., Home Poll Confdl no. 60/1937.


96. ibid.


99. ibid., Sime to Kalidas Bhattacharya, 13 June 1929.


108. ibid., pp. 45-6.


111. ibid. Emphasis added.


114. R.C.L.I., Vol. 5, Pt 1, p. 144.

115. ibid., pp. 144, 149, 276.

116. ibid., p. 144.

117. ibid., p. 150.

118. ibid., p. 149.


120. K.C.R.P., Diary No. 3, Entry under 25.8.29 to 28.11.29.


127. ibid., p. 173.


130. Roy Chowdhury wrote a Bengali play called *Dharmaghat* (The Strike) in 1926 and thus described it in its old age when he considered making it into a film: 'Kindly read it and note its objective - Socialistic propaganda, 21 years before Independence when very few people had any idea of the subject'. K.C.R.P., letter to J.P. Banerjee, 27 June 1959.

131. Even a casual reading of his diaries would confirm this point.


135. ibid.

136. ibid., p. 411.

137. Prabhabati Mirza (née Das Gupta), 'Interview', pp. 11-12, 18-19.


140. Ramanuja Vidyarnava, 'Bhattapalli Gatha' in his Kantamala (Bhatpara, n.d. [c. 1913?]).

141. The straightforward history of these parties and the journals (e.g. Sramik, Sramajibi, Naya Mazdur etc.) they brought out is relatively well known and well documented. Two interesting analytical accounts of the period are Roger Stuart, 'The Formation of the Communist Party of India, 1927-1937: The Dilemma of the Indian Left' (A.N.U. Ph.D. thesis, 1978) and Tanika Sarkar, 'National Movement'.


144. Roy Chowdhury, Dharmaghat, p. 6.

145. 'Interview' in Chattopadhyay, Communism, I, p. 135.


147. The leaflet is reproduced in W.B.S.A., Home Poll Confdl no. 484/1937.

149. Chakravorty, 'Interview', p. 135.


'There was no organization. Yet there was a great struggle. How indeed could that ever happen?' Abdul Momin wondered about this question in 1970 as he thought back to the stormy days of 1929 when he, as a young radical trade unionist, took a prominent role in conducting the first general strike of the Calcutta jute workers. In asking this question, Momin raised an important issue: how indeed does one understand a case of working-class militancy that does not flow from, or result in, organization? Historians often seek to answer this question in terms of the material conditions of the workers. 'Grievances', 'demands', 'living standards' form the stuff of their analyses. We, however, shall argue here that to understand the nature of jute workers' militancy, one will have to look at the relationships of power and authority within the mills, for it was in these relationships that 'the will to protest' was rooted. This becomes clear if we examine an important feature of jute workers' protest - the ever-present tendency towards physical and personal violence directed against the authorities.

By 'authorities', I refer to the managers and their European superintendents, called Assistants or European Assistants, in
the jute mills. They, as we know, were mostly Scotsmen from Dundee and its neighbourhood; a Handbook and Guide to Dundee and District published in 1912 reported that 'the overseers, managers and mechanics in the Indian jute mills [were] almost wholly recruited from Dundee'.

I overlook here whatever complexities may have characterized relationships within the managerial hierarchy in a mill. I also overlook, in this chapter, the special role of the sardars who occupied a grey zone between management and labour. I include them in my category of 'workers', and thus ignore the complex relations between the sardars and ordinary workers below them. One reason for doing this is that in instances of protests the workers were often led by the sardars themselves.

II

Let me begin with some typical cases of working-class protest in the 1890s.

In 1895 there was a riot at the Kankinara Jute Mill after the manager had refused a wage-increase. The manager 'narrowly escaped', though 'Iron bolts &c., were thrown at him and his house was attacked'. Next year in the Baranagar Jute Mill, spinners, demanding increased wages, 'surrounded the Manager and the Spinning Master ... assaulted an Indian clerk and showered brickbats into the mill premises'. Muslim 'coolies' at the Kamarhati Jute Mill were refused leave on the Id day in 1895. They responded by striking the 'Manager and the durwans (gatekeepers; armed retainers) by throwing brickbats at them.'
Hindu workers of a mill at Titagarh protested in a similar way when they were not allowed leave on the day of the Annapurna Puja (a Hindu religious festival). The manager was beaten up, as well as the police who came to save him.  

Two very well known instances of labour protest of these years were an 1895 strike at the Budge Budge Jute Mill and an 1899 strike at the Bowreah Cotton Mill. Regarding the former, an Amrita Bazar Patrika report ran as follows:

On Tuesday last [June 1895] ... a serious riot took place at Budge Budge. Nearly seven thousand labourers of the Budge Budge Jute Mills mustered in the vicinity of the bungalow, where European employees of the mill reside. It appears that the labourers fell out with their Sirdar and proposed to strike if his services were not dispensed with. The mill authorities declining to accede to the prayer, the labourers in a body assembled and broke down the panels of the bungalow by pelting stones and brickbats. The Europeans fired on the mob ... along with two police constables ... a durwan of the mills ... has been assaulted by the mob.

The Bowreah Cotton Mill disturbance was caused by the reelers who for some time past had been pressing for a wage increase. This refused, the reelers struck work and the manager issued a notice closing down the mill. The events that followed are thus described in the words of the manager, A.M. Downs, himself:

Soon after the reelers to the number of 2-300 surrounded the mill office with threats to murder me ... [Downs quickly collected four European officers around him]. I told them [the officers] that ... being 5 Europeans together they [workers] would leave us alone. I immediately left the office. We were surrounded and one man took me by the shirt front and demanded his wage. I ... told him to clear out. I then had a blow
on the right shoulder. When this took place I clubbed my umbrella and cleared a space around me, and one man received the blow on the body and smashed the umbrella. This was the only weapon in the hands of the Europeans. We were attacked by bamboos, brickbats and parts of the machines broken by workers for this purpose.⁷

The manager and the assistants eventually used gun fire but were themselves also rather badly hurt: 'One of my Assistants (Downs said) had his topi smashed; another lost his; mine was knocked off and my head cut open with a brickbat, the blood covering my clothes'.

The details of such incidents are obviously bloodstained, but they help to underscore one point. Irrespective of their demands, working-class protest against mill authorities frequently contained a strong element of vengeance in it. In many of these protests, violence was directed personally at the manager, his European assistants, the durwans, and when they were inaccessible, their houses and mill property.

It is this element of personal violence that has prompted a recent study of the nineteenth-century Calcutta working class to describe these protests as exhibiting 'a somewhat primitive defiance of authority'.⁸ The operative word here is 'primitive' and a little reflection on it may help us in setting the perspective of this chapter. In what sense was the jute-mill workers' defiance of authority 'primitive'? Destruction of mill property and 'physical violence against the employers', it is said in the study in question, 'reminds us in some ways of the Luddites'.⁹ This reference to the Luddites suggests two connotations for the word 'primitive'. It could refer to a particular period in the history of working-class protest in Bengal (presumably the early years of industrialization). On the other hand, it could have an ahistorical
status and could refer to an implicit (since this is never spelt out in the text under consideration) and a priori classification of forms of protest into some 'lower' and 'higher' types. In fact a conflation of both these senses - the old/new and the lower/higher oppositions - is suggested in the way the study contrasts the working-class protests of the 1890s with those of the 1870s and '80s - note for instance the use of words like 'transcend' and 'new': 'the miniature-scale deputations, "mobbings", strikes, violent troubles [of the 1890s] ... revealed that they [the workers] were trying to transcend the blind, individualistic, instinctive forms of reaction and to find new, more powerful and effective forms of protest'.

Even so, 'primitive' then also seems to imply here 'blind, individualistic, instinctive forms of reaction'.

Now there are serious historical and theoretical problems involved in looking at the history of working-class protest in Bengal in terms of a pre-conceived hierarchy of 'stages', based essentially on the peculiar historical experience of England. Space will not permit a fuller treatment of the question here, but this chapter will seek to demonstrate that the metaphors of 'primitiveness', 'instinct' or 'blindness' are unfortunate in the present context. They do not help us to understand why working-class protest in the Calcutta jute mills was frequently marked by a strong degree of physical violence or personal vengeance. It will be argued here that we do not understand a particular expression of defiance until we have examined the particular forms of manifestation of the 'authority' that is under challenge. The way the mill worker chose to register his protest had something to do with the way he related to authority. Far from being 'blind', it depended on how actually he saw authority.
Besides, employment of personal violence/vengeance against managers was not just a nineteenth-century phenomenon in Calcutta. It characterized much of working-class protest in the twentieth century as well. For instance, at the Birla Jute Mill in Budge Budge, one day in March 1937, when strikers from a neighbouring mill came in a procession, waving red flags, and 'paraded in front of the mill', the spinners got out 'in a body' and 'assaulted the European Engineer'. The manager of the Kankinara Jute Mill was 'assaulted' in another case of labour protest in January 1937. Later in the year in June, again, as he was 'remonstrating' with the spinners for 'disobeying mill regulations', he was 'suddenly hit by a bobbin'. A note from the district magistrate of the 24-Parganas said:

Yesterday's trouble arose when an Assistant Manager warned one of the operatives for bad work. He refused to obey the Assistant Manager's orders and [said that] he must have the Manager's orders. The Manager then came to the spot and upheld the Assistant Manager's orders. The man refused to obey and was then asked to leave. He refused to do so and struck the Manager on the head with a bobbin. A number of other operatives also threw bobbins at the Manager and [the] Assistant Manager.

A strike caused by a reduction of staff at the Northbrook Jute Mill in December 1937 featured a similar kind of violence. 'The mill hands', a government report said, 'were excited'. They 'became rowdy ... and indulged in rough play by throwing bobbins - one spinner being rather badly hurt'. In July 1939 the weavers of the Samnugger Jute Mill 'attacked the European Officers inside the mill in a body' over what the police thought was 'a trifling matter' and assaulted them, damaging some mill property too in the process. In August of the same year the weavers of the India Jute Mill 'assaulted the manager and two European
Earlier in 1936, a strike in Hukumchand Jute Mill on 9 April was marked by working-class violence whereby 'four Europeans were injured' and a durwan killed. Even when there was no actual physical violence against the manager, there was always a possibility of this occurring. There was a strike in May 1937 at the Khardah Jute Mill, caused by the dismissal of a few spinners. No violence was seen in this case, but the management handed over to the police 'some iron bars' that had been found with the spinners and the police thought that 'this trouble ... might [have] led to an outbreak of violence'.

Should all my illustrations appear to come from the nineteen-thirties, here is the text of a telegram that the Bengal government sent to Delhi, regarding a 'riot' at Anglo-Indian Jute Mill on 18 May 1926:

Mill hands demanded increased wages and attacked [Manager's] office. outside crowd broke in mill gates and pushed European Assistants to their quarters. The European Assistants who are members of auxiliary force fired nine shots in air with service rifles and dispersed crowd.

Such examples could be multiplied. The manager of the Bally Jute Mill 'went to surprise the workers of the weaving department' one day in June 1926. He was immediately 'attacked by 260 to 300 weavers and assaulted by many of them who threw shuttles, bobbins and other missiles at him causing injuries'. The manager thought that his decision to suspend 'the wages of four sirdars of the department ... [had] led them to organise an attack on him'. During the 1920-1 phase of 'industrial unrest' in Bengal, certain similar incidents occurred. The strike of 6 July 1920 at the New Central Jute Mill, Howrah, occurred over the
arrest of some weavers accused of 'a serious assault upon [a] European Assistant'.

Labour protests in the Wellington Jute Mill or the Union South Jute Mill in early 1921 exhibited very similar features - 'assaults, on managers or assistants'.

Even the so-called 'blind, individualistic' form of protest was quite in evidence in the twentieth century. In November 1926, Razak, a mill hand belonging to the Hooghly Jute Mill, was 'charged with having assaulted seriously the Mill manager, Mr Wilson'.

It is alleged [a newspaper report said] that the accused was having a chat with some coolies and the mill manager took him to task for it. The accused grew furious and struck the manager with a lathi which separated the thumb from the forefinger of his hand.

What does such protest signify? Why did defiance of authority take the expression of personal vengeance? To answer these questions we need to examine the mode of functioning of authority in the mills. The next two sections focus on this aspect of the problem.

III

The nature of managerial authority in the Calcutta jute mills comes out very clearly in some of the documents pertaining to the mid-1930s, which, as seen in the last chapter, were years of crisis when such authority was challenged by a massive upsurge of labour protest and strikes, organized under Communist leadership. The captains of the industry, the Government of Bengal and the Indian Jute Mills Association
then set about introducing certain 'reforms' in jute mill labour-management practices. Sir Edward Benthall tried at this time to get his managers to accept 'reforms' like Whitley Councils or works committees, labour officers, welfare officers alongside 'healthy' (which meant employer-promoted, anti-Communist) trade unions.

It is interesting to note that Benthall's proposals met with strong opposition from the managers. He was quickly warned against doing anything that undermined the authority of the manager in the eyes of the workers. Two of his managers objected to the idea of a works committee on the ground that the workers would read this only as a sign of the manager's weakness. Indeed, managerial sabotage made ineffective some of the works committees set up under pressure from Benthall. One committee soon ran out of topics to discuss as managers could not find issues on which consulting the workers could be considered worthwhile.

Benthall recognized the nature and strength of this opposition, and the manager's point of view was soon accommodated within his general strategy for containing labour unrest. He gave up the idea of purely western-type Whitley Councils where workers and managers sat as supposedly equal partners and took decisions jointly on matters affecting production and the worker's life. Such equality would be too un-Indian. If managers and workers were to get closer together through some institutional arrangement, then that arrangement had better be a 'panchayat' (traditional Indian village council), which was 'indigenous', rather than a Whitley Council, which would be 'foreign'. For, as Benthall eventually came round to accept in 1941, there was 'still much' in the 'Ma-Baap' relationship that was supposed to exist between the manager and the worker in a jute mill.
'Ma-Baap' literally means 'parents'. Managers obviously claimed that they were *in loco parentis* to the worker. The worker was a 'child' and was thought incapable of 'rational', 'adult' behaviour. He could be easily led astray; strikes for instance were always seen as the handiwork of 'ringleaders' or 'outsiders'. He was unreasoning and unpredictable, and managers often expressed surprise at the 'suddeness' of working-class protest. The worker was therefore child-like. A typically parental statement which Sir Alexander Murray (whom we have met in earlier chapters) introduced into the body of the report of the Committee on Industrial Unrest (1920/21) ran as follows. Note the key words: 'Labour, in its ignorance, is certain to make unreasonable demands which could not be granted without destroying industry, but firmness in refusing such demands needs to be mingled with much patience and consideration'.

This statement encapsulates the two necessary aspects of a 'Ma-Baap' authority. On the one hand, managers had to be seen as dispensers of 'parental' justice (showing the 'patience' and 'consideration' that Murray mentioned). Approaching the manager with complaints about an oppressive sardar was obviously an indication that managers were seen and even partly accepted in this role. Even in some of the Communist-led jute-mill strikes of 1937, workers frequently demanded that there should be 'no dismissals except by the manager or a European' - an obvious reference to the oppression the workers suffered at the hands of the sardars or their accomplices, the Bengali mill-clerks. But, on the other hand, being seen as patient and kind was not enough; managers also needed to be seen as disproportionately powerful figures, embodying the 'firmness' of Murray's prescription. The power-relationship
between the manager and the worker had to be visibly as asymmetric as between an adult and a child.

The exemplary manager was someone whom the workers would 'look up to ... as a sort of God'. This is how John Finlay, the manager of the Hastings Jute Mill, was described in 1894 by a visitor from Dundee:

John Finlay ... is the Nestor among the mill men now ... [He] has tact, mother-wit, and common sense in the management of the workers. He is intimately acquainted with their language and character, and the consequence is that things go on smoothly. There are no better workers in the world than those in the Indian jute mills. A paternal despotism suits them exactly. Whenever they get to believe in their manager as one who will be kind though firm with them, who, while demanding absolute obedience, will give them absolute fairplay, their loyalty is secure. They look up to him as a sort of God.\textsuperscript{36}

This quotation overestimates the importance the manager normally attached to learning the worker's language or about his character. According to an official report of 1906, the average jute-mill manager, 'usually a kindly Scot from Dundee', knew 'but little of the language which his employees talk[ed] ... [and] often [could not] freely communicate with them'. He did not have 'much acquaintance with their manners and habits' either.\textsuperscript{37} The description seems closer to reality and is borne out by the evidence of the Benthall papers. One persistent complaint of Benthall and his partners during the frequent jute-mill strikes of 1937 related to the absolute lack of managers and supervisors who knew the language of the workers well enough to be able to act as mediators between labour and capital, especially at moments of increased tension and hostility.\textsuperscript{38} But the shallowness of the manager's knowledge was
never seen to stand in the way of his 'Ma-Baap' authority. In 1923, a lady doctor investigating the conditions of female workers in the jute mills came across typical instances of assumed 'deification' of the manager. The manager of the Baranagar Jute Mill No. 2 told her how the 'temporary wives [of workers] go over to other men, upon which there is trouble, and then the manager is required to give a decision ... [He] said his Sunday mornings were often given up to such work'. At the Lothian Jute Mill, the manager pointed out to the doctor a Bengali woman worker. 'Once when one of her "husbands" had been beating her when she was pregnant, she appealed to Mr. Macnab [the manager] who, when he found the offence was proved, dismissed the man from the mill.' Another instructive case was the manager of the Fort Gloster Jute Mill:

The manager of this mill succeeded his father, and has himself been here 20 years ... I noticed as we went round the mill he did not hesitate to hit workers lightly with his cane. He himself settles disputes among the workers, gives divorces etc. He allows a wine shop and toddy shop inside the workers' village, says there is less 'budmasheri' and he has more control over his workers if they get drunk inside the village than out.  

Such arrogation by the manager of absolute authority to himself was obviously dependent on the worker seeing him as absolutely powerful, while in reality the manager's actual powers were often quite limited. For the 'Ma-Baap' relationship to work, it was necessary for the manager to have an overpowering presence and for the worker to be made to feel it. If this were not so, no manager would have dared to walk among his workers, alone, flicking his cane about, hitting them casually, as the Fort Gloster Mill manager did in the incident mentioned above.
What made the manager appear so powerful and big, and the worker powerless and small? What was the technology, so to speak, of such magnification?

IV

It is when we touch on this question of 'magnification' what we realize that the manager's authority was essentially colonial. It derived more from the colonial situation than from technology or any other factor internal to the production process. The word 'colonial' is meant here to include what was indigenous to Indian society. There is of course no denying that the authority of the mill manager was bolstered up by his position as a member of the ruling race. But, in some respects, one also cannot help noticing the essentially Indian nature of this authority. Hence the close resemblance - often commented upon in the nationalist press - of the jute-mill manager's authority to that of the nineteenth-century indigo-planter in Bengal, who in turn modelled himself on the Bengali (or north-Indian) landlord.41

The Scottish manager in a Calcutta jute mill was something that he could never have been at home. Our 1894 visitor observed: 'The jute mill manager in India is a much more important personage than his brother in Dundee ... He lives in a spacious bungalow, beautifully furnished, and has quite a retinue of servants to attend to him'.42 Thus it was the typical signs of ostentatious colonial power that made the manager more important than he would have been in Dundee:
'spacious bungalow', lavishly furnished, a large 'retinue of servants'. The words speak of plenitude and excess, which marked the life-style of the Scottish assistant as well. The Scotsmen in Calcutta presented such a novel spectacle to the Dundee gentleman whom we have been quoting so far that he proceeded to record their life-style in utmost detail.

To an Indian reader, many of the details would seem obvious and trivial, but their presence in the pages of the *Dundee Year Book* goes to show how strange and exotic they must have appeared to the readers in Dundee. The Scottish jute-mill assistant, it was reported, 'lives well'. '[He has] a bearer, a Mahomedan, who helps off and on with his clothes, takes charge of his room, attends him at table, stirs his tea, lights his pipe'. And this is how the assistant spent his daily life:

When a mill man gets up in the morning ... his attendant brings him a cup of tea with some toast and sometimes a couple of eggs. This is called *chota haziri* (little breakfast). When the real breakfast time comes, he sits down to several courses, consisting of fish, steved steak and onions, eggs, curried fowl and rice, with the usual addenda of tea or coffee, with bread, butter and jam. Instead of the tea, some prefer beer or iced water, while others take a peg. The 'peg' is a great Indian institution ... It consists of a glass of whisky, a bottle of soda water, and a lump of ice all tumbled into a tall glass ... The 'peg' is responsible for the downfall and early death of many a fine promising young man ... The tiffin (luncheon) ... is less elaborate than the morning meal ... and when the day's work is over, and bathing and dressing accomplished, the whole chummery sit down together to their evening meal consisting of a soup, fish, joint, side dishes, pudding and fruit. The various fruits in season are on the table at every meal. A plentiful supply of ice is provided by the Company.
with its own vocabulary - *chota haziri*, 'peg', 'tiffin' - signifying, again, excess and plenitude. An American gentleman who lived and worked in the jute-manufacturing circles of Calcutta in the 1920s noted with interest the emphasis his European colleagues placed on their living styles. He wrote:

> Europeans in India must keep up a certain standard of living. In fact, this is so vital to the white man's prestige that most of the big firms will not allow their juniors to marry on less than a thousand rupees a month. And this did not go far when I was in Calcutta. Take the servants alone, a married couple must keep ... Ten servants seem a lot for a couple with modest means, but there is no way of cutting down.⁴⁴

There was an irony of history in all this. For the mill managers and assistants were often themselves of working-class origin.⁴⁵ But out in the colony, they were transformed overnight into members of the ruling class and the ruling race. They sat on municipal committees, were made Honorary Magistrates,⁴⁶ and socialized with the British civil servants in the colonial bureaucracy. The private and public statements of the civil servants sometimes bore unintended testimony to the closeness and warmth of this relationship. 'Social life in Hooghly was brisk', reminisced T.G. Holman, an I.C.S. officer serving in Bengal in the 1920s and 30s. 'Alethea and I had many happy times with the gentlemen in jute at Angus [Mill]. They had a delightful swimming bath and a very well kept nine-hole golf course, where I had the good luck to win the Chinsura Challenge Trophy ...'⁴⁷ A note written by N.V.H. Symons, the District Magistrate of Howrah, in June 1937 on the occasion of a strike at the Belvedere Jute Mills is also quite revealing. This is how Symons expressed his views on the strike:
McKay, the manager of the mill is a very decent fellow, youngish and on perfectly good terms with his labour, and I should say competent and conscientious. It is very bad luck on him that he should keep on having these troubles and I am sure he has done nothing to deserve them.\(^{4,5}\)

In short, the managers became the bearers of the colonial rule in mufassil Bengal. Even bhadralok enterprise and social-reform movements in the mill areas often depended crucially on their patronage.\(^{4,9}\)

An interesting example of such colonial transformation is the career of James Robertson of Dundee, who went out to Bengal in 1874 as the manager of Samnugger Jute Mill. A certificate from the Douglas Foundry, Dundee dated 25 January 1866, described him as one who 'has served a regular apprenticeship of 5 years to us as a machine maker and has been with us as a journeyman for some months'.\(^{50}\) But two farewell addresses that he received in 1885 when he retired from Samnugger Jute Mill show him in a very different light. One address, from the local residents, mentioned how 'mill employees and the villagers ... looked upon him as the promoter of their welfare and happiness'. Another, from the secretary of a local school, was even more supplicatory in its tone:

Mr. James Robertson ... the worthy gentleman, whose good feelings towards the natives ... induced him to commiserate the want of an English School ... It is he, who favoured [the school] with a donation and ... took a lively interest in the Examination and distribution of prizes ... To preserve his memory hereafter, we beg of him for [a] miniature in photograph ... to be suspended in the school.\(^{51}\)

The effect of such colonial 'magnification' of one's power and status was not lost on the mill manager or his assistant. To quote the 1894 visitor again:
When the mill assistant arrives out in Calcutta his circumstances undergo a change. He may have been known in Dundee as Sandy Tamson: but out here he is changed at once into Alexander Thomson, Esquire, weaving master, and all his letters are so addressed.\textsuperscript{52}

The effect was not lost on the worker either. This was the context for K.C. Roy Chowdury's statement, mentioned earlier, that the jute mill workers always preferred a 'rich' Indian as their spokesman when it came to dealing with the sahibs, and that they were very pleased to see trade union leaders come to attend meetings in their own motor cars.\textsuperscript{53} In other words, the worker registered the signs of managerial authority and wanted his leader to match up to them.

In the jute mills of Bengal, then, managerial power worked more by making a spectacle of itself and less by the quiet mechanism of 'discipline' that acts through the labour-market, technology and the organization of work.\textsuperscript{54} In the 'classic' case of metropolitan capitalism, we may recall Marx's words once again, the 'place of the slave-driver's lash is taken by the overlooker's book of penalties'.\textsuperscript{55} In the colonial capitalism of Bengal, as I shall now proceed to show, the lash remained more important than the fine-book.

\textbf{V}

If we look at the manager's authority through the worker's eyes, three characteristics of such authority stand out. They are related but separable.
Firstly, authority was personalized. Factory rules were seen as the manager's will. Issues like wage-increases, wage-cuts, dismissals or lock-outs were perceived as matters of his personal choice. A telling case was a riot that broke out at the Anglo Indian Jute Mill on the morning of 18 May 1926. The mill had just laid off some workers. So the atmosphere in the mill was tense. It had also changed its working hours as a result of which women workers expected a rise in their wages.

In making his morning rounds at 6.30 in the mill a mob began following the Manager round and a few bobbins were thrown. The Manager then went into his office which was immediately surrounded by a crowd of 2000-3000 ... deputations were sent to the Manager to ask him to increase the wages. On his saying that it was not in his power, bricks were thrown at the office windows and the windows ... were smashed.\[^{56}\]

Much violence followed. A later police report repeated that the raising of wages was indeed not within the manager's power: 'Managers have no say in the matter of wages, which are controlled by the [Managing] Agents'.\[^{57}\] Why did the workers not believe this? Because they were used to seeing authority as an unrestrained expression of the manager's personal will. On the Friday preceding the riot - which was also their pay-day - the same manager had refused to pay them when he heard 'some murmuring' among the workers. He had warned them instead that he would cancel all due wages unless workers (then on strike) joined work by the following Monday. In the absence of explicit service or wage-regulations in the industry, such a warning could have only appeared to come from the manager personally.

Even in the course of daily routine - conversations with the workers, managers and assistants projected their authority not only
in the imperative, but often in the first person singular. A sample of 'useful sentences' taken from a manual of spoken Hindi - put together for use in jute mills - will make that clear. It should be noted that the word used to mean 'I' was 'ham' (or 'hum') which literally meant 'we'. The British in India used it often as a substitute for the royal 'We'. The sentences thus sought to impress upon the mind of the worker a sense of the manager's (or the assistant's) 'sovereignty', his unlimited power.

(a) Agar tum kārkhnā men phir jhaegra karegā to ham tumko jawāb degā.
(b) Tum do mahinā huā ghar gaya thā. Ham tumko abhi jāne nahin degā.
(c) Tum abhi ek mahinā talab baghair kām karo. Agar tumhara kām achcha hoga to ham tumko barābar rakhegā.
(d) Jo ādmi kāl der se āegra ham uspar jurmānā karegā.
(e) Ham jaise boltā hai vaisā karo nahin to kām chhor do.
(f) Tum donon kā kasūr hai. Ham donon ko jawāb degā.
(g) Agar Barā Sahib dekhgā to vuh bahut gussa hoga.

If you quarrel again inside the factory, I shall sack you.
It's now only a couple of months since you've been back from home (village). I shall not allow you to go now.
You work now for a month without any wages. If your work is satisfactory, I shall keep you permanently.
I shall fine anyone who comes in late tomorrow.
Do as I say, or give up your job and leave.
You are both guilty. I shall sack you both.
Look, if the Bara ('Chief') Sahib happens to see this, it will make him very angry.

Small wonder, then, that authority was seen in personal terms. As a Bengal government report once said: 'The ensuing of trouble on the appointment of a new Manager is not an infrequent occurrence'.
Apart from being personalized, authority was excessive. I use the word 'excess' in opposition to the word 'economy'. In Marx's (or Foucault's) discussion of capitalist discipline, managerial and supervisory authority is seen to operate through an articulated body of rules and legislation which have the effect of ensuring an economy in the use and exercise of managerial power. In the jute mills of Calcutta, however, there prevailed the idea that the managers should be in complete and unchallenged control of their labourers. No 'outsider' could be allowed to intervene in the manager-worker relationship. Thus in October 1905, the manager of the Fort Closter Jute Mill lost his temper when he saw some of his clerks and workers wearing rakhee. The rakhee to him was a sign of the presence of the 'outside agitator'. He 'struck a Bengali clerk and two or three Mohamedan mill-hands' which led to a strike. During the Khilafat movement in 1920, the manager of the Union Jute Mill came across 'a hartal [strike] leaflet posted up on the wall of the mill'. In a dramatic demonstration of his anger, not only did he tear it off the wall but he also 'trampled it under foot' before the watching eyes of his workers. Managers' reaction was the same when the Government of Bengal intervened to settle the 1929 general strike. A deputation of employers to the Governor bitterly complained how, as a result of such 'unfortunate action ... control of labour had ... passed out of the hands of the employers'.

The demonstration of excessive authority was also used for retaining labour. For, in a highly imperfect labour market, there was also the fear of temporary but serious labour shortage. The following report from 1918 brings out this aspect of the problem:
A manager ... starting a new mill heard that a mill across the river was out on a strike and so he sent a sardar with a launch to get some of the labour. The sardar came back without the labour and was ordered to go back once more. But he again returned alone. To the manager's question he replied that there was a sahib with a gun standing on the ghat [steps leading from the river-bank to the river] daring him to come near.

Thirdly, authority bore marks of terror. Excessive authority obviously depended on a certain use and demonstration of physical force. Managerial power had a necessary extra-legal dimension to it.

There was the Voluntary Artillery Force of which 'nearly every jute mill assistant' and manager were members. The object of raising the force was to meet labour unrest 'with arms'. As some of my examples will have shown, this was no empty threat. Besides, throughout the period under discussion, assaulting the worker physically was an extremely common practice - far too common, in fact, for it to be overlooked as any individual manager's personal failing. The nationalist press was always full of complaints about this aspect of managerial behaviour. A report that appeared in the Bengalee of 2 August 1906 describing how the manager of the Indian Jute Mill once kicked one of his weavers while 'using abusive language at the same time' was typical of the genre of such reports. Jute-mill workers, it is said, often compared their bosses to ill-tempered horses, as in dealing with both one faced the danger of getting kicked. Matters came to a head in 1926 when a Scottish assistant actually killed a weaver by kicking him in a fit of anger. The ensuing scandal and uproar in the press, and mounting working-class grievance over physical 'torture', forced I.J.M.A. to assure the government in 1929 that 'there will be no
corporal punishment' in the mills.\textsuperscript{70} This was not a very effective assurance, for we hear of physical assaults by managers and assistants as late as 1938 or 1940.\textsuperscript{71} By then the assumptions underlying the so-called 'Ma-Baap' relationship had obviously become parts of a strong managerial tradition in the jute mills.

Even more vicious, from the worker's point of view, was organized managerial terror (as distinct from sporadic physical assaults) that was unleashed on labour at moments of protest. In the flow of such excessive, organized managerial violence, the police, the sardars and the durwans often acted as capillaries, aiding the flow.

Sumit Sarkar records in his aforementioned book an early instance of this. The workers of Fort Closter Jute Mill had gone on strike in March 1906. 'On the night of 12-13 March', Sarkar writes, 'mill durwans, a mob of upcountry coolies and some police constables launched a violent attack on the neighbouring villages of Khajari, where many of the [striking] workers lived'.\textsuperscript{72} Abdul Momin, one of the organizers of the 1929 general strike, mentions the use by managers of hired Kabuli 'goondas' when the strike was on.\textsuperscript{73} During a strike at the Ludlow Jute Mill in May 1928, the manager one day let off 'the blacklegs' (working in place of the strikers) 'two hours before the usual time', and they, 'assisted by the Jamadars [durwans] and other servants of the mill, armed with lathis, swords, sticks and daggers, set upon the [striking] workers in their quarters and inflicted serious injuries on them'. A month later at the same factory, the women went out on strike. One day during the strike the manager 'induced' (in the language of a newspaper report) the women leaders of the strike to come to his office:
Thereafter the gates were locked up and strikers were threatened with prosecution if they failed to rejoin at once. The police and the Jamadars of the mill continued to intimidate them all along. On their refusal to resume work, several of the leaders were severely assaulted and immediately put under arrest. The rest of the women workers were ... assaulted and dispersed, being forcibly dragged by their hair.\textsuperscript{74}

It should be emphasized once again, however, that this projection of authority in personalized, excessive and terrorizing terms was not a European invention on Indian soil. Nor was it a European monopoly. Even after making allowances for the haughtiness and arrogance of a ruling race, the evidence points to remarkable similarities between the managerial style described above and that obtaining in the Indian-managed cotton mills in Bengal. The Communist-run newspaper Ganabani published a report in 1928 which described how the workers of the Dhakeshwari Cotton Mill (near Dacca) had been treated by the mill-management on demanding a rise in wages. The Bengali manager of the mill - who eventually forced them out of the factory with the help of his durwans - hurled a shower of abuse on the workers, using the Bengali equivalents of 'bastard', 'swine', and 'son of a bitch'.\textsuperscript{75} The details of the following police-report on a strike at the Indian-owned and Bengali-managed Bangoday Cotton Mill (on the outskirts of Calcutta) are also instructive:

On ... 6.4.[19]37 in the afternoon one Kartic Ch. Dey, weaver, while working in the Bangoday Cotton Mill was assaulted by one Ganesh, Head Jobber of the weaving department ... At this other weavers of the department took objection and complained ... to the weaving-in-charge Godu Babu who took no action but threatened with further assault and discharge. So these Bengali weavers determined not to work in the company and wanted their pay. As arranged by Godu Babu these weavers about 64 in number ... went to the mill gate
on 7.4.37 at 11.30 hrs to take their pay, when some Darvans and collies [coolies] came out of the mill gate with lathis and under the direction of Godu Babu and the mill manager Kunja Babu assaulted the ... weavers ... causing injuries.26

VI

The strong resemblances between the managerial styles of the Scottish jute-mill manager and the Bengali cotton-mill manager point to the existence in both cases of a culture obsessively concerned with the employment and maintenance of the visible signs of domination and subordination. However much the British in India may have improvised on it, this culture was undeniably Indian in origin and it refused to come to terms with the bourgeois notion of 'contract' that, theoretically at least, underlay the wage-relationship between labour and capital. Abusing the worker verbally or physically, addressing him in the disrespectful form 'tum' (see the Hindi sentences quoted above) or the even more disrespectful 'tui' (which was used by the Dhakeshwari Cotton Mill manager) were all signs of the worker's lowly social status and, insofar as he accepted them, of his subordination. 'Ma-Baap' relationship was thus the name that managers gave to their near-feudal domination. Up to a point, it must have worked. But as workers' protests show, the relationship broke down quite often. When exactly did such moments occur?

Let us go back to the case of the Anglo-Indian Jute Mill manager in 1926, the gentlemen who was subject to much working-class violence when he pleaded his inability to grant a wage-increase. As we know,
workers thought this to have been his personal choice. But that was to be expected; authority perceived as personalized could be only
'arbitrary'. But arbitrariness was not sufficient to provoke protest. If it were, jute mills in Bengal would never have seen any moments of 'peace'. In this case, the manager was seen as not just 'arbitrary', but also 'unfair'. He was arbitrary in an unfair way. The combination was explosive. The workers here believed - wrongly, but that does not matter - that while other managers in the mills had already agreed to a wage-increase, the gentleman here was holding this back quite unreasonably. The supposed agreement of the other managers had already made the demand reasonable and just. So in holding it back, the manager was withholding something that the workers thought was due to them. He was therefore unfair and deserving of punishment.

Time and again, through instances of working-class protest, we return to the worker's notion of 'fairness' and 'justice'. The worker reacts when he sees himself being deprived of something that he thinks is justly his. Such an injured sense of fairness and complaints about the manager's unreasonableness permeate the following petition that the workers of eight jute mills of the Titagarh area sent to the District Magistrate in 1931. This was a time when the mills were laying off thousands of men. Managers, fearing trouble from outside workers, had ordered entries into or exits from the mills to be strictly controlled. The petition is indicative of the workers' view at a time of heightened tension:

... at the time we are working in the mills we find ourselves imprisoned, as it were, with no liberty even to go to answer the calls of nature. If any of us pressed by an urgent call goes cut his token is
taken away and he is dismissed. If any of our relatives in our houses happen to fall ill or if any danger befalls any member of our family at the time we are working in the mills, we cannot get any information as the gates of the mill are kept closed and no one is allowed to go in or come out. We do not see why this rule should have been introduced, regarding closing of gates ...  

The petition is quite clear on the working class 'logic' of protest: '... when for many years in the past the gates were kept open during working hours there was no trouble whatsoever in the working of the mills'. Thus it was not because there was trouble that the gates were shut - which would have been the managerial view - it was because the gates were shut that there was trouble. In point of fact, this was not a 'true' explanation; there had been much trouble before even when 'the gates were kept open'. But the 'truth' of the statement lay elsewhere: the closing of the gates symbolized the manager's unfairness, and it was this that called for protest.  

In the absence of more documents from the workers themselves, their notion of fairness or justice is difficult to disentangle and analyse in depth. Yet some aspects of the question are clear. The worker's idea of fairness was related to his idea of what was customary (or riwaz). 'Unfair' was what was not done. If attending to ailing relatives or 'urgent calls' was his 'duty' and therefore customary - even if it meant interrupting work - then that was fair. Whoever or whatever stopped him from doing so was unfair.  

Chitra Joshi in her work on the Kanpur (in Uttar Pradesh) textile mill workers - workers from the same cultural region as the jute mill workers - has identified a notion of 'fair wage' that the workers there
had. A similar notion can be discerned in the case of jute mill workers too. A 'fair' wage was what a labourer in a neighbouring mill received (or what a neighbour working for a different mill did). In other words, fair was what was seen as 'customary'. Therefore, if one manager granted a wage-increase (for whatever reasons) and another in a neighbouring factory refused to do so (for whatever reasons, again), the latter was unfair, because he was denying workers what had become customary (in other mills) and thus rightfully theirs. The general strikes of 1929 and 1936/7 provide good illustrations of this. This was also at the heart of some of the important conflicts of 1920 - the year of 'industrial unrest'. At the Hooghly Jute Mill in November 1920, the spinners asked the manager for a wage-increase 'alleging other mills are getting it'. The manager denied this, but - and this is significant - 'says if others get it they shall also'. The spinners went on strike, and the strike quickly spread to the mills in the town of Howrah - the Ganges, Fort William and Howrah Jute Mills. The strikes broke out on the same day, ended on the same day, and all had the same demand for 25 per cent wage increase. The only way the government could explain the spread of this strike which originated in a single isolated mill on the other side of the river was by pointing out that, though isolated, the Hooghly Jute Mill 'belongs by intercourse to the Howrah group, quite a proportion of the labour of the Howrah mills living in its neighbourhood'.

To appear 'just', however, an idea did not always require the force of real tradition behind it. An arbitrary reference to the kanoon (law) of the land or to a superordinate authority was often sufficient to establish something as time-honoured (and thus a matter of 'right'),
much the same way as insurgent peasants would invoke the authority of the raj against an oppressive landlord. In April 1936, for example, the workers of the Hooghly Jute Mill went on strike and the authorities issued notices asking them to vacate their rooms in the mill's cooly-lines. Much violence resulted. But what preceded the violence is even more interesting. Debendra Nath Sen, a Communist leader, told the strikers: '... as you pay rent and as you are employees in their Mills, the proprietors have no right to eject you all of a sudden ...'. In a later meeting, another leader, Abdul Aziz, was even more forthright: 'The notice given by the Sahib is not lawful. He does not conform to the laws of the Government'. Of course, both Sen and Aziz were wrong in their knowledge of the law, as a prolonged court-case later proved. But the argument worked. When the manager went to the lines with his assistant and durwans to evict the workers, they were greeted by a very heavy dose of working-class anger and violence.

It is easy to see that the worker's notion of fairness became inextricably bound up with the questions of defending what was 'customary' and thus with his traditional sense of honour and dignity. This came out strongly in strikes over alleged acts of misbehaviour toward women by assistants or durwans, where striking was a matter of protecting the women's izzat (honour). Another good example is the case we have cited earlier of the manager of the Union Jute Mill who tore up a Khilafat leaflet in 1920 and trampled it under his foot in the presence of his Muslim workers. He was 'chased to his private quarters by a number of workmen who threw brickbats at the doors and windows'. The workers later told the police that 'as there were certain religious verses quoted in the notice, the trampling under foot was ... insulting
to their religion'. In other cases of protest, too, there always remained an element of the worker's dignity being at stake. In December 1905, when two 'ringleaders' of the protesters at the Fort Gloster Jute Mill were arrested, workers 'promptly went on strike, and ... told the ... police ... that in arresting the two men they had all been insulted'. In January 1933, when the 'Burra Sahib' of the Waverly Jute Mill 'roughly handled some of the weavers whose production did not prove satisfactory', it was not just 'bad yarn' that the weavers complained of. They actually 'resented ... this alleged bad behaviour and ... severely assaulted him with shuttles and iron instruments, necessitating his removal to the hospital'.

Thus it was at points when the manager was not only arbitrary but both arbitrary and unfair (and thus unreasonable and insulting) that there was protest. At these moments the 'Ma-Baap' relationship broke down. It not only broke down: more important, the terms of the relationship became instantaneously reversed. The manager's view of the worker as a 'child' was replaced by the worker's view of him as a 'despot'. Working-class vengeance took the place of managerial terror, and protest now bore marks of retaliation which the worker needed to stamp on the manager's body (since authority was personalized) or on the body of his assistant or durwan or on objects bearing a relationship of contiguity to them, such as their bungalows, quarters or offices (that is, mill property). Using the anthropologist's language, we may schematize this 'reversibility':
Protesting, then, became a ceremony of defiance. The rebel worker inverted the terms of his relationship with the manager or the supervisor and overturned the two major everyday signs of his subordination: abusive language and physical violence. This inversion of relationships can be seen in most instances of working-class protest in the period under study. But an example from the nineteenth century would probably serve to show it in its pristine clarity. We reproduce here a letter that the authorities of the Alliance Jute Mill wrote to I.J.M.A., reporting a 'disturbance' at their mill on 6 July 1897.

We continued full working until about 10.30 A.M., when notice was brought that a large gang of men armed with lathies had attacked the gate, burst it open, and were surrounding the Mill. As things looked serious the engine was stopped, and the Europeans went off to their houses to arm themselves, but before they got back to the compound the Mill was surrounded by two to three thousand excited men all armed with lathies, and with their clothes tightly tied up, shouting all kinds of abusive language and making threatening gestures with their sticks. The engine, the governor gear was broken, and other damage done. It was only the prompt appearance of some of the Europeans with fire-arms that prevented the rioters from continuing their course of destruction and attacking the European quarters, upon which a body of men were marching. When asked to state their reason for causing the disturbance the only reply was a shout of defiance, with abusive language, a brandishing of their lathies and a shower of bricks. A few shots fired in the air, and a charge or two of snipe shot at their legs, got them to retire as far as the gate which they again attacked with their sticks and broke to pieces. This and the throwing of bricks appeared to satisfy them for a time.
The coming of the nationalist movement in the twentieth
introduced competing ideologies and organization into the field of
industrial relations in Bengal. The whole scene of labour movement
became literally more colourful in the 1930s as the left in Bengal
started celebrating such ceremonies as May Day, Lenin Day, November
Day, etc. The [red] flag with the insignia of the hammer, sickle and
star and revolutionary slogans are a common feature of most demonstrations
in Calcutta and most of the speeches which are made at these...
demonstrations advocate communism', noted the Chief Secretary of Bengal
in 1937. Along with this went a constant effort to undermine the
authority of the British. A police report of 1939 gives a good description
of the kind of 'manuscript posters' that the Communists often circulated
in mill-areas inciting the mill-hands against the mill authorities and
Europeans.

This poster exhibits a picture of a man calling
himself ... a revolutionary holding a revolver in his
hand and with the other holding a rope tied to the
neck of a man who has been styled ... a two-footed
monkey probably meaning [a] European.

All this of course had significant influences on the working-
class as the scale and intensity of labour protest in the 1930s suggest.
As the nationalist movement gained momentum and the legitimacy of the
British presence suffered erosion, workers naturally felt more encouraged
to challenge the authority of their superiors at work. Yet it is possible
to recognize a continuing structure in the nature of working-class
defiance of authority all through the history of 'political mobilization'
of labour. There are, for example, uncanny similarities between the
modes of labour mobilization of the Swadeshi period (1905-08) and
those, under Communist leadership, of the nineteen thirties. The red badge replaced the *rakhee*, slogans like 'Mazdur ki Jai' (Victory to the Workers) replaced 'Bande Mataram' (Glory to the Motherland), but the 'bourgeois' nationalism of the Swadeshi *bhadralok* and the Marxism of the later *bhadralok* Communist often spoke to the worker with the same voice. Thus if the sight of the worker wearing the Swadeshi *rakhee* angered the manager in 1905, this is what Zaman, a Communist leader, told the workers of a jute mill in 1938: '[He] ... asked workers ... to enter the mill for work with red badges on and with lathis. He gave them instructions to assault anybody objecting to their wearing badges'. In 1905 Aswini Banerji, the Swadeshi nationalist labour organizer, told his followers 'that it was the slave who tempted, invited, nay compelled tyranny and that if they could return 2 blows for one, their burra sahibs ... would begin to respect them'. Years later, in 1937, the Communist Niharendu Dutt Majumdar had the same message for the working class: '... if any workman was assaulted by a manager, the workers should retaliate by hitting him back'. The particular ideological content of the preachings do not seem to have been crucial. 'Bande Mataram' was as good as 'Mazdur ki Jai' when it came to signifying defiance. At the Kamarhati Jute Mill in June 1937, spinners charged with bad work defied the manager's order to leave, and 'struck the manager on the head with a bobbin'. 'A number of other operatives also threw bobbins at the Manager and Assistant Manager' whereupon the police arrested 'several of the rioters'. 'Immediately a crowd of about 1000 workmen assembled in front of the thana [police station] shouting slogans such as "Mazdur ki Jai"' and demanded their release. When asked why, the 'ringleaders' replied 'it was their order'. How similar to the incidents at the Fort Gloster Jute Mill in December 1905, where one
day, when a 'considerable amount of unrest' already existed in the workers' minds over a recently concluded strike, the cry of 'Bande Mataram' was 'taken up by one department after another', the European assistants 'hustled about the place', and the police were told by the workers, on arresting two people, that "all brothers in the mill, all brothers in Bengal; that in arresting the two men they had all been insulted".  

These similarities across the separation of decades are not accidental. They arise from the fact that both the Swadeshi bhadralok and his later Communist successor had to address themselves to the already existing working-class notions about defying authority. These notions were rooted deep in the worker's understanding of authority and in the manager's projection of it. Physical violence against the employer was not necessarily a 'primitive' defiance of authority; it was rather an acknowledgement of the way authority was represented in the jute mills and elsewhere. In the very nature of defiance was mirrored the nature of authority.
Chapter 5

NOTES


5. The Indian Daily News, 5 Apr. 1895, quoted in ibid., p. 97.


9. ibid., pp. 30, 32.

10. ibid., p. 149.


13. ibid.


16. W.B.S.A., Home Poll Confdl no. 60/1937.


18. ibid.

19. W.B.S.A., Govt of Bengal, 'Fortnightly Confidential Reports on Political Situation in Bengal, First Half of January to Second Half of June 1936'.


22. The Amrita Bazar Patrika, 1 Dec. 1926, carried a report on this case.

24. ibid.


27. C.S.A.S., B.P., box 12, 'Paul' to Benthall, 21 July 1937.

28. In this particular committee, all that they could discuss were the prospects of the Muhammadan Sporting Club - these were years of heightened Hindu-Muslim tension in the working class - in the Calcutta Soccer League. Once the club won the league, however, there was nothing else to talk about. C.S.A.S., B.P., box 11, 'Paul' to Benthall, 19 July 1937.

29. C.S.A.S., B.P., box 16, 'Paul' to Benthall, 26 Nov. 1940; also box 11, Benthall to 'Monty', 15 July 1937.

30. C.S.A.S., B.P., box 16, Benthall to 'George', 5 Apr. 1941.


32. Even a casual reading of the weekly reports on strikes available in Home Poll Confdl series (W.B.S.A.) will bear this out.

33. See, for example, W.B.S.A., Home Poll Confdl no. 818/1936, Govt of Bengal letter no. 522 Com[merce] of 1936.

35. See W.B.S.A., Home Poll Confdl, no. 484/1937 and no. 60/1937.


40. Raising wages, for example, was often not within the manager's power. Even orders for 'lock-outs' at times came from the Managing Agent's Head Office. B.C. Roy Papers, held at the Nehru Memorial Library, New Delhi, have some correspondence (from the early 1920s) bearing on the problem. Also see W.B.S.A., Home Poll Confdl no. 215/1930.

42. Anon., 'Calcutta Jute Mills', p. 104.

43. ibid., pp. 100-102.


45. 'The overseers, managers and mechanics in the Indian jute mills are almost wholly recruited from Dundee. There are hundreds of such men who have passed through Dundee's technical classes, and a certificate of attendance at the technical college has come to be regarded as proving that the holder has been willing ... to acquire a knowledge of the principles of jute manufacture'. British Association, Dundee, Handbook and Guide to Dundee and District (Dundee, 1912), pp. 118-20.

46. See W.B.S.A., Home Poll Confdl nos 307(1-32)/1920 and 22/1930, P.D. Martyn, the Sub-Division of Barrackpore in the early 1930s later recalled: 'When in Barrackpore I inspected the honorary magistrates' courts in the various jute mill areas - mostly mill managers from Dundee or Aberdeen on the Benches ... Justice may have been done but it was surprisingly rough. I.O.L., MSS. Eur. F 180/13, Memoirs of P.D. Martyn, p. 18.


48. W.B.S.A., Home Poll Confdl no. 60/1937.

50. T.D.A., bundle on James Robertson.

51. T.D.A., the bundle on Robertson contains these addresses.


56. For details, see W.B.S.A., Home Poll Confdl no. 286(1-4)/1926.

57. ibid.


59. See N.A.I., Ind. and Lab. file no. L881(11) of 1921, and W.B.S.A., Home Poll Confdl no. 32/1940.

60. See Chapter 3 above.

61. A piece of thread worn around the wrist as a mark of brotherhood. A traditional Hindu rite. During the agitation against the partition of Bengal in 1905 Hindu Bengali leaders often exchanged *rakhees* with Muslims to indicate Hindu-Muslim unity. See Sumit Sarkar, *Swadeshi Movement*, p. 287.


64. N.A.I., Home Poll Confdl no. 257/1 and K.W. of 1930.

65. J.C. Kydd, 'Industrial Labour in Bengal', *The Bengal Economic Jl*, (1918), pp. 345-46. See also Anon., 'Calcutta Jute Mills', p. 95, for similar instances from the 1890s.


68. Interview with Jyotish Ganguli (Calcutta, Sept. 1979).

69. For details, see W.B.S.A., Home Poll Confdl no. 177/1926.

70. N.A.I., Ind. and Lab. file no. L881(24) of 1930.


74. Amrita Bazar Patrika, 3 May, 10, 22 June 1928.


77. See W.B.S.A., Home Poll Confdl, no. 286(1-4)/1026.

78. W.B.S.A., Home Poll Confdl, no. 150/1931.

79. The gate occupied quite a crucial position in the architectural plan of the mill, as far as the exercise of managerial power was concerned. It was a means of controlling entry and exit. It was also where workers were physically checked by durwans for possible 'thefts' and other offences. Scuffles between workers and durwans at the gate were quite common. Managers often ordered the gate to be closed as a demonstration of their will (as in the case of a lock-out) - hence, as a demonstration of a counter-will, gate-crashing by striking workers. See W.B.S.A., Home Poll Confdl no. 128/1937, Pt 3, note dtd. 4.6.1937 by the inspector General of Police; N.A.I., Ind. and Lab. nos L881(30) of 1931 and L881(10) of 1924.

80. See her Ph.D. thesis on the Kanpur textile labour force (in progress at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi). I am grateful to Ms Joshi for having let me read two of her draft chapters.

81. Report I.U.C., 'Appendix'.


84. See, for example, Report I.U.C., 'Appendix', and N.A.I., Ind. and Lab. file no. L881(10) of 1924.

85. W.B.S.A., Home Poll Confdl no. 106(1-30)/1920.


88. Cf. Foucault's discussion of the inversion of relationships that 'normally' existed between the sovereign's terrorizing power and ordinary people, where violence became 'instantaneously reversible': Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, pp. 59-60, 63.

89. For the concept of 'contiguous' (or metonymic) relationships, see Edmund R. Leach, *Culture and Communication: The Logic by which Symbols are Connected* (Cambridge, 1976); Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology* (New York, 1979), pp. 59-60.

90. *I.J.M.A.* Report, 1897 (Calcutta, 1898), 'Appendix'.


93. W.B.S.A., Home Poll Confdl no. 446/1939.

94. 'Swadeshi movement' refers to the anti-partition movement in Bengal between the years 1905 and 1908. 'Swadesh' literally means 'one's native land'.

95. W.B.S.A., Home Poll Confdl no. 31/1938.


98. ibid.

Their poverty gave the jute mill workers a sense of identity and a certain sense of social stratification as well. Even when issues like religion divided them, there still remained, in their own minds, a fundamental distinction between themselves as 'poor people' and others who seemed well off. 'We are poor people and [we] work in mills' is how a group of Muslim mill-hands once described themselves in 1896 while requesting help from wealthier Muslims in fighting their Hindu fellow-workers who were just as poor and who would have possibly described themselves in very much the same terms. Overlapping with the rich-poor distinction was the distinction the workers made between themselves and their employers. During times of strikes and industrial tension, especially after the 1930s, the workers suspected any affluent-looking stranger moving about in their midst of being a 'spy' working for the employers. For instance, a group of Bengali sociologists who had decided in 1944 to live in a working-class slum in Jagaddal in order to research the living conditions of the workers soon discovered that 'the employment of a cook and servant promptly led to their being doubted as agents of jute mill owners'. It was only after they had 'dismissed the servants',...
taken turns at the cooking of their meals' and explained their mission to the workers that they were able to 'disarm suspicion' and make 'friendly contacts'.

If this was one expression of an emergent, though elementary, class consciousness on the part of the jute worker, there were other expressions as well. The strike-wave of 1937-38 was accompanied by some very impressive demonstrations of working-class solidarity. The government documents belonging to these years, speak of the workers of the Nahaiti Jute Mills 'receiving monetary assistance from the workers of certain other jute mills' while on strike in December '37, or of some '530 spinners' of the Dalhousie Jute Mill striking work 'in sympathy with workers on strike at the Northbrook Jute mill'. On 12th November 1937, to give yet another example, more than 2500 workers at the Cheviot Jute Mill stopped work in 'sympathy with the workers on strike in the Caledonian Jute Mill'; they even made (unsuccessful) attempts 'to bring out the workers of the Budge Budge Jute Mill' in support of the same cause.

For more than fifty years, however - that is, for the entire period under consideration - this emergent identity of belonging to a class remained enmeshed in other narrower and conflicting identities of the jute worker such as those emanating from his religion, language, habitat, etc. The 'gulf between the ... Hindustani [i.e. Hindi-speaking] and Bengali workers', the lack of 'strong fraternal ties' between them, always presented the trade union organizer with special problems of working-class unity. Sometimes the 'gulf' was so large, that 'the Bengali labourer [would] not bathe in the same tank with the Hindustani labourer' as they considered the latter 'dirty'. And there was besides,
the perpetual problem of what (in the language of Indian nationalism) is called the 'communal question', i.e. the problem of antagonism between Hindu and Muslim labourers. Thus, its impressive manifestations notwithstanding, the class-identity of the jute-mill workers remained remarkably fragile and easily gave place to the other identities created by race and religion.

This was most dramatically revealed in the 1930s and '40s when the workers' hostility towards their employers was matched by an equally strong sense of hostility between large sections of the workers themselves, resulting in a series of bitter feuds between Hindus and Muslims. There was for example a 'serious' riot between Hindu and Muslim workers at Gouripur (24 Parganas) at the time of the Bakr Id festival in 1932. Extreme feelings of hostility between the Hindu and the Muslim workers of the Oriental Jute Mill at Budge Budge were reported on the occasion of the Bakr Id festival in March 1934, while 'at Shyamgunge, at the site of the G.D. Birla Jute Mill to the south of Budge Budge', violence erupted between the two groups and 'a very ugly situation likely to have resulted in bloodshed' was averted only by strong police action. On the 3rd June of the following year the Muslim workmen at the India Jute Mills at the Serampore abstained from work and fought with 'brickbats and soda-water bottles' attempts by local Hindus to demolish what they, the Muslims, regarded as a mosque. 'Tense feelings' and 'a likelihood of a fracas' between Hindus and Muslims at Kamarhati and Titagarh were reported to the police in 1938. In Titagarh and Kankinara, the Hindus and the Muslims took turns in complaining to the government about each other's unfriendliness. In June 1938, the 'Hindus of Kankinara' wrote to the government describing a riot between them and the Muslims 'during the
Holi festival day last' when 'several' Hindus were injured and 'one killed'. Besides, 'Hindu houses' and women were attacked 'in front of the Kankinara big mosque'. The news of this incident, said the Hindus, 'ran into the city like ... wildfire and Mussalmans began to assault Hindus wherever they found them lonely [sic]'\(^\text{11}\). A petition from some 60 Muslims of Titagarh in October 1938 on the other hand complained of Hindu arrogance in playing music before Muslim mosques during the celebration of Hindu festivals. In his note on this petition, H.J. Twynam, the Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal, admitted that it was 'unfortunately true that a state of communal tension exists at Titagarh at present' and pointed out that 'numbers taking part in the Durga Puja procession [this year] were a good deal above normal'.\(^\text{12}\)

In March 1939, the situation turned ugly once again when the celebration of the Hindu festival of Holi was marred by an outbreak of Hindu-Muslim riots among the mill-hands of Metriabruj, Titagarh, Khardah, Kamarhati, Naihati and Jagaddal, in which both lives and properties were lost.\(^\text{13}\) Tension between the two groups was evident again in 1940 when the government felt constrained to refuse permission to 'the Hindus of Kamarhati' to take out a religious procession 'at Kamarhati Agarpara Jute Mill [cooler] line'. The government based its decision on the ground that 'the processionists definitely refused to proceed unless allowed to go armed'.\(^\text{14}\) In March 1940, a communal riot at Bansberia in Hooghly was acknowledged by the government to have had 'injurious reactions on Hindu-Muslim relationship in the Mill area generally'.\(^\text{15}\) The state of feelings can be gauged from the way the members of the two communities often proceeded to describe each other. On 11 March 1940 some Muslims of Gouripur wrote to the government
asking for protection from attacks by Hindus. The letter described the
upcountry Hindu workers of 'the jute mill area in the suburb[s] of
Calcutta' as 'deadly enemies of Muslims', their 'cherish[ed] desire ... 
[being] to harrass and oppress' the latter. These antagonisms received
an ultimate and gruesome expression in 'the communal riots of 1946-47
and ... the subsequent riots of 1950' which, to quote Indrajit
Gupta, 'particularly affected the jute mill areas of Barrackpore,
Hooghly and Howrah'.

At first sight, these conflicts of race and religion among the
workers may appear to reveal a totally different aspect of the workers'
consciousness than that expressed through conflicts between the workers
and the authorities (eg. strikes). In every instance of jute workers'
strikes, however, 'there [was] always ... the possibility', as the
government put it in 1929, 'of communal and even racial clashes'. At
the very height of the general strike of 1937, the government noticed
'acute communal [i.e. Hindu-Muslim] tension' among the workers in the
mill-towns of Kankinara, Jagaddal, Khardah and Kamarhati. The tension
had in fact been 'augmented by the strikes' in which 'the Muhammadans
[were] very unwilling' to participate.

At Jagatdal [the government said], one Muhammadan
Sardar of Meghna Mill - Mulla sardar - had kept
Meghna running by bringing in his Muhammadan workers
of the mill in a body. They were one day attacked by
the Hindu strikers (Rajputs) of Anglo-India Middle
Mill ... and there is great ill-feeling over this
on both sides.

One can adduce more such instances of strikes turning into 'communal'
conflicts. In March 1937, a strike at the Birla Jute Mills ended in a race
riot between the strikers and the 'loyal' workers, the strikers being 'local Bengalee men' and the loyal workers, Hindi-speaking upcountry people. A very similar situation occurred at the National Jute Mill in December 1938 with the difference that here the lines of division between the 'strikers' and the 'non-strikers' were based on religion and not language. The result was a Hindu-Muslim riot 'on the morning of the 5th [December]' as the authorities tried to re-open the mill with the help of the non-strikers. A police report said:

About 400 workers attended [the mill]. Almost the whole of these men were Muhammadans. About 7 O'Clock a crowd of about 300 men composed of recently dismissed workers and strikers attacked the cooly lines of the men who were working in the mill. The Muhammadan coolies working in the mill received information [of this] and seizing weapons from the mill rushed out to defend their quarters ... [and] a riot started between the two parties - the one party being mainly Muhammadan and the other mainly Hindu ...

Here is another example. Six Hindu spinners of the Standard Jute Mills were dismissed in November 1938 for assaulting the manager. Their dismissal caused a strike on 14 November and resulted soon in sympathetic strikes at a few other mills, forcing the closure of five of them, the strike thus affecting some 30,000 workers altogether. This was no doubt an impressive instance of workers' solidarity against the employers. On the night of the 16th November, however, 'a free fight' ensued between 'the strikers and the loyal workers at Tittagarh', which, the government reported, 'later took the form of a communal [Hindu-Muslim] riot [in which] one man was killed and several persons injured'. When the local authorities tried to arrange a peace-making meeting of the leaders of the two communities, 'it was found difficult to persuade the speakers to discuss
the communal trouble without reference to the strike in the local mills'. The Muslims resented 'being out of work because the Hindus wish[ed] to strike'. At this meeting, it was reported, 'the Mahomedans continually referred to the fact that all the workers [were] without wages because 6 Hindus [had] a disagreement with the management'.

These strikes and the religious and racial riots discussed before help to isolate an important aspect of the jute workers' culture that we wish to emphasize here. Clearly, this culture was capable of generating militant protests and an anti-employer outlook, as the discussion here and in the preceding two chapters will have made clear. It would appear that the workers did have an awareness of being poor and oppressed and on occasions gave some remarkable demonstrations of a sense of solidarity against their employers. Yet all collective public actions of the workers were marked by an inherent ambiguity. An act of revolt against the authorities, e.g. a strike, always had the potential of turning into its opposite, a fight among the workers themselves, e.g. a religious riot; a religious or racial riot, on the other hand, contained a necessary element of rebellion against authority, an extreme manifestation of which were the strikes based on 'religious' or 'racial' demands.

This duality characteristic of the collective and public acts of the working class usually receives explanations that are either narrowly political or political-economic in orientation. None of these explanations, we shall argue, gives us any clues to the nature of the consciousness that was expressed in the ambiguity inherent in collective actions by
jute workers. Expressive of a class-mentality that had been, as it were, caught for ever in a state of incipience (being perpetually inter-twined with religious and ethnic mentality), this duality was rooted in something we have emphasized throughout this study: the pre-bourgeois nature of the jute worker's culture. The question of the development of class consciousness among industrial workers in a society where relationships retain a predominantly pre-capitalist character is thus - we will finally seek to show - far more problematic and open ended than is usually conceded in optimistic histories of the Indian working class.

II

Sympathetic observers of the working class often explain the weakness of worker-solidarity in terms of the seeds of division deliberately sown among workers by the interested people from the ruling classes (naturally including the employers). We should listen carefully to their argument - especially as it applies to the present context - for it is not without some force to it. 'The real gravity of this communal disruption', wrote Indrajit Gupta, referring to Hindu-Muslim riots in the jute-mill areas in the 1950s, 'lies in the latent anti-Muslim sentiments which have been fostered among the non-Muslim workers ... by the poisonous anti-Pakistan propaganda carried on by reactionary leaders ...'. The workers had been 'provoked and incited by communal reactionaries into regarding their ... fellow workers as enemies'.

Stated so baldly, this sounds like a crude theory of manipulation and conspiracy. Yet we could do worse than Gupta by ignoring altogether
the existence of such 'provocation' and 'incitements'. For example, in the same letter of 1940 in which the Muslim mill-hands of Naihati described their up-country Hindu fellow-workers as 'deadly enemies to Muslims', they also made a pointed reference to the doings of the Arya Samaj which, in their view exacerbated such 'enmity'. Thanks to 'the activities of the Arya Samaj' over 'the last two years', the letter told the government, the Hindu workers' hostility had turned to 'open violence'. The latter's decision to take out processions on the day of the Holi festival - 'with a large number of armed Hindu Gundas with exciting slogans full of abuse to Muslims and their faith', accompanied by 'a lorry full of brickbats and soda water bottles' that were hidden from view by '15 strong durwans of the Gouripur Jute Mill' sitting on them - was, according to the letter, quite a new feature in Hindu-Muslim relations in that area. So, allegedly, was also the Hindu demand that they be allowed to play music while passing by mosques. 'This year', the authors warned, 'the situation appears more grave [due to] the increased activities of the Arya Samajists combined with [those of] the disciples of Shyama Prasad and Mo[o]nje'.

On the side of the Muslim worker, too, much of the sensitivity he showed towards religious issues in the 1930s and '40s had to do with the activities of the Muslim league, of politicians like H.S. Suhrawardy and the backing they received in these years from the employers and the government. The strike-wave of 1936-38, the prospect of India's self-rule, and the success of the Bengali left at the elections of 1937 (in which all the eight labour seats were won by them) had unnerved the European employers and the British bureaucrats in Calcutta. To many of them 'labour conditions' now looked like 'becoming increasingly difficult'.

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Their nervousness was reflected in their reactions to the jute workers’ general strike of 1937. Arguing from the premise that the strike could not have had a ‘real economic basis ... [as] otherwise labour surely would have protested long before’, the employers soon talked themselves into believing their own, imagined scenario of an imminent Bolshevik revolution. The strike was ‘purely political’, declared I.J.M.A., ‘with the workers being exploited for communistic and political purposes having as their object the overthrow of ordered government’. That this was not an act of empty grandstanding by I.J.M.A. is suggested by the following private note from Benthall to one of his colleagues in 1937:

What we have to be careful about [wrote Benthall] is that congress or the Communists do not form proper Labour Unions - "proper" in the sense that they conform with the definitions of the [Trade Union] Act and use those unions as the nuclei of revolution in accordance with the standard Communist method of working.

The militant mood of the workers only confirmed some of the worst fears of the employers and the government. An official report on 'Strikes in various jute mills in the district of 24 Parganas' in 1937 described the 'general attitude which has been growing among mill workers' as 'one of defiance' and concluded that 'there is no doubt whatever that communistic ideas are rapidly spreading among them', producing 'a contempt for and defiance of authority'. Understandably therefore the authorities were more than pleased to be assured by H.S. Suhrawardy, the labour minister in the new ministry, that his Muslim League unions were 'the best antidote to communism', that his men were 'at least taught two things' - as he told Benthall over a private lunch in 1940 - 'respect for the employer and respect for the government'. Suhrawardy’s strident advocacy of
anti-communism had caught their attention even earlier and his success in weaning a substantial section of the Calcutta dock workers away from the Communists during a strike of 1934 had won him praise from the government and the employers alike.\(^3\) The bond between Muslim league ministers like Suhrawardy or Khwaja Nazimuddin and the European employers was further reinforced by the fact that the new ministry depended for its survival on the support of the European bloc in the Bengal Legislative Assembly.\(^3\) The ministry therefore - as Nazimuddin was reported to have said to a colleague of Benthall's - was 'particularly anxious ... to avoid a break with the Europeans, especially over labour policy'.\(^3\) The employers responded warmly to the gesture. Benthall advised his friends in Bird and Company to 'go on keeping in close touch with Shaheed [Suhrawardy]',\(^3\) and proceeded to congratulate 'Fazl [sic] Huq, Shaheed and [Nazimuddin] ... on the capable way in which ... [they had] ... met the menace of communism that surrounded the [1937] jute mill strike'.\(^3\) This was followed up by a round of lunches and dinners and men like Suhrawardy were now allowed a degree of 'familiarity' and 'intimacy' with the European businessmen which surely would have been denied to most other Indians. Benthall's description of a private lunch he once hosted for Suhrawardy in 1940 ended as followed:

My guest had two helpings of each course and finished off with a large cigar which by 3.30 pm. proved too much for him. After being revived with ice water, he decided it was time to get back to work and departed with many pleasant personal compliments.\(^3\)

The support that the jute-mill owners gave to the Muslim League unions was not simply confined to dinners and lunches, however. Suhrawardy, on his part, clearly saw them as an important source of funds for his...
organizations. 'To get these [White Flag] unions going', he told Chapman Mortimer in 1937, 'we need money, and my proposal is that the [jute] Mills should provide this'. Asked if any possible public knowledge of such funding would not be too embarrassing, his calculated reply was that 'no one would know'. It is difficult to tell from the evidence of the Benthall papers to what extent Suhrawardy succeeded in achieving this objective, but of active employer-support for his Muslim League Unions we are left in no doubt. I.J.M.A. assured him in July 1937 that the 'Association Mills had consistently refused to have anything to do with the self-styled labour leaders, to wit the communist agitators who were the cause of all trouble'. Instead, they 'would be prepared to recognize ... [Suhrawardy's unions] and deal with them'. Once, when Suhrawardy complained to a high official of Bird and Company about the attitudes of some of their jute-mill officers towards his unions, the gentleman 'asked Mr S., if he had any complaints of this nature, to ask Lewis or anyone else he pleases to send them privately to me so that I could investigate them'. Benthall offered him similar advice from time to time:

I said that so far as building up Labour Unions is concerned, our greatest difficulty was the personnel that he [Suhrawardy] employed and the cases that he brought up. As regards personnel, "If only he could establish close working conditions with the managers ... he would make wonderful progress with the Trade Unions. Further, I said that the mistake which his Unions made was to take up bad cases ... He could save himself much trouble and build up more quickly if he could instruct his chosen men to approach our organization privately to find out whether the case was good or not."

Now, a major ingredient of the 'antidote to communism' that Suhrawardy wanted to administer to the working class was an emphatic
assertion of Hindu-Muslim differences. In the appeal to religion he found an answer to communism. The Communist trade unionist A.M.A. Zaman made the following complaint to the government in July 1937:

One Mr. Mohiuddin of Howrah, in the name of the Hon'ble Labour Minister [Suhrawardy], is forming several unions on communal basis in Bhadreswar Police Station area and Serampore P.S. area ... [He] is carrying on his propaganda with some called Maulvis and religious heads against my lawful union.¹³

Zaman did not fabricate his complaint. On 23rd August 1937 the Police Superintendent of Hooghly warned the District Magistrate of the trends of 'the last two months' which showed that there was 'a danger that the rivalry between the unions of Zaman and Mohiuddin may develop on communal lines and that Mohiuddin has definitely been trying to detach the Muhammadans from Zaman's union by using the religious appeal'.¹⁴ He also quoted another Intelligence Boranch report (of 8th August 1937) which described 'the Maulana of the Dalhousie Jute Mill mosque [as having] indulged in enlisting members on behalf of Mohiuddin on communal basis by saying that Zaman was not a true Muhammadan ... that no true Muslim could join it [Zaman's union] ... [and] that the Muhammadan workers who helped the Hindu strikers with money etc. were kafirs'.¹⁵

The activities of parties like the Arya Samaj or the Muslim League thus have to be taken into account in any attempt at a comprehensive historical understanding of religious conflict among the jute workers in the 1930s and later. But what made the Muslim League unions into a specially effective force in the 1930s was not simply their religious appeal but also the support they received from the employers. In their
propaganda to the ordinary workers, Suhrawardy's men made a point of mentioning the fact of this support, thus adding to the heavenly rewards of being a 'true Muslim' the promise of some tangible, concrete and immediate material benefits as well. 'Mohiuddin's party', we read in the same police file as mentioned above, enlisted members '[by] saying that his union [was] the true Muslim union and [that] it [was] being backed by the mill companies, Labour Minister and the government'. At this, the report added, 'many Muhammadans who were of Zaman's party were enlisting their names in Mohiuddin's office'. Some of these new members gave the following as their reasons for joining Suhrawardy's union (note especially points 2, 4 and 5):

1. That the union was the true union of the Muhammadans.
2. That the rents of the coolie lines will be removed.
3. That the sardars who ... take bribes will be discharged.
4. That all the appointments and discharge will be made by the companies according to the instructions of the Presidents and the Secretaries of the Unions.
5. That the union will be patronised by the ministers, it being a union of the Moslem League. 

Indrajit Gupta's argument, then, that the jute workers were 'victim[s] of all sorts of fissiparous tendencies and disruptive propaganda' or that they were 'always liable to be provoked and incited by communal reactionaries into regarding their ... fellow workers as enemies' is not to be laughed away. Yet the poverty of this formulation is obvious in the statement itself. One can turn Gupta's expression around and ask: why were the workers 'always liable' to be provoked into divisive conflicts?
The tradition of Hindu-Muslim riots predates even the formation of the Muslim League (1906) and cannot be explained by the latter's politics alone. Elsewhere I have documented and analyzed some of these riots that occurred in the mid-1890s, and in which the mill-hands of Standard Jute Mills, Titaghur Jute Mills, Titaghur Paper Mills, Lower Hooghly Jute Mills, Upper Hooghly Jute Mills and Hastings Jute Mills were involved. Riots of this kind punctuate jute workers' history for the entire period under consideration. 'A disturbance took place at Naihati at the Bakr-i-Id of 1898 with reference to the kurbani [animal (cow) sacrifice]', wrote the Commissioner of The Presidency Division in 1900. 'The Muhammadan mill-hands of Gouripur wanted to sacrifice kine at Garifa, a village near Naihati, to which the Hindus objected', and this led to the disturbance. Two years later, in 1900, the Hindu mill-hands of Naihati were reported to be 'still bitterly opposed to the slaughter of kine there'. The District Magistrate of the 24 Pargana wrote: 'The feeling among the Hindu hands of the Gouripore Jute Mill is evidenced by the serious riots which broke out on the 12th April 1900 on the mere suspicion, which proved groundless, that a calf had been killed by the Muhammadans'. '[An] excited crowd of Hindi mill-hands armed with lathis broke into the Muhammadan quarter and proceeded to wreck the houses and beat the occupants who were chiefly women and children.'

In the years that followed, Muslim and Hindu religious festivals like Bakr Id, Muharram, Holi, Durga Puja continued to be the occasions when serious divisions surfaced between the two groups of mill-hands resulting sometimes in violent disputes. Bakr Id disturbances, for instance, were reported from Telinipara (Hooghly) in 1913. Another Hindu-Muslim riot among the workers of the Angus Jute Mill in the same
year - during which 'the Muhammadans of the Angus Mill went down to the Northbrook Mill to get help from thier eo-religionists' - was explained by the authorities as 'a relic of the Tittagarh riots many years ago'.

Telripara was to become a scene of 'prolonged rioting' in 1922 and by 1926 the official practice of posting 'a small force of military police' there 'during important Muhammadan festivals' was considered to be a 'customary' one. 'A few men [were] also sent to Champdany and Rishra', the other important mill-areas where violent conflicts between Hindus and Muslims were always a strong possibility. Bakr Id riots occurred at the Garden Reach area in 1924 when '600 Hindus attacked a group of 300 Muslims who were ... performing Kurbani [and] killed one and wounded 37'. In October 1926 the Hindu and the Muslim mill-hands at Naihati fought each other with 'lathis, bayonets and naked swords' after the Hindus placed 'an idol on the ground near a mosque', allegedly to 'insult' the Muslims. In March 1927, to give another example, the Muslim labourers at Serampore began to assert their 'right to kill cows' as a result of 'Hindu Muslim tension regarding music before mosques'.

Tension between the two communities was also reported in 1927 from Ramkrishnapur in Hoorah (where 'there was a disturbance during the last Durga Puja festival') and Rishna in Hooghly. The issue of 'music before mosques', especially at the time of Hindu religious festivals, often caused serious rioting at Titagarh and Kankinara till a 'committee of Hindu [and] Muslim leaders was formed [at Kankinara in 1927] ... [to] avoid rioting on the day of the immersion of Durga pratima [idol, image]'.

A more determined search would no doubt produce many more examples of such religious or racial conflicts in the jute workers' history. One could of course explore the individual and unique nature of the circumstances...
surrounding the origins of each of these outbreaks and stress the role played at different times by organizations like the Arya Samaj or the Muslim League (or their likes) in making the workers deviate from the path of class-solidarity. But one could also question the fragile nature of this solidarity itself and inquire into the reasons for its fragility in the case of the Calcutta jute-mill workers. Narrowly political explanations emphasizing 'provocations' and 'incitements' do not throw any light on questions of underdeveloped class-consciousness.

III

Let me anticipate here an answer usually offered in response to these questions by scholars who expect 'economic' factors to act as the ultimate limits on - if not as the determinants of - the course of human history. The very structure of the labour market in the jute industry, it will be said, created conditions conducive to the growth of racial and religious conflicts that were subversive of class-solidarity. Two significant aspects of the labour market would be of crucial importance to this argument: the sardari method of recruitment and control which emphasized the primordial ties of the worker, and the keen competition for employment inevitable in a market which was overstocked with unemployed labourers and where the unskilled nature of work made every single worker easily replaceable. These factors would seem to make it understandable that the workers should find their religious, linguistic and geographical bonds useful in obtaining and retaining employment. Did not religious or racial clashes, then, ultimately reflect the competitive nature of the labour market which, thanks to its
organization, reinforced religious and racial solidarities? The problem of working-class unity and the question of class-consciousness would then appear amenable to an explanation (and solution) that gave primacy to the economic.

It is of course undeniable that, in their concern to create and maintain a steady supply of cheap unskilled labour, the jute-mill owners developed a labour market in which a host of 'informal' relations and methods came to acquire important economic functions necessary for the running of the industry (see Chapter 3 above). For the mill workers, kinship and village connections often provided the network for the flow of information regarding the state of the market. One heard of and obtained employment through these connections. Foley, who investigated the labour market for the Calcutta industrial belt in 1905-6, noted this while travelling in the district of Saran (Bihar). 'I believe', he said, 'the rates and conditions of work in the Calcutta industries are well known in this district'.

There is a constant flow to and from the mills, and one man will inform a whole village as to what his earnings and his work have been. To test this I attended a chaukidari parade. Several chaukidars told me, as I thought correctly, what some weavers from their village had made in a Jute Mill, and a third seemed to know a good deal about jute presses.\(^5\)

The importance of these family or village or other community ties was stressed in many of the interviews of individual jute workers, recorded for the Royal Commission on Labour in 1929. 'My brother is working in the Standard [Jute] Mill; I got my job through my brother', said Prakash, a boy from U.P., who worked at the Titaghur Jute Mills. Kalil, a weaver
from Ghazipur (U.P.) owed his job at the Anglo-India Jute Mills to his uncle who did 'weaving work in this mill'. Jamrath, an 'ordinary weaver' at Titagarh 'secured [his] employment through one of [his] village men who was working in the mill'. Lachanao, a migrant boy-worker, had 'heard from his father that there was work in the mill'. Behari Rai, an up-country spinner at the Angus Jute Mill, had heard about vacancies at the mill from 'some of his village folks' who worked there. Noormahamad, a weaver at Titagarh who was born in Jaunpur (U.P.) was 'only a boy ... when his mother was compelled to send him to work in some of the jute mills in Calcutta, being advised to do so by many of her well-wishers some of whom were mill employees of this province'. The fact that 'so many of his villagers were in the wearing [department]' aroused in Noormahamad the ambition to become a weaver. The final realization of this ambition was also something that he owed to his village connections. '[He] used to go in his leisure to the Weaving Department to help his villagers in their work ... [and] thus acquired good practice in the art of weaving'. Dar Basona, to give another example, came to Calcutta from Madras along with a co-villager 'who was a jute mill worker' and found, through his help, 'cooly's job' at Titagarh. Abdul Khan, another jute worker, was brought from Gaya to Calcutta by a cousin 'who was a sirdar in the Champdeny Jute Mills' and who 'had him admitted in the said mill as a shifter boy in the Spinning Department'.

Very similar were the stories of Biro, an Oriya 'calendar cooly' at the Champdany Jute Mills, Jumrathi Miah, Khedoo Miah, and Mohan Noonia, the first two being weavers and the last a worker in the Machine Seving Department of the Victoria Jute Mills. Biro came to Rishra from Cuttack 'with one of his countrymen' who worked at Rishra and 'through
his help he secured a job as a drawing cooly in Rishra Jute Mills', Jumrathi came from Balia (U.P.) with his brother who was a weaver in Victoria Mill ... [and] at once obtained employment in the Spinning Department', Khedoo had been sent by his father with some of his fellow-villagers to look for work in a jute mill'; and Noonia, another person from Balia, was found employment at the Shamnagar Jute Mill 'by a relative who was a worker in that Mill'. At the apex of the network of such relations of course stood the sardar with his methods of recruitment and control that we have already described in chapter 3. 'In some of the mills', the Royal Commission was informed by the Kankinarrah Labour Union, 'if the Burra [Head] Sirdar (weaving supervisor) happens to be native of Chapra district, most of his men (weavers) under him are relatives of Chapra'.

Apart from the question of employment, the insecurity of the jute worker's life - caused by poor wages and the absence of service-rules - gave his village, racial or religious ties a new economic significance in the city. Since the mills discouraged family migration (see chapters 1 and 3), most jute workers retained some links with their villages. Data collected for eleven jute manufacturing concerns in 1929 showed that the 'number of non-Bengali persons born in Jute Mill lines or neighbourhood who have been employed solely in Jute Mills and who do not normally leave the neighbourhood for a native village' to be about 2.57 per cent of the total number employed by these concerns. Moreover, in the absence of service-rules, employment in the mills was rather irregular. The majority of the jute workers were, in the words of R.N. Gilchrist, 'short service workers'. Dargmar Curjel was told by several mill-managers during her investigations in 1922-23 that about one-third of the workers in any mill were always 'on the move'. Information collected from eleven mills
in 1929 regarding the 'length of service' of their labourers is summarized in the table below. It will be seen that more than sixty per cent of the workers had worked in their respective mills for less than five years, even though it was always believed that employment in the jute industry was the only source of livelihood for the majority of the millhands, at least some ninety per cent.®^°

In a life characterized by poverty and such insecurity of work, a labourer's need for economic and physical support from his or her kinsmen (real or putative), linguistic or religious community, naturally extended far beyond the stage of obtaining employment. These traditional relationships impinged on several aspects of the worker's daily life. Two contrasting pieces of evidence go to show how crucial such support could be even to the question of sheer physical survival of the worker. The Civil Surgeon of Howrah made an enquiry in 1912 into the circumstances of the '100 or 150' people who died every year at the Howrah General Hospital of 'dysentery, diarrhoea and other similar diseases which [could] be attributed ... to starvation'. The inquiry revealed that these men were 'the flotsam and jetsam' of the labour market in Howrah, people who for some reason lacked the support of village or kinship connections in the city. Such labourers, the Civil Surgeon said,

have great difficulty about cooking their food as they have not the means to provide themselves with suitable huts and have not the opportunity to cook their food properly; they live on parched grain or other indigestible diet with the result that they get bowel troubles which with ordinary suitable treatment and diet would be of little account. They become too weak and, their money exhausted, they then lie up in some corner of a hut or even in the open air and practically starve until ... the police bring them to the hospital in a perfectly hopeless situation.®^
**TABLE 18**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Mill</th>
<th>(I) Proportion of total male employees working less than 5 years (%)</th>
<th>(II) Average of (I) (%)</th>
<th>(III) Proportion of total female employees working less than 5 years (%)</th>
<th>(IV) Average of (III) (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gouripur</td>
<td>51.5</td>
<td></td>
<td>66.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shamnagar</td>
<td>61.8</td>
<td></td>
<td>68.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Titagarh</td>
<td>57.8</td>
<td></td>
<td>69.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clive</td>
<td>65.8</td>
<td></td>
<td>75.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>68.1</td>
<td>62.2</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>71.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Champdani</td>
<td>74.2</td>
<td></td>
<td>71.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hastings</td>
<td>51.6</td>
<td></td>
<td>72</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Howrah</td>
<td>70.7</td>
<td></td>
<td>79.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delta</td>
<td>69.0</td>
<td></td>
<td>62.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lawrence</td>
<td>63.6</td>
<td></td>
<td>79.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Budge Budge</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td></td>
<td>69.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In complete contrast was the case of Narsama Kurmi (a female jute worker interviewed during the proceedings of the Labour Commission) the story of whose survival emphasized at every point the support she had received from members of her native 'community'. When she first arrived at Howrah from Madras, Narsama 'could not speak ... Hindustani'. Someone 'she had met on the train ... put her on a tram car and told the driver to put her off at the Madrassi [cooler] lines'.

The tramway man told her to get off about the place that she lives in now, and there she saw some people of her own country to whom she was able to speak. One of the Madrassis took her to a sirdar of the mill ... [who] gave her work in his line in Howrah [Jute] Mills.^

The ties of language, religion or village thus served the worker well in regard to his need for accommodation and shelter. A dismissed upcountry worker, the Royal Commission was told, could live in working-class slums on credit provided by the sardar 'till he got a job'. Such help could also be provided by 'relatives'. Mangari and her husband, both workers at the Titaghur Jute Mills, were 'posted in the house of a relative' of theirs when they first arrived from Madras. So was Gobardhan, another worker at the same mill who came to Titagarh from upcountry as a young man of twenty. He 'stayed with a relative who secured for him a job as a cooler in the Preparing Department in the local jute mill'.^

In ill-health and bad times, too, the workers often fell back on their 'traditional' relationships. 'I had fever a year ago', said Gowri, a female worker of the Standard Jute Mills who was interviewed by the Royal Commission.
I did not go to the doctor [she said] because I was too weak and unable to move, nor did the doctor come and see me ... I paid Rs. 3 to Rs. 5 to a man who came to my house and treated me. He is a man of my caste, but he is not a qualified doctor.®

Muthialu was another worker who 'did not go to the doctor' when she had eye trouble. She said: 'I put in my eyes the medicine other people gave me'. Curjel's investigations of 1922-23 into the condition of women workers brought to light the case of a Muslim woman called Mia whose existence depended to a large extent on the material assistance she received from her co-religionists. Mia was 35 and had three children to look after, having been deserted by her second husband; Curjel found her being 'supported by the charity of a number of Mahomedan workers in the mill lines'.

In choosing to emphasize (through violent feuds or otherwise) the bonds of race or religion, the jute-mill worker did not, therefore, behave in an 'irrational' manner. He may have imported a peasant-culture into the industrial setting as he migrated from the countryside; but the retention of some of the key elements of this culture in his new environment was not a simple matter of nostalgic behaviour on the part of the migrant peasant. The structure of the labour market was such that the primordial ties of language, religion or kinship - ties that are especially strong in pre-capitalist cultures - had a practical and economic utility to the worker in his struggle for survival in the face of poverty and insecurity. They helped him protect his standard of living. Is it surprising then, it will be asked, that these relationships should bulk large in his consciousness and undermine his sense of class solidarity? 'Utility', the celebrants of Political Economy will tell us, is the key to the secrets of consciousness.
In a fundamental sense, however, this understanding misconstrues the jute workers' consciousness. The ties of kinship, religion, language or race were of course of much economic utility to the jute worker. But to see in this 'utility' the workers' reason for valuing and retaining these bonds is to invest the jute worker with a bourgeois rationality, since it is only in such a system of rationality that the economic utility of an action (or an object, relationship, institution etc.) defines its reasonableness.71

The jute workers, on the contrary, acted out of an understanding that was pre-bourgeois in its elements. It was not that they did not value things economic - poverty itself would have often brought home to the worker the value of money. Yet the 'economic utility' and the 'reasonableness' of an action were different categories, the former often subsumed under the latter. A very good example of this is provided by the opinion that Behari Rai, a Brahmin upcountry spinner working at the Angus Jute Mill, expressed in an interview in 1929 regarding the problem of jute workers' indebtedness. Debt was incurred, said Rai, not though whimsical, thoughtless action (shok) on the part of the worker but through 'necessity'. He himself would 'never go into debt because he wanted to buy something beyond his means'. Yet it is interesting to see what Rai saw as 'necessity', 'Caste, or fellow men', he said, 'determine[d] how much an individual should spend ... [since] caste itself [carried] an obligation as to spending'. Being a Brahmin, he was obliged 'to spend far more than if he were less highly born'.72 To Rai then, it only stood to reason that one should go into debt, if necessary, in order to protect one's honour and
position within one's caste even though the 'economic utility' of such
ation could indeed be negative. The bourgeois notion of 'utility' thus
is not of much assistance in understanding a pre-bourgeois consciousness
such as Rai's.73

There was another important aspect to this consciousness - the
absence of individualism and individualistic identities that mark a bourgeois
culture. The individual jute mill worker never appeared 'in the dot-like
isolation' in which Marx placed the individual industrial worker belonging
to a bourgeois society; the jute worker in Calcutta always conducted
himself - to use Marx's words again - 'only as a link, as a member' of
a 'community' defined, somewhat ambiguously, by the primordial links of
religion, language, habitat etc.74

The point can be illustrated by exploring the jute worker's sense
of 'honour' which, as seen in the last chapter, often informed working-
class protest in the jute mills. 'People of my district do not bring their
families to these industrial areas here', said Abdul Hakim, a jute-mill
worker from the Darbhanga district in Bihar when he was interviewed by
the Royal Commission on labour. 'If I brought my family', he added, 'my people
would laugh at me'.75 'My wife does not work [in mills]', explained another
worker, a Bengali, '[as] in Bengal our wives do not work'.76 Indeed, so
dishonourable, in Bengali eyes, was factory-work for women that almost all
of the Bengali women interviewed by the Factory Commission of 1890
declared that they would not let their daughters become mill-workers unless
they were really desperate. Digambari, a woman working at the Howrah
Jute Mill said: 'Unless Bengali women are widows, they do not come to
work in mills'.77 Sookvaria, a woman from Chapra, however, was of a
decidedly contrary opinion -'she [would] bring her daughter to work when she [was] sufficiently old ...' It is clear that the sense of honour expressed in these statements referred back to a notion of 'community' which the workers saw as the ultimate arbiter and dispenser of honour and shame. The worker's identity was merged in that of the 'community'.

In the examples given above, 'community' was primarily defined by habitat and language. In addition to these two factors, religion was another, perhaps the strongest, source of a notion of 'community' and therefore of a communal sense of identity and honour as well. In the statement of Behari Rai quoted earlier on, his sense of honour was clearly a part of his overall sense of belonging to a community of 'fellow-men', the 'community' being defined here by the ties of caste (hence kinship) and religion. Gopen Chakravarty, the Bolshevik leader mentioned in our chapter on organization, has left us a graphic account of how important religion was in giving the jute workers a sense of 'morality' and 'honour'. In 1928 Chakravarty and his comrades organized an historic march of industrial workers in the jute mill areas. 'The plan had a two-fold objective - the first was to rally support of the entire working class of Bengal behind this struggle [strikes of 1928] and secondly to rouse and organise the jute workers through the process.' In Chakravarty's words:

We took the marchers to the bank of the Ganges. There they rested while we went to the market to purchase [food] ... It was then that we received a shock. The marchers, who had remained firm in class battle and not flinched in the face of bullets, would not dine together - so deep was their prejudice of caste and religion. As they put it, "Jan dene sakta, lekin dharam nehi dene sakta" [We can give our lives but not sacrifice our religion].

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A worker, it would seem, would rather suffer than be put to shame in the eyes of his 'community'. Kamala, a drawing machine feeder at the Howrah Jute Mill told the Royal Commission on Labour that her husband had been sick and unemployed for the past three months at the time of her interview. Kamala therefore had been 'obliged to borrow the sum of Rs. 20 ... [paying] interest at the rate of Rs. 2.8 per month'. Living, as Kamala herself put it, was 'very hard now'. Yet her husband refused to 'take medicine from the mills dispensary' and the reason he gave is significant in the context of our present discussion: '[he] says it will break his caste'.

Being a 'virtuous Muslim', similarly, was a matter of honour. It was to this communal sense of honour that the Muslim League trade unions appealed, for instance, as we have seen above. Noormahamad, the Titagarah Jute Mill weaver quoted earlier, prided himself on being a 'virtuous Muslim'. He drank tea 'twice daily', smoked biri, and 'at the weekends [was] in the habit of going to the cinema in Calcutta' but 'being rather a virtuous Muhammadan himself, [he had] never indulged in any other vice'.

The question of honour (or shame or insult) of an individual was thus subsumed under the notion of communal honour. An insult inflicted on an individual member of the community, however defined at the time in question, could be construed as an insult to the whole community. And conversely, the individual perpetrating the insult could easily be seen as acting on behalf of another community. This is why racial or religious conflicts could be sparked off by events which historians often regard as 'trivial'. A 'serious communal trouble' was 'provoked' at Naihati in March 1934 (during the Id festival) by 'a Muhammadan boy ... running through the streets with hands covered with blood and shouting and
cheering, and secondly, [by] another Muhammadan ... washing [sacrificial] meat at a public hydrant'. At Budge Budge the same year a Hindu-Muslim riot started 'through [a] Muhammadan taking meat for his own consumption into the [cooile] lines of the Orient Jute Mill ...'. At the time of the Holi festival in 1939, a riot broke out between Hindu and Muslim labourers at Metiabruj. According to the government, 'the trouble started over a Hindu throwing red water on a Mahomedan without any warning ... [when] the Mahomedans attacked the Hindu [cooile] lines in a body'.

Why were these individual acts, 'trivial' by our judgement, capable of provoking such strong and collective reactions? Precisely because they were seen as gestures calculated to offend the sense of honour of a community. Such a communal sense of honour speaks of the non-individualistic, pre-bourgeois nature of the identity that the jute-mill worker had. And so innate to the worker's consciousness were the identities flowing from religion or race that some of the insults and counter-insults traded during 'communal' conflicts attained highly codified, symbolic forms that were charged with explosive potentials. The playing of music by Hindu religious processions in front of mosques, debates over the routes through which the sacrificial cow would be taken during the Bakr Id festivities, 'alleged desecration of the Koran', the singing of 'objectionable songs' by Hindus while passing by mosques - these issues figure with monotonous and predictable regularity in all accounts of Hindu-Muslim riots among the jute-mill workers.

Another such issue was the question of women's izzat (honour). This was once again a question of the honour of the community, which is why the 'molestation of women' of one community by men from another was
considered a grave communal insult. A 1938 report on a Hindu-Muslim conflict at Kankinara mentioned attacks by Muslim on 'Hindu houses and women'.

A riot between Bengali and upcountry labourers at Baurea in November 1928 was caused by a piece of 'false information' reaching the Bengalis that the upcountrymen 'had entered [their] ... villages ... and had been molesting their womenfolk'. Yet another riot in December 1938 between the Hindu workers of the National Jute Mill who had gone on strike and the 'loyal' Muslim workers broke out when the strikers reportedly 'started molesting the women and children in the [Muslim] coolie lines'.

All this however should not lead us to imagine that the 'communities' were separated into water-tight compartments by their irreconcilable differences, that the Hindus and the Muslims, for instance, were always out for each other's blood. While workers belonged to a culture that lacked any idea of the individuality of the individual, their notion of a 'community' based on the primordial loyalties of religion, language, habitat, kinship etc. could only be ambiguous. This was because a 'community' defined by such loyalties was necessarily a self-contradictory entity. People sharing the same religion for example could be divided by language (or habitat) and vice versa. It needs to be emphasized that this both lessened and aggravated the danger of the outbreak of any particular type of 'communal' conflict. For while in some cases a religious unity could be formed that cut across the language or ethnic barrier, this barrier itself could in other cases stop a religious conflict from spreading. In still other cases, one could have the divisions of language and habitat overriding those of religion, as in the case of conflict between Bengali workers and the upcountry people.
This ambiguity inherent in the notion of primordial 'community' however does not take away from our basic argument - that the 'distinctions based on birth' - e.g. religion, language, kinship etc. - were central to the jute-mill worker's sense of identity. He conducted himself even in the 'political' sphere of his life 'only as a link, as a member' of mental 'communities' based on these distinctions. He was never, in other words, the 'bourgeois citizen' (even though the Indian constitution today defines him as such) that Marx described in his early essay 'On the Jewish Question'. Unlike in the case of the 'citizen', the jute worker's political culture, lacking any bourgeois notions of the equality of the individual, had not split him into his 'public' and 'private' selves; and he had not, unlike the citizen, relegated all 'the distinctions based on birth' to the sphere of the 'private', the non-political. To quote Marx on this point:

The dissolution of man into Jew and citizen, Protestant and citizen, religious man and citizen, is not a denial of citizenship or an avoidance of political emancipation: it is political emancipation itself, it is the political way of emancipating oneself from religion.

In this sense, the jute mill worker had never been 'politically' emancipated from religion. Religion therefore - or we could say, ethnicity or language or other similar loyalties - formed the stuff of his politics. This was so even at moments of confrontation between labour and capital. Mobilization for class-battles (e.g. strikes) often based on emotional appeals to the primordial ties of the worker and to their communal sense of honour and shame. During the 1929 general strike, it was publicized by the trade union organizers that Hindu and Muslim
workers had sworn by their religions to support the strike. Strike-breaking, it was said, would amount to beef-eating for the Hindu and pork-eating for the Muslims. A group of Muslim weavers told the authorities of the Birla Jute Mill at the time of the strike that 'if they resumed work they would be visited by bands of hooligans from other areas on strike and would have half their beards shaved off, which is a crowning insult to Mahomedans, the beard having religious significance'. Apparently, the threat of dishonouring the womenfolk of non-strike (or non-striking) women was also used during this strike.

Thus the elements of solidarity that went into the making of 'strikes' were not all that different from those that made up a case of racial or religious conflict. This was why, as the government had said, 'there [was] always a possibility' of racial or religious violence breaking out in the middle of a strike by the workers. Whether or not the 'possibility' would become an actuality was partly dependent of course on circumstances. But we cannot explain the logic of workers' consciousness by referring to these circumstances alone. As we have tried to explain here, in the jute workers' mind itself, the incipient awareness of belonging to a class remained a prisoner of his pre-capitalist culture. In the absence of notions like individualism, citizenship etc. in this culture, the class-identity of the worker could never be distilled out of the pre-capitalist identities that arose from the relationships he had been born into. This of course did not stop him from rebelling and sometimes led to temporary but remarkable instances of solidarity, but both the organization and solidarity of jute workers retained their essentially fragile nature. The class-aspect of the jute workers' consciousness that we have encountered in this chapter and in the previous one is thus explainable
in terms of Gramsci's diagnosis of the 'purely Italian concept of "subversive"' - 'a negative rather than a positive class position'.

The "people" is aware [wrote Gramsci] that it has enemies, but only identifies them empirically as the so-called signori ... This "generic" hatred is still "semi-feudal" rather than modern in character, and cannot be taken as evidence of class consciousness - merely as the first glimmer of such consciousness, in other words, merely as the basic negative, polemical attitude.⁹⁴
Chapter 6

NOTES


4. ibid.

5. Gupta, Capital and Labour, pp. 41-2.


8. ibid.


25. Gupta, *Capital and Labour*, p. 44.


28. C.S.A.S., B.P., box 12, mimeographed note dated 27 April 1937: 'Jute Strike Situation'.

30. C.S.A.S., B.P., box 12, Benthall to McKerrow, 9 Nov. 1937.


32. C.S.A.S., B.P., box 19, diary entry for 19 March 1940; also see box 12, synopsis of Suhrawardy; discussion with Chapman Mortimer on 5th June 1940.


35. C.S.A.S., B.P., box 12, 'Strictly Private' letter from 'David', 19th April 1937; see also the unsigned note (marked 'Strictly Private') on discussion with Suhrawardy, dated 4th May 1937.

36. C.S.A.S., B.P., box 12, Benthall to 'Mac', 21 May 1937.

37. C.S.A.S., B.P., box 12, Benthall to Nazimuddin, 11 May 1937.

38. C.S.A.S., B.P., box 19, diary entry for 19 March 1940.

39. C.S.A.S., B.P., box 12, Synopsis of Suhrawardy's discussion with Chapman Mortimer on 5th June 1937; notes on 'confidential' meeting between Suhrawardy and the I.J.M.A. Chairman, H.H. Brown, on 28 July 1937; box 16, unsigned note on 'Mr. S[uhrawardy]', dated 9th Dec. 1940.
40. C.S.A.S., B.P., box 12, notes on discussion with Suhrawardy, 28 July 1937.


42. C.S.A.S., B.P., box 19, diary entry for 19 March 1940. Emphasis added.


44. W.B.S.A., Home Poll Confdl, no. 326/1937.

45. ibid.

46. ibid.

47. See my 'Communal Riots and Labour'.


49. ibid.

50. W.B.S.A., Home Poll Confdl, no. 66/1913 K.W.

51. W.B.S.A., Home Poll Confdl, no. 77/1926.


53. W.B.S.A., Home Poll Confdl, no. 516(1-14)/1926.


56. W.B.S.A., Home Poll Conf'dl, no. 174(1-24)/1926 and K.C.R.P.,
    English diary no. 2, entry for 25 Aug. 1927 and Bengali diary no.
    2, entry for 6 October 1927.

57. Foley, Report, para. 83.

58. This paragraph is based on R.C.L.I., vol. 5, Pt 1, p. 262; Pt 2,
    pp. 26, 76, 78-9; vol. 11, Pt 2, pp. 355-6, 359-60, 362-4.


60. Gilchrist, Indian Labour and the Land, p. 10.


63. W.B.S.A., Medical Dept Medical Branch, January 1914 B287-95.

64. R.C.L.I., vol. 11, Pt 2, p. 360.

65. ibid., vol. 5, Pt 2, p. 135.

66. ibid., vol. 11, Pt 2, p. 357.

67. ibid., p. 358.

68. ibid., vol. 5, Pt 2, p. 70.

69. ibid.

71. Cf. K. Marx and F. Engels, The German Ideology (Moscow, 1976), pp. 436-37: 'Thanks to the Physiocrats, political economy for the first time was raised to the rank of a special science ... As a special branch of science it absorbed the other relations - political, juridicial, etc. - to such an extent that it reduced them to economic relations ... The complete subordination of all existing relations to the relation of utility, and its unconditional elevation to the sole content of all other relations, occurs for the first time in Bentham's works, where, after the French Revolution and the development large-scale industry, the bourgeoisie is no longer presented as a special class, but as the class whose conditions of existence are those of the whole society'.


73. See the discussion on the difference between the 'modern' and the 'pre-modern' mind in Gaston Bachelard, The Psychoanalysis of Fire (Boston, 1964), pp. 31-33.


76. ibid., p. 115.


78. ibid., p. 85.

79. Chakravarty, 'Interview' in Gautam Chattopadhyay, Communism, p. 139.

81. ibid., p. 357.

82. W.B.S.A., Home Poll Confdl, no. 117/1934.

83. ibid.

84. W.B.S.A., Home Poll Confdl, no. 324/1939.

85. References on this point could be many. Some of the Bengal government files that I have consulted are W.B.S.A., Home Poll Confdl, nos 59/1900, 516(1-14)/1926, 51/1927, 51(11-25)/1927, 51/1927 K.W., 226/1927, 117/1934, 324/1939, 229/1940.


87. Amrita Bazar Patrika, 27 Nov. 1928.


89. Ranajit Guha has made this point with regard to the Indian peasantry in his *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi, 1983).


91. K.C.R.P., Bengali diary no. 3, entry for 15.7.29 to 26.8.29.


93. ibid.

In focusing on the questions of culture and consciousness in the history of Calcutta jute-mill workers, it has not been our intention to replace techno-economic explanations by cultural ones. We do not, for instance, see culture as being causally responsible for everything that happened in the jute workers' history. Ours has rather been an endeavour to question the primary determining role that is usually given to technical and economic factors in many Marxian accounts of labour-capital relationship. We have in other words opposed a reductionist view of culture and consciousness and contended that the inherent logic of a particular culture (or consciousness) cannot be derived from a politico-economic argument.

At the level of empirical history, we have tried to demonstrate that even the so-called economic and technological factors operate only within a particular cultural context and are in turn influenced by the latter. The history of the Calcutta jute workers clearly would have been different if the industry had required a more skilled, stable and structured labour force - that is to say, if the industry had gone in for technological innovation. At first this may sound like a simple techno-economic argument. Yet, as we have shown in Chapter 2, the question of technological stagnation in the jute industry cannot be
separated from the strongly mercantilist mentality of the men who ran the managing agencies and this 'mentality' cannot be reduced to any single, overriding economic factor. Or take the question of 'discipline' inside the jute mills. As we have discussed in Chapters 3 and 5, economic and technological explanations are of only limited help here. One has to take into account the consciousness of the workers, their notions of authority and the general cultural traditions of the British colonialists in India who always sought to legitimize their presence in terms that (they thought) the 'natives' would understand. Hence their attempts to imitate what they perceived as Indian forms of authority.

At a more theoretical level, however, we have (hopefully) drawn attention to the point that Marx's analysis of the labour-capital relationship within the capitalist method of production takes a hegemonic bourgeois culture for granted. And this assumption informs his discussion of 'disciplinary authority' of capital and of capitalist production relations in general, relations that involve the consciousness of the workers. The importance of this assumption in Marx's understanding becomes clear when one looks through Marxian categories at a group of industrial labourers such as the Calcutta jute workers whose culture was pre-capitalist and who belonged to a society where even the elites were far from being bourgeois in their outlook.

It is not however simply a question of being clear about the nature of Marx's categories that concerns us here. The argument is of historiographical and, one hopes, political significance. Historians writing about Indian factory workers have not paid any particular attention to the pre-bourgeois nature of the worker's culture and
consciousness. This is so mainly because the worker's culture has not been seen to pose any special problems for the development of class-consciousness or working-class organization. All problems of class-consciousness or organization have usually been explained by economic or political factors like underdeveloped industrialization or 'reactionary' conspiracy and propaganda. Recently, moreover, all these factors have been brought together in that one supreme demiurgic concept of modern Indian nationalist historiography: colonialism. The result has been a neat but unfortunate argument with respect to the phenomenon and problems of class consciousness, an argument that begins by obliterating all distinctions of culture and consciousness between industrial workers of different countries. The first-generation workers in all countries, we are told in effect, exhibit certain similar forms of pre-capitalist behaviour and mental attitudes, and the question as to how these attitudes might change into a working-class consciousness is answered in terms of changes in the economic structure of the society. Thus a study of the Calcutta jute workers' behaviour in the 1870s and '80s has lately asserted:

\[\text{it should be noted that the sort of responses referred to above was not peculiar to factory workers of Bengal or India in the seventies and eighties of the last century. That in the classic British case and in the initial period of all the industrialising countries [my emphasis] the early workers behaved by and large in a similar fashion is too well known to merit any repetition here.}\]

The second step in this argument states that what really makes a 'class' of this mass of factory workers by developing class consciousness in their minds is intensive industrialization:
But in Britain (and other industrialising countries of the nineteenth century) such problems were transient in history ... the elements of pre-capitalist habits of mind and behaviour, in the worker's attitudes or in the total social structure, were transcended through the cumulative progress of the Industrial Revolution which accounted for the transformation of workers into a working class within the broader society, and also for the growth of working class consciousness and action, ethos and culture.

The third step, then, is to argue that in the Indian case, because 'genuine capitalist industrialization was ruled out by the colonial order', it is 'no wonder that even second or third generation workers remained rootless, part human, half proletarian, wretched creatures'. Thus

it may be noted that the kind of activities in which the worker in England or France or Germany in the early period of industrialisation participated or the economic, political, social outlook exhibited by them or the type of organisation they formed, are not to be found here [Bengal]. The colonialised character of the industrial situation ruled these out.

So, if the working class in India did not show a developed class consciousness, the blame, in this analysis, lies squarely with colonialism.¹

Yet E.P. Thompson, upon whose authority some of the statements quoted above seem to have been based, argued precisely against the understanding that 'the Industrial Revolution ... accounted for the growth of working class consciousness and action, ethos and culture'. In a celebrated passage of The Making of the English Working Class Thompson wrote:
The making of the working class is a fact of political and cultural, as much as of economic, history. It was not the spontaneous generation of the factory system. Nor should we think of an external force - the 'industrial revolution' - working upon some nondescript undifferentiated raw material of humanity, and turning it out at the other end as a 'fresh race of beings' ... the Industrial Revolution ... [was] imposed, not upon raw material, but upon the free-born Englishman - and the free-born Englishman as Paine had left him or as the Methodists had moulded him. The factory hand or stockinger was also the inheritor of Bunyan, of remembered village rights, of notions of equality before the law, or craft traditions. He was the object of massive religious indoctrination and the creator of political traditions. The working class made itself as much as it was made.

Here Thompson takes us back to the question of culture and consciousness in working-class history. The culture of the working man in pre-industrial England had obviously developed certain important bourgeois notions such as that of equality before the law. But it does not follow that, given the most 'favourable' material conditions, any pre-capitalist, pre-industrial culture will develop such notions with equal or greater rapidity. While all pre-capitalist cultures share one feature in common in that they are all pre-capitalist, they of course remain very specific and different in terms of their internal logic, their inherent mechanisms for the production of meanings. Because they differ from one another in these respects, they pose their own special problems of transition and change when called upon to perform tasks the essential terms of which derive from the Western, bourgeois culture. The end-result of this transition is by no means a foregone conclusion and this is why we have contended that the question of 'class consciousness' must remain an unpredictable, open-ended question in the history of the Indian working class. One thing however is predictable about this history - the struggle to change it.
Chapter 7

NOTES


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A. GOVERNMENT RECORDS
   I. Unpublished
   II. Published.

B. PAPERS OF ORGANIZATIONS
   I. Unpublished
   II. Published

C. PAPERS RELATING TO INDIVIDUALS
   I. Institutional collections
   II. Private collections

D. NEWSPAPERS AND PERIODICALS

E. INTERVIEWS

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Glossary</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bakr Id:</td>
<td>Muslim festival commemorating the Patriarch Abraham's sacrifice of his son Isaac.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bhadralok:</td>
<td>lit. gentlefolk; respectable people of the middle class.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chota Haziri:</td>
<td>The Anglo-Indian institution of 'little breakfast'.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Durwan(s):</td>
<td>Gatekeepers; security men; armed retainers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fatka:</td>
<td>lit. bubble; speculative market</td>
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<tr>
<td>Izzat:</td>
<td>Honour.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Khilafat:</td>
<td>lit. 'Caliphate'. Refers to the pan-Islamic movement in India in support of the Turkish Sultan after the First World War.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ma-Baap:</td>
<td>lit. mother-father; parents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maiji/Mataji:</td>
<td>Mother.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merua:</td>
<td>A decisive Bengali term for any native speaker of Hindi.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Musjid:</td>
<td>Mosque.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Panchayat: The traditional Indian village council.

Panwali: Female seller of betel-leaf.

Sahib: Boss; generally referred to the Europeans in colonial India.

Sardar: lit. headman, chief; jobber in the jute mills.

Swadeshi movement: (Swadeshi: one's native land) anti-partition agitation in Bengal, 1905-8.

Thana: Police station.

Zamindar: Landlord.