

**JUTE LABOUR POLITICS IN BENGAL
1937 – 1947**

*Dissertation submitted to the Jawaharlal Nehru University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the award of the Degree of*

MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

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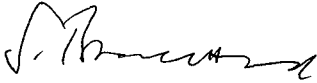
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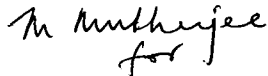


CERTIFICATE

Certified that this dissertation entitled '**Jute Labour Politics in Bengal, 1937-1947**', submitted by **Mr. Supriyo Ghosh** is an original work. It has not been submitted previously by him for any degree to this or any other University. We recommend that the dissertation be placed before the examiners for evaluation.


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In the end, the responsibility for all errors is mine.

Supriyo Ghosh

ABBREVIATIONS

AITUC	All India Trade Union Congress
BCMU	Bengal Chatkal Mazdoor Union
BLA	Bengal Legislative Assembly
BP	Benthall Papers
BPTUC	Bengal Provincial Trade Union Congress
Br.	Branch
Confdl.	Confidential
CPI	Communist Party of India
GOB	Government of Bengal
GOI	Government of India
IESHR	Indian Economic and Social History Review
IJMA	Indian Jute Mills Association
IPC	Indian Penal Code
KPP	Krishak Praja Party
MLA	Member of Legislative Assembly
NAI	National Archives of India, New Delhi
NMML	Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi
Poll.	Political
SP	Superintendent of Police
WBSA	West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata
WRID	Weekly Report on Industrial Disputes

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Introduction

The industrial labour force in India emerged as a result of the growth of modern industries ever since the second half of the nineteenth century. In Bengal, from the 1850s, the principal industry that developed, along the banks of the Hooghly, was that of jute manufacturing, employing a large body of workers. These jute mill hands coming from different catchment areas, with their distinct community, lingual or caste identities, and being engaged in diverse categories of work (both skilled as well as unskilled) - cannot be altogether seen as a homogeneous body of workers. Yet, at the same time, being situated in an area sixty miles long and two miles broad, the jute labour in Bengal exhibited the largest and the most densely settled group of industrial workers in India with similar interests vis a vis Capital.¹ The logic of the argument might appear contradictory, but it is this paradox of jute workers' organisation and protests that makes the story of jute labour movement in Bengal, which is the central focus of my study, an interesting one.

The documented history on industrial labour in India has been, till the early 1970s, quite general in content. When an inquiry was attempted, labour historians usually remained satisfied with a narration of basic facts relating to the size of the labour force, the growth of the trade unions, the frequency of strikes, etc. Certain additional information on the living conditions of the workers, the wages, the legislation of factory Acts and occasional reference to the findings of the various commissions were considered sufficient for any standard work on labour. Parallel to it, such writings on labour were

¹ In the course of this work, the term 'Capital' would be used to refer to the jute mill owners of Bengal.

attempted from an all India perspective, which naturally precluded any detailed treatment of the distinctiveness and complexities of a region specific industry and its labour force.²

Traditional Marxist writers, on their part, had an extra offering to make. They generally projected the impression, to cite Sukomal Sen,³ that the 'proletariat' grew from strength to strength, marching forward to fulfil its historical duty to stage a revolution. Certain assumptions were almost implicit in their kind of history writing. As masses of Indians worked in different mills and factories, it was assumed that India had a 'working class' with its own distinct 'class consciousness'. However, alongside this assumption, the awareness amongst the Marxist scholars that the working class in India exhibited certain features apart from that of class cohesion made them explain such features as signs of backwardness due to colonial rule. Such backwardness, they assumed, would be overcome with the passage of time.

As most of these studies did not satisfactorily explain the mechanics of organisation of labour at the grass root level, a new trend in labour historiography emerged in late 1970s. Emphasis was now put on working class movements in a particular region or an industry - analysing the structure of the labour force, its economic and social conditions, the protest movements, etc. Significant works, such as on the workers of Bombay by R.K. Newman⁴ or on the plantation labour in Assam by Rana Pratap Behal⁵, exemplified this new trend in labour historiography.

As with time, the prospect of there being a full fledged working class, free of caste and community ties, looked bleak - a new approach to the writing of the working

² See, for instance, G. K. Sharma, *Labour Movement in India: Its Past and Present* (New Delhi, 1963).

³ Sukomal Sen, *Working Class of India: History of Emergence and Movement, 1830-1970* (Calcutta, 1977).

⁴ R.K. Newman, *Workers and Unions in Bombay Mills, 1918-29: A Study of Organization in the Cotton Mills* (Canberra, 1981).

class history began to emerge. The assumption that caste and community ties among labour were merely the results of colonial meddling gave way to the new belief where such ties were seen as essentially inherent in the Indian culture. This new group of historians, who called themselves the 'Subalterns', sought to analyse the history of Indian labour from the viewpoint of the industrial workers. One of the best expressions of the Subaltern thinking was seen in Dipesh Chakrabarty's work on the jute workers of colonial Bengal.⁶ Chakrabarty looked at the issues such as 'discipline', 'authority', 'protest', 'solidarity' and 'organisation' in respect to the jute mill hands of Bengal, who were not born into a bourgeois society but belonged to a culture that was largely 'pre-capitalist'.⁷ It was from this basic premise that his work sought to demonstrate how the predominance of the pre-capitalist notions of culture, such as ties of language, religion and caste, seriously affected the jute workers of Bengal in their capacity to constitute themselves into a 'class'. This way, his work directly refuted the universalising logic of traditional Marxist writings which, according to him, takes a linear view of progressive class struggle and consciousness proceeding from an assumption of an unilinear process entailing the dissolution of pre-capitalist social relations.⁸

⁵ Rana Pratap Behal, *Plantation Labour in Assam, 1900-1930*, Ph.D. Thesis, 1978.

⁶ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working Class History: Bengal 1890-1940* (Princeton, 1988).

⁷ Chakrabarty, 1988, p. 4.

⁸ Existence of such diversities and particularistic identities among the labour is not something peculiar or unique to the Indian society. Many Marxist and radical works, in the last three or four decades, have dealt with such particularistic identities – while discussing the working class formations in Europe and their implications for labour movements, organisation and consciousness. Works such as – '*Class Struggle in the Industrial Revolution*' (London, 1974) by John Foster and '*Labour in British Society*' (London, 1986) by Richard Price could be cited as examples in this respect. Also in India, since the late 1970s, some scholars have focused in varying degrees on some of these aspects and have added substantially to our knowledge on labour. See, for instance, Parimal Ghosh, 'Colonialism, Communalism and Labour: A Belaboured Matter of Consciousness and Experience of the Calcutta Mill Workers, 1880-1930', in S. Bandopadhyay and S. Das (eds.) *Caste and Communal Politics in South Asia* (Calcutta, 1993); Sanat Bose, 'Industrial Unrest and Growth of Labour Unions in Bengal, 1920-1924', *Economic and Political Weekly* (hereafter, EPW), November 1981, Special Number.

Jute workers in Bengal, accordingly he explained, had different set of identities based on religion, language, region to which they were born. But why could not such pre-capitalist notions of identity give way to a class-based identity – with their experiences as an industrial labour force? Chakrabarty explained it in terms of the typically dual character of the jute mill workers – comprising characteristics of both the peasant and the worker.⁹ For him, it was this midway existence of the jute labour which served to sustain the regional, lingual, community orientation of its peasant self. Loyalties based on such sets of ‘peasant’ identity, which often got translated into clashes, dissipated the prospects of class cohesion and solidarity among the jute workers of Bengal. Parallel to this, Chakrabarty pointed out, the very structure of the labour market created conditions for the strengthening of such regional and community identities. For instance, the ‘sirdari’ method of recruitment and control and the keen competition among labour for employment in the jute mills made it imperative for the workers to cultivate their primordial ties for securing jobs in the industry.

In short, Chakrabarty rejected the primacy of the economic thesis and the conclusion(s) that follow from it; and instead sought to explain the Capital-Labour relationship in terms of ‘culture’.

A very different thinking emerged in Ranajit Das Gupta's study of the Calcutta jute labour¹⁰, which being written from a broad Marxian perspective came as a counter

⁹ It is important to note here, that Chakrabarty's ‘jute worker’ was mainly the one who had migrated from the north Indian peasant family. In this respect, he preferred to locate these migrant workers as compository elements of an undifferentiated, homogenised peasantry.

¹⁰ Ranajit Das Gupta, *Labour and Working Class in Eastern India: Studies in Colonial History* (Calcutta, 1994).

response to Chakrabarty's basic thesis. While reiterating the importance of the rural context from which the jute labour came like Chakrabarty, he argued instead that such elements of its peasant identity were not essentially in contradiction with the consolidation of its 'class identity'.

In his attempt to understand the dynamics of labour history in terms of general conditions, Dasgupta argued that the instability, tension and anger generated by the consistently deteriorating conditions of existence brought about a mood of protest among the jute workers during the last years of the nineteenth century. Such moods of protest which sometimes led to communal disturbances, therefore should not be seen only in terms of their 'communal content', but such should also be understood with reference to the pressure generated on labour by the hostility and suspicion of the colonial state, the miserable conditions of the shop floor, etc. This way, Dasgupta, in direct contrast to Chakrabarty, minimised his emphasis on the 'community consciousness' of the jute labour – while explaining their participation in communal fights. Further, he showed that most of the labour protests were actually related to the variety of grievances arising out of Labour-Capital relationship, both economic and non-economic. Thus, Dasgupta could argue that through these struggles there was a 'germination of class feeling – a feeling of an identity of interests as between the workers themselves and as against the employers.'¹¹

Parallel to this, Dasgupta contended that the continuance of the rural links and traditional institutions among the workers did not necessarily hinder their class-

¹¹ Dasgupta, 1994, p. 387.

consciousness. To establish his argument, Dasgupta pointed out how the preservation of rural nexus, subsistence derived from the countryside enhanced considerably the staying power of the jute workers in their struggles with their employers as evident during the 1929 jute workers' strike in Bengal.

Dasgupta's position, therefore, was a powerful reiteration of the Marxist understanding of the question of working class formation in the context of colonial India. However, what distinguished it from that of the earlier Marxists was its sensitive appreciation of the crosscurrents of 'community consciousness and class feeling', which he did not see as mutually exclusive categories.

Parimal Ghosh introduced a new angle in the historical study of industrial labour in his book on the jute mill hands of Calcutta.¹² Following largely from a Marxian perspective, Ghosh mainly focused on the impact of the colonial state over jute labour rather than on capitalist relations of productivity per se, i.e., to locate how it perceived and was perceived by the jute labour in setting the context of the latter's organisation and protest. Recognising the presence of colonial state in both the 'peasant' self and the 'worker' self of the labour, he analysed how these conditioned the hostility of the jute workers towards the colonial state over the various phases. Ghosh further argued that the industrial labour (here jute labour) in India, being unique and peculiar, was situated in a context where multiple modes of production co-existed. In other words, Ghosh forcefully argued that in India the industrial labour could form a part of both these existing modes due to the failure of the 'bourgeoisie' and the 'proletariat' to play their assigned 'historical role'.

¹² Parimal Ghosh, *Colonialism, Class and a History of Calcutta Jute Mill Hands: 1880-1930* (Chennai, 2000).

The approach to the study of the jute workers' resistance in colonial Bengal underwent a distinct change in Nirban Basu's book¹³ on the jute labour movement in Bengal. Like Chakrabarty, Basu also acknowledged the paradox of a 'militant working class' and 'poor trade union organisation' in respect to the jute workers of Bengal. However, he explained it not in the realm of the workers' 'culture' but from the perspective of the political leadership available to them from above. He contended that during the years preceding the independence, the jute workers' solidarity based on pressing economic grievances could not develop into an enduring trade union movement because of political factionalism among the various sections of the working class leadership.

The issue of 'outside' leadership in the jute workers' resistance was tackled differently by Amal Das in his article on the jute labour of Howrah.¹⁴ Through his careful analysis of the different jute strikes in the mills of Howrah between 1900 and 1930, Das showed how the workers themselves took the initiative for protest and agitation over different economic issues. His basic argument, as evident from his work, is that the jute workers' agitation was largely an 'autonomous' domain - where 'outside' intervention occurred only at particular moments in these struggles.

This way, Das adopted a position directly in contrast to Basu; for he - while limiting the importance of leadership from outside - accepted the spontaneous role that the labouring people played in building up their own movements through proper initiatives, solidarity and collectivity in pursuing their aims. At the same time, he could

¹³ Nirban Basu, *The Working Class Movement: A Study of Jute Mills of Bengal 1937-47* (Calcutta, 1994).

¹⁴ Amal Das, 'Outside Intervention in Jute Mill Strikes: Howrah, 1870-1920', in Arjaan de Haan and Samita Sen (eds.), *A Case for Labour History: The Jute Industry in Eastern India* (Calcutta, 1999).

explain the paradox of a militant working class and weak trade union organisation in terms of short-lived connections between the jute workers and the 'outside leadership'.

Arjaan de Haan introduced another interesting angle in the historical study of the jute labour in his book on the jute workers of Titagarh.¹⁵ He advanced an agency-oriented concept, while explaining the patterns of migration, female labour participation and the formation and influence of identities in the labour market of Titagarh. According to him, the choices exercised by the jute workers were of considerable importance. In this regard, he largely borrowed from the sociologist Anthony Giddens who had argued that explanations in social sciences have to incorporate both the purposive behaviour of actors, and the social- material context of that behaviour.

The patterns of migration and the segmentation of the labour force were explained differently by Samita Sen in her book on the Bengal jute industry and its labour force.¹⁶ She has mainly focussed on the role of gender (which had hitherto remained largely neglected) in the development of the working class, in the division of work within factories and households and in the determination of wages.

In view of the fact that jute labour has been discussed upon in a number of recent works, it becomes imperative on my part to defend the need for the present effort. Apart from the different issues in respect to the jute workers taken up in the three chapters of this work, to be discussed subsequently, it is the period chosen 1937-47 that sets the present work in a different context. Most of the existing literature on the jute labour deals with the periods from the late nineteenth century upto the mid-1930s, with emphasis on

¹⁵ Arjaan de Haan, *Unsettled Settlers: Migrant Workers and Industrial Capitalism in Calcutta* (Rotterdam, 1994).

¹⁶ Samita Sen, *Women and Labour in Late Colonial India: The Bengal Jute Industry* (Cambridge, 1999).

the phase when jute workers turned from informal to formal organisations around 1920. The only exception in this respect would be Nirban Basu's work which deals with the referred period, but does not descend below the level of the leadership and seek further explanations for the weaknesses within the jute workers' organisation and protests.

Apart from it, the decade from 1937 to 1947 has until now remained a neglected period in historical research, despite its significant importance from various angles. From the economic point of view, the period saw widespread Wartime dislocation and post War inflation and recession. In the case of jute, basically an export commodity, the volatile demand - resulting in the changes of working hours and technology - further complicated the situation and gave rise to serious discontent among workers. Politically, it saw the anti-imperialist mass struggle at its height, along with the popularly elected provincial ministries in charge of the labour related issues - adding a new dimension to the Capital-Labour friction. This was also the decade which exhibited in Bengal the gradually widening cleavage among the people on overtly communal lines - naturally not precluding the jute mill labour. Such crosscurrents of wider political and socio-economic factors in this fateful decade make the study of the jute workers' movement and other related issues an interesting enterprise.

The **first chapter** of the present work would focus upon the various trends of the jute labour movement in Bengal between the years 1937-47 and try to locate the precise factors that contributed to the general failure of their protest during this period. In this respect, the general developments within the jute industry and the material conditions of the workers - over the period under consideration would be discussed. Such an approach would help us to figure out how far the industry itself was in a position to yield

concessions to the labour during the various phases of struggle, as also the basic issues that could have formed the core of their demands.

On the strikes during this period, which would be studied through three different phases – the Depression years (1937-39), the War years (1939-45) and the post-War period (1945-47) – my major query would be to inquire whether such strikes were of enduring nature - fought on major issues like wage, allowance, over a considerable area accommodating a good number of workers, or whether they were isolated localized attempts of protest without any impact over space and in the long run of history. While offering certain socio-economic explanations for the general failure of the jute labour movement between 1937-47, the present chapter would seek to explore some hypotheses beyond the existing ones discussed in some of the recent works.

The **second chapter** would focus on the varying nature of interventions made and the role played by the different provincial ministries of Bengal in matters relating to the jute industry (primarily in respect to its labour force) over the period. The nature of intervention made by the different elected ministries in Bengal, while mediating within the Capital-Labour disputes, would be studied mainly by taking into account the respective positions taken by them over issues involving the Capital interests and the workforce - as evident during the debates in the Bengal Legislative Assembly. Subsequently, an effort would be made to appreciate the various considerations that prompted each of these ministries to adopt contrasting positions over these issues from time to time. For a comprehensive understanding of the labour policies pursued by the elected ministries in Bengal, that chapter would also focus upon the role of the

government as a 'law enforcing institution' – particularly while dealing with the cases of labour disputes and stoppages.

The labour historiography in the last two decades has significantly addressed the question of 'dominant identity' within the jute mill hands - with some scholars emphasising upon certain notions of consciousness as the focal point of the identity of labour in India, rather than 'class' as the fundamental unit. Some scholars, on the contrary, argue that the 'class feeling' is the primary basis of the workers identity, with the other forms of consciousness supplementing the former. The **third chapter** proposes to examine the above stated contentions, i.e., class versus community (in this sense religion), in respect to the jute mill hands of Bengal during the period 1937-47. The chapter studies, in this light, the various instances of communal friction involving the jute mill hands over the period 1937-45 - the years which witnessed an increasing vertical solidarity among both the Hindu and the Muslim population of the province with active support from political parties and leadership. While studying these incidents of communal strife, the focus would be on identifying the various issues that led to these acts, for such would indicate the level of 'communal animosity' that existed between the jute mill workers, operating within an organised setup. Parallel to this, an attempt would be made to see, whether or not there were any acts of concerted labour resistance, overcoming the communal divide, in jute mills that had been susceptible to incidents of communal violence over the period.

The chapter would also focus upon the climactic years 1946-47, to identify the extent to which the jute mill workers of Bengal were participants in acts of mob violence. The emphasis here would be on the question, whether or not the trade union activists

played any significant role in averting the possibility of communal flare-ups among the jute workers. Besides this chapter, in the final part, would also enquire how far such acts of violence involving the jute mill hands had any lasting impact upon the general jute labour movement on the eve of independence.

The primary sources that I have used in the course of this work are mainly, government files, published official reports, organisational records, private papers and newspapers. I also had the opportunity of interviewing a contemporary trade union leader, conversation with whom helped me immensely to understand the finer issues of jute labour politics.

CHAPTER ONE

The Prospect and Failure of Jute Labour Movement in Bengal: 1937-47

The jute industry that developed and prospered in a small strip of land above and below the city of Calcutta, during the first half of the twentieth century, stood out in itself for certain specific features which it contained. Situated in an area sixty miles long and two miles broad, the jute mill workers of Bengal then exhibited perhaps the largest and most compactly settled group of workers with identical interests in the world. No less prominent was the industry in its economic importance with its production, for a good many years, accounting in the manufacturing sector alone for nearly fifty percent of the total value of exports - earning no less than thirty percent of India's foreign exchange on the trading account.¹ With an industry whose profit margin was very high (barring the slump period of 1930-31 to 1938-39) and a compactly settled labour force of nearly 3,00,000 workers, the jute belt of Bengal hosted a perfect site for a keen contest between the Capital and the Labour. In such a 'contest', the jute labour had the potential of standing out as an example for the rest of the working class in India- of how to bargain maximum concessions from the clutches of the Capital. Yet, paradoxically enough, even while being one of the largest working groups in the country, the jute mill workers were among the lowest paid of the industrial workers in India.

It is this paradox, of a large concentration of working force with a relatively restricted bargaining space, that provides basis to the present study of jute labour

¹ Omkar Goswami, 'Collaboration and Conflict: European and Indian Capitalists and the Indian Jute Economy of Bengal, 1919-39', *IESHR*, vol. XIX, no.2, June 1982, p.141.

movement in Bengal between 1937-47. The decade from 1937-47 is important on several counts. It stretches from the slump years in the jute industry (1937-39) to the major profit years during 1939-45 - mainly under the impact of the Second World War.² Accordingly, the period reflects upon the quickly changing fortunes of the jute industry as a whole. Parallely, the period exhibits the steady deterioration in the condition of the mill workers - due to substantial rise in the cost of living, arising out the widespread Wartime dislocation and post War inflation. Politically too, the period is of major importance. By the year 1937, the trade union consciousness had penetrated quite deep within the jute belt of Bengal (compared to the previous decades) and as such the years 1937-47 offered under the given conditions, the best prospect of 'organised' labour resistance to Capital. In view of all these factors, the study of the jute workers' movement over this decade becomes important.

The present chapter has been divided into four parts. The condition of the jute workers and their subsequent demands cannot be seen in isolation from the general developments within the industry. Therefore, the chapter begins with a brief discussion on the industry during this period, which would help us to figure out how far the industry itself was in a position to mete out concessions to the labour. The second part focuses upon the material condition of the jute workers over the period, in respect to certain issues - such as the question of basic wage, amenity allowances, housing facilities, etc. Besides drawing a contrast with the prosperity of the jute mills, such an understanding would also help in identifying the basic issues that could have constituted the major part of labour demands over the period under consideration. The

² Though during the post-War phase there was a recession in the economy, it did not affect the jute industry much.

third part of the chapter seeks to study the various occasions of jute labour protest between 1937-47, through three distinct phases - the Depression Years (1937-39), the War Years (1939-45) and the Post War Period (1945-47). In this regard, the basic attempt would be to understand the general pattern of strikes, i.e., the issues on which they were called, whether or not they had any impact upon the jute workers in the adjoining mills towards building up a broad based workers' struggle as also to see how far they were successful in the end. In the final part, an effort is made to offer certain socio-economic and political explanations for the subsequent developments in respect to the jute labour protests during these years.

I

By the end of the First World War, the jute industry in Bengal was already placed on a sound footing. Flushed by the trading profits of the War, the 1920s saw the coming up of many new mills into operation. This growth, both in the number of mills and the volume of trade, continued throughout this decade without any signs of check. However, the Depression hit the jute industry in 1930 and with the collapse of the world market, there was no longer much demand for the jute bags, cloth, etc.³ Unlike most Western and Latin American countries, the Depression in the Indian jute sector did not peter out by 1934, but carried on right until the eve of the Second World War.

³ In a single year, 1930, the volume of gunny bags and cloth exports dropped by 17 and 23 percent respectively. Their prices fell by 19 and 32 percent and their export value crashed by 39 percent. [Source: Omkar Goswami, *Industry, Trade and Peasant Society: The Jute Economy of Eastern India 1900-1947* (Delhi, 1991), p.127].

My period of study, therefore, begins with an industry wide Depression that showed no immediate signs of recovery. Though between 1937-39, the volume of gunny output and gunny bag exports picked up in a big way - total output and gunny bag exports being greater than ever before - the unit values remained well below the 1920s' level but also lower than the initial years of the Depression. This was largely due to the collapse in the world wide demand as also because of the rising pressures from the major buyers, particularly the USA, who successfully dictated the terms of trade in the given situation and kept prices low. Table 1.1 (in the following page) would explain the state of the jute industry during the slump years.

However, with the outbreak of the Second World War, the industry received a much-needed fresh lease of life. The massive demand generated for sandbags lifted the industry out of the recession and within the first six months of the War, the jute mills of Bengal supplied 923 million bags and 45 million yards of gunny cloth only for War orders.⁴

⁴ *IJMA, Report of the Committee, 1939* (Calcutta, 1940), pp. 68-69.

Table 1.1

Jute Industry during the Thirties

	Volume of Output (in thousand tons)	Value of Output (in Rs. Million)	Real Value (in Rs. Million) 1938-39 as base	Volume of Gunny Bag Exports (in million bags)	Volume of Gunny Cloth Exports (in million yards)	Price of Gunny Bags (in Rs. /100 bags)	Price of Gunny Cloth (in Rs. /100 yards)
1925-29 (average)	1,045	716	446	471.5	1,542	47.13	16.13
1930-31	815	334	258	434.1	1,272	27.88	8.56
1931-32	795	270	250	388.5	1,021	25.94	8.31
1932-33	907	296	279	415.1	1,012	24.56	8.75
1933-34	907	304	304	401.6	1,053	23.50	9.63
1934-35	968	319	327	423.0	1,064	24.88	9.06
% change 1930-34 (average) over 1925-29 (average)	-16	-57	-36	-13	-30	-46	-45
1935-36	1,048	326	330	458.9	1,218	21.56	8.38
1936-37	1,255	350	375	576.4	1,708	20.69	7.88
1937-38	1,348	382	379	612.3	1,643	20.69	7.13
1938-39	1,172	331	331	598.4	1,550	24.50	8.25
% change 1935-39 (average) over 1925-29 (average)	+15	-51	-21	+19	+0.1	-54	-51

[Source: *IJMA, Report of the Committee 1949* (Calcutta, 1950), pp. 97-101]

Continuous War demands, severe shipping constraints and erratic commercial supply combined to bring about a rapid increase in the prices of gunny bags. While in 1938, the price of 100 gunny bags was Rs.20.69; by November 1939 - it had tripled to

Rs.64.⁵ The increasing demand for gunny bags and jute cloth, and the subsequent high price per unit of production remained consistent throughout the War years. In fact, the demand picked up with the entry of Japan into the War and the subsequent fall of Rangoon. The mill owners, under the given conditions, could effectively restrict the total output of jute bags and thereby garner huge profits. Table 1.2 illustrates this growth in sales and profit per unit during the War.

Table 1.2

Jute Industry during World War II

	Gunny Output (in thousand tons)	Value of Output (in Rs. Million)	Unit Value (Rs. per ton)
1935-39 (Average)	1,206	347	288
1939-40	1,335	568	425
1940-41	1,062	517	487
1941-42	1,300	765	588
1942-43	1,278	745	583
1943-44	1,023	879	859
1944-45	1,059	947	894
Over War Years (Average)	1,176	737	639
Rate of Growth (%) in 1939-45 (average) over 1935-39 (average)	-2.4	+112.4	+121.9

[Source: *IJMA, Report of the Committee 1949* (Calcutta, 1950), pp. 114-117].

Thus, the Second World War placed the jute industry on an unprecedented high, where every year bettered the previous year's performance. From an average of 7.3 percent of paid up capital between 1935 and 1938, the jute industry's net profit soared up to 52 percent by 1942 and remained above 40 percent till the end of the War.⁶

⁵ GOI, Home Poll. (I), no.37/99/40, P.C. Joshi Archives, New Delhi.

⁶ Computed from *Indian Investor's Year Book* (1937-47): Section on Jute, cited in, Omkar Goswami, 'Then came the Marwaris: Some Aspects of Change in the pattern of Industrial Control in Eastern India', *IESHR*, vol. XXII, no-3, p.241.

II

In the backdrop of such rapid and substantial growth in the fortunes of the jute industry from 1939, the present section seeks to trace the general condition of the large body of jute workers - as to how they fared during the years 1937-47. In this respect, the focus is limited to certain issues that concerned the workers most - the question of basic wage, amenity allowances, housing condition and related facilities.

The issue that rattled most the consciousness of labour - was that of wage. However, in order to obtain any figure as the basic wage of the jute mill workers over a period of years, one has to keep two things in mind. First, that the jute workers did not constitute a single occupational category; and second, that there was no standardisation of wages of the workers across the jute mills. Generally speaking, the cause of jute labour suffered a serious reverse in the year 1937, when the mills suffering under the effects of the Depression adopted a policy of retrenchment of workers and a twenty percent wage cut of the 1929 wage standards. Though the basic wage was somewhat increased with the boom in the industry, never again was the 1929 wage standard actually restored.

The government enquiry conducted in 1946 to calculate the basic wages of the jute workers showed them in different categories. While the weavers (the single largest body of workers in jute mills) usually earned in the range of Rs.5 to Rs.6-8 annas per week, the other important group of spinners had a weekly basic wage ranging from Rs.4 to Rs.5.⁷ For the rest, constituting winders and coolies, the average weekly wage varied between Rs.2-8 annas to Rs.5. Taking all the workers in the

⁷*Labour Investigation Committee, Rege Committee Report (Delhi, 1946), pp.191-192.*

selected occupations, the Committee Report estimated the average basic wage in the jute industry to be Rs.5 per week.⁸

Such standards of basic wage, prevailing over the period under consideration, were hardly adequate if one compares them to the 1929 standards. The statements on basic wages made by the representatives of the IJMA and the Kankinarah Labour Union to the Royal Commission on Labour in 1929 - show that the weavers in the industry received a weekly basic wage ranging from Rs.6-9 annas to Rs.7-2 annas per week.⁹ For the spinners, it usually varied from Rs. 2-15-6 paises to Rs. 3-5-2 paises per week.¹⁰ It compared then, the basic wages of the weavers in the jute industry, in fact, went down considerably between the period 1929 to 1947; while the spinners, on their part, had to be content with a minimal increase in their earnings.

Closely related to the question of basic wage was that of amenity allowances, which assumed more importance over the period 1939-47 - when under the impact of the War and post-War inflation, the general cost of living more than doubled.¹¹ Perhaps more threatening was the impact of the Bengal famine that ravaged most parts of the province in 1943-44. The acute shortage in the supply of food grains over these two years led to a meteoric rise in the prices of food grains in Calcutta and adjoining regions, which again influenced the prices of the other commodities.

Yet, there was no major increase in amenity allowances during the period. In July 1941, the IJMA granted a flat increase in amenity allowance of one rupee per

⁸ *Labour Investigation Committee, Rege Committee Report*, p.192.

⁹ *Report of Royal Commission on Labour in India* (hereafter, *RCLI*), vol., pt.1(London, 1931), p.266, p.299.

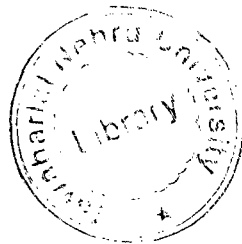
¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.377.

¹¹ According to the report submitted by the Labour Commissioner in 1947, the cost of living index of the workers in the Calcutta area was at 268 in June 1946, compared to the pre-war base of 100. [Source: Basu, 1994, p.52].

week.¹² By the end of December 1944, it was further raised to Rs.2 per week¹³ - an increase that was far from adequate in respect to the compelling hardships of the time. In fact, the allowance rate offered to the jute workers of Bengal was much less compared to the workers in the jute mills of Kanpur - who received Rs. 6 per week as amenity allowance, according to the scale adopted by the Employers' Association of North India.¹⁴ With an amenity allowance of Rs. 2 per week and a grain concession amounting to Rs. 1-1-9 paise per week, the increase in their net earnings did not even amount to 100 percent of their basic wage by 1945 - while the cost of living more than doubled.

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Dr. K. M. Mukherjee has given the long-term trend of real wages in the jute mills of Calcutta in his article published in March 1960. His figures are given in the Table 1.3 (in the next page).



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¹² Home Poll. (I), no.12/11/1942, NAI.

¹³ *Labour Investigation Committee*, Rege Committee Report, p.194.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.197.

Table 1.3

Real Wages in the Jute Mills of Bengal

Year	Money Wages per month (in rupees)	Working Class cost of living index for Calcutta	Real wages per month (in rupees)	Index of real wages (1951=100)
1928	17.7	35.0	32.2	56.0
1929	16.5	54.6	30.2	52.5
1930	14.3	48.8	29.3	51.0
1931	16.2	42.1	38.5	67.0
1932	15.4	43.0	35.8	62.3
1933	14.6	41.1	35.5	61.7
1934	14.6	37.5	38.9	67.7
1935	14.6	38.8	37.6	65.4
1936	16.9	37.4	45.2	78.6
1937	18.3	38.3	49.9	86.8
1939	19.6	39.0	50.3	87.5
1940	22.3	38.0	58.7	102.1
1941	21.4	41.0	52.2	90.8
1942	22.9	52.0	44.0	76.5
1943	29.7	104.0	28.6	49.7
1944	30.5	100.0	30.5	53.7
1945	32.8	101.0	32.5	56.5
1946	35.9	99.0	36.3	63.1
1947	41.9	111.0	37.7	65.6

[Source: K. M. Mukherjee, 'Trend in Real Wages in the Jute Textile Industry from 1900 to 1951', *Artha Vijnana*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1960].

It appears from the basic table that between 1932 and 1935, the real wages rose sharply as a result of the cost of living falling faster than the very considerable wage reduction. During 1936 and 1940, money-wages increased at a faster rate than the actual price rise and so the real wages increased. But the price rise during the Second World War period affected the real wages adversely and the wage level dropped almost to pre-depression levels until the matters were rectified by two major awards in the post-independence years. The Labour Investigation Committee Report of 1946, thus rightly concluded in clear terms that the jute workers of Bengal were worse off in the 1940s than during the pre-War period.¹⁵

¹⁵ *Labour Investigation Committee, Rege Committee Report*, p. 199.

The general condition of jute labour cannot only be gauged from the index of its net earnings or real wage figures, such also needs to take into account its immediate standards of living. A large majority of the jute workers lived in damp and dark huts in bustees owned by the 'sirdars' – which were in worse condition than either 'the Chawl of Bombay or the Chatta of Cawnpore where their fellow mill workers lived.'¹⁶ These huts, where most of the jute mill hands lived, had no windows or chimneys for ventilation, no proper water or sewage arrangements attached to it. In them often lived entire families without enough space to move themselves. Such completely uninhabitable conditions within which the workers were compelled to survive made them vulnerable to a number of diseases like dysentery, diarrhoea, malaria, etc.¹⁷

Not much better than these private bustees owned by the sirdars were the accommodation offered by the various jute mills. In ninety-four percent of the cases, the floor space available to a worker in a mill quarter, where he often lived with his family, was less than even hundred square feet.¹⁸ Most of these rooms, built back to back, did not have adequate floor space to be counted as a 'habitable room' under the provisions of the then Calcutta Municipality Act. The effectiveness of the supervision of sanitary conditions also varied from one mill to another according to the type of staff entrusted with such work.

The deplorable conditions within which such a large body of jute mill workers had to survive, during the period 1937-47, thus had enough heat to fuel up major

¹⁶ S. R. Deshpande, *Report on an Enquiry into the Conditions of Labour in Jute Mill Industry in India* (Delhi, 1946), p. 31.

¹⁷ *Labour Investigation Committee*, Rege Committee Report, p.304; *RCLI*, vol.5, pt. 2. p. 156.

¹⁸ *Labour Investigation Committee*, Rege Committee Report, p. 31.

industrial unrest. More was so, as the jute industry over this period was doing generally well.

III

It is from this perspective that the present work sets out to trace the labour activities in the jute belt of Bengal between 1937-47, through three different phases- the Depression Years (1937-39), the War Years (1939-45) and the post-War period (1945-47).

The Depression Years (1937-39)

The jute labour unrest in Bengal picked up in the year 1937 when there was a major jute workers' strike involving over 1,00,000 workers. Originating in the Howrah-Sibpore area, the unrest moved south and across the river Hooghly to Budge Budge and by April had spread to the mills in Calcutta, northern parts of 24 Parganas and Hooghly.¹⁹ Initially led by trade union leaders, with both Communist and Congress affiliations, the 1937 strike showed tremendous working class solidarity - pursuing major demands such as restoration of wage cuts, ending the policy of retrenchment, fixing of minimum wages, facilities for provident funds, provision for a month's paid leave every year, etc.

¹⁹Fortnightly Reports for the months of February-April 1937, Home Poll. (I), no. 18/2/37-18/4/37, NAI.

One of the significant features of the general jute strike of February-April 1937 was its enduring strength even after the top trade union leaders - names such as Sibnath Bannerjee, Suresh Bannerjee, Niharendu Dutt Mazumdar, and A.M.A. Zaman- were extenuated from the disturbed areas and administrative orders banning demonstrations were promulgated. The consolidation of the labour force and the progress of the strike were ensured by the second rung trade union activists as also the jute mill sirdars, who could hardly adopt a rigidly pro-employer stance in the face of rising unemployment and cut in wages. The frustration of the colonial state, while trying to reach out to the lower level leadership, was evident in the official writings- "...the organisers of the strikes have many unknown agents working for them throughout the industrial area and orders of restraint and restriction passed on selected leaders would unfortunately produce no effective result."²⁰

The strike of 1937, which left a major impact upon the industry, was called off only after the Premier of Bengal, Fazlul Huq assured the Central Strike Committee - of looking into its legitimate demands. Yet, the Huq settlement of May 1937, in spite of its fanfare, did nothing except to propose that the legitimate grievances would be redressed. In fact, the KPP-Muslim League ministry could have done precious little, even if it desired so, as its very existence depended upon the bloc support of the European Capitalists inside the legislature. Instead, the potent strength of the 1937 strike and the penetration of the Communists within the jute labour forced the IJMA to think in different terms. To curb the Communist influence, it began to encourage

²⁰ Fortnightly Report for the second half of April, Home Poll.(I),no.18/4/1937, NAI.

the Muslim League to form alternative trade unions which would divide the jute workers on religious lines.²¹

The lull in the working class movement, following the failure of the 1937 strike, provided the Muslim League with an open space to set up a rival body called the Bengal National Jute Workers' Union (popularly known as the 'White Flag' union). Parallel to this, the jute mill owners began their operation of flushing out workers from the mills whom they believed to be the principal Communists. Such consolidation of a clearly communal body on one hand and the unfair victimization of the jute workers on the other, hindered the resurgence of proper trade union activity over 1937-38. It was quite evident during the labour protests against the Jute Ordinance, which statutorily restricted the working hours in a jute mill to 45 hours per week from the previous limit of 60 hours - thereby effecting a twenty percent wage cut for the workers. The entire body of jute workers could not be brought together under the banner of the BCMU, as any attempt at consolidating the workers was frustrated by the use of religious sentiments and government force. For instance, when the BCMU activists planned to launch a general strike against the Jute Ordinance on 5 December 1938, a large section of jute workers stayed away in the mill areas of Budge Budge, Kankinarah, Chengail-Bauria - where the rival 'White Flag' union was admitted as being strong. In Titagarh, where six mills were already on strike over the demand of re-instatement of some recently dismissed workers, labour leaders like Niharendu Dutt Majumdar, Sisir Roy and Nanigopal Mukherjee were arrested and

²¹The main initiative, in this respect, was taken by the then Labour Minister of Bengal - H.S. Suhrawardy. It is often stated that Suhrawardy received regular financial assistance from the IJMA to keep his unions in operation. [Source: CSAS, BP, 6 August 1937, cited in, Goswami, 1991, p. 146].

externed from the area.²² Elsewhere, Sibnath Bannerjee, MLA and then General Secretary - BCMU, was arrested on the charge of instigating a strike in the National Jute Mill.²³ The arrest of such prominent labour leaders had a demoralising effect upon the jute workers and the second rung leadership in the respective areas – thus neutralising the prospect of a full fledged workers' strike.

Though the Jute Ordinance was withdrawn by February 1939, the episode made the organisational weakness of the union quite apparent. The early months of 1939, accordingly, were relatively free of serious labour trouble. Throughout the period February-September 1939, there were sporadic strikes over issues such as reduction in the number of mill hands, dismissal of co-workers, holidays on account of religious festivals, etc. In most of the cases, the workers on strike soon assumed work even though their demands were not met by the mill managements.

The War Years (1939-45)

It was not until the end of 1939 that labour unrest in jute mills could again gain some momentum. The outbreak of the Second World War brought about a fresh lease of life for the industry, while alongside there was a hike in the prices of the essential commodities. Seizing this opportunity, the BCMU threatened the IJMA with a general strike at the mills of Rishra, Howrah, Baranagar, Hajinagar and Budge-Budge - over the demand of increased wage.²⁴ The IJMA responded with an immediate increase of ten percent in the basic wage of the jute workers. Such a swift victory made the BCMU more confident, as it now began demanding that this

²² *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, 11 December 1938.

²³ *Ibid.*, 7 December 1938.

²⁴ Fortnightly Reports, October-November, 1939, Home Poll. (I), no.18/10/39 and 18/11/39, NAI.

increment should be made permanent and keeping in mind the price rise a further sum of four annas per rupee should be paid as amenity allowance.²⁵ The Communist leadership saw in this 'Capitalist War', the impressive prospect of consolidating the jute workers into resistance and thereby winning concessions for them.

However, there was no major build up for industrial unrest in the jute belt between the period December 1939 to July 1940, barring certain isolated strikes on localised issues. Some of them are discussed below. In March 1940, 500 workers of the Kinnison Jute Mill struck work refusing to co-operate with the proposed labour bureau as also demanding an increase in wages.²⁶ In April, about 600 mill hands went to a strike at the Clive New Jute Mill protesting against the dismissal of a weaver for bad work and for having permitted unauthorised persons to work on his loom.²⁷ In both the cases, the strikers soon resumed work on being assured by the labour officers that their grievances would be looked into. Such short lived strikes over issues specific to the respective mills did not contribute much towards building up a broad-based workers' struggle in the adjoining mills.

With the IJMA decision to reduce the working hours in the jute mills to 45 from 54 per week in July 1940, in order to prevent undue accumulation of stocks, the scene heated up once more. Such a directive, if put into operation, meant thousand of workers being thrown out of employment and a reduction in their wage by ten pice in a rupee.²⁸

²⁵ GOI, Home Poll. (I), no. 37/99, P. C. Joshi Archives, New Delhi.

²⁶ WRID, 9 March 1940.

²⁷ Ibid., 11 April 1940.

²⁸ GOI, Home Poll. (I), no.37/99/40, P.C. Joshi Archives, New Delhi.

The BCMU came forward with its demand of providing the labour with the same wages (in the 45 hour system) as it received under the previous one, and sought to organise the workers into strike committees over the mills. Yet, there was no occurrence of labour disputes on this issue between August-October 1940. There were, no doubt, some strikes at the various mills of Howrah and Hooghly, but there the issues varied greatly between the quality of yarns supplied to the workers to that of maltreatment by sirdars in the mills.

The increasing discontent among the jute workers due to the meteoric rise in the prices of the daily commodities, by June 1941, provided the trade union leaders with another opportunity to build up labour protest in the jute mills of Bengal. The prospects were bright enough, as a parallel movement organised by the Girni Kamgar Union (GKU) at Bombay had forced the Bombay Mill Owners' Association to concede a scheme of dearness allowance for the cotton mill workers of Bombay - ranging from Rs.4-8 annas to Rs. 9.²⁹ In Bengal, however, even before the workers could be properly mobilised, the IJMA granted a flat increase of one rupee per week as amenity allowance - thus nipping the possibilities of labour resistance at its very bud. The developments for the rest of the year were the same, of short-lived strikes mostly relating to issues of local interest.

The year 1942, on the other hand, began with a lot of promise for the cause of jute labour as there were substantial number of strikes over major economic demands - such as wage increase, payment of War allowances and bonus, etc. Throughout January-February 1942, strikes were reported from the various jute mills of Calcutta and its suburbs - though most of them terminated as a result of intervention by

²⁹ GOI, Home Poll. (I), no. 12/3/194, P.C. Joshi Archives, New Delhi.

government officials. The strike in the Budge Budge jute mill area, however, was an organised movement which continued for long. It began on 15 January in six mills of Budge Budge - Albion, Lothian, Orient, Cheviot, Caledonian, and Budge-Budge when about 15,000 workers struck work demanding a 25 percent wage increase, a War allowance of Rs. 3 per month, two months' pay in advance and War accident benefits.³⁰ The jute workers of Budge Budge, led by the prominent labour leader Suresh Bannerjee, successfully held out till they forced the mill management to accept their demands. During March-April 1942, War scare caused a number of strikes in the Shamnagar, Hastings, Victoria and Caledonian jute mills. Here the jute workers' demands were generally for advance of pay and leave to return to the safety of their village homes.³¹ Though most of the strikes ended unconditionally, these instances of protest made evident the growing anxiety among the jute mill hands of Bengal. The prevailing mood of labour unrest can also be corroborated from the number of stoppages in work that were reported. In fact, the number of stoppages in the jute mills of Bengal for the first six months of 1942 was much higher than that recorded in the last six months of 1941.³²

The momentum generated for the first half of 1942, however, was not evident over the rest part of the year. It seems quite surprising in view of the fact that various issues of significant political and economic importance confronted the jute labour

³⁰ Nirban Basu, 1994, p. 190.

³¹ Ibid., pp.193-194.

³² While the number of labour stoppages reported for the last six months of 1941 were 44, it shot up to 70 during the first six months of 1942. However, here one needs to differentiate between a labour stoppage and a labour strike. An act of protest leading to suspension of work, carried out on the behalf of a recognized labour union, is a strike. A labour stoppage, on the other hand, can be effected by a group of workers, irrespective of the sanction of a labour union. Accordingly, the number of labour

stoppages reported for any period was much higher than the official strikes. [Source: Weekly Reviews of Labour Situation, Home Poll. (I), no.12/1/1941, and 12/7/1942, NAI].

during this period. In June 1942, the Government of India decided to reduce the monthly output of manufactured jute from 90,000 tons to 55,000 tons. It was estimated that this could not be achieved without throwing out of employment over 1,00,000 mill hands. Though the proposals were ultimately abandoned, the issue failed to evoke much response from the jute workers across Bengal. Apart from passing resolutions from time to time, the BCMU or the BPTUC did little to organise the workers against the retrenchment and reduction of hours.³³ Similarly, the jute workers remained virtually unaffected during the countrywide unrest generated by the Quit India Movement, in August 1942. Labour stoppages in protest of the arrest of the Congress leaders were reported only from Birla and India Jute Mills.³⁴ For the rest of the year, there were short lived and sporadic strikes - mainly on local issues.

The pattern of industrial activity in the jute belt of Bengal, however, distinctly changed over the years 1943-44. During this period, there was no major labour unrest in jute mills on demands such as increase in wage, payment of War bonus, etc. The reason behind such a shift was the 'Bengal Famine' of 1943, which swept across at least sixty percent of Bengal's net cultivable area and left in its wake almost three million people dead.³⁵ Acute shortage of food articles, especially rice, corresponded by the rising prices of almost all commodities of daily use shaped the course of jute labour resistance on different lines. The frequency of stoppages in the jute mills were quite low in 1943, while the demands which were central to them were common - the

³³ Nirban Basu, 1994, pp. 196-197.

³⁴ WRID, 29, September 1942.

³⁵ The ravaging effect of the Bengal Famine can be gauged from the following figures arrived at from a survey conducted by P.C. Mahalanobis in 1945-46. According to it, in the course of the year 1943 alone- there was a forty-five percent increase in the number of rural destitute, leaving more than 6,000 rural families in a state of beggary. [Source: Omkar Goswami, 'The Bengal Famine of 1943: Re-examining the Data', *IESHR.*, vol. XXVII, no. 4, p. 446].

regular availability of cheap food stuff over the mill ration shops and a minimum emergency/amenity allowance to survive in a city where prices of the daily commodities had skyrocketed. Alongside these demands, labour stoppages were also reported over the issue of security of service. For instance, the entire labour force of the Clive Jute Mill struck work on 27 April protesting against the excessive number of warning cards issued to weavers for 'short production'.³⁶ Naturally, the issue of retrenchment (which would deprive the jute mill hands of food grains from the mill shops at subsidised rates) was of immense significance for the workers within such trying circumstances. The BCMU took these demands of security of service, increase in dearness allowance and payment of emergency allowance to the arbitration board in June 1943 and were successful in gaining certain concessions.³⁷ Parallel to this, the frequent closing down of jute mills from May 1943, due to the acute shortage of coal, led to the workers' demand for 'khoraki', i.e., compensation for enforced idleness. The increasing discontent among the jute workers over the closure of mills pressed the IJMA to fix a subsistence allowance of Rs.3 per week for the mill hands, whenever such occasions arose, besides the usual amenity allowance and weekly rations at subsidised rates.

The issues of 'khoraki' and 'supply of sufficient quantity of rations' constituted the core of jute labour demands even in 1944. In the early part of the year, the workers of the Clive, Bally and New Central Jute Mills went on a strike demanding good quality of rations and dearness allowance commensurate with the

³⁶ Weekly Reports on Labour Situation, 6 May 1943, WBSA.

³⁷ *Labour Gazette*, November 1943 (Delhi, 1944), p. 122.

increased cost of living.³⁸ Rationing was introduced in the Greater Calcutta area from 1 May, but the quantity of cereals supplied under this scheme was less than what the workers had so far received. Accordingly in May, the CPI started agitation among the jute workers over demands of increased quota of ration and payment of dearness allowance at the rate of Rs.30 per month.³⁹ Subsequently, there was a spate of labour stoppages, the prominent among them being the strike at the Hukumchand Jute Mill. Here, the mill hands returned to work on receiving an assurance that the short fall in the quantity of cereals would be supplemented by the supply of 1 seer of any 'uncontrolled' article like dal, chana, jowar or bajra which the management agreed to supply.⁴⁰

The workers' demand for payment of 'khoraki', in order to compensate for the closing of mills due to coal shortage, led to a number of labour stoppages during 1944. For instance, the workers of the Fort William New Jute Mill struck work on 31 May over the demand of compensation for the period the mill had recently remained closed. Similar unrest was reported in October from the Shamnagar South Jute Mill, where the closing down of the mill for an indefinite period left about 3,000 workers without job.⁴¹ However, in most of the cases, the strikes terminated without any result and the workers resumed work unconditionally.

Another significant issue that led to major jute protests, throughout 1944, was the closure of mills due to military requisitioning. Altogether 16 mills were taken over by the military under the requirements of the War and as a result around 35,000

³⁸Basu, 1994, p. 207.

³⁹ Labour Commissioner, GOB, to Secretary, Department of Labour, GOI. Home Poll. Confdl.,no.159/44, WBSA.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

workers were thrown out of employment. Though the workers were to be reabsorbed, the process was time consuming and hence, most of the workers found it difficult to survive on their own till they were re-employed. This sense of insecurity among the workers at large, sparked off major outbursts of labour protest in the Hastings, Lothian, Albion and Khardah Jute Mills.⁴² In most cases, the strikes were partially successful, as the workers of the requisitioned mills were absorbed in the nearby mills under the same Managing Agency.

As the prices of the commodities tended to stabilize in the year 1945, with agricultural production in Bengal showing some signs of recovery, the nature of labour protests in the jute mills once again shifted course. Apart from the strikes over the usual issues of 'khoraki' and 'supply of increased quantity of rations', the first six months of the year saw substantial number of stoppages in the jute mills - being effected on major demands such as the fixing of minimum basic wages, increase in amenity allowances, immediate payment of War bonus, etc.⁴³ Yet, no effort was evident on the part of the jute workers' organisations to provide a wider basis to these instances of labour protest. Naturally, such resistance offered by the mill hands, partially unemployed over the year and vulnerable in the face of any further increase in the cost of living, could not be sustained for over a week.⁴⁴

⁴² Nirban Basu, 1994, pp. 205-206; Labour Commissioner, GOB, to Secretary, Department of Labour, GOI. Home Poll. Confdl., no.159/44, WBSA.

⁴³ Workers of Alliance, Dalhousie and Kankinarah Jute Mills went on strike between April-May 1945, with the demand for increased rate of wages, introduction of graded pay, leave of one month with full pay, etc. [Source: Labour Commissioner, GOB, to Secretary, Department of Labour, GOI. 14 June 1945, Home Poll.Confdl., no.20/45].

⁴⁴Home Poll. (I), no.18/12/45, NAI.

The Post-War Period (1945-47)

The trend for the first half of 1945 continued quite unchanged throughout the year. Between August-December, there were numerous strikes over issues related to that of increase in wage, payment of war bonus, etc. About 7,000 workers of the Dalhousie Jute Mill went on a strike on 25 August in protest against non-payment of full wages for Victory Holidays on 16 and 17 August 1945.⁴⁵ The workers of the Hukumchand Jute Mill struck work on 17 September demanding an increase in wage rates.⁴⁶ Similar instances were reported from the Alliance, Auckland, Waverly and Shri Gauri Sankar Jute Mills, where workers, by the end of December, resorted to strike demanding the same rates of payment as given to men employed in the mills under Messrs Jardine Skinners.⁴⁷ However, such strikes, without any organisational backing, could not survive for long. In most cases, the mill hands resumed their work either unconditionally or following assurances from the management that their grievances would be considered.

The intensity of labour agitation picked up by the early part of 1946, 'supposedly' because of the forthcoming Assembly elections where the jute workers were to elect their representatives. By March, a large number of strikes were reported from the jute mills of Hooghly, Howrah and Barrackpore, mainly in protest against the cut in cereal rations. The emphasis of the demand soon shifted from the cut in rations to increase in dearness allowance, as workers of the jute mills in Baranagar, Jagaddal, Howrah, and Bansberia, numbering nearly 1,00,000, struck work on 20

⁴⁵ Nirban Basu, 1994, p. 225.

⁴⁶ Labour Commissioner, GOB, to Secretary, Department of Labour, GOI. Home Poll. Confdl.,no.20/45, WBSA.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

March. According to an Intelligence Branch report, the labour unrest was fomented by the CPI in the hope of promoting its prospects in the elections from labour constituencies to the legislative assembly - scheduled for the end of March.⁴⁸ Frequent strikes of this nature had its desired effect as the IJMA, by April, granted a 15 percent increase in the wages of the jute workers. However, as the increase was not uniformly implemented, there were spontaneous labour protests during May in the jute mills of Budge Budge.⁴⁹ Most of these strikes ended tamely as the workers returned to their work unconditionally.

The jute labour agitations in Bengal, evident over June-August 1946, showed significant links with formal trade unionism. For instance, when the management of the Fort Gloster (Old) Jute Mill declared a lockout in response to certain workers' demands, the local trade union leaders came promptly to their support. A big workers' rally was organised on 9 June, where a resolution condemning the management for declaring a lockout was passed under the chairmanship of the prominent labour leader - Suresh Bannerjee. Subsequently the Bengal Labour Association activists, on behalf of the workers, entered into negotiation with the authorities and successfully arrived at a settlement through the mediation of the Additional Commissioner of Labour.⁵⁰ Most of the demands initially placed by the workers were met, and they joined work as the mill reopened on 11 July. Similarly, the CPI was seen active, when the workers employed in the mills under the managing agency of Thomas Duff and Company struck work in July over the demand of payment of deferred War bonus.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Nirban Basu, 1994, p. 227.

⁴⁹ *The Statesman*, 3 May 1946 and 8 May 1946.

⁵⁰ *Hindusthan Standard*, 6 July 1946.

⁵¹ Nirban Basu, 1994, p. 229.

Negotiations followed and the Company agreed to pay the first installment of the bonus to the jute workers.

The prospect of organised jute labour protests for the rest part of the year, however, suffered due to the severe outbreaks of communal riot that affected Greater Calcutta ever since August 1946. Though the jute workers were not directly involved in such acts of mob violence, the existing tense situation forced the trade unions to defer plans for labour agitation for the time being. Between October and December 1946, only short-lived strikes were reported - mostly over issues of working hours and statutory holidays.⁵²

The number of jute labour stoppages, on concrete economic demands, went up in the following year. By January 1947, altogether 20,000 mill hands of the jute mills in Budge-Budge went on strike demanding an increase in dearness allowance upto Rs.45 per month.⁵³ Similarly, between April-July, a number of strikes were reported from the Bally, Hastings and Birla Jute Mills over demands such as increase in wages and amenity allowances, strike pay, etc. Most of these strikes could hold on to their demands till the mill authorities met them or the disputes were referred to higher bodies for arbitration.

Seen over the period, the jute workers' resistance to the Capital did not meet with much success. Apart from the 15 percent hike in the wages (by August 1946) and some increase in the amenity allowances from time to time, no other significant demand of the workers - such as the fixing of minimum basic wage, better housing facilities or a month's leave with pay - were met by the IJMA.

⁵² Nirban Basu, 1994, p.230.

⁵³ *Hindustan Standard*, 31 January 1947.

The sudden termination of the 1937 jute strike, without yielding any result, dealt a severe blow to the jute workers' interest in Bengal - a blow from which they could never really recover. The pattern of jute labour unrest in Bengal between 1939-47, can be gauged from Table 1.4 (given below), which reflects on the number of strikes and the man hours lost as reported from the jute mills during these years.

Table 1.4
Strikes in Jute Mills of Bengal, 1939-47

Year	Number of Strikes	Man Hours lost
1939	25	81,74,471
1940	11	40,65,754
1941	7	30,78,783
1942	25	75,54,464
1943	23	35,18,846
1944	23	47,95,910
1945	9	35,83,609
1946	67	3,42,49,696
1947	27	97,12,073

[Source: *IJMA Annual Report* (s), for the years ending 1939-47 (Calcutta)].

As shown in the table and as has already been discussed, after the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, there was an increase in the number of strikes owing to the frequent attempts of the BCMU to consolidate the jute labour into concerted resistance. Yet, these strikes were unsuccessful on most occasions. There was a sharp decline in the intensity of labour movement during the years 1940-41, when the initiatives of the BCMU rarely met with serious response from the workers. It was only in the first half of 1942, that there were some successful labour protests on major economic issues. Yet, the momentum gained could not be sustained over the year. The prospects of labour resistance after 1942 were markedly affected by the Bengal famine and the regular closing down of mills due to War requirements. The jute

workers, between 1943-45, left vulnerable in the face of rising prices of commodities, thus had little option apart from demanding increased supply of cereals at subsidised rates and compensation for enforced idleness from the management. Accordingly, no major scale labour activity was evident during this period, and in most cases the strikes were isolated and fought on local issues. It was only in the post-War years of 1946-47, that the number of jute labour strikes went up and the workers supported by the trade unions could force the mill authorities to concede certain demands.

IV

Such a failure on the part of the jute mill hands of Bengal, one of the largest and most compactly settled working groups in the country, to clinch substantial concessions from an industry that was doing exceptionally well - remains a paradox. And more was so, for the jute workers of Bengal - during the period 1937-47 - were much worse off than the pre-War years.

The present section, in its quest to locate the factors that may have contributed to such, begins with the two most commonly cited arguments. The failure of the working class movement in India during the 1940s is usually attributed to the repressive War time regulations adopted by the colonial state as also to the gradual alienation of the industrial workers from the Communist activists after 1941. To what extent does these two factors really explain the shortcomings of the jute labour movement in Bengal is, however, open to questions.

The Essential Services Maintenance Ordinance (1941) and the Defence of India Rule (January 1942), as their names tend to suggest, were Acts promulgated by the British Government to ensure steady industrial production according to the requirements of the War. These Acts prohibited 'strikes or lockouts in connection with any trade disputes' and automatically referred the disputes for adjudication, pending which all strikes were to be held illegal and strikers punishable under law.⁵⁴ These repressive regulations had their necessary effects, yet it would be too simple to conclude that they had a total binding effect upon jute labour activities. In fact, one would see, as had already been discussed in the previous section, that the number of strikes in the jute mills of Bengal shot up during the first six months of 1942 - the same period when both these regulations had come to full use. Besides that, though the jute bags formed an essential component in the British War efforts, the Government did not consider the production in the jute mills - as production primarily related to War efforts.⁵⁵ Naturally so, these regulations were not that stringently applied in case of stoppages in the jute mills of Bengal - as would have been done in respect to same in, for instance, the Iron Works or Port Engineering industries.

The second contention - which holds that the Communist support for the 'People's War' distanced the party activists from the Indian labour class, and thus effectively neutralised any possibility of building up major labour protests after 1941 - also appears a bit simplistic. No doubt, the CPI had - by December 1941 -

⁵⁴ GOI, Home Poll.(I)., no.42/9/1942, P. C. Joshi Archives, New Delhi.

⁵⁵ This can be deduced from the fact that jute mills were not bracketed in the same category of 'factories engaged in war work' like Iron Works, Metal and Steel Works, Chemical Factories, etc. [Source: Labour Department's Summaries of Reports regarding Industrial Unrest in Factories engaged in War Work, Home Poll. (I)., no. 44/32/42, NAI].

unequivocally declared its support for the British War efforts.⁵⁶ But did such support necessarily imply that the Communist leadership had dissociated itself from the general interests of the labour? If that were to be, then the first half of 1942 would have witnessed a sharp decline in the intensity of labour activities across the jute mills of Bengal. To the contrary, the early months of 1942 witnessed numerous short spanned, yet effective labour movements across the jute mills. As has already been mentioned in the previous section, the number of jute labour stoppages for the first six months of 1942 was much higher than that recorded in the last six months of 1941. Besides, the jute workers were also successful in forcing the mill authorities to accept their demands on several occasions. In fact, through out the period 1943-47, the Communist activists of the BCMU were seen quite active among the jute workers – organising meetings, holding demonstrations and sending delegations to the concerned authorities on their behalf.

What then led the Communist activists to adopt a general ‘pro-labour’ line, even when their efforts could stand in the way of their pledged support for the ‘People’s War’? An explanation to this, could be that the lower level activists were not much willing to abandon the cause of labour and refrain from demanding the fulfillment of workers’ grievances, more so, when the party (declared legal only in 1942) was in a position to extend its influence in the trade union field following the absence of the nationalist trade union workers, most of whom were either jailed or externed. Even prominent leaders like P. C. Joshi (General Secretary of the CPI) acknowledged this fact by the closing months of 1942, and regretted that no attempt

⁵⁶ Resolution of the CPI Politburo, 15 December 1941. Home Poll.(I)., no. 44/32/42, P. C. Joshi Archives, New Delhi.

has been made by the party to build up a leadership of the working class.⁵⁷ Accordingly, the Communist activists were seen making significant inroads within the labour fields between 1942-45. According to CPI's own publication, the total number of members affiliated to the party rose from 2000 in January 1942 to 28,200 by April 1943.⁵⁸ Allowing for the inevitable exaggeration in the party's claim, one still has to accept that far from there being a wide gulf between the CPI and the labour force in the post-1942 scenario, the Communist activists were rather seen as extending their network among the workers through silent organisation.

The failure of the jute labour movement in Bengal then has to be located elsewhere. Such would require a thorough understanding of the weaknesses within the organisation of the jute workers, the nature of trade within the industry as also certain extraneous developments.

A major limitation that had crippled the prospect of sustained labour movement in the jute mills of Bengal was the absence of strong and enduring trade unions. A government enquiry in 1945 revealed that only about 18 percent of the workers - 'some 47,697 of a total of 2,67,193 - were members of unions'.⁵⁹ The general jute strikes in Bengal organised by the BCMU, therefore, sustained themselves not on the basis of the members of the labour unions, but by enlisting support from the wider section of jute workers who stood beyond it. For instance, in 1937, only 9,950 workers were members of trade unions, who accounted for merely

⁵⁷ Basu, *The Political Parties and the Labour Politics: 1937-47* (Calcutta, 1992), p. 63.

⁵⁸ *Janayuddha*, 28 April 1943.

⁵⁹ Deshpande, 1946, pp. 34-35.

4.5 percent of the striking force.⁶⁰ Such a large body of workers, unaffiliated to any union, could have been mobilised into an agitation only when some major issues threatened their conditions of living. They could not be persuaded into yearlong low key movements that usually followed such big strikes, more so when they had practically gained nothing from their previous efforts.

The general jute strike of 1937, which involved more than 1,00,000 workers, would explain the above stated contention more clearly. In spite of all its radicalism, the general strike of 1937 failed to achieve anything in practical terms for the cause of jute labour. Even worse, in the months immediately following the strike more than 13,000 workers were unfairly dismissed⁶¹ by the employers for their alleged Communistic inclinations. As a result, the 1937 episode led to a sense of frustration and helplessness among the jute labour, which in turn dissociated them largely from the BCMU. In other words, it became increasingly difficult for the labour activists even to hold the jute workers together - during their renewed efforts to build up fresh movements, let aside during the period of inactivity. Such indifference among jute workers, to the movements planned from above, was amply evident during August 1940 - when an effort on the part of the BCMU to build up a protest demonstration against IJMA's directive of reducing working hours met with little response from the workers. A Home Department report of September 1941 read- "Extremist (read: Communist) agitators are trying to cause trouble in jute mills taking advantage of the dissatisfaction caused by recent reduction of working hours. A very objectionable

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ *BLA Progs*, Sibnath Bannerjee, 20 August 1937, pp. 325-326.

leaflet has been circulated among some of the workers. No disturbance, however, is yet to be reported". In fact, the report adds, "The workers seem to appreciate the circumstances which made the reduction necessary".⁶² Similarly in July 1941 when, with the increase in the cost of living, labour leaders like Sibnath Bannerjee sought to organise the mill workers over demands of increased wages and dearness allowance- they failed to garner even minimum support.⁶³

The failure of the BCMU to organise the workers into sustained labour movements was also due to the factionalism that existed within the organisation itself. The office bearers and the executive committee members of the BCMU included representatives from different political outfits - the Bengal Labour Association, the Congress Socialist Party (CSP), the Bengal Labour Party (BLP), the CPI, the Royists and the Communist League. Each of these factions of the BCMU had their particular area of influence and, quite predictably, were not prepared to yield any space to the rival factions.⁶⁴ Accordingly, there were occasions when one union affiliated to a particular party sabotaged the prospect of a labour strike called by a rival union in the same area, in order to maintain its influence upon the workers. One such instance is cited below. In December 1938, when the labour activists of the BLP and the CPI groups planned a general strike in the jute mills of Titagarh - against the Jute Ordinance, the CSP group influenced a section of the workers not to join it.⁶⁵ Such instances of inter-union rivalry, at the end, also contributed in increasing the distance between the labour unions and the jute workers of Bengal.

⁶² Fortnightly Report for the second half of September, Home Poll.(I)., no. 18/9/40., NAI.

⁶³ Reports to Home Department, Home Poll. (I)., no. 12/3/41, NAI.

⁶⁴ For further discussion on this point, see Basu, 1994.

⁶⁵ As told in a personal interview by Shri Nandalal Bose (the then CPI organiser), in December 2001.

The failure of the BCMU to bring a substantial strength of jute workers under its influence was also conditioned by the strong presence of 'sirdari' system within the industry. The sirdars, who employed and supervised the daily activities of the jute labour, held an important position in the jute mills - acting as the link between the workers and the employers. In fact, the loyalty that they enjoyed from the workers did not have its basis only in their status as jobber-cum-supervisor, but also in their regional, lingual and caste identities.⁶⁶ Naturally so, these sirdars in the jute mills could carry a large number of mill workers with them.

The considerable support that the sirdars enjoyed from the workers made them alternative centres of power vis-à-vis the trade union leaders within the industry - particularly in certain mill areas. While the BCMU leaders had a significant hold in Howrah, Chengail, Bauria and Budge-Budge - where the proportion of Bengali mill workers was high, the sirdars (who were mostly from U. P. and Bihar) had a stronger hold over the non-Bengali migrant labour in the mill areas to the north of Calcutta. The sirdars, often to retain their control over the mill workers, did their utmost to prevent the party activists from extending their influence within the mills under their supervision. Such a condition of hostility and mistrust had its diluting effect upon the numerous protest movements organised by the BCMU. To cite one example, in March 1937, there was a serious fight in the Birla Jute Mill between the sirdars' men and the workers affiliated to the CPI led union over the legitimacy of a proposed strike. The rift between the workers helped the mill management to crush the emerging protest

⁶⁶ For further discussion on this point, see Chakrabarty, 1988.

movement by arresting the strikers who had connections with the CPI.⁶⁷ Similarly, the strikes organised by the Communist activists in the Shamnagar and Victoria Jute Mills in June 1939 could not continue in the face of stiff opposition from the sirdars - who thought such strikes to be opposed to their interests.⁶⁸ Such marked divisions within the workforce, thus, effectively blurred the prospects of a broad-based jute workers' organization in Bengal.

The weaknesses within the jute workers' organisation were actively exploited by the jute mill owners, particularly during the years 1938-1941. Stern measures were adopted by the authorities, through labour officers, to wean away the jute workers from the potential 'trouble makers'. For instance, in May 1938, the jute mill managements^a in the Barrackpore subdivision 'insisted that their employees must keep away from the communist agitators'⁶⁹ and employed people to report to them on workers violating the order. These measures weakened the organisational base of the CPI faction of the BCMU in Barrackpore to such an extent that the management felt that there was not the remotest chance of a jute strike on a large scale in the near future.

Although the Government of Bengal was a passive participant in the affairs of the jute industry, it had an important role to play while mediating within the Capital-Labour disputes. The approach of the Muslim League ministries⁷⁰ and the colonial

⁶⁷ *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 6 March 1937.

⁶⁸ Fortnightly Report for the month of June 1939, Home Poll. (I), no. 18/6/39, NAI.

⁶⁹ Nirban Basu, 1994, p. 121.

⁷⁰ The first provincial ministry in Bengal was formed on 24 March 1937 when the Krishak Praja Party and the Muslim League came together. The ministry resigned on 1 December 1941, when the understanding between the two broke down. Muslim League again formed the government in March 1943 and remained in power till March 1945. After the 1946 elections, a Muslim League ministry was formed under H. S. Suhrawardy, which continued to hold office till the eventual partition of the province.

state towards labour stoppages were largely conditioned by their similar understanding of the 1937 jute strike – as ‘politically motivated’ by the Communists to disturb the democratically elected order of Bengal. Understandably, therefore, the government, from time to time, adopted strict repressive measures like the externment of prominent labour leaders and the imposition of section 144 of the IPC banning protest demonstrations and public meetings – to break the labour movements at their very inception. The government initiatives to curb any probable act of dissension were more marked in the post-1941 period – when, with the entry of Japan into the War and the parallel developments related to the Bengal famine, the city of Calcutta and its suburbs became vulnerable to both internal disorder and external threat.

The BCMU could have covered some of its organisational shortcomings, had it effected an intimate link between the jute mill workers and the jute growers. But even here it failed to adopt concrete measures. Ira Mitra, in an article, holds this shortsightedness on the part of the Communist leaders to develop a worker-peasant unity, as the key to the failure of the trade union activities in the jute sector.⁷¹ She contends that, had the supply of raw jute to the mills been effectively blocked during the period of labour unrest, the impact of the jute workers’ resistance would have been more alarming for the Capital. The mill owners with export orders, during the War years, could then have been forced to concede minimum concessions for both the jute growers and workers. Yet, nothing of that sort materialised, as the jute growers could not be accommodated under the banner of Communist leadership.

⁷¹ Ira Mitra, ‘Growth of Trade Union Consciousness among the Jute Mill Workers 1920-1940’, *EPW*, Special Number, November 1981, pp: 1847-48.

The initiatives of the labour activists to organise the mill workers of Bengal into full-fledged jute workers' movements, further suffered from an extraneous development, i.e., the Bengal famine of 1943. The acute shortage of food grains by March 1943, and the subsequent steep hike in the prices of cereals, made the IJMA provide weekly rations of food grains for the mill workers at a subsidised rate.⁷² In the markets of Calcutta, such severe shortage in supply, over 1943, led to a meteoric rise in the prices of food grains, particularly coarse rice - whose price per maund almost tripled between January and August.⁷³ Naturally the jute workers of Bengal, with their limited income, could not afford to purchase grain from the open market at such high prices. To survive, therefore, with their families in such troubled times - these jute workers had to depend upon the weekly ration of rice supplied from the mill shops. This in turn, made it imperative for them to continue with their assigned works within the mills and therefore refrain from any act of protest. These conditions contributed significantly to the absence of major jute labour resistance during the years 1943-1945.

In total contrast to the jute workers, who remained a divided and demoralised force for most of the 1940s, stood their employers - whose absolute position to dictate the terms in the jute industry made matters worse for the former. Jute being primarily

⁷² It is not that the jute mills didn't supply weekly ration of cereals before March 1943. Such provisions were already there from December 1942, only their importance increased significantly as the effects of the Bengal famine became more pronounced with time. Besides, the weekly supply of food grains to the workers varied from time to time in accordance with the overall market situation.

⁷³ The price of coarse rice per maund in Calcutta, was Rs. 12.31 in March 1943, which increased to Rs. 37 by August of the same year. [Source: *Report of the Famine Inquiry Commission on Bengal* (Delhi 1945), p. 40].

an export commodity, the demand for gunny bags and cloth was not uniform over a period of time. In fact during the Second World War, the demand for jute products from Bengal varied from year to year according to the War requirements of USA and Great Britain (two of the biggest buyers). Therefore, the jute employers during the slack phase had the option of closing down the production units in the face of labour protests, without risking any loss in profit. Instead, during the period 1942-45, the jute mill owners were more interested in reducing their output to ensure steady rise in the unit value of jute products.⁷⁴ Parallely, whenever the mill owners found their production on War-demand suffering from labour stoppages, they would promptly contain the dissatisfied workers by conceding certain concessions. Minimum concessions, such as nominal increase in basic wages and dearness allowances - as evident in 1939 as also in 1941, were found adequate enough to pacify for the time being any act of disorganised labour protest.

Another factor that strengthened the hands of the mill owners was that of the excess supply of labour in the jute sector. At least 83, 000 workers were left idle by the policy of retrenchment followed by the IJMA during the first five years of the Depression. As these workers were not accommodated even when there was a boom in the industry, they constituted a steady pool of 'budli' workers in the industry. This excess reserve was of much help to the employers while overcoming the shortages in labour supply owing to strikes. Parallely, the division among the jute labour force on the line of religion, as engineered by the Muslim League controlled 'White Flag' unions, came to serve the needs of the mill authorities during labour crises. The

⁷⁴ The unit value of the jute products during the War years has been shown in Table 1.2, of this chapter (p.18).

Muslim mill workers affiliated to the 'White Flag' unions, who were loyal to the management, could be effectively used by the latter to neutralise the prospects of sustained labour strike.⁷⁵ These available options helped the mill owners to adopt a stringent stand in the face of the jute workers' protests.

The above discussion touches on some of the factors that would explain the failure of the jute workers in winning substantial concessions for themselves between 1937-1947. In absence of strong and enduring movements, the general tenor of the labour protests during this period acquired localised characters - mainly pursuing issues of limited interests. Such scattered resistance, with diminishing intensity, left the Capital in a position of great comfort wherefrom it could dictate the terms of production and profit effectively.

Conclusions

A major thrust of this chapter has been to understand the various developments that affected the jute industry and its labour force between 1937-47. The outbreak of the Second World War brought along contrasting fortunes for the mill owners and the jute mill workers. While the increasing profit margin in production, owing to the War demands, facilitated a substantial flow of capital within the industry, not much in concrete economic terms was done for the cause of jute labour – their condition, as has been discussed in the second section, worsening from that of the pre-War years.

⁷⁵ For a detailed discussion on this aspect, see Chapter Three, 'Community Identities and the Labouring Class'.

Given such situations, the stage was quite set for full-fledged labour movements, spanning across the jute mills of Bengal, forcing the mill authorities to concede on certain major economic demands. Yet, nothing of that sort actually happened. Following the failure of the general jute strike of 1937, numerous efforts were undertaken by the BCMU to build up jute labour protests in Bengal. Only few of them met with much active response from the workers. Except for certain phases in labour struggle, which saw some spontaneous and successful strikes on significant economic issues, there was no broad based jute labour movement over these years – involving substantial number of workers - that could pose a threat to the Capital. In fact during this period, most of the strikes were of sporadic nature – called on issues specific to the respective mills.

The present chapter concludes with an overview of the factors that could explain such marked failure of jute workers' protests between 1937-47. The central problem that affected the prospects of sustained labour movement in the jute sector – was the absence of strong organisations encompassing jute workers of different shades. Most of the jute workers were not members of the trade unions and hence, it became increasingly difficult for the labour activists to effect a broad-based jute workers' unity – when the occasion demanded so. The divisions within the workers themselves – owing to different identities of religion, region and language - were also perpetuated by the mill sirdars for their own interests. To make matters worse, the BCMU itself remained a divided body for most of the period under consideration. These factors, acting in combination, contributed significantly in weakening the labour protests across the jute mills – which could not often withstand the divisive tactics and repressive measures adopted by the mill management and the government.

The intensity of jute labour movement further suffered due to the famine of 1943, which robbed the workers of much of their vigour and zeal to protest. Parallely, the very nature of the industry - its export oriented production and excess supply of reserve labour - placed the jute mill owners in a position of great comfort, wherefrom they could easily sustain and check such divided and scattered acts of labour protest.

CHAPTER TWO

EXPERIMENT WITH ELECTORAL POLITICS, 1937-47: JUTE LABOUR POLICIES OF THE BENGAL MINISTRIES

The jute labour movement in Bengal, between 1937-47, was significantly shaped by the official interventions made in respect of it. In the entire 'contest' between the Capital and the Labour, an indispensable role was played by the various governments (both at the national and the provincial level) which had major interests involved in the overall developments within the Bengal jute industry. No assessment, therefore, of the jute industry and its labour force would be comprehensive without an effective understanding of the varying nature of state intervention, at different levels and through different agencies, from time to time.

By the end of World War I, jute (both in its raw and manufactured form) had become the key to the financial stability of the Government of India. The export surplus earned by jute enabled India to pay her way in the Empire, supporting the Indian army, general administrative costs in India and the home charges in London (such as the running of the India Office, payment of interest on loans, meeting the cost of pensions and leave salaries, etc.).¹ Any crisis in the jute industry of Bengal (including the cultivators) that could lead to financial loss for the British Indian economy, therefore, prompted immediate and serious

¹ B.R. Tomlinson, *The Political Economy of the Raj: 1914-47* (London, 1979), p.18.

intervention on the part of the imperial officials at Delhi and Calcutta.² It was in the best interest of the Government to ensure steady production within the industry, with minimum occasions of labour unrest.

However, the scope for intervention by the British Indian Government into the affairs relating to labour and industry got significantly curtailed with the coming up of the Government of India Act - 1935. Under the provisions of this Act, items such as 'Labour' and 'Industry' were placed concurrently under the jurisdiction of the provincial governments to be elected by popular mandate.³ Such powers being vested in the 'democratically elected' provincial governments for the first time, meant that a new element had to be incorporated within the existing triad of relationships between the colonial state, Capital and Labour. It is in this context that the present paper seeks to focus upon the various facets of intervention made by the Government of Bengal into matters relating to the jute industry (primarily in respect to its labour force) over the period 1937-47, when Bengal was under its ~~first~~ first elected governments. The years 1937-47 saw four ministries in Bengal⁴, whose policies regarding jute labour varied significantly from that of the other. Such tangible differences in their approach, which necessarily followed from their respective interests within the industry,

² Such an understanding is clearly evident in the various correspondence exchanged by the imperial officials at Delhi and Calcutta between 1928-35. [Source: Gordon T. Stewart, *Jute and Empire: The Calcutta Jute Wallahs and the Landscapes of Empire* (Manchester, 1998), Chapter: "Jute in crisis, 1928- 1955"].

³ According to the provisions of the new Act, though the British Indian Government at the centre could formulate policies for the various industries and their labour force; it no longer held the exclusive power to implement such policies (except during emergency situations) in the provinces without the consent of the respective governments.

⁴ The first provincial ministry in Bengal was formed on 24 March 1937 with Fazlul Huq as the Premier. As the understanding between the KPP and the Muslim League (two main constituents of the first coalition government) broke down, Huq resigned on 1 December 1941. The second ministry in Bengal was formed on 11 December 1941, with again Huq as the Premier and continued in office till the Governor of Bengal dismissed it on 28 March 1943. The next ministry was led by Khwaja Sir Nazimuddin of Muslim League and it fell on 28 March 1945 - when it failed to pass a bill in the Assembly. After the 1946 elections, a Muslim League ministry was formed with H.S.Suhrawardy as the Premier. It continued to hold office till the eventual partition of the province in August 1947. League ministry was formed with H.S.Suhrawardy as the Premier. It continued to hold office till the eventual partition of the province in August 1947.

provide the basis to the present effort. However, the major emphasis given in this paper upon the role played by the elected provincial ministries in Bengal vis-à-vis the jute industry and its labour force does not deny the overarching presence of the colonial state in matters relating to the industry during the given period. The fact that Britain's financial interests in India were well served by the export surplus generated by jute products, made it still imperative for the imperial officials at Delhi to maintain a close eye over it.

This chapter, for thematic considerations, has been divided into three parts. The scope for government intervention, while mediating within the Capital-Labour disputes, cannot be appreciated without a general understanding of the respective conditions of the jute industry (in terms of its business) and its labour force over the years 1937-47. As has been discussed in the previous chapter, the jute industry – between 1939-45 – was doing remarkably well mainly due to soaring growth in sales and profit under the demands of the Second World War.⁵ This way, the jute mills of Bengal were financially in a position, by the 1940s, to part with a share of their profit in the form of concessions granted to the jute workers employed under them, if they desired so. It is with this consideration that, the chapter starts off with a brief discussion on the general condition of the jute work force in Bengal. It would enable us to figure out the related issues that could have formed a part of the broader agenda pursued by the elected Government of Bengal during this period – while mediating within the Capital-Labour disputes.

The second part of the chapter focuses upon the legislation relating to the jute workers proposed and passed by these ministries as also the positions adopted by them in the Bengal Assembly over various matters concerning the jute labour. A study in this respect

⁵ From an average of 7.3 percent of paid up capital between 1935-38, the jute industry's net profit soared up to 52 percent by 1942 and remained above 40 percent till the end of the War.

would provide a fair idea on the policies adopted by the ministries vis-à-vis Capital and Labour interests during their tenure in office. In this section, a brief study of the nature of government intervention in respect to the jute growers of Bengal is made, to bring out the contrast between the positions taken by them towards the jute cultivators and the mill workers. Parallel to it, this part of the chapter also reflects upon the interplay of various factors that conditioned the policies adopted by the respective ministries on jute labour and industry.

A broad understanding of the labour policies pursued by the different elected ministries in Bengal, between 1937-47, would also require a careful study of the government as a law enforcing institution - particularly while dealing with various cases of labour disputes. With this purpose, the third part of the chapter seeks to locate the action taken by these ministries in relation to jute workers during various strikes or protest demonstrations. Though their response over the question of 'labour participation' in various jute strikes differed, they had a common perception of threat regarding the 'unholy nexus' between the jute workers and the Communist activists. None of these ministries felt comfortable with the increasing penetration of Communistic ideas within the jute workers of Bengal - more so due to the pressure from the British bureaucrats. Their use of the state apparatus and various divisive tactics while combating Communism (evident during the various phases of jute labour discontent between 1937-47) brings to the fore another dimension of government intervention into the affairs of the jute industry and its work force.

I

The rapid and substantial growth in the fortunes of the jute industry did not lead to any similar improvement in the conditions of the jute workers during the years 1937-47. As has been discussed in the previous chapter, a comparison between the reports submitted by the Rege Committee in 1946 and the Whitley Commission in 1929 on jute labour clearly show that the basic wages of the jute workers of Bengal went down between the period 1929-1947.⁶

The disparity in the wages earned by the jute workers of Bengal between 1929 and 1947 was due to the twenty percent cut of the 1929 wage standards adopted by various mills under the effects of the Depression. Though the basic wage was some what raised with the boom in the industry, and other extra allowances (like amenity allowance of Rs. 2 per week and grain concession of Rs. 1-1-9 paise per week) were introduced under the compelling effects of the War, the increase in their net earnings did not even amount to hundred percent of their basic wages by 1945 - while the cost of living more than doubled. Parallel to it, as has been discussed in the previous chapter, the 'real wage' of the jute mill workers also went down during the War years. The Labour Investigation Committee Report of 1946, thus concluded in clear terms that the jute mill workers of Bengal were worse off in the 1940s than during the pre-War period.⁷

Even by April 1937, the jute labour of Bengal did not fare any better in certain other related issues, which constituted the core of their demands even since the late 1920s. One of

⁶ For relevant details, see Chapter One, pp. 19-20.

⁷ *Labour Investigation Committee, Rege Committee Report*, p.199.

the inherent flaws within the wage structure of the jute industry was that there was no standardisation of wages of the workers across the jute mills.⁸ Accordingly, there was no provision for 'minimum wage' in respect to every occupational category amongst the jute workers. Secondly, though the British Indian Government had passed the 'Workers' Compensation Act' (1926), which had provisions for financial assistance to workers against accidents taking place within the factory, it had not been properly implemented in respect to certain industries in Bengal - jute being one of them.⁹ Thirdly, by 1937 there was no legal provision for payments against involuntary unemployment and retrenchment (evident in the jute mills from time to time with reduction in working hours and sealing of looms), paid holidays or regular payment of pension to jute workers - these issues being handled by the respective mill authorities at individual level. Even while discussions were on for the Maternity Benefit Scheme, it had not been given the form of a formal Act in Bengal. A system of maternity benefit had been in force in most of the IJMA mills, but the period of the scheme varied from 4-8 weeks - with the income ranging from Rs. 2 per week to their normal wage. That was in sharp contrast to the fact that by 1936, a clearly defined Maternity Benefit Act had come into operation in most parts of British India, including Bombay (1929), Central Provinces (1930), Madras (1935) and Delhi (1936). Alongside, the housing

⁸ The wage position prevalent in the jute industry, over the years, is well evident from the following observations made by the Government of Bengal in its memorandum submitted to the Royal Commission on Labour in 1929. The memorandum read: "Perhaps in no industry in the world situated in such a circumscribed area is the wage situation more inchoate. For example, in two mills situated in the same area and separated from each other by little more than a boundary wall, under the same Managing Agents, there is practically not a single entry of wages which is the same". Such a situation in the jute industry prevailed at least till the early 1950s. [Source: *RLCI*, Main Report (Delhi, 1931), p. 215].

⁹ By April 1937, there was no clearly defined Act recommending compensation for workers, through a proper procedure, in case of accidents on any other cause. Though workers were being paid with compensation amounts for accidents, they were given so by mills on individual basis and according to their own provisions. [Source: Arjaan de Haan, 1994, p. 151].

and sanitary facilities provided to the jute workers by the various mills were of very poor standard. In ninety four percent of the cases, the floor space available to a worker in a mill quarter, where he lived with his family of five or six, was less than even hundred square feet. Not only the floor space, but the absence of adequate ventilation, proper water and sewage arrangements made conditions so uninhabitable that the workers compelled to live within them often found themselves vulnerable to a number of diseases like dysentery, diarrhoea, enteric, malaria etc.¹⁰

The miserable conditions, within which a large body of jute mill workers had to survive, thus left quite a task in front of the 'popularly elected' provincial government in Bengal in 1937. The fact that the jute industry did handsomely well during the War period made it quite convenient for the Government of Bengal - in case it planned, like most of the other provincial governments,¹¹ to push through certain laws in support of the mill workers.

II

It is from this perspective that the present paper sets out to trace the Acts passed by the various ministries in Bengal as also the positions adopted by them in the Assembly on various matters relating to the jute labour between 1937-47. By the time the first elected ministry was constituted under the premiership of Fazlul Huq, a massive jute workers' strike

¹⁰ *Labour Investigation Committee*, Rege Committee Report, p. 304.

¹¹ Between 1937-39, the Congress led ministries in various provinces adopted specific policies to ameliorate the condition of the labour. For instance, immediately after assuming office, the Bombay Ministry appointed a Textile Enquiry Committee that recommended, among other improvements, the increase in wages. Similarly, the recommendation made by a Labour Enquiry Committee in United Provinces saw the 'minimum wages' of labour being increased to Rs. 25 per month. [Source: N.N. Mitra (ed.), *Indian Annual Register*, 1937-1939 (Delhi, 1990)].

broke out in Bengal spanning across the major industrial districts. The general jute strike of February-April 1937, which paralysed more than thirty mills involving over 1,00,000 workers, created a sense of panic within the jute industry as it struggled to come to terms with this unforeseen crisis.

And this sense of crisis did not entirely follow from the loss in production for the various mills due to the shortage of labour within the industry. In fact, the jute mills of Bengal suffered no major financial loss even with reduced production between the month of February and April 1937. As the March 11 edition of 'Capital'¹² explained, the reduced output due to strike created a greater demand for near deliveries, which in turn raised the unit price of jute products – thereby compensating for the financial losses suffered due to under production. The problem for the jute mill owners lay elsewhere. The massive public furore generated by the strike made them apprehensive of major interventions on the part of the elected government, while settling Capital-Labour disputes. Such interventions, if made from a pro-labour standpoint, meant that the Capital would have to concede a fair share of their profit to accommodate the pressing labour demands.

The idea of untried 'Responsible Government' intervening into the affairs of the IJMA had already led to much suspicion within the ranks of the mill owners, even before the elections for such were held.¹³ Now with the Government of India bringing in laws such as 'Payment of Wages Act' (1936)¹⁴ and deliberating on other pro-labour bills, the jute mill

¹²Capital was a weekly journal on Commerce, Industry and Finance published from Calcutta.

¹³Memorandum to IJMA members from E.C. Benthall, Calcutta, 29 June 1935. BP (Indian Correspondence June–September, 1935), Box X Confdl, cited in, Saugata Mukherjee, 'The Jute Industry in Eastern India During the Depression and its Influence on the Domestic Economy of the Region', *Occasional Papers*, no. 44, CSS, Calcutta, Appendix-I.

¹⁴According to this Act, the scope for imposing fines against workers for bad work was relatively curtailed. Parallely, the worker was given the right to decline any work if he had adequate grounds to defend his inaction. [Source: *Capital*, 17 June 1937].

owners in Bengal did not have enough arguments to withhold the Bengal Government from introducing similar measures in the province. Under the given situation, the only feasible option left before them was to build up pressure upon the government through various channels - urging it "to ensure that the new legislation [to be introduced], while being fair to the employed, gives [gave] adequate protection to the employees."¹⁵ Yet, nothing of that sort happened during the first few months of the Huq regime.

The First Fazlul Huq Government (March 1937-December 1941)

The general jute workers' strike was called off in May 1937 only after the Premier of Bengal, Fazlul Huq, assured the Central Strike Committee of looking into their 'legitimate' demands. However in practice, the months following the termination of the strike witnessed large-scale dismissal of jute workers whom the mill owners believed to be 'principal Communists'¹⁶ and externment of prominent labour leaders from various industrial pockets-with the government playing the role of a mute spectator.

It was only in the end of September 1937, that the Huq ministry introduced the 'Bengal Maternity Benefit Bill' in the Legislative Assembly. According to the provisions of the Bill (which became an Act as late as November 1939), every women employed in a factory for no less than nine months immediately preceding the date of her confinement was entitled to receive from her employers maternity benefit at the rate of her average daily earnings including amenity or eight annas a day whichever was greater for a period of eight

¹⁵ *Capital*, 24 June 1937.

¹⁶ CSAS, BP, 14 December 1937, cited in, Goswami, 'Multiple Images: Jute Mill Strikes of 1929 and 1937. Seen through Other's Eyes', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. XXI, no. 3, July 1987, p. 581.

weeks, i.e., four weeks preceding and four weeks following the birth.¹⁷ Though the IJMA had some initial reservations regarding the Bill, as it advocated that individual mills with extant schemes on maternity benefit should be exempted from the Act¹⁸, it finally agreed to it. In fact, the jute employers faced no major loss from such legislation as they had the easy option of dispensing with women workers whenever they deemed fit. That is what actually happened after 1939 when the number of women workers employed in the jute industry went down.

Table 2.1 would explain the above made point more clearly.

Table 2.1
Number of People Employed in the Jute Industry of Bengal,
1939-43

Year	Total Number of Workers	Number of Adult Males	Number of Adult Females	% of Female Workers to the Total Jute Workers' Population
1939	281, 195	243, 496	37, 699	13.40
1940	284, 686	248,046	36,640	12.87
1941	286,643	251,388	35,255	12.29
1942	287,882	252,799	35,083	12.18
1943	279,884	245,125	34,759	12.31

[Source: S. R. Deshpande, *Report on an Enquiry into Conditions of Labour in the Jute Mill Industry in India* (Delhi, 1946), p. 6].

¹⁷ *BLA Progs*, Official Bill presented by Commerce and Labour Minister H.S. Suhrawardy, 30 September 1937, pp. 146-147.

¹⁸ *IJMA Report*, May 1939; Commerce Communication, May 1939, no. A7-22, WBSA, cited in, Samita Sen, 1999, p. 174.

As is evident from the table, between 1939-1943, there was a decline in the proportion of female workers to the total jute population. In contrast, during these years there was a corresponding increase in the number of male workers employed in jute mills.

Interestingly, the Bengal Maternity Benefit Bill was the only effort on the part of the first Huq regime which aimed at ameliorating the conditions of jute labour in Bengal through legislation. Now on, whenever issues relating to the Capital-Labour disputes within the jute industry came up for discussion in the Assembly, the ministry sided with the interests of the Capital. Its general policy in this regard was to steer clear of any action on issues that might harm the interests of the IJMA. For instance when, in October 1937, Niharendu Dutt Mazumdar (a prominent labour leader and MLA) requested H.S. Suhrawardy, the Minister for Commerce and Labour, to set up a Court of Enquiry or Board of Conciliation to mediate on labour issues – such as wage increase, payment of bonus, abolition of bribery in the mills, the latter refused to comply stating that the existing situation did not demand so.¹⁹ On being asked to comment upon the increasing frequency of workers being dismissed from various mills for their ‘alleged’ involvement in the general strike, Suhrawardy replied that such was being done due to their ‘continuous bad work’. Similarly in April 1938, when with the introduction of new machines thousands of workers were being thrown out of employment, Suhrawardy could only commit that the “government would request the IJMA to absorb these workers discharged through rationalisation as early as possible.”²⁰ The soft attitude adopted by the government in respect to Capital interests became further evident when a discussion on the Workmen’s Compensation Act came up in the Assembly on 22 August 1938. The labour leaders moved an amendment to the existing

¹⁹ *BLA Progs*, Niharendu Dutta Mazumdar and H.S. Suhrawardy, 21 October 1937, pp. 1675-1676.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, H.S. Suhrawardy, 8 April 1938, pp. 316-317.

Act, by which the aggrieved party had the right to appeal within sixty days to the office of Labour Commissioner - whose decision in this regard would be final.²¹ An amendment of this nature to the existing Act, if passed, meant that the settlements made by the labour officers in various mills (who were under the control of the mill owners) would not be binding upon the labour, who had the further right of pleading their case before a 'relatively neutral' higher authority. But such an anti-employer move was thwarted by the government as it voted against the motion and defeated it.

Instead, in September 1938, the Huq ministry promulgated the Jute Ordinance restricting the working hours in the jute mills to 45 hours per week from the previous limit of 60 hours – thereby serving the IJMA interests by limiting the production within the industry. The reduction in the working hours effectively meant a twenty percent wage cut for the permanent workers and a sharp decrease in the demand for 'budli' (temporarily employed against leave) labour. In fact, if the correspondence that took place between the Bengal Governor and the deputy to the Viceroy is to be believed, it was Suhrawardy himself, who was 'very keen on intervention'²² and determined to go forward even by an ordinance since the Assembly was not in session. Though the Jute Ordinance was withdrawn by the government in February 1939, the episode clearly demonstrated its pro-IJMA character.

With the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939 and the subsequent hike in the cost of living, labour related issues were again hotly debated on the floor of the Assembly. Suresh Chandra Bannerjee moved a non-official resolution urging the

²¹ *BLA Progs*, Amendment moved by A.M.A. Zaman, 22 August 1938, pp. 208-209.

²² Sir Robert Reid to Lord Brabourne, Calcutta, 5 September 1938, Reid-Brabourne Correspondence, MSS.EUR, no. 125/37, cited in, Stewart, 1998, p. 121.

government, in the wake of the recent price rise, to pass an ordinance by which a twenty-percent War bonus would be paid compulsorily to the jute workers. J. R. Walker, the European representative, opposed the resolution on the ground that while the cost of living for the workers had increased by twelve percent, their wages had been raised by approximately seventy percent from September 1939, taking in account the increase in working hours, paid overtime and other allowances. The response of the Labour Minister to the resolution was also on predictable lines. He opposed it as 'impracticable', firstly by arguing that such an ordinance was beyond the jurisdiction of the Assembly and secondly by defending the IJMA – that it was actually "*working at a loss*, because the Government of India had put up an Excess Profit Tax."²³ (Emphasis mine). Such unconvincing arguments made by Suhrawardy, in order to counter any pro-labour move, show how far the government was determined to defend the interests of the IJMA. Similarly when Sibnath Banerjee, the labour representative from Howrah jute mill area, moved a non-official 'Minimum Rates of Wages Bill' by which the Government of Bengal would guarantee a minimum living wage to all workers covered under the Factories Act, it was turned down by Suhrawardy on the ground that such a bill was of all India nature and could not be implemented in a single province.²⁴ Interestingly, he chose to forget the fact that in most of the other provinces like Bombay, Bihar and C.P., a minimum monthly wage of Rs. 25 had already been fixed for the factory workers by the respective provincial governments.

All throughout its four years in office, therefore, the Muslim League-KPP Coalition Government followed a clear policy of safeguarding the IJMA interests. Even when the

²³ *BLA Progs*, Suresh Chandra Banerjee, J.R. Walker, H.S. Suhrawardy, 1 March 1940, pp. 280-303.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, Sibnath Banerjee and H.S. Suhrawardy, 16 August 1940, pp. 145-156.

Government of Bengal passed an Act entitling persons employed in shops, commercial establishments or establishments for public entertainment to a month's paid leave per year against a fixed period of service,²⁵ it ensured that the jute industry was not covered under the Act. On similar demands being raised by Suresh Chandra Banerjee for jute workers, Suhrawardy replied that the IJMA was giving six paid holidays in a year which "is a good beginning when there was nothing before."²⁶ Six paid holidays for the jute workers [considered as sufficient] as against a month's holiday granted to the private shop workers amply exhibited the 'discriminatory' policy vis-à-vis jute labour adopted by the first Huq regime.

Interestingly, although the first Huq ministry was indifferent to the plight of the jute mill workers, it undertook various measures to ameliorate the condition of the jute growers of Bengal. One of the pressing problems that affected the jute growers of Bengal was that of sharp fall in the prices of raw jute due to fluctuating market demand. In order to maintain the prices of raw jute at an economic level, the Huq ministry introduced the Jute Regulation Bill in the Bengal Assembly on 30 November 1939. According to the provisions of this Bill, production of raw jute in Bengal was to be restricted by fixing the area under cultivation (subject to Government of India's consent), which being in parity with the demand in the market would restore for the growers a competitive price for their product.²⁷ The Bill got the form of an Act in July 1941. Parallel to this, the Huq regime passed the Bengal Raw Jute Taxation Act in November 1941 (in spite of much criticism from the IJMA) fixing a

²⁵This provision was included within the Bengal Shops and Establishment Act, passed on 12 September 1940.

²⁶*BLA Progs*, Suresh Chandra Banerjee and H.S. Suhrawardy, 12-9-1940, pp. 121-123.

²⁷*Ibid.*, Official Bill presented by Minister for Agriculture, Tamizuddin Khan, 30 November 1939, pp. 148-149.

compulsory tax of 2 annas on the purchase of every maund of raw jute.²⁸ The revenue raised through such taxation was to be spent by the government in furthering the interests of the growers – by stabilising the jute prices, improving the warehousing scheme, etc.

Such marked absence of major pro-labour legislations taken up by the first Huq ministry, which stayed in office from March 1937-November 1941, remains a paradox. In various other provinces like Bombay, Bihar and U.P., the respective provincial governments implemented, over the same period of time, certain measures that addressed the issues of the industrial labour force. Yet nothing of that order happened in Bengal during the first Huq regime.

However, from the labour policy pursued by the Huq Government between 1937-41, one should not assume that it had deliberately adopted an ‘anti poor’ stance. In fact, the Government of Bengal had introduced during this period various significant reforms that led to a substantial improvement in the condition of the peasantry, including the jute cultivators.²⁹ This way then, there must have been certain specific considerations which prompted the Huq Government to follow a largely ‘discriminatory’ policy towards jute labour, in favour of the IJMA.

The unstinting support, on the part of the Huq Government, for the Capital interests

²⁸ *Capital*, 10 July, 31 July and 27 November 1941.

²⁹ Soon after assuming office, the KPP-Muslim League ministry introduced the Bengal Tenancy Amendment Bill (September 1937)-whose main provisions were the abolition of landlords’ fees for the transfer of land, abolition of the landlords’ right of pre-emption when occupancy holdings were sold, reduction in the rate of interest on arrears of rent from 12.5 percent to 6.25 percent, suspension of rent enhancement for ten years for tenure holders and raiyats, and making abwabs (illegal taxes) punishable by fine. This Bill was passed as early as April 1938. At the same length, the first Huq regime took initiative to establish Debt Settlement Board in all districts of Bengal, giving immediate effect to the Bengal Agricultural Debtors’ Act of 1935. [Source: Shila Sen, *Muslim Politics in Bengal 1937-1947*, Ph.D. Thesis, Jawaharlal Nehru University, 1975, pp.147-148].

was, naturally, not without reasons. In the first place, the very existence of the Fazlul Huq regime in Bengal hinged on the support of the twenty-five members, who represented the European interests in the Bengal Legislative Assembly. In an Assembly of 250 members, the KPP-Muslim League coalition (inclusive of its minor constituents) had the total strength of 118³⁰ - 8 short of the majority. As such the coalition was comfortably off – in the face of various no-confidence motions - only as long the Europeans provided ‘outside’ support to it.³¹ Naturally so, the ministry could not afford to move any pro-labour legislation that might harm the interest of the (European dominated) IJMA and thereby deny them the bloc support of the Europeans within the Assembly.

The second reason was more expedient. Several of the ministers were themselves holders of jute mill shares. For instance, the Finance Minister, Nalini Ranjan Sarkar, was himself a prominent member of the Bengal National Chamber of Commerce ‘who held substantial jute mill shares.’³² The ministry, thus, had some interest in shying away from moves that might cut into the profit of the jute mills and thus reduce their personal income from share dividends. Such an understanding was clearly evident from the speech that Sarkar made during a dinner with the European group held in Calcutta in June 1937. While assuring the assembled businessman that the present government would protect British capital, he candidly admitted - “*In so doing, I believe I am protecting also my own business, and I will do all in my power to prevent anything which would tend to the flight of British capital from Calcutta.*”³³ (Emphasis mine). No wonder that favourable equation of this

³⁰ *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 24 April 1937.

³¹ The importance of the European support to the Huq ministry increased significantly when, in September 1937, 17 members of the KPP broke away from the coalition — forming the Independent Praja Party. This meant that the effective strength of the coalition was reduced to 101 [Source: Shila Sen, Thesis, p.129].

³² Goswami, 1991, p.145.

³³ CSAC, BP, Box XII, J.A.McKerrow to E.C. Benthall, Calcutta, 31 July 1937, cited in, Stewart, 1998, p.119.

nature made Benthall remark: "What a wonderful position we have with the Government.... In fact, if we were to work things right, I believe they would adopt that we liked to press on them."³⁴

The indifference shown by the Huq Government to the cause of jute labour was also conditioned by certain considerations that were independent of the IJMA. The increasing penetration of the Communistic ideas within the rank and file of jute workers in Bengal (as evident during the 1937 jute workers' strike) had been a major thorn in the flesh for the Huq ministry. It made the government refrain from introducing any measure for labour welfare (even when the demand for such was considered as legitimate) that might ultimately strengthen the hold of the Communists over the workers. The position of the government in this regard was explained by Suhrawardy, in a confidential note, during the jute strike of 1937. He stated, "In my opinion some of the grievances appear to be genuine and call for a remedy.... But the problem remains that even if certain concessions are granted they would be seen by labourers as settled by the Central Jute Committee (read: Communists). That this Government cannot allow to happen."³⁵ Instead, to wean away the jute labour from the Communist influence, Suhrawardy took serious initiative in building up parallel 'White Flag' unions – which promoted trade unionism on the lines acceptable to both the government and the jute mill owners.

The inaction on the part of the government also followed from the fact that the large body of jute workers in the industrial pockets of Bengal did not constitute the 'vote bank' for either the KPP or the Muslim League. As evident from the 1937 elections, in all four

³⁴ CAAS, BP, Box XII, Benthall-McKerrow, 11 October 1937, cited in, Goswami, 1987, p.581.

³⁵ Confidential Note by Suhrawardy, August 1937. Commerce and Labour Department, Commerce Branch, no. B352, WBSA.

labour constituencies reserved for the jute workers - the candidates who won were Congress members.³⁶ In the short run, therefore, neither KPP nor Muslim League stood to gain any political benefit by extending all out support to the cause of jute labour - that too by offending the powerful European bloc in the Assembly. Interestingly, it was the same political compulsion that prompted the Huq ministry to adopt a much softer stand towards the jute growers of Bengal. As most of the members of the KPP - Muslim League coalition came from rural constituencies of eastern Bengal, the ministry could not afford to ignore the interests of the jute cultivators. The KPP, in particular, had a predominantly rich peasant support base, which it could not afford to alienate. In fact, as things turned out to be, certain Acts were passed supporting the jute growers - even at the cost of the IJMA interests.

The Second Fazlul Huq Government, (December 1941-March 1943)

In contrast to the previous regime, the second Huq ministry, with Progressive Coalition Party, KPP, Hindu Mahasabha and Forward Bloc as its major constituents, adopted a supposedly labour friendly stance. In its first budget, the Huq ministry introduced a Labour Welfare Scheme which had provisions for setting up labour welfare schools, maternity and child welfare centres and crèches across the different industrial areas of Bengal. Accordingly, a substantial amount of twenty thousand rupees was allotted for the purpose.³⁷ With the increase in the cost of living, the Huq ministry announced in February

³⁶ The four successful candidates were A. M. A Zaman (Hooghly jute mill area), Niharendu Dutt Mazumdar (Barrackpore jute mill area), Sibnath Bannerjee (Howrah jute mill area) and Suresh Chandra Banerjee (Budge Budge jute mill area). All of them were important members of the Congress led opposition within the Assembly. (Source: *Amita Bazar Patrika*, 28 January 1937.)

³⁷ *Capital*, 28 May 1942.

1942 a scheme of dearness allowance for all government employees. At the same time, the government through its Labour Department entered into dialogue with the IJMA and co-ordinated the rise in dearness allowance to compensate for the increasing prices of commodities.³⁸ In April 1942, the IJMA granted a flat increase in amenity allowance for all jute workers to one rupee per week.

By September 1942, the Government introduced the Workmen's Compensation (Bengal Amendment) Bill, which had been delayed for long by the previous ministry. According to the provisions of the Bill, in case of disputes between the employers and the employed over the compensation, the Labour Commissioner could refer the case to medical referees duly appointed for the purpose. The report by the medical referee would ordinarily be binding upon both the parties, but in special cases (as deemed fit by the Commissioner) the aggrieved party could be allowed to adduce further evidence for his/her case.³⁹ The new Act was a definite improvement upon its previous form, for it made it compulsory that the cases in this regard should be settled by the Labour Commissioner's office and not by labour officers in various mills. Parallel to this, the workers had certain safeguards such as neutrality while investigation – as the aggrieved party now had the right to object to the referee.

The second Huq regime could adopt a general pro-labour line, as it was relatively free of any such limiting influence that conditioned the labour policy of the previous ministry. In the first place, the new ministry enjoyed a comfortable majority within the

³⁸ *BLA Progs*, Khan Bahadur M. Abdul Karim, 1 April 1942, p.177.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, Official Bill presented by acting Labour Minister, Santosh Kumar Basu, 28 September 1942, p. 98.

Assembly⁴⁰, thus being independent of any support from the European group. Consequently it could afford to introduce pro-labour laws even at the expense of the IJMA interests.

Like that of the previous ministry, the labour policy adopted by the second Huq government was also considerably influenced by the pressures exerted by its constituents - though in a completely different direction. The presence of the Forward Bloc⁴¹ and the CPI (though not officially) in the new coalition, with names such as Niharendu Dutt Mazumdar, Suresh Chandra Banerjee, Sibnath Bannerjee and A.M.A. Zaman in its ranks, made it imperative for the government to take up the issues related to jute labour with enough seriousness. The pressure being exerted by the Forward Bloc on the government could well be gauged from the following statement made by A.M.A. Zaman during the budget session of 1942. While criticising the previous ministry for its pro-employer attitude, he hoped that the new government would be sincere in taking up the cause of (jute) labour. 'For otherwise the ministry would be in grave trouble, of which they ~~were~~^{are} themselves well aware of.'⁴²

However, one should not automatically assume that the new ministry was only too eager to implement labour reforms on lines as proposed by the radical constituents within it. The fact that a large section of the members in the government side came from rural Bengal, also made it necessary for the second Huq regime to continue with a broad pro-peasant

⁴⁰ Out of the total strength of 250 members in the Assembly, the second Huq ministry had the support of 144 MLAs. [Source: Shila Sen, Thesis, p. 196].

⁴¹ The Bengal Congress split in 1940 following the expulsion of Subhash Chandra Bose from the party. In Bengal two new groups came up, one led by Sarat Chandra Bose and the other by Kiran Sankar Roy. The first group (also known as the Forward Bloc) which had the support of 28 MLAs joined the second Huq ministry, while the other group known as official Congress extended support to it from outside. The prominent labour leaders who represented the jute workers in the Bengal Assembly were members of the Forward Bloc. [Source: N.N. Mitra, vols. 1941-42, 1990].

⁴² *BLA Progs*, A.M.A. Zaman's speech (in Bengali), 25 March 1942, pp. 79-81.

policy. Accordingly, a substantial amount of Rs. 35 lakhs was allotted for stabilising the price of raw jute - thus bringing in much relief for the jute growers of Bengal.⁴³

The Nazimuddin Government (April 1943-March 1945)

The second Huq ministry was dismissed by Governor J.A. Herbert in March 1943 and was replaced by a pre-dominantly Muslim League ministry led by Khwaja Sir Nazimuddin. The new ministry adopted a rigid pro-employer line, even more than the first Huq regime. Not a single bill concerning labour interests was introduced in the Assembly by the government, during its tenure of almost two years.

On 5 July 1943, a motion was moved by Dr. Nalinaksha Sanyal urging the government to intervene against the fixing of maximum price of raw jute to be purchased by the IJMA. According to Sanyal, the price of different varieties of raw jute fixed between Rs. 14 to Rs. 19 per maund, to benefit the jute mills⁴⁴, was in utter disregard of the interests of jute growers. The Minister in charge of Labour, Commerce and Industries – Khwaja Shahabuddin opposed the motion as he argued, that such had taken place through an agreement between the jute mills and the government thereby had ‘no concern for it.’⁴⁵ The indifference shown by the Nazimuddin ministry to a matter of grave importance for a large number of jute growers in Bengal – particularly when the province was reeling under the severity of the Bengal famine - was quite surprising, as it reflected a sharp departure from the pro-jute grower stance adopted by the previous ministries.

⁴³ *BLA Progs*, Surendra Nath Biswas, 25 March 1943, p. 28.

⁴⁴ The prices of the different varieties of raw jute were fixed by the IJMA to supply a big order for hessian fibres to the United States Government at the price of Rs. 26 per hundred yards. [Source: *BLA Progs*, Surendranath Biswas and Khwaja Shahabuddin, 21 September 1943, pp. 60-66].

⁴⁵ *BLA Progs*, Khwaja Shahabuddin, 5 July 1943, p. 25.

Things fared no better for the toiling jute labour under the Nazimuddin regime. The year 1943 witnessed a series of jute strikes on issues such as increase in dearness allowances and increased quota of cheap foodstuff available over mill ration shops. The government hardly put any pressure upon the IJMA to concede over such demands and even refrained from issuing a general circular highlighting the broad outlines of necessary relief measures.⁴⁶ The frequent sealing of looms in the jute mills due to shortages in supply of coal, between September 1943 and January 1944, forced more than 10,000 jute mill workers out of employment. Such massive dislocation of labour within the jute industry, while conditions of living were extremely testing, led to a huge uproar within the Assembly – where labour leaders urged the government to come out with an ordinance by which it could intervene if the employers dismissed the workers without adequate cause. But the government once more preferred to steer clear of the issue by arguing that such an ordinance was beyond its jurisdiction.⁴⁷

In the rural sector, the Nazimuddin ministry adopted an ambivalent stand regarding the jute growers. It passed an important regulation by which the minimum price for raw jute during the War period was fixed at Rs. 15 per maund. Such price fixation for raw jute meant a considerable profit of Rs. 3-4 per maund for the jute cultivators of Bengal.⁴⁸ However at the same time, the government (at the insistence of the IJMA) carried out a systematic propaganda to discourage the peasants from growing paddy in their land at the expense of

⁴⁶ *BLA Progs*, Syed Abdul Majid's reply to questions asked by A.M.A. Zaman and Maulavi Abu Hussain Sarker, 18 September 1943, pp. 206-208.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, Khwaja Shahabuddin, 4 February 1944, pp. 189-193.

⁴⁸ *Capital*, 24 February and 2 March 1944.

jute, whereas, due to the acute shortage of food grains in the market under the Bengal famine, it was more profitable for the peasants to cultivate paddy.⁴⁹

After the resignation of the Nazimuddin ministry in March 1945, the province of Bengal came under the direct administration of the British Government⁵⁰ till a new ministry was formed after the general elections of March 1946. Accordingly, a Muslim League ministry assumed power in April 1946 with H. S. Suhrawardy as its Premier.

The Suhrawardy Government (April 1946-August 1947)

Similar to the previous ministry of Khwaja Sir Nazimuddin, the new ministry adopted a clear pro-employer stance during its tenure of sixteen months. Its general policy in regard to the Capital-Labour disputes was to steer clear of any action that might harm the interests of the IJMA. It became evident in August 1946, when Sibnath Bannerjee – a prominent labour leader and MLA – argued in the Assembly that there had been a steady deterioration in the condition of the jute workers (due to the steep rise in the cost of living since the pre-War years) and requested Shamsuddin Ahmed, the minister for Commerce, Labour and Industries, to intervene and pressurise the IJMA for effecting a minimum increase of Rs. 20 in their basic wages and other allowances.⁵¹ In his reply, the Labour Minister made it clear that his government cannot do much in the present situation – as the IJMA had already increased the basic wage of the jute workers by 15 percent in April

⁴⁹ According to a survey made by a *Capital* correspondent, while the profit per acre on jute for a peasant family was Rs. 77-9-6 ps, it was around Rs. 133-6 as on paddy. [Source: *Capital*, 2 March 1944].

⁵⁰ From March 1945 to April 1946, Bengal was under the direct rule of the Governor – according to the Section 93 of the Government of India Act 1935.

⁵¹ *BLA Progs*, Sibnath Bannerjee, 14 August 1946, p. 192.

1946.⁵² The growing disparity between the profit making Capital and the jute labour force came up for discussion again in February 1947. On 13 February, Suresh Chandra Banerjee urged the Government to pass an ordinance by which the workers would be adequately compensated with respect to the rising prices of commodities and the increased profit making by the jute mills of Bengal.⁵³ Ahmed responded on predictable lines by arguing that such an ordinance was beyond the jurisdiction of the Assembly. In fact, he went on to defend the position of the IJMA by stating that - ever since the War began - that the latter had effected 'a total increase of eighty-six percent' in the earnings of the jute worker taking into account all allowances in cash and kind. At the same time, he accepted that the rise in the cost of living from the pre-War years had been more than 300 percent.⁵⁴

Parallel to it, the Suhrawardy ministry did not adopt any concrete step to ameliorate the condition of the jute growers of Bengal. The issues involving the jute growers came up for discussion in July 1946, when Nisith Nath Kundu requested the Minister for Agriculture, Ahmed Hossain, to fix a minimum price for raw jute under a new Jute Regulation. He charged the Government of being indifferent to the plights of the jute growers, as under the present Regulation only the maximum price of raw jute was fixed 'for the benefit of the rich mill owners.'⁵⁵ Hossain, in his response, expressed the incapacity of his government to intervene in this respect as the time frame of the present Jute Price Control Regulation (promulgated by the Government of India as a War time measure) was statutorily fixed till September 1946. Even after September, no Regulation ensuring free and equitable price for jute to the cultivators was passed by the Suhrawardy ministry. Instead, the price of raw jute

⁵² *BLA Progs*, Shamsuddin Ahmed, 14 August 1946, p. 192.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, Suresh Chandra Banerjee, 13 February 1947, pp. 189-190.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, Shamsuddin Ahmed, 13 February 1947, p. 190.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, Nisith Nath Kundu, 30 July 1946, p. 116.

was decontrolled and it remained unstable owing to the varying demands placed by the jute balers and the mill owners. The matter was raised in the Assembly by Suresh Chandra Bannerjee in February, who accused the IJMA of dictating the prices of raw jute for its profit 'at the expense of the poor jute growers.'⁵⁶ Shamsuddin Ahmed admitted that unstable prices of raw jute were acting against the jute growers' interests, yet at the same time, he opined that decontrol of prices was of advantage to both the growers and manufacturers of jute. The pro-IJMA stance of the Suhrawardy ministry became more pronounced, as he went on to add - that the jute mills were not actually doing well for 'the greater part of their profit had been absorbed in payment of Excess Profits Tax and other taxations.'⁵⁷

The nature of government intervention vis-à-vis jute labour, under the Nazimuddin and the Suhrawardy ministries, remained similar to that of the first Huq regime. In fact the factors that conditioned their labour policies were more or less the same, if one compares them to those during Muslim League's first stay in office. From the very inception, the Nazimuddin ministry was dependent upon the support of the European group, for it did not have the required majority in the Assembly otherwise.⁵⁸ Accordingly, it could not afford to introduce any measure for the welfare of jute workers in Bengal, which might deny the

⁵⁶ *BLA Progs*, Suresh Chandra Bannerjee, 17 February 1947, pp. 268-269.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, Shamsuddin Ahmed, 17 February 1947, p. 269.

⁵⁸ Out of the 250 members in the Assembly, the Nazimuddin ministry had the support of 115 members-excluding the European bloc. [Source: Jahanara Begum, *The Last Decade of Undivided Bengal* (Calcutta, 1994), p.140].

government of the crucial European support. Apart from that, the Muslim League - on its own - had little to gain in concrete political terms by nursing the jute workers of Bengal who, in case, were the sympathisers of the Congress Party.

However, the policy adopted by the Nazimuddin regime vis-a-vis the jute growers of Bengal was at a marked difference from that of the first Huq ministry. The first Huq Government, as has been discussed in this chapter, refrained from compromising on issues related to the interests of jute cultivators of Bengal, even when they lay in conflict with that of the Capital. For the Nazimuddin ministry, the top most priority was to appease the IJMA irrespective of the interests of the cultivators. Two instances in this regard would be sufficient. Within months after coming to power, the Nazimuddin ministry granted the IJMA with the permission to procure raw jute at a low price (uneconomic from the point of the growers) - in order to facilitate the latter's commerce dealings with the United States Government.⁵⁹ Similarly, in March 1944, the government carried out a systematic propaganda pursuing the peasants to grow jute in place of paddy (with the purpose of providing the IJMA with raw stock), even when cultivating paddy was far more profitable.

A shift of this nature in the policy of the Nazimuddin ministry (apart from the fact that it was exclusive of the 'radical' KPP elements) has to be contextualised within the broad changes that took place in the political approach of the Bengal League, evident over the period 1942-45. Under the leadership of H.S. Suhrawardy and Abul Hashem (the secretary of the Bengal Muslim League) - the League adopted a political programme asking for popular support on the single point of 'religion' and not on concrete socio-economic

⁵⁹ Though the government initially denied that it had any role to play in such fixation of price for raw jute, the IJMA made it quite clear that the action taken was 'within the full cognizance of the Government of Bengal.' [Source: *Capital*, 22 July 1943].

issues.⁶⁰ Such use of religious symbolism to win Muslim support meant that government actions based on pure economic issues were no longer a primary component in the Nazimuddin ministry's agenda.

An understanding of similar sort conditioned the response of the Suhrawardy ministry to various matters involving the interests of the jute labour and jute growers, during its short term in office. As has already been discussed, Suhrawardy regime did not initiate any significant move that could improve the condition of these groups. The lack of initiative on its part largely followed from its emerging political priorities. In April 1946, Muslim League in Bengal was elected to power on the single point agenda of a 'Separate Pakistan'. The 'legitimation' of the League brand of 'communal politics' by the popular electorate, made the Suhrawardy Government focus on issues that would lend strength to its separatist campaign. Accordingly, its agenda of governance did not contain much for reforms on pressing socio-economic issues.

At the same time, the Suhrawardy ministry – much like the previous Nazimuddin ministry - adopted a rigid pro-IJMA stance while mediating within the Capital-Labour disputes. However, the position of the government in this respect was not conditioned by any 'political compulsion'. Unlike the previous Muslim League regimes, the Suhrawardy ministry enjoyed an absolute majority in the Bengal Legislative Assembly. In an Assembly of 250 members, the Muslim League ministry (inclusive of its minor constituents) had the total strength of 130⁶¹ and hence, could remain in power even without the support of the

⁶⁰ The nature of political campaign undertaken by the League during this period is discussed in Shila Sen, Thesis, Chapter: "Nazimuddin Ministry and the Pakistan Movement."

⁶¹ Jahanara Begum, 1994, p.197.

European Capitalist bloc. The reason behind the unstinting support of the Suhrawardy regime for the Capital interests thus has to be located elsewhere. It mainly followed from the rapport that had existed for long between the top IJMA officials and the Muslim League leaders – prominent among them being Suhrawardy himself. The Suhrawardy ministry did not consider it politically expedient to offend its ‘natural ally’ in favour of the jute workers of Bengal, more so when the latter did not constitute the vote bank of the Muslim League. As in 1937, all four candidates who had won from the jute labour constituencies in 1946 were Congress members.⁶² Therefore, in the short run, it had no political benefit to gain by extending all out support to the cause of jute labour.

Seen overall, nothing significant was achieved for the cause of jute labour, either through legislation or otherwise, during Bengal’s first experiment with ‘elected’ ministries. The KPP-Muslim League Government, with Fazlul Huq as the Premier and H.S. Suhrawardy as the Labour Minister, adopted a clear pro-IJMA stance owing to its political compulsions. In contrast, the first Huq ministry was quite attentive to the plights of the jute growers in Bengal, supporting them with some important legislation. The second Huq regime did much better, as within one and a half years time it passed the Workmen’s Compensation (Bengal Amendment) Act, introduced the Labour Welfare Scheme and forced the IJMA to concede on certain labour demands. The pro-labour measures, introduced by the second Huq ministry, were much due to the consistent pressure exerted upon the government by the jute labour representatives. The cause of the jute workers suffered under

⁶² The four successful candidates were A.M.A. Zaman (Hooghly jute mill area), Niharendu Dutt Mazumdar (Barrackpore jute mill area), Sibnath Bannerjee (Howrah jute mill area) and Suresh Chandra Bannerjee (Budge Budge jute mill area). [Source: Basu, 1992, p. 40].

the Nazimuddin and the Suhrawardy ministries, when neither was any pro-labour bill introduced in the Assembly, nor was the government prepared to take any step that might harm the Capital interests vis-à-vis that of labour. In contrast to the first Huq regime, these ministries even refrained from defending the interests of the jute growers – their policies following largely from the shift in the general political approach of the Muslim League.

III

The Communist Challenge and the Government Response

The positions adopted by the Government of Bengal, under different ministries, vis-à-vis the jute labour - while mediating within the Capital-Labour disputes - bring to the fore another important aspect of government intervention into the affairs of the jute industry and its labour force between 1937-47. One of the pivotal points around which the general labour policy of the Bengal Government was framed during this period, was that of the increasing penetration of Communistic influence within the rank and file of factory labour in Bengal. Such influence as understood by the government (both at the centre and the province) had the potential of inciting the workers into a militant agitation - which in turn might have posed a law and order problem before the colonial state. Accordingly, the government was quite apprehensive of any brewing discontent among the jute workers of Bengal and thus remained extra-cautious to nip it (whenever necessary) at the very bud, either through dialogue or by application of force.

The increasing acceptance of Communistic ideas within the jute workers of Bengal had been a matter of great concern for the British Indian Government ever since the mid

1920s. The open preaching of Marxist tenets among the jute labour advocating the forceful overthrow of the British capital interests in India and the establishment of a 'Workers' State' on the Russian model made the colonial state adopt, from time to time, a stringent stand against the Communist activists. In this respect, the British Indian Government found an important ally in the first elected ministry of Bengal, which from the very inception made its distaste for Communism quite apparent. The fundamental contradiction that the Huq ministry had with the idea of Communism was best voiced by the Labour Minister, H.S. Suhrawardy - "Communism is public enemy number one of the social and economic structure. So long as I happen to administer the portfolio of labour... so long shall I use my fullest endeavour to break the evil of Communism."⁶³ The massive jute workers' strike of 1937, sustained mainly by the Communist activists across the jute mills of Bengal, came up as a contentious issue for the newly formed Huq government. The government stand on the strike was largely conditioned by its understanding of the unrest (which was also shared by the British bureaucrats and the IJMA officials) as 'politically motivated and not originating from genuine economic grievances.'⁶⁴ The restricted understanding of the jute labour discontentment by the Bengal Government made it adopt strict repressive measures to combat what was seen as the 'Communist design of staging a revolution by inciting the workers to a militant strike.'⁶⁵

However, it should not be assumed from the above discussion that the Huq Government was any more sympathetic towards labour activists affiliated to political

⁶³ *BLA Progs*, H.S. Suhrawardy, 6 September 1937, p.1103.

⁶⁴ *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 4 May 1937, Fazlul Huq's statement. The same understanding regarding the strike can be seen in the speech of the President IJMA, who simply put it as - 'undoubtedly political and not of economic origin'. [Source: *Amita Bazar Patrika*, 12 May 1937] .

⁶⁵ Confidential note by Suhrawardy, August 1937, Commerce and Labour Department, Commerce Branch, no. B-352, WBSA.

organisations other than the CPI, who could consolidate the jute workers into serious agitation on concrete economic demands. Thus, labour leaders who were members of the Congress or the Congress Socialist Party had to withstand strict repressive measures adopted by the government from time to time.

It became evident during the general jute strike of 1937, when prominent labour leaders, like Suresh Chandra Banerjee (affiliated to the Congress influenced Bengal Labour Association) and Sibnath Bannerjee (Bengal Labour Party) were externed from the strike affected areas along with Communist leaders like Nani Gopal Mukherjee and Sisir Roy.⁶⁶ Even public meetings and protest demonstrations were banned under section 144 of the IPC. Parallel to it, the government promulgated the 'Public Safety Ordinance', under which the strikers were arrested in large numbers on the charge of hampering public safety through violent picketing.

Once the strike was called off following the Huq settlement of 10 May 1937,⁶⁷ the Government of Bengal and the IJMA realised the necessity of working out alternative arrangements in order to curb the growing Communist influence within the jute labour of Bengal. On one hand, the employers were given an implicit *carte blanche* to deal with strikers in any way they saw fit - and consequently, within three months, no less than 1,300 workers were victimised and unfairly dismissed.⁶⁸ Alongside, being funded by the IJMA,⁶⁹

⁶⁶ *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, 7 December and 11 December 1938.

⁶⁷ According to the Huq settlement, the Government assured the Central Strike Committee that all the legitimate grievances of the jute workers would be investigated and redressed. [Source: *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 11 May 1937].

⁶⁸ *BLA Progs*, Sibnath Banerjee, 20 October 1937, pp. 325-326.

⁶⁹ CSAC, BP, Box XII, Synopsis of conversation between the Hon'ble Mr. Suhrawardy and Mr. Chapman, 5 June 1937, cited in, Stewart, 1998, p.121.

the League under the guidance of H.S. Suhrawardy began to form alternative trade unions for jute labour with the ulterior motive of dividing the workers on religious lines. These 'White Flags' unions, often acknowledged as 'official' unions by the mill authorities, became quite strong in the mill areas of Budge Budge, Kamarhati, Titagarh, Kankinarah and Chengail-Bauria. They were successful to a large extent in frustrating the attempts of bringing together the jute labour during the agitations organised by the BCMU against the Jute Ordinance in October-November 1938.⁷⁰

With the outbreak of the Second World War and the subsequent increase in the cost of living, labour agitation in Bengal once again picked up under the leadership of the Communist activists. In the changed context, the Huq ministry had to adopt the Defence of India Ordinance (promulgated by the Government of India) by which strikes or lockouts in connection with any trade disputes were declared as illegal and strikers punishable under law. According to it, all strikes and lockouts were compulsorily referred for conciliation, enquiry and adjudication to the office of the Labour Commissioner. An ordinance of this nature was effectively utilised by the government to curb labour unrest particularly in the jute mill areas where, as Suhrawardy found out, 'more subversiveness unfortunately abounds than in other areas'.⁷¹ Accordingly, a large number of strikers were arrested and orders were served to prevent prominent labour leaders like A. M. A. Zaman and Badal Das

⁷⁰ Fortnightly reports for October-November 1938, Home Poll.(I), no. 18/10/38-18/11/38, NAI.

⁷¹ *BLA Progs*, H.S. Suhrawardy, 20 December 1939.

from entering Hooghly and Howrah district respectively⁷² - with the motive of dissipating the consolidating labour unrest in those areas.

The second Huq regime, however, adopted a softer line on jute labour, though such did not necessarily mean that it was quite comfortable with the presence of the Communist activists within the jute workers of Bengal. In fact, if the accounts of contemporary Communist activists are to be believed, the Bengal Government used its influence significantly to curb the penetrating influence of the Communist activists within the jute workers of Bengal.⁷³ In this respect, the government had the tacit support of both the official Congress and the Forward Bloc who were opposed to the Communist Party. While on one hand, the Communist opposition to the Quit India Movement had made it the sworn political enemy of the Congress; its relentless attack on Subhash Chandra Bose - branding him as a 'quisling' - had made the Communist activists no popular with the Forward Bloc supporters.

The approach of the second Huq regime towards the jute labour was largely conditioned by the changed political context within which it had to remain in office. With the entry of Japan into the War and the nation-wide disturbance generated by the Quit India Movement, the British Indian Government adopted a far more stringent stand in respect to the elected provincial governments. Accordingly, the Governor of Bengal, J. A. Herbert,

⁷² Ibid., Sibnath Banerjee, 20 February 1940, p.124.

⁷³ The memoir written by a Communist activist, Manikuntala Devi reflects a lot in this regard. *Sediner Katha* (in Bengali) (Calcutta, 1982).

instructed the British bureaucrats in Bengal to bypass the elected ministry⁷⁴ in running the administration as and when necessary.

Naturally in such a political climate, where the ministry had been 'robbed' of much of its political power, it became increasingly difficult for it to work the way it preferred. The insufficient control of the Huq ministry upon the important elements of state machinery, such as 'police', became evident when one of the members on the government side - Suresh Chandra Bannerjee - was placed under house arrest on the charge of fomenting trouble in the jute mill area of Budge-Budge,⁷⁵ even without the knowledge of the Home Minister. The government therefore could not adopt a committed pro-labour stand, even if it decided so, in the face of the opposition from the permanent British officials, for such could (as eventually happened) lead to its dismissal. Parallel to this, the scope for 'independent' government intervention into the jute labour disputes was further restricted by the promulgation of the Essential Services Maintenance Ordinance (Government of India, 1941), which made disruption of work in any of the industries related to the War efforts, a punishable offence under the law.

The Muslim League ministry led by Khwaja Sir Nazimuddin assumed power in such a context when, under the severe effects of the Bengal famine, the nature of labour movement in the province had significantly changed. The high number of disputes that affected the jute industry during 1943-44 were mainly based on demands for increase in amenity allowances, regular supply of cheap food-stuff over ration, - demands which were generally agreed upon by the jute mill managements. As the price of food-grain in the open market was beyond the reach of the jute workers, they - in order to survive with their family-

⁷⁴ Jahanara Begum, 1994, p.145.

⁷⁵ *BLA Progs*, Sibnath Bannerjee and Fazlul Huq, 20 February 1942, p. 123.

had to depend on the weekly ration of rice supplied by the mills. This, in turn, made it imperative for them to refrain from any act of protest. An industry, relatively free of major labour disputes (due to the compelling effects of the famine) thus left the Nazimuddin ministry clear of any serious intervention into its affairs, which might have been otherwise necessary.

However, such a policy of inaction adopted by the Nazimuddin regime, did not mean that it was indifferent to the 'volatile' nature of the jute labour - particularly when under the influence of the Communists. Owing to the Japanese threat and acute domestic problems, the Government of Bengal (under significant pressure from the British bureaucrats) had to be extra cautious in averting any labour crisis that might translate into a law and order problem. Consequently, the jute mills were instructed by the Labour Minister Khwaja Shahabuddin, through a special circular, to form labour bureaus which may serve the purpose of weaning away labour from the 'potential trouble makers' (read: Communists).⁷⁶

The Suhrawardy ministry, which assumed power in April 1946, had to deal with a series of jute labour strikes that took place during its tenure. These strikes, which were planned by the Communist faction of the BCMU, did not inspire much sympathetic consideration from the Suhrawardy Government. It was quite predictable, keeping in mind Suhrawardy's declared opposition to the idea of 'Communism' as a whole and his cherished desire of curbing any act of Communist-led labour protest.

The stern approach adopted by the Government of Bengal became evident when a number of jute strikes broke out in the mills of Hooghly and 24-Parganas during November

⁷⁶Governor of Bengal's Report to the Viceroy, for the second half of September 1943, Home Poll. Confdl., no. 502/43, WBSA.

1946, mostly over issues of working hours and statutory holidays. These stoppages, which were seen by the IJMA as the handiwork of the Communist activists, evoked a strong response from the Labour Minister. After promising the IJMA officials that he would tour the affected industrial areas and advise workers to seek redress of their grievances through proper channels, the Minister issued a communiqué stating in clear terms that such stoppages would not be tolerated and if these did not cease after his tour, he would not hesitate 'to extern the agitators responsible for such action.'⁷⁷

Accordingly, the Suhrawardy Government issued preventive orders – under Section 144 of the IPC – banning protest demonstrations and public meetings and externing prominent labour leaders, when calls for general strikes were given by the CPI during February-March 1947. Such general strikes were also viewed by the ministry as 'disastrous to the interests of peace and order', considering the contemporary political and communal situation of Bengal.⁷⁸ The Suhrawardy regime's concern for general peace, amidst widespread acts of communal violence, became evident when the CPI faction of the BPTUC gave a call for a general strike on 28 March. The government felt that such a strike would, almost certainly, lead to violence and hence, the strike was a threat that the government could not ignore.

Subsequently, to cite a Home Department report, Suhrawardy in a meeting with his cabinet colleagues on 28 March made it clear that the government should 'proceed to take

⁷⁷ *IJMA Annual Report*, for the year ending 1946 (Calcutta, 1947), pp. 18-20.

⁷⁸ Report on the Meeting of the Council of Ministers dated 28 March 1947, by Cabinet Secretary, GOB, 2 April 1947. Home Poll. Confdl., no. 172/47, WBSA.

legal action, including arrests, against persons calling for such a strike.⁷⁹ The preventive measures adopted by the Bengal Government had its limiting impact upon the jute labour movement during this period. In a private meeting of the Jute faction of the CPI held on 13 March 1947, prominent leaders like Abdul Momin, Indrajit Gupta and Nityananda Chaudhury acknowledged the fact that their campaign among labour 'was not meeting with much success due to the orders under Section 144 P. C.'⁸⁰ The CPI leaders, along with Sibnath Bannerjee of Congress Labour Party, even met the Governor of Bengal to rescind these orders, but to no avail.⁸¹

A brief foray into the various forms of intervention made by the Government of Bengal in respect to the labour disputes within the jute industry between 1937-47, brings to the fore its general understanding of labour discontentment 'as being engineered by the Communist elements for their own interest sake.' Accordingly, all the 'elected' ministries of Bengal adopted a strict approach while dealing with the Communist penetration within the jute workers of the province. The lead in this respect was taken by the first Huq ministry which, under H.S. Suhrawardy - the Minister for Labour, sought to minimise the labour unrest within the industry. While on the one hand, it allowed the employers to dismiss whoever they saw to be principal Communists, on the other, it weakened the strength of the trade union movement through parallel unions formed strictly on religious lines. The second Huq Government pursued a comparatively moderate line while dealing with the Capital-Labour disputes. However, their efforts in this respect were effectively checked by the War-

⁷⁹ Report on the Meeting of the Council of Ministers dated 28 March 1947, by Cabinet Secretary, GOB, 2 April 1947. Home Poll. Confdl., no. 172/47, WBSA.

⁸⁰ Supply of Information to the Government of India about Communist Activities in India, Home Poll. Confdl., no. 142/47, WBSA.

⁸¹ Ibid.

time regulations promulgated by the Government of India. Both the Nazimuddin and Suhrawardy ministries reverted to the strict anti-labour policy adopted by the first Huq regime. It had its desired effect, as the Communist-led jute labour movement during 1946-47 could not gain much strength due to the various preventive orders.

Conclusions

The present chapter, thus, covers the important developments that affected the jute industry in Bengal and its labour force under the different elected provincial ministries between 1937-47. The chapter begins with the constitution of a 'popularly elected' government (under the Government of India Act - 1935) in Bengal, which brought along the fresh possibility of pro-labour Acts being passed, particularly in respect to the large body of jute workers, as the industry - owing to the War demands - was doing handsomely well during this period. Yet, nothing in concrete terms was achieved for the cause of jute labour under the four different ministries that remained in office between 1937-47. Only two Acts were passed, while the important issue of wage - that had been significantly addressed by the provincial governments elsewhere - was not touched upon. In fact, as evident from the numerous deliberations on (jute) labour in the Assembly, the elected ministries in Bengal - except for the second Huq regime - were seen pursuing a definite pro-employer (IJMA) policy.

A major thrust of this paper has been to understand the interplay of various factors that prompted the different ministries to adopt a largely discriminatory policy towards the cause of the jute labour. Significantly, the approach of these ministries vis-à-vis the jute

workers were conditioned primarily by their respective political interests. For both the KPP-Muslim League coalition and the Nazimuddin ministry, the European support was essential due to their minority status within the Assembly. Accordingly, they had to accommodate the IJMA interests and advocate a largely pro-employer policy. At the same time, the first Huq regime – owing to the presence of the KPP members within its fold – had to address the issues involving the jute growers of Bengal. Similarly, the second Fazlul Huq regime had to be sympathetic to the plight of the jute workers and attend them through concessions, because of the pressure from the labour representatives who were supporting the government inside the legislature. The issue was somewhat different for the Suhrawardy ministry which enjoyed an absolute majority in the Assembly. Its unstinting support for the Capital interests during the occasions of labour protest, largely followed from the rapport that had existed for long between the IJMA and the League leaders - Suhrawardy in particular. At the same time, as none of the jute members were on the Government side, it had no substantial political gain to make by extending all out support to the jute workers of Bengal.

The interventions on the part of these ministries while dealing with the cases of jute labour dispute, bring to the fore another important aspect of the labour policy followed by the Bengal Government during this period. Its attitude in this respect followed largely from the common understanding that the increasing penetration of the Communists within the jute workers posed a potent threat for the ordered government in Bengal. The KPP-Muslim League coalition could effectively counter such a 'threat' by adopting severe repressive measures and various divisive tactics, with the tacit support of the IJMA. The trend continued under both the Nazimuddin and the Suhrawardy Government, as preventive orders were passed to curb the jute workers' movements - whenever the situation demanded

so. Even when the government itself was sympathetic to the legitimate demands raised by the jute workers, it had to take note of the considerable pressure exerted by the Government of India within the rapidly changing political context of the day. For instance, with the entry of Japan into Second World War, the second Huq regime had to take a tougher stance towards the jute workers on strike.

A study of the various facets of government intervention in respect to the jute labour of colonial Bengal, over the period 1937-47, offers certain important insights into the triad of relationships between the colonial state, Capital and Labour. It traces how, for most of the period under consideration, the various ministries in Bengal had been indifferent to the cause of jute labour, unlike most of the contemporary provincial governments in the country. Such interventions made by the Bengal Government in support of the Capital contributed significantly in weakening the prospects of jute labour movement in Bengal during the decade, 1937-47.

CHAPTER THREE**COMMUNITY IDENTITIES AND THE LABOURING CLASS**

The labour historiography in the last two decades has significantly addressed the question of 'dominant identity' among the jute mill hands – with some scholars emphasising upon certain 'pre-capitalist' notions of consciousness as the focal point of the identity of labour in India, rather than 'class' as the fundamental unit. The finest expression of this line of thinking was seen in Dipesh Chakrabarty's work published in 1988¹, where he argued that jute mill labour in Bengal exhibited traits of what he called 'community consciousness' which strongly influenced and guided its response within an organised set up. For him, it was this element which largely accounted for the frequent communal clashes (in the sub-continental sense of a religious divide - Hindu versus Muslim) in which the jute factory workers of Bengal became involved throughout the late nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century – thereby frustrating the growth of 'class solidarity' among them.² Some scholars, on the contrary, have argued that the 'class feeling' constituted the primary basis of the jute workers' identity in Bengal.³ Other forms of social consciousness like community identity/solidarity, caste and lingual ties among factory workers were seen by them as reflective of collective labour action, ultimately reinforcing their sense of 'class loyalty'.

The following chapter proposes to examine the above stated contentions, i.e., class versus community (in this sense religion) as the main determinant of labour identity, in respect of the jute mill hands of Bengal during the period 1937-47. Both in terms of social

¹ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working Class History: Bengal 1890-1940* (Princeton, 1988).

² Chakrabarty's understanding of community, even in the sub-continental context, was not only restricted to that of religion. The scope of the term was expansive enough to accommodate identities based on language, caste or territory. See Chakrabarty, 1988, pp.216-217.

³ See, for instance, Ranajit Das Gupta, *Labour and Working Class in Eastern India: Studies in Colonial History* (Calcutta, 1994).

geography and political developments, Bengal occupied a crucial role in the evolution and growth of communal politics in the sub-continent. The decade under observation is further important as it exhibited in Bengal, probably more distinctly than anywhere else in the sub-continent, gradually widening cleavage among the people on overtly communal lines - the process culminating into the worst phase of communal violence in pre-independent Bengal during 1946-47.⁴ The jute workers of Bengal, comprising of both the Hindu and the Muslim, were predictably exposed to such rapidly vitiating environment of communal hatred. It is within this wider context, that an effort is made to appreciate the varying response of the jute mill hands of Bengal, through such phases of communal tension, as also to identify the extent and degree of their participation in incidents of communal violence - supposedly being stretched into them by their respective 'community' identity/loyalty.

The present chapter has been divided into two parts. The first part focuses upon the instances of serious communal friction involving the jute mill hands of Bengal over the period 1937-45 - the years that witnessed an increasing vertical solidarity among both the Hindu and the Muslim population of the province with active support from political parties and leadership. While studying these incidents of communal strife, the emphasis would be on identifying the issues that led to such acts. A clear cognizance of the issues that ran common through these incidents of communal violence would indicate the level of 'communal animosity' that existed amongst the jute mill workers, operating within an organised set up. A similar understanding of the issues that led to the occasions of communal violence, involving the jute mill workers, might also help in ascertaining how far these instances of labour

⁴This phase of violence began with the Great Calcutta Killing of August 1946, which was followed by the Noakhali carnage in October and then the spate of partition riots - continuing till the final partition of the province in August 1947.

friction were wholly 'spontaneous'. A major question is, whether or not some of them were engineered from above by different groups having major stakes in the jute industry in order to serve their political and economic interests. Parallel to this enquiry, an effort is made to locate whether or not there were any act(s) of concerted labour resistance from the jute mill areas which had been susceptible to incidents of communal violence over the period. It would help us in understanding whether these acts of violence reflected a momentary exhibition of a strong sense of 'community identity' on the part of the jute labour, or they had any restricting influence upon their collective efforts to clinch certain major economic demands.

The second part of the chapter focuses upon the period 1946-47, the final phase of communal violence in pre-independent Bengal, to identify the extent to which the jute mill hands of Bengal were participants in such acts of mob violence. A study in this respect would help us in understanding whether or not there was a marked difference between the 'organised' jute mill hands and the 'unorganised work force' of Bengal while responding to the all round acts of communal frenzy. At the same time in the second section, an effort is made to figure out how far such acts of violence involving the jute mill hands affected the general jute labour movement over 1946-47.

I

Early Growth of Community Identities

Any attempt at a comprehensive historical understanding of the communal conflicts involving the jute mill hands of Bengal, over the period 1937-45, would remain rather incomplete without any reference to some of the previous instances of communal friction between them. The present section would, therefore, begin with a brief discussion on the emergent 'community consciousness' on the part of the jute workers – which expressed itself

in the form of communal clashes, over various issues, throughout the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century Bengal. An understanding of the issues that ignited the communal passion on the both sides as well as the respective state of feelings that the two communities had for each other - evident over these incidents of clashes - would provide a proper context for the study of the same in the later period. It would also effectively bring to the fore the elements of continuity within the gradually evolving 'consciousness' of jute labour.

In the late 1890s, there had been some major Hindu-Muslim conflicts breaking out among jute mill workers, in the midst of a series of strikes over falling wages and worsening conditions. The strength of the workers' feelings over issues relating to their religion became manifest enough over the riots that occurred at Titagarh and Garden Reach in 1896. The Bakr-Id riot at Titagarh (24 Parganas) in 1896 began when some 'upcountry'⁵ Muslim mill hands of the Standard Jute Mill attempted sacrificing a cow, which was naturally opposed by some Hindu workers. In the ensuing riot, workers of the neighbouring Titagarh Paper Mills and the Titagarh Jute Mills joined in, taking sides according to religions allegiance.⁶ Communal passions were similarly aroused to a high pitch, in the Bakr-Id riot at the Lower Hooghly Jute Mill (in Garden Reach, 24 Parganas), when the Muslim workers on the festival day sacrificed a cow. In retaliation some Dosadhs (low caste Hindus) killed a pig inside the mill compound, aggrieving the Muslim mill hands - that whereas they had been prevented from holding sacrifice within the mill compound, the low caste Hindus had actually been allowed to do so. Subsequently, as the demand of the Muslim workers for dismissing the 'guilty' Dosadhs to them were turned down by the mill administration, a major riot broke out in the area.⁷ The

⁵ By the term 'upcountry', I refer to those people who had migrated to Bengal from Bihar and United Provinces.

⁶ Judicial Department. Police Br., August 1896. A4-5, WBSA, cited in, Chakrabarty, 1988, p.191.

⁷ Judicial Department. Police Br., July 1896. A36-38, WBSA, cited in, Chakrabarty, 1988, p.192.

issue involved in both these riots was not merely the killing of the animals seen as 'sacred' by the respective communities, but the deliberate intention, on the part of the one, of wounding the religious feelings of the other. Significantly, such Hindu-Muslim antagonism only gained strength on certain religious occasions as evident again during the Bakr-Id riots at Naihati in 1898 or Gourepore in 1900.

A pattern of recurring clashes on such issues remained unchanged, in the decades that followed, when serious divisions surfaced between the two groups on religious festivals like Bakr-Id, Muharram, Holi and Durga Puja – leading to violent clashes. For instance, Bakr-Id disturbances over the 'korboni' issue were reported from the Angus Jute Mill at Telinipara (Hooghly) in 1913. As further incidents of rioting were reported from Telinipara in 1922, the British Government made it customary to post a military regiment there 'during important Muhammedan festivals'.⁸ Similar situations of communal tension and subsequent acts of rioting were reported due to the Hindu practice of playing music while passing the mosque, at the time of religious festivals. Serious rioting took place at Titagarh and Kankinarah in the 1920s during the Durga Puja festival, which prompted the local Hindu and Muslim leaders to form peace committees to avoid violence on the day of the immersion of the Durga idol.⁹

Communal Clashes in 1937-45

Over the period 1937-45, similar incidents of communal violence between jute workers (during various religious occasions) were largely reported. In March 1938, on the occasion of the Holi, a major riot broke out between the Hindu and the Muslim jute mill workers of Kankinarah (24 Parganas), leading to the murder of one worker and serious injuries to many.¹⁰ The trouble began when a Hindu procession was attacked in front of a

⁸ Home Poll. Confdl., no. 77/1926, WBSA, cited in ,Chakrabarty,1988,p.204.

⁹ Home Poll. Confdl., no.174(1-24)/1926,WBSA, cited in, Chakrabarty ,1988, p.205.

¹⁰ Home Poll. Confdl., no.260/1938, WBSA.

mosque, with prompt retaliation from the other side. According to an official report, which presented the Hindu version of the incident, the news of violence “ran in to the city like...wildfire and Mussalmans began to assault Hindus [even women and children] wherever they found them lonely [sic].”¹¹ By October 1938, violence erupted between groups of workers at Titagarh (24 Parganas) when Hindu processionists playing music before the mosques, on the occasion of the Dussehra, were attacked by the local Muslims.¹² Though prompt intervention on the part of the police saved the situation from assuming serious proportions, a state of communal tension continued to exist at Titagarh throughout the year.

In March 1939, the situation once more took an ugly turn, when the celebration of the Hindu festival of Holi led to severe outbreak of Hindu-Muslim riots among the mill hands of Naihati, Titagarh, Kamarhati, Khardah and Jagaddal (all in Barrackpore subdivision of 24 Parganas) and in Metiabruz (in the Garden Reach police station area). The trouble arose over the celebration of Holi by the ‘upcountry’ Hindu workers of Titagarh and Jagaddal, who in many cases behaved in a disorderly manner and attacked the Muslims.¹³ These clashes which led to casualties on both sides ended soon enough, yet the tension surfaced at the nearby mill areas of Naihati, Khardah and Kamarhati giving rise to rumour and scare. At Metiabruz (24 Parganas), communal flare-ups among the mill workers led to the closure of the Union South Jute Mill rendering 3,000 operatives idle. Here, the trouble began over a dispute between a section of mill hands, mostly Muslims, and a number of mill durwans, mostly Hindus, about permitting a Holi procession to pass through the mill quarters.¹⁴ Trouble on a serious scale was also reported from Gourepore Jute Mill of Naihati, when a Hindu procession, on the day of the Holi festival, attacked the Muslim mill hands.¹⁵ In the

¹¹ Home Poll. Confdl., no. 260/1938, WBSA.

¹² Ibid., no.370/1938.

¹³ Nirban Basu, 1994,p.154.

¹⁴ *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, 14 March 1939.

¹⁵ Mussalmans of Gauripur, Nadia, 24 Parganas, to Hon’ble Sir Khwaja Nazimuddin , Minister in charge, Home Department, GOB, 11 March 1940.Home Poll. Confdl., no.229/1940, WBSA.

violence that followed there was loss of human lives and injuries to many. A significant feature of the 'open violence' that took place at the Goureopore Jute Mill was the amount of planning and preparation that went into it. In a letter written by some Muslims of Goureopore to the Government, they narrated how the Hindu procession was accompanied by "a lorry full of brick bats and soda water bottles"¹⁶ that were hidden from view by "15 strong durwans of the Gouripur Jute Mill" sitting on them.¹⁷ Such show of 'preparedness' and 'hostility' on the part of the Hindu workers were, as stated by the Muslim mill hands of Naihati, an outcome of the doings of the Arya Samaj – whose increased activities in the area has exacerbated the enmity between the two communities.

Tension between the two groups was evident again in April 1940, when the government felt constrained to refuse permission to the Hindus of Kamarhati to take out a religious procession through the Kamarhatty Agarpara Jute Mill coolie lines. The government decision was based on its consideration that the processionists would carry arms, and once that was allowed there remained, in view of the present state of feelings, every possibility of a flare-up between the Hindu and the Muslim mill workers of the area.¹⁸ Similar apprehensions about communal trouble over the occasion of Holi was reported from Naihati, where there had been previous instances of 'open violence' involving both Hindu and Muslim mill workers.

Communal tension among the jute workers took a violent turn in October 1942 at the Bansberia Jute Mill (Hooghly), over the occasion of Durga Puja. Bansberia had the past history of being vulnerable to communal incitements, as there had been, in March 1940, a serious communal riot that left "injurious impacts upon the Hindu-Muslim relationship in the

¹⁶ Soda water bottles were often used as explosives during various acts of group violence.

¹⁷ Mussalmans of Gauripur, Nadia, 24 Parganas, to Hon'ble Sir Khwaja Nazimuddin, Minister in charge, Home Department, GOB, 11 March 1940. Home Poll. Confdl., no.229/1940, WBSA.

¹⁸ District Magistrate, 24 Parganas, to Deputy Secretary, Home Political Department, GOB, 6 May 1940. Home Poll. Confdl., no. 302/1940, WBSA.

mill area.”¹⁹ In the early part of 1942, there had been considerable tension in Bansberia when the government refused the request of the Muslim mill workers to allow them to take out the Muharram procession by a particular route. Though the permission for the procession by a different route was later granted, it led to a huge hue and cry by the Hindu workers – who resorted to a strike.²⁰ The strained feelings between the two communities reached the flash point, when a section of the Muslim mill workers attacked a Hindu procession on the way to the immersion of the Durga idol, while passing through a predominantly Muslim inhabited coolie line. Significantly, the Muslim mill hands had previously objected to the Dussehra procession route - though without any result.²¹ The riot that followed led to serious injuries on both sides.

The sacrifice of a cow within the mill compound, on the occasion of the Bakr-Id, raised the communal passion among the Hindu workers of the Kamarhati Jute Mill in February 1943. Though the likelihood of a fracas was averted by some strong police action and the prompt dismissal of four ‘accused’ Muslim workers, communal discontent continued to smolder in the area.²² On 14 August of the following year, similar acts of violence were reported from Khardah, when a serious riot broke out between mill workers over the issue of holiday on the account of Muharram. The demand of the Muslim workers for a holiday was turned down by the mill authorities, which made them to resort to strikes. However, as most of the Hindu workers refused to join the strike – a section of the Muslim mill hands, on the day of Muharram, attacked the adjacent Hindu coolie lines. On receiving the information of the attack, the Hindu workers rushed to defend their quarters which led to severe clashes between the two groups continuing for almost a week. As the news of the riot spread to the

¹⁹ Home Poll. Confdl., no. 157/1940, WBSA.

²⁰ WRID, 14 March 1942.

²¹ Home Poll., Confdl., no. 139/1942, WBSA.

²² District Magistrate, 24 Parganas, to the Chief Secretary, GOB, 16 March 1943. Home Poll. Confdl., no. 130/1943, WBSA.

nearby mill areas of Titagarh and Barrackpore, it led to further incidents of violence – forcing the government to act with considerable alacrity.

Thus, much like the earlier decades, the period under consideration witnessed numerous instances of ‘communal conflict’ between the jute workers of Bengal - occurring over the celebration of various religious festivals.

Communal Violence and Organised Politics

Yet, to assume that every form of communal conflict, in which the jute mill hands of Bengal were involved, occurred only over different religious issues would be an unwarranted generalisation. Any attempt at a comprehensive historical understanding of the religious conflicts among the jute workers, ever since the mid-1930s, would also have to take into account the presence of organisations like the Muslim League and the Arya Samaj, which operated at different jute mill areas with the main aim of creating division between the workers on the lines of religion. Such attempts at division within the rank of the jute workers on the basis of religion particularly gained strength after the formation of the Bengal National Jute Workers’ Union - affiliated to the Muslim League.

The formation of the League controlled unions, popularly known as the ‘White Flag’ unions,²³ was not without important motives. The impressive jute workers’ strike of 1937 had been quite a thorn in the flesh for both the Muslim League ministry in Bengal and the IJMA. The growing number of strikes in the jute mills and the general ‘defiance of authority’ on the part of the mill workers were seen by them as an outcome of the rapidly spreading Communistic influence within the jute labour. To counter such spread of Communistic ideas

²³ The Muslim League controlled labour unions were popularly known as the ‘White Flag’ unions as they were to check the growing influence of the Communist inspired ‘Red Flag’ unions within the jute workers of Bengal.

(which were also perceived as a threat to the democratically elected order of Bengal), H. S. Suhrawardy, the Labour Minister, floated Muslim League unions which were to serve as 'the best antidote to Communism' - besides ensuring 'respect for the employer and respect for the government'.²⁴ Understandably, therefore, the mill authorities were more than pleased at these unions and extended them full support. These unions were also successful in weaning away a considerable section of the Muslim mill workers from the Communist as well as Congress influence, not only due to their religious appeal but also for the support they received from the employers. The latter condition was of immense significance, for it ensured for the members of the League controlled unions easier employment opportunities in an industry with otherwise competitive job market, where the supply of labour was much in excess of the demand.²⁵

Naturally so, over the period 1937-41, wherever the League controlled unions were functional, in every strike there remained the possibility of communal clashes between loyal Muslim workers and the strikers (who were pre-dominantly Hindu). Such instances of strikes turning into communal conflicts were evident, when in November 1938 a major riot broke out at Titagarh. Earlier six Hindu spinners of the Standard Jute Mill were dismissed on the charge of assaulting the manager. Their dismissal caused a strike on 14 November and resulted soon in sympathetic strikes at five other mills, thus affecting thirty thousand workers ~~all together~~. On 16 November, a number of strikers at Titagarh went before the Khardah Jute Mill gate (which had not joined the strike previously) and successfully persuaded the Hindu workers to join them. Altercations followed soon between the loyal workers, mostly Muslims, and the strikers, which later assumed the form of communal riot throughout

²⁴ As told by H.S Suhrawardy to E.C Benthall of the IJMA over a private lunch in 1940.

[Source: CSAS., B P, Box 19, diary entry for 19 March 1940; cited in, Chakrabarty, 1988, p.200].

²⁵ For further discussion on this point, see Goswami, 1987, pp. 582-83.

Titagarh.²⁶ The general Muslim perception of the strike was evident when, in a peace keeping meeting, they resented the fact that “all the workers [were] without wages because 6 Hindus (had) a disagreement with the management.”²⁷

A similar situation occurred at the National Jute Mill of Howrah in December 1938, where there had been an ongoing strike over the recent dismissal of some Hindu workers. The trouble erupted when the authorities, on the morning of 5 December, tried to reopen the mill with the help of the Muslim mill workers who were opposed to the strike. A crowd of the recently dismissed workers and strikers, in retaliation to what they saw as a definite ‘breach of trust’ on the part of the workers loyal to the management, attacked the Muslim coolie lines and that led to a serious Hindu-Muslim riot in the area.²⁸ Same year, trouble broke out at the Anglo-India Group of mills in Jagaddal when there was a clash between workers loyal to the Communist leader Niharendu Dutt Mazumdar and those loyal to Latafat Hussain (leader of the ‘White Flag’ unions). Hussain’s union, which had the support of the mill managers concerned, threatened the jute workers that if they did not sever connection with the Leftist unions the management would dismiss them. In response, the supporters of Dutt Mazumdar planned for a general strike at Titagarh and Jagaddal mill area from 1 May.²⁹ Things came to a head when workers affiliated to both these unions (divided on religious lines) clashed with each other over the issue of the strike.

Such emphatic assertions of Hindu-Muslim differences, made by the League controlled unions, led to strained relations between the workers of the two communities in the Bhadreswar-Serampore mill area during 1937-40. Here, a League activist, by the name of

²⁶ Joint Secretary, GOB, to Secretary, GOI, Department of Labour, 19 November, 1938. Home Poll. Confdl., no. 381/1938, WBSA; *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, 16 November-18 November 1938.

²⁷ Home Poll. Confdl., no. 370/1938, WBSA.

²⁸ SP, Howrah, to Secretary, GOB, Home Poll. Confdl., no. 403/1938.

²⁹ Home Poll. Confdl., no. 502/1939.

Mohiuddin, floated several unions with the purpose of weaning away Muslim mill workers from the control of the veteran labour leader A. M. A. Zaman. His line of propaganda against Zaman had a simple yet strong communal content, that Zaman was not a 'true Muslim' and hence no 'true Muslim' could join his union. In contrast, Mohiuddin promised, while enlisting members, that "his union [was] the true Muslim union and it [was] being backed by the mill companies, Labour Minister and the government."³⁰ Significantly, as was pointed out by an Intelligence Branch Report, in his effort Mohiuddin even garnered the support of 'the Maulana of the Dalhousie Jute Mill mosque' who went around saying that the Muslim workers in Zaman's union "who helped the Hindu strikers with money etc. were [acting as] Kafirs."³¹

Disruptive propaganda of this nature was also evident at the Titagarh jute mill area, where it resulted in a Hindu-Muslim riot over the issue of a strike in 1940. The rapid spread of Communistic ideas among the mill workers of Titagarh, under the leadership of Kali Mukherjee and Nandalal Bose of BPTUC, had posed a direct threat to the Muslim League affiliated 'Workers' Welfare League' for the control of the area. When the BPTUC section of Titagarh planned a strike at the Kelvin Jute Mill in August 1940, to protest against the recent IJMA decision of reducing the working hours in the mills as well as the recent dismissal of some workers, the Workers' Welfare League urged the 'true Muslims' to stay away from the strike. The refusal on the part of some mill workers, mostly Muslims, to join the strike led to their clash with the Hindu strikers, which continued for successive days.³²

However, from the above discussion, one should not assume that it was only the Muslim League which sought to divide the workers on religious lines, in order to serve its own political and economic interests. Even the CPI activists, on occasions, were accused of

³⁰ District Magistrate, Hooghly, to Commissioner, Burdwan Division, 26 July 1937. Home Poll. Confdl., no. 326/1937, WBSA.

³¹ Ibid.

³² As told in a personal interview by Shri Nandalal Bose, in December 2001.

arousing the communal passion among the Hindu mill workers over various religious issues, with the ulterior objective of strengthening their hold upon them. For instance, in October 1938, the Communists were seen as responsible for 'stirring up the Hindus' of Titagarh on the occasion of the Durga Puja – which ultimately led to a riot. A report submitted by a Sub-Divisional Officer (SDO) held the Communist activists squarely responsible for the strained feelings between the two communities. It read – “ The fact is that the red flag people are stirring up the Hindus for their own ends, having lost faith in almost every other method.”³³ Again a month later, when some Muslim workers of Titagarh demanded the early closure of the mills during Ramzan, the Communist leaders like Nani Gopal Mukherjee advised the Hindu mill hands to object to it, as it meant an effective loss in salary for them.³⁴ These 'tactical' errors on the part of the local activists that aggravated the already existing tension in the area, were later condemned by the official Communist leadership.

We have seen there are (a) examples of communal conflict, resulting supposedly from 'pure religious issues' as well as (b) examples of the utilisation of solidarity on religious-communal lines to disrupt strikes and generally to protect the employers' interests. The question which needs to be asked here is - was not there any co-existing sense of 'collective identity' as 'workers' among the labour force, which had shown such strong adherence to their 'community ties' from time to time?

Workers' Collective Identity versus 'Community Identity'

The present section would focus upon some of the instances of 'collective resistance' put up by the workers from the same jute mill areas, which had been susceptible to communal

³³ 'Notes to Successor', a collection of notes by the SDO of Titagarh, cited in, de Haan, 1994, p.173.

³⁴ *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, 19 November 1938.

incitements. The jute mills of Jagaddal and Naihati, which had witnessed serious communal violence during March 1939, exhibited major working class movement later that year. With the outbreak of the Second World War, about 2,000 workers of the Anglo-India Group of jute mills struck work on 3 October demanding an increase in the wage as also the payment of a War-bonus. The strike soon spread to the Jagaddal Mill and, by 5 October, no less than thirty thousand workers (both Hindu and Muslim) were left idle.³⁵ Though the strike was called off within a week, following assurances from the Labour Minister, it showed enough prospects of workers' unity in the area. Similarly in Naihati, labour agitation was reported from Hukumchand Jute Mill where a group of 700 weavers started a strike on 7 October - demanding payment at the rates given in the nearby Naihatty Jute Mill. The strike ended on 9 October, when the management accepted their demand.³⁶ In the neighbouring Nuddea Jute Mill, there was a simultaneous strike when the workers protested against the reduction in the wages.³⁷ Though their demands were not met and the work had to be resumed unconditionally, these strikes made evident the scope of jute labour agitation in the Naihati region.

Likewise the workers of the Gourepore Jute Mill, who had been involved in major scale communal violence during March 1939, strongly exhibited an anti-employer, and hence potentially uniting outlook, over the period 1939-40. In November 1939, the workers of the mill went on a strike demanding restoration of the recent cut in their daily wages and consequently the mill had to be closed rendering 4,800 workers idle.³⁸ Again, on 13 May, 1940, workers from both the communities went on a strike in protest against the arrest of a discharged worker by the police on the charge of trespassing. In fact, next day the workers held a demonstration against the management that ended in a clash with the police, where

³⁵ WRID, 7 October 1939.

³⁶ Ibid., 14 October 1939.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 9 December 1939.

several policemen and strikers were injured. The situation became so tense, that the mill had to be closed down and preventive orders like Section 144 was imposed.³⁹ These two instances of labour strike in the Gourepore Jute Mill indicate the presence of a certain sense of 'class identity' among the mill hands, which could hardly be neutralised by their respective loyalties towards their 'community'. That was why, the mill workers could impressively regroup themselves for a united move against the management within months of a bitter communal feud which had then divided them on religious lines.

A similar show of jute workers' unity was evident in January 1944, when the entire labour force of the Kamarhati Jute Mill, about 7,500 in number, went on a strike. The issue involved here was very significant - the workers resorting to a 'sit down' strike over the demand of a four days holiday for Muharram.⁴⁰ The fact that the Hindu section of the labour force in the Kamarhati Jute Mill could be successfully mobilised for an issue that had to do with the religious sentiments of only the Muslim workers is of great interest. More so, because there had been considerable Hindu-Muslim tension in the area following the Bakr-Id disturbances that took place the year before. But then, such instances of the workers of one community rallying in support of the other, over issues that were of direct importance to one, are not rare in the history of the jute workers of Bengal. One example is cited here. In November 1937, the Muslim mill hands of the Caledonian Jute Mill in Budge Budge (24 Parganas) requested the Manager of making some changes in the working hours because of the Ramzan fast. The Manager did not agree and the workers assumed that he had been influenced by a Hindu sardar in this regard. Four Muslim weavers assaulted and seriously injured that sardar and for this act they were dismissed. This was followed by a major 'stay in' strike, in which both Hindu and Muslim workers participated, over the demands of

³⁹ Ibid., 16 May 1940.

⁴⁰ Weekly Report on Labour Situation, 6 January 1944, WBSA.

reinstatement of the discharged workers as well as altering of the working hours as originally requested by the workers.⁴¹

The jute mill workers of Bengal, thus, showed enough evidence of collective resistance, while dealing with issues which had religious connotations specific to one of the communities. That is not to deny the perpetual problem of antagonism between the Hindu and the Muslim mill hands, deriving strength from their respective sense of 'community'; yet it could not undermine their sense of identity as 'workers'. Hence we have frequent instances of the same group of workers, involved in acts of communal violence, fighting the employers and the management in unison with their 'religious opponents'.

II

The Climatic Years: 1946-47

The second section of the chapter focuses upon the period 1946-47, which saw major scale communal violence in Bengal – beginning with the Calcutta outbreak of 16 August, followed by the Noakhali killings and then continuing through sporadic clashes till the eve of the independence. The communal riots that took place in 1946-47 were significantly different from all the preceding instances of Hindu-Muslim violence in Bengal. Apart from being 'organised' in form - being closely connected with developments in institutional politics - these outbreaks saw large-scale participation by people from all sections of the social strata, divided on overtly communal lines. It is in the backdrop of the present consideration, that an effort is made to identify the extent to which the jute workers of Bengal were participants in such widespread acts of communal violence. Such participation, in the midst of inflamed

⁴¹ WRID, 13 November 1937.

communal passions all around, would strongly indicate to the strength of their ties with their respective 'community'.

It is not our aim here to repeat the generally known facts about the Calcutta Riots of 1946. It is common knowledge that the Riots of 1946 began on 16 August, which was observed as the 'Direct Action Day' by the Muslim League all over the country.⁴² On that day, a huge gathering of Muslim masses at the Maidan was addressed by the Chief Minister H. S. Suhrawardy who "repeatedly assured the audience that the military has been restrained."⁴³ Such was probably interpreted by the gathering as an open concession to commit violence on its rival community, and the processionists on their way back started attacking the Hindus and looting their shops. Retaliation from the Hindu side, which constituted three-fourth of the city population, precipitated matters further and the violence that continued till 19 August led to a huge loss in life⁴⁴ and enormous destruction of property.

The storm centre of the 1946 Calcutta Riots were the wards of Burrabazar, Bowbazar, Jorasanko, Kalootola, Muchipara, Taltola, Amherst Street and Entally. The violence was thus mostly evident in the 'heart land' of the city; to the north the Hindus were in overwhelming majority, while in the east the Muslims had a sizeable representation.⁴⁵ Apart from these areas, communal clashes also occurred in the wards of Burtolla, Shyampukur, Jorabagan, Manicktolla, Beliaghata, Tollygunge and the sector in 24 Parganas contiguous to Calcutta – Garden Reach and Watgunge.

⁴² The failure of the Cabinet Mission Plan (May 1946) to accommodate the Muslim League demand for Pakistan in clear terms, made the latter apprehensive of the designs of both the Congress and the British Government. Thus the League decided to observe the 'Direct Action Day' on 16 August - as a show of their strength against any imposition of unity.

⁴³ Suranjan Das, *Communal Riots in Bengal: 1905-1947* (Delhi, 1991), p. 171.

⁴⁴ According to an official estimate, 4,000 were killed and 10,000 were injured in the Calcutta Riots. [Source: Telegram from Governor Sir F. Burrows to Viceroy Lord Wavell, 22 August, 1946, cited in, Mansergh and Moon (eds.), *The Transfer of Power: 1942-7*, Vol. 8 (London), pp. 297-300].

⁴⁵ In the areas like Barabazar, Jorasanko and Manicktola, which constituted the northern fringes of the city, the Hindus were overwhelmingly dominant. The wards that formed the eastern part of the city, like Entally and Taltola, had a fair share of Muslim representation - higher than the city average of 25 percent.

The high frequency of communal violence in these wards of the city can well be gauged from the number of persons arrested in different police stations in connection with the Calcutta Riots. (See Table 3.1).

Table 3.1

Statement of Arrests made by the Calcutta Police in connection with the Calcutta Disturbances from 16. 8. 1946 - 6. 9.1946 (inclusive)

Name of the Police Station	Hindu	Muslim	Others
Shyampukur	80	6	0
Jorabagan	89	0	0
Burtolla	96	3	0
Burrabazar	109	73	0
Jorasanko	105	256	0
Amherst Street	49	86	0
Hare Street	101	31	0
Bowbazar	25	298	8
Muchipara	200	19	0
Taltola	19	154	5
Park Street	7	32	3
Hastings	0	2	0
Cossipore	5	4	0
Chitpore	8	9	0
Manicktolla	33	30	0
Beliaghata	26	43	0
Entally	37	58	0
Beniapukur	4	11	0
Ballygunge	22	22	0
Bhowanipore	47	6	0
Tollygunge	57	2	0
Alipore	29	0	0
Watgunge	41	111	0
Garden Reach	24	37	0
Ekbalpore	14	11	0
Total	1227	1304	16

[Source: The Commissioner of Police, Calcutta, to the Chief Secretary, GOB, 20

September 1946. Home Poll. Confdl., no. 401/46, WBSA].

From this statement of arrests made by the city police, one can argue that communal clashes were mostly evident in the already mentioned wards of central and eastern Calcutta. A Home Department report also identified these areas as the main centres of communal trouble during

the August days. To cite it, “Between 17th and 19th instant [of August] communal trouble was frequently reported from Muchipara, Entally, Manicktolla, Belgatchia, Beliaghata, Amherst Street, Taltola, Burrabazar, Bowbazar and Lower Circular Road.”⁴⁶

What was the occupational composition of the men who were involved in these incidents of violence as evident in the different wards of the city? The rioting crowd was mostly composed of men who were mainly engaged in various occupations which came under the ‘unorganised’ sector of the economy. As mentioned in the contemporary records, a large section of the rioters were butchers (kasais), dockworkers (khalasis), coolies, tailors (darjis), cobblers (muchis), masons (rajmistris), richshaw pullers, milkmen (goalas), durwans, etc.

The Hindu-Muslim riots were marked on a high pitch in the dock areas, where there were frequent instances of clash between the Hindu boatmen and the Muslim khalasis. On 17 August, 50 Hindu boatmen (majhis) came near the Jagannath Ghat and attacked the Muslim khalasis working at the shed. Trouble was averted by the timely intervention of the police and the Muslim khalasis had to work under the police protection.⁴⁷ In a separate incident, on the same day, ‘a mob of about 500 Muslim hooligans – most of whom were Khalasis...looted the Bichali Ghat Arats and set fire to 15 boats loaded with straw – killing most of the boatmen.’⁴⁸ According to an Intelligence Branch report, there were traditional connections between the Muslim khalasis and arms smuggling trade, and they certainly supplied their co-religionists with the necessary weapons during the violence.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ S. G. Taylor, Inspector General of Police, Bengal, to E. F. IcInerney, Special Officer, Home Department, GOB, 18 September 1946. Home Poll. Confdl., no. 393/46, WBSA.

⁴⁷ *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, 19 August 1946.

⁴⁸ S. G. Taylor, Inspector General of Police, Bengal, to E. F. IcInerney, Special Officer, Home Department, GOB, 18 September 1946. Home Poll. Confdl., no. 393/46, WBSA.

⁴⁹ *Calcutta Disturbances Commission of Enquiry*, Minutes of Evidence, no. VII, p. 260; no. IX, p. 139, cited in, Das, 1991, p. 182.

The involvement of the same occupation groups in incidents of violence at the 'heartland' of the city were also largely reported. A large number of Muslim butchers of central and north Calcutta were convicted for violence in the Presidency Magistrate's Court.⁵⁰ Their presence in the crowd was also apparent from the widespread use of 'meat choppers' during the riots.⁵¹ Muslim shoemakers, tailors and masons were also seen desecrating Hindu temples in Kalootola and Kalabagan area specially targeting Marwari merchants.⁵²

Among the Hindu rioters, a major section were upcountry cobblers, sweepers, blacksmiths, rickshaw pullers and durwans of government offices and business establishments. Hindu blacksmiths of the city were the manufacturers of spearheads and other weapons, which were used by them as also by their co-religionists during the various occasions of 'planned attack' on their rival community.⁵³ Similarly, on 16 August, Hindu cobblers were found attacking Muslim bustees in the vicinity of Amherst Street.⁵⁴ Another important component of the rioting mob were the upcountry Hindu durwans active in the Dharmatolla region. One Police Report, for instance, blamed the 400 'upcountry' Hindu durwans inhabiting Clive and Canning streets - the city's business centre - for most of the 'vicious acts' during August 1946. The Police Commissioner Hardwick reported the recovery of looted booty from their quarters.⁵⁵

Another section quite active during the 1946 outbreak were the professional anti-socials, known in popular parlance as 'goondas', who often had close contacts with the working labour of the city. Jayanta K. Ray in his study of the Calcutta underworld has shown

⁵⁰ *Hindusthan Standard*, 12 December 1946.

⁵¹ Suranjan Das, 1991, pp. 181-182.

⁵² *Hindusthan Standard*, 22 August 1946.

⁵³ *Calcutta Disturbances Commission of Enquiry*, Minutes of Evidence, no. IV, p. 294, cited in, Das, 1991, p. 180.

⁵⁴ *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 23 August 1946.

⁵⁵ *Calcutta Disturbances Commission of Enquiry*, Minutes of Evidence, no. II, pp. 216-7; no. V, pp. 8-9 and 193, cited in, Das, 1991, p. 182.

how these upcountry goondas were active in the northern and central parts of the city during the 1946 riots - inciting the co-religionists of the area to various acts of communal violence. Prominent among them were Basanta Kumar Saha, Punit Goala, Gopal Mukherjee (popularly known as Gopal Pantha), Lal Mian and Rajab Ali, who were active in the Bowbazar, Beadon Street and Narkeldanga area of the city.⁵⁶ Besides them, a section of marginalised people - dubbed in official terminology as 'bad characters'- were also involved in the incidents of rioting. A Police Report refers to a class of persons known as 'kangalis' who were instigating the Hindus in the vicinity of the Howrah railway station to attack their 'sworn enemies' over the period 1946-47.⁵⁷

Yet, there is no evidence of large-scale participation of the *jute mill hands* of Bengal in the communal orgy that swept parts of Calcutta during 1946. Throughout the month of August, the jute workers in different mills continued to work side by side. This is not to deny the sense of apprehension and mistrust that had come to grip the workers of both communities. Still, that did not lead to any major communal flare up among the jute mill hands of Calcutta, even those settled in the northern part of the city. The only instance of violence where some workers of a city jute mill were involved was reported from Metiabruz. Even here the trouble began when some Muslim mill workers of the Kesoram Cotton Mill attacked Hindu Oriya coolies, and it was only subsequently some Muslim workers of a jute mill came in to join their fellow religionists. According to the report of the Magistrate of 24-Parganas, in the 'mindless massacre' that followed at least 156 Oriya mill hands were slaughtered by the Muslim rioters.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ For more details, see Jayanta K. Ray and Suranjan Das (eds.), *The Goondas: Towards a Reconstruction of the Calcutta Underworld* (Calcutta, 1996).

⁵⁷ Report by SP, Howrah, 10 September 1947. Home Poll. Confdl., no. 174/47, WBSA.

⁵⁸ District Magistrate, 24 Parganas, to Special Officer, Home Political Department, GOB, 23 September 1946. Home Poll. Confdl., no. 392/46, WBSA.

Some reports of violence in which the jute labour were involved during August 1946 came from the industrial suburbs of Calcutta. A large number of Muslim mill hands who came to Calcutta from these areas to attend the Direct Action Day rally provoked discord in their native localities when they returned. As early as 17 August, communal trouble was reported from the Presidency Jute Mill at Serampore.⁵⁹ By 19 August, a serious communal riot broke in a jute mill at Hajinagar (near Naihati) continuing for almost a week.⁶⁰ Similar violence between two groups of jute workers was reported from the Kankinarah Jute Mill. Here a section of the Muslim weavers attacked the adjacent Hindu coolie lines, with prompt retaliation from the other side. The clashes which followed (and which also spread to the neighbouring mill area of Jagaddal) led to loss in human lives and property.⁶¹ However, apart from these three instances, the jute mills in the industrial districts of 24-Parganas, Howrah and Hooghly continued to work uninterrupted for most of the referred period.

The volatile situation in Bengal ^{took} ~~to~~ a dramatic turn on October 10, when major communal violence broke out in the Noakhali district and soon spread to the adjoining district of Tipperah in eastern Bengal.⁶² While in Calcutta, the killing had been 'even for both sides', in Noakhali there had been one sided killings of the Hindus- the latter there being overwhelmingly in minority.⁶³ Apart from the usual loot and destruction of property, killing of men and women - common to any riot, the Noakhali-Tipperah episodes were significantly marked by the mass scale conversion of Hindus and the abduction and rape of Hindu women.

⁵⁹ S. G. Taylor, Inspector General of Police, Bengal, to E. F. IcInerney, Special Officer, Home Department, GOB, 18 September 1946. Home Poll. Confdl., no. 393/46, WBSA.

⁶⁰ District Magistrate, 24 Parganas, to Special Officer, Home Political Department, GOB, 23 September 1946. Home Poll. Confdl., no. 392/46, WBSA: As told in a personal interview by Shri Nandalal Bose (the then BPTUC Secretary), in December 2001.

⁶¹ As told in a personal interview by Shri Nandalal Bose (the then BPTUC Secretary), in December 2001.

⁶² Here the tension had escalated ever since the Calcutta Killings, as a major section of the Muslims killed in Calcutta were the shopkeepers and the dockworkers who had come from Noakhali. The tense situation was further vitiated by Ghulam Sarwar Husseini, an ex-MLA, whose inflammatory speeches, urging the Muslims to avenge the Calcutta killings, were in a large measure responsible for the outbreak. [Source: Shila Sen, Thesis, p. 314].

⁶³ In 1941, the combined Muslim population of these two districts was approximately around 4, 782,000 - while that of the Hindus, 1, 292. 000. [Source: *Census of India*, 1941, Bengal, Tables, Vol. 4, Pt. II, pp. 44-45].

Such horrifying acts, which were seen by the Hindus as 'deliberate' forms of attack upon their 'religion', evoked strong counter response all over the country. Consequently, in Calcutta and its suburbs, the incidents of Noakhali triggered off a fresh series of sporadic violence that continued till the eve of the Partition. Such stray incidents of rioting, evident over the period October 1946 to August 1947, mainly took place at Beniapukur, Muchipara, Entally, Manicktola, Belgatchia, Chitpore, Cossipore, Amherst Street, Bowbazar, Burrabazar, and the neighbouring wards of Howrah - which had previously been affected during the August violence.⁶⁴ The participants in these incidents of rioting were again people mostly from the occupations of the 'unorganised sector'- such as coolies, boatmen, durwans, butchers, etc.⁶⁵

The communal tension prevailing over Calcutta and its suburbs throughout this period did not lead to any large-scale communal violence among the jute workers of the area. The only incident of communal friction in 1947 between the mill hands of the two communities was reported on 7 April when a riot broke out at the Angus Jute Mill. The incident soon assumed serious complications and the mill authorities, in order to disperse the rioting mob, had to resort to police firing in which five workers were killed. The Hindu workers refused to resume work until the mill hands arrested in connection with the rioting were released. The management had to close down the mill for the whole of April.⁶⁶ For the rest of the period, there were only minor incidents of attack upon individual jute workers, without any lasting impact upon the respective 'community' as a whole. For instance, on 18 April 1947, there was a stray incident of violence in which a Muslim worker of the Howrah Jute Mill was murdered by some Hindu miscreants.⁶⁷ Elsewhere, on 21 April, a Hindu jute worker was

⁶⁴ The Statesman, 16 October 1946, 17 October 1946, 27 October 1946, 11 November 1946; SP, Howrah, to the Additional Secretary, GOB, 4 May 1947. Home Poll. Confdl., 171/47, Part I, WBSA.

⁶⁵ SP, Howrah, to the Additional Secretary, GOB, 4 May 1947. Home Poll. Confdl., 171/47, Part I, WBSA; The Statesman, 17 October 1946 and 27 October 1946.

⁶⁶ Basu, 1994, p. 231.

⁶⁷ SP, Howrah, to the Additional Secretary, GOB, 4 May 1947. Home Poll. Confdl., no. 171/47, Part I, WBSA.

fired at by a group of Muslims 'allegedly' employed in the Bally Jute Mill.⁶⁸ In another case, a Muslim weaver of the Naskarpara Jute Mill in Howrah was found lying with a stab injury in front of the mill gate in May 1947.⁶⁹ Yet, none of these incidents could assume the form of wider conflict involving the jute workers from both the communities.

The above discussion on the various groups involved in the communal riots of 1946-47 reveals a marked difference between the 'organised' jute mill hands and the 'unorganised' workforce of Bengal, while responding to the all round acts of violence. It has already been shown that, in spite of a general sense of panic prevailing among the jute labour, there were only few instances of communal clashes in which they were actually involved. In sharp contrast, the workers from the 'unorganised sector' were seen majorly active in the various acts of rioting during this period. What then led to such difference in the response of the respective groups, operating within the same time and space, is indeed significant. The restraint shown by the jute mill hands of Bengal amidst wide spread tension, was much due to the presence of the trade union activists within its ranks - who on certain occasions averted the possibility of a communal flare-up among the workers by their timely intervention, or minimised the possibility of further trouble in areas affected by communal violence by their continued presence among the workers.

After incidents of communal violence involving mill workers were reported from Metiabruz on 17 and 18 August 1946, prominent trade union leader and MLA, Suresh Chandra Bannerjee, went to the relief of the riot affected victims and arranged for feeding 3000 Hindu workers who had taken shelter at Kesoram Cotton Mill.⁷⁰ His presence among the mill workers of the area was in a large way responsible in reducing the communal tension existing at Metiabruz. Similarly, in the Barrackpore jute mill area, Niharendu Dutt Mazumdar

⁶⁸ SP, Howrah, to the Additional Secretary, GOB, 4 May 1947. Home Poll. Confdl., no. 171/47, Part I, WBSA.

⁶⁹ SP, Howrah, to Additional Secretary, GOB. Home Poll. Confdl., no. 171/47, Part II, WBSA.

⁷⁰ District Magistrate, 24 Parganas, to Special Officer, Home Political Department, GOB, 23 September 1946. Home Poll. Confdl., no. 392/46, WBSA.

(local MLA and labour leader) was active in maintaining communal amity among the mill hands. He organised a joint squad of Hindu and Muslim jute mill workers to keep peace in the area.⁷¹ To cite another example, during the August days of violence, BPTUC activists promptly intervened to diffuse the communal tension in the Angus Jute Mill near Bhadreswar - which could have otherwise led to serious outbreaks in the area.⁷²

The nature of working class leadership available to the jute mill hands of Bengal was thus of considerable importance in keeping the workforce together during this period. The continued presence of the labour activists among the jute mill hands helped to break rumours about impending attacks from the rival community, originating from different unassignable sources, which could have otherwise led to major communal flare-ups among them. The same was not true for the 'working poor' of the city, who in absence of 'organised leadership' could often get involved in rioting activities following rumours – as they had no definite information on the actual occurrences in the riots.

For a comprehensive understanding of the jute workers' loyalties towards their 'community', during the climactic years of 1946-47, one also needs to understand - how far did such strained feelings among the jute workers, divided on religious lines, act as a limiting factor, in respect to the general jute workers' movement over the period. Throughout 1946-1947, there were considerable numbers of labour stoppages in the jute mills of Bengal - higher than what was seen during the War years.⁷³ For instance, in November 1946, a general strike took place in a jute mill of Naihati to protest against the dismissal of two workers for collecting subscriptions for the union from inside the mill. Both the CPI and the Bolshevik Party of India came to the support of the workers and the agitation continued till the demands of the latter were met.⁷⁴ By the beginning of January, about 4,000 workers of a jute mill in

⁷¹ *Hindusthan Standard*, 23 August 1946.

⁷² As told in a personal interview by Shri Nandalal Bose (the then BPTUC Secretary), in December 2001.

⁷³ Basu, 1994, pp. 233-235.

⁷⁴ Home Poll. Confdl., no. 142/47, WBSA.

Budge Budge left work as the management refused to reemploy some men who had participated in a strike on the previous day. The management of another mill in the same area closed the factory on 23 January when its workers left duty without notice. By the end of the month, no less than 20,000 of four mills were on strike.⁷⁵ Some jute workers also stayed away from work, when a call for a general strike was given by the BPTUC on 5 February. Accordingly, some jute mills at Titagarh, Tollygunge and Metiabruz (where there had ^{been} acute communal tension among workers) had to be closed down.⁷⁶ Similarly, over the month of July, a number of strikes were reported from the jute mills of Bengal over demands such as increase in wages and amenity allowances, strike pay, etc. Most of these strikes could hold on to their demands successfully till the disputes were referred to higher bodies for arbitration.

These instances of successful strikes as evident over the period 1946-47 thus strongly suggest at the presence of a certain sense of identity as 'workers' among the jute mill hands of Bengal. Situated within a context where the practices and behaviour of an individual was largely influenced by her/his respective loyalty towards the 'community', the presence of such a sense of collective identity among the jute workers seems to indicate to the contrary.

Conclusions

A major thrust of this paper has been to understand the various shades of the jute workers' consciousness - as evident through the various incidents of communal violence involving them- between 1937-47. Throughout the period 1937-45, there had been numerous instances of communal friction involving the jute mill hands of Bengal on various religious issues- such as playing the music by Hindu religious processions in front of the mosques, the

⁷⁵ *Hindusthan Standard*, 31 January 1947.

⁷⁶ SP, 24 Parganas, to Additional Secretary, GOB, 6 February 1947. Home Poll. Confdl., no. 69/47, WBSA.

sacrifice of the cow during Bakr-Id, etc. These issues, to which some of us might attach mere 'ritualistic importance', could evoke strong and collective response from the jute workers for in them the respective communities could identify a deliberate intention on the part of the other to offend their sense of honour. And such a 'communal sense of honour', Dipesh Chakrabarty argues, indicates "the non-individualistic pre-bourgeois nature of the identity that the jute workers had."⁷⁷

Similarly, as has been discussed in the first section, the jute workers of Bengal were often seen vulnerable to all sorts of divisive propaganda, be it by the Muslim League, the Arya Samaj or the CPI. Accordingly there were several instances where jute labour strikes got converted into communal conflicts. But then, that leads to the obvious query - why were the workers often liable to be provoked into divisive conflicts? Here again, one needs to appreciate the basic form of jute workers' 'politics' which had never really been emancipated from their loyalties towards their religion, and for that matter, region, caste or language.

Yet, it should not lead us to assume that the workers' collective actions were fundamentally and primarily shaped by their 'community consciousness'. There are several instances, throughout this period, where the jute workers despite 'community' identity of their own, had united together to stage successful labour protests over issues of common interests. The instances of strikes turning into communal conflicts are epiphenomena of Hindu-Muslim antagonism, the fundamental phenomenon being the ability of the employers to instrumentalise communal sentiments to their own advantage. The 'White Flag' unions of the Muslim League undoubtedly promoted 'community consciousness' as a means of defending the interests of the management, but in exchange these unions gained short-term economic concessions from the mill authorities. And interestingly, pro-employer group fighting against trade unionists did not always constitute of members from only one

⁷⁷ Chakrabarty, 1988, p. 215.

'community'. For example, in November 1938, a strike at the National Jute Mill in Titagarh turned into a communal riot between the workers. In the fighting that broke out, one side was wholly composed of Muslim mill hands and Hindu durwans, while the other comprised of mainly Hindu workers who were already on strike.⁷⁸ Such instances of conflict, where Hindu durwans loyal to the management were up in arms against their fellow religionists could thus hardly be explained as resulting from only communal loyalties among workers.

The second section of the chapter focuses entirely on the period 1946-47, the final phase of communal violence in Bengal, in order to locate the extent to which the jute workers participated in such acts of rioting. In spite of a sense of panic prevailing among the jute workers, only a few instances of communal clashes were reported between 1946-47 in which they were actually involved. Instead, it was mainly the workers from the 'unorganised' sector who participated in various acts of communal violence in Calcutta and its suburbs. The restraint shown by the jute mill workers of Bengal amidst such communally charged environment, was much due to the presence of trade union activists within its ranks. This section concludes while discussing how in spite of strained feelings among the jute workers, divided on religious lines, there were considerable number of jute labour protests over concrete economic issues during this period.

Any effort to study the jute workers' consciousness while reconciling its various conflicting identities is indeed a difficult task. And to conclude with certainty, on the primacy of one identity as the main determinant of the workers' consciousness is even more problematic. The fact that industrialisation in India, under the colonial rule, was never 'complete', also signified that the consequent evolution of 'class feeling' among the labour force was limited. Parallel to it, due to the incomplete depeasantisation of the worker, the working class in the colonial period could not forsake its pre-capitalist identities of religion,

⁷⁸ Basu, 1994, pp. 137-138.

caste or language. Accordingly, throughout the first half of the twentieth century, there was a close and contradictory coexistence of identities of 'class', potentially uniting, and 'community', potentially divisive, among the industrial workers of India. So far as the jute workers of Bengal were concerned, such divisions surfaced time and again; yet notwithstanding such divisions the workers participated in major movements with a definite 'anti-employer' character attached to it.

Conclusion

The study of the jute labour force of Bengal, between the years 1937–47, through its different aspects has been an interesting enterprise. Be it the general jute labour movement, the government interventions in respect of the Capital–Labour disputes, or the question of ‘dominant identity’ among the mill hands, each of these issues bring to the fore certain problems – as evident over this period – which had hitherto remained neglected or explored rather inadequately. The present work has taken up these issues and sought to address them thematically in the three main chapters. The important observations that have emerged out of the discussions on the same are detailed below.

The **first chapter** focuses upon the jute labour movement in Bengal between 1937-47, and begins in this respect with a discussion on the financial state of the jute industry and the material condition of a large body of mill hands during this period. As the study has revealed, under the impact of the Second World War, the jute mills of Bengal fared remarkably well between 1939–45 - due to the soaring growth in sales and profit. From an average of 7.3 percent of paid-up capital between 1935-38 (the Depression Years), the jute industry’s net profit soared up to 52 percent by 1942 and remained above 40 percent till 1945. This way, the jute mills of Bengal were in a position, by the 1940s, to part with a share of their profit in the form of concessions granted to the jute workers employed under them, though they did not actually do so.

In contrast to the rapid and substantial growth in the fortunes of the jute industry, there was no significant improvement in the condition of the jute workers who had to survive against the compelling hardships of the time – when the cost of living had more than doubled due to the War related developments and post-War inflation. In fact, the

government surveys conducted on labour clearly show that the jute mill hands of Bengal were worse off in the 1940s than during the pre-War years. As has been discussed, the 'real wage' of the jute workers went down from the pre-War years. Alongside, the housing and sanitation facilities provided to the workers by the different jute mills were also of very poor standard.

The miserable conditions within which the jute workers had to survive, during the period 1937-47, thus could have triggered off major labour protests across the jute mills of Bengal. Yet, as the study has shown, apart from the general jute strike of 1937 - which involved more than 1,00,000 workers - there was no major occasion of industrial unrest in the jute mills of Bengal which could sustain itself collectively for a considerable period of time and pose a threat to the Capital interests. After the outbreak of the Second World War, the BCMU made frequent attempts to consolidate the jute workers into concerted resistance; yet its attempts met with rare success. It was only during the first half of 1942, that the jute workers of Bengal were successful in clinching certain concessions - such as increase in wage and other allowances, but the momentum gained for labour unrest could not be sustained for long. In fact, after the Bengal famine of 1943, the prospects of jute labour resistance suffered heavily. The jute workers, left vulnerable in the face of acute shortage in cereals and the corresponding steep hike in the prices of other commodities, had to solely focus on issues - such as regular supply of subsidised food stuff over mill rations, increased payment of amenity allowances, etc. Accordingly, the workers could not build up labour movement over concrete demands for increase in basic wage, regular payment of bonus, provisions for a month's holiday with pay - at least till the beginning of 1946.

What was also detrimental to the general interest of jute labour movement, for the entire period under consideration, was the fact that on most of the occasions - the labour stoppages in the jute mills of Bengal took place over local issues which had no bearing upon the workers in the adjoining mills. Therefore, these isolated acts of protest could not assume a wider character and could not sustain themselves for long - posing little or no threat to the Capital in the strategic sense.

While elaborating upon the factors that contributed to the failure of the jute labour movement in Bengal, the chapter ventures beyond the usually offered explanations. The failure of the jute workers had much more to it than the repressive War time regulations promulgated by the colonial state, the gradual alienation of the Communist labour activists from the jute workers after their support to the British War efforts, or the divisions within the workers on lines of caste, region and religion.

The present study identifies the marked distance between the jute workers and the trade unions of Bengal as a significant factor, which would explain - why the isolated acts of protest by the mill hands could not be given the form of a wide based labour movement, collectively fought and sustained over time. The fact that only one-fifth of the jute workers of Bengal were members of the different trade unions by 1945, meant that the labour activists could not bring a major section of the workers together whenever they planned to build up fresh movements. Apart from it, another important issue that curtailed the prospect of labour resistance in Bengal, which has been hitherto largely ignored, was the famine of 1943. The acute shortage of food grains in the open market and the high price of the commodities of daily use compelled the workers in Calcutta and its suburbs to continue with their assigned works within the mills and refrain from any act

of protest that might see them out of job, and hence deprive them of their weekly quota of subsidised food grains from the mills ration shops. Besides, the study also focuses upon certain features of the jute industry - its export oriented production, the excess supply of 'budli' labour - to explain the dictating position that the jute mill owners of Bengal enjoyed while dealing with the scattered and divided acts of labour protest. As the demand for jute products varied from year to year owing to the War requirements of major buyers like USA and Great Britain, the jute mills during the slack phase had the option of closing down production units in the face of labour protests – without risking any real loss in profit.

The **second chapter** locates the varying nature of interventions made and the role played by the different elected ministries of Bengal in matters relating to the jute industry and its labour force over the period. In Bengal, between 1937-47, four different ministries were in power and their approach while mediating within the jute Capital-Labour disputes varied significantly following largely from their respective political alignment and interests.

The jute workers of Bengal were in a miserable position by the beginning of 1937, if one compares them with their fellow mill workers either in Kanpur or Bombay. As has been shown, most of the demands made by the jute workers of Bengal - like fixing of the minimum standard wage, increase in the basic wage, a month's leave with pay – were not met; while these issues were addressed by the other provincial ministries as a part of their well formulated labour policies. Much therefore was expected from the different Bengal ministries in respect of pro-labour legislation, but nothing of that sort actually happened over the period.

The first Huq ministry (KPP and Muslim League coalition), which remained in power from March 1937 to December 1941, did little for the jute workers of Bengal by introducing new Acts. Instead, as has been made evident from the debates in the Bengal Legislative Assembly, the ministry adopted a clear pro-employer stance and stood committed to defend the interests of the IJMA. The only pro-labour legislation came in the form of the Bengal Maternity Benefit Act (1939); even there the scope of the Act was limited - as the jute mill owners had the easy option of dispensing with women workers whenever they deemed fit. In contrast, the first Huq regime was quite attentive to the plights of the jute growers in Bengal, supporting them with some important legislation.

The second Huq ministry - comprising of the Progressive Coalition Party, KPP and the Forward Bloc - did much more for the jute labour, as within one and a half years time it passed the Workmen's Compensation (Bengal Amendment) Act, introduced the Labour Welfare Scheme, and forced the IJMA to concede on certain important demands. Under the Muslim League ministries of Khwaja Sir Nazimuddin and H. S. Suhrawardy (1943-47), the cause of the jute labour suffered badly as no significant move was initiated by the Government of Bengal to improve the condition of the mill hands.

The unstinting support on the part of the Bengal Government for the Capital interests was, naturally, not without reasons. As has been discussed, the very existence of both the first Huq regime and the later Nazimuddin ministry hinged on the support of the European members representing the capitalist interest within the Assembly. Both these ministries were short of absolute majority and hence, they could not afford to move any pro-labour legislation that might harm the interest of the (European dominated) IJMA and thereby deny them the bloc support of the Europeans within the Assembly. At the same

time, the first Huq regime was quite attentive to the demands of the jute growers of Bengal due to the pressure from the KPP faction of the coalition - which had the rich peasant group as its important support base. The second Huq regime, in marked contrast, could adopt a general pro-labour line, as it could stay in office independent of any support from the European group. The very fact that the labour leaders were supporters of the second Huq Government, made it imperative for the latter to take up the issues related to jute labour with adequate seriousness.

Parallel to it, the chapter also focuses upon the respective positions adopted by these ministries while dealing with the various occasions of jute labour strikes. The response of the elected ministries in this regard was largely conditioned by their general understanding of labour discontentment as being engineered from above by the Communist activists - in order to serve their own political interests.

The KPP-Muslim League coalition could counter the 'Communist threat' by adopting severe repressive measures and various divisive tactics, with the tacit support of the IJMA. The Muslim League labour unions were formed with the sole aim of dividing the jute workers on religious lines - thus weakening the influence of the CPI activists within the general jute labour force of Bengal. The trend continued unreversed under both the Nazimuddin and the Suhrawardy Government, as preventive orders were passed to curb the jute workers' protests from time to time. It had its desired effect, as the Communist-led jute labour movement, particularly during 1946-47, could not gain much momentum in the face of government repression. A break in this respect was somewhat evident during the second Huq regime, when the government was sympathetic - owing to its political compulsions - to the workers' demands during various occasions of strike.

Even here, as has been pointed out, the Bengal Government often had to adopt a tough stance towards strikers, owing to the pressure exerted by the Government of India in the form of the War-time Ordinances.

The **third chapter** addresses the question of 'dominant identity' among the jute mill workers of Bengal over the years 1937-47. Labour historians in the last two decades have remained largely divided on this issue. Some scholars have emphasised upon certain 'pre-capitalist' notions of consciousness as the focal point of the identity of labour in India, while others have identified 'class' as the fundamental basis of identity. This chapter has examined the above stated contentions, i.e., class versus community (in this sense religion) as the main determinant of identity, in respect of the jute mill hands of Bengal – the way it is evident from their participation in incidents of communal violence for the period under consideration.

A study of the various instances of communal friction involving the jute workers of Bengal between 1937-45 has shown that most of them occurred over the celebration of various religious festivals. The playing of music in front of the mosque by Hindu processions during the Holi or the Durga Puja, the sacrifice of the cow during the Muslim festival of Bakr-Id, were issues which could evoke strong and collective response from the jute workers – for in them the respective communities could identify a deliberate intension on the part of the other to offend their sense of honour. Parallel to it, there were instances where different political parties, particularly the Muslim League, utilised the solidarity of the jute workers on religious-communal lines in order to disrupt strikes - thus serving their respective interests. There were frequent occasions when the Muslim League controlled unions urged its members not to participate in strikes called by the

BCMU affiliated Hindu jute workers, which ultimately led to serious clashes between the two communities.

Along side being divided on 'community' lines, the jute mill hands of Bengal also showed a strong sense of 'collective identity' as 'workers' between 1937-45. As has been discussed in this chapter, there were occasions when the workers from the same jute mill areas, which had been susceptible to communal incitements, were seen fighting the employers and the management in unison with their 'religious opponents'. More significantly, the jute worker showed enough evidence of collective resistance even while dealing with issues that had religious connotations specific to one of the communities.

The chapter next focuses upon the period 1946-47, which witnessed large-scale communal violence in pre-independent Bengal. The major participants in the various acts of mob violence were the workers engaged in different occupations that came under the 'unorganised' sector of the economy. In contrast, the jute workers in the various mills of Calcutta and its suburbs - the areas which had been most affected by the communal violence - remained relatively uninvolved in these acts of rioting. In spite of a general sense of panic prevailing among the jute labour, there were only few instances of communal clashes in which they actually participated. That the incidents of communal violence could not undermine the former's sense of identity as 'workers' could also be gauged from the fact during 1946-47, there was considerable number of labour stoppages in the jute mills of Bengal – higher than what was seen during the War years.

The marked difference between the 'organised' jute mill hands and the 'unorganised work force' of Bengal, while responding to the all round acts of communal frenzy, appears as an interesting problem. The present chapter explains the restraint

shown by the jute workers of Bengal amidst wide spread tension in the presence of the trade union activists within its ranks – who on certain occasions averted the possibility of communal flare-ups among the jute workers by their timely intervention. The nature of the working class leadership available to the jute mill hands of Bengal was thus of considerable importance in guiding the workers into major movements over concrete economic demands, even while there were divisions among them on the lines of religion.

A study of the different issues involving the jute workers in Bengal, over the span of a decade, is not complete in itself. Yet, it offers certain important insights about a significant component of the urban society and economy. The problems that the jute mill hands of Bengal had to deal with in the 1940s, or the issues that came to influence their response within varying situations – were specific both to the space and time to which they belonged. All the same, these issues might be contrasted with those - which involved their fellow workers in the other parts of the country to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the various aspects relating to the industrial labour in colonial India. Besides, a study in this regard would also help the labour historians to identify the problems that still confront the jute workers of present day West Bengal or for that matter the workers in most of the Indian industries. The present work is an effort seeking to contribute in this respect.

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