

**Working class struggles, labour elites and closed shops: the lessons from India's  
trade unions and experiences of organisation**

**Paper for the SEWA/Cornell/WIEGO conference  
Membership-Based Organizations of the Poor**

**Ahmedabad, January 2005**

**Arjan de Haan with Samita Sen<sup>1</sup>**

**Introduction**

At a workshop on membership based organisations of the poor hosted by SEWA it seemed, to me, appropriate to reflect on the role and history of India's trade unions. SEWA came up in the context of the decline of one of India's largest employer of non-agricultural labour of the twentieth century, which gave rise to what at the beginning of the twentieth century seemed to be amongst the most important forms of organisation of the poor.

This paper will reflect on the history of the India's trade unions of unskilled labour, their origins under colonial rule, transformation during the first decades of Independence, and decline with the crises of the old colonial industries. While referring to studies on trade unions elsewhere, the paper will focus on the fate of trade unions in and around Calcutta, particularly – drawing on historical and contemporary work by both authors – of the colonial jute industry and the industrial neighbourhoods in which large numbers of migrant workers from different parts of India came to work.<sup>2</sup>

The paper will, in a way, aim at restoration of the image of trade unions in countries like India where only a small proportion of the population derives livelihoods from large-scale industries. While they have become increasingly associated with notions of a 'labour aristocracy', the trade unions emerged as major progressive forces with the rise of the industries at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, under – as a rule – regimes that did not favour organisation of the poor. They were major parts of the independence movement, and often have played a progressive role against rising communalism. They were major forces in moderately enhancing the

---

<sup>1</sup> Arjan de Haan is at the UK Department for International Development and Samita Sen is Professor of History, Calcutta University; the paper will be written by Arjan *with* Samita as her inputs are expected for a revised version of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> This draws in particular on our jointly edited volume, A de Haan and S Sen, *A Case for Labour History. The Jute Industry in Eastern India*, Calcutta, 1999, and our respective PhDs finished mid 1990s.

living standards of the mostly unskilled work force and their families, many of whom stayed back in rural areas (and hence improvement of wages did benefit the relatively poor rural areas), and many of who did settle in urban areas and have expanded their economic and educational opportunities.

Against that background, the main aim of the paper will be to draw lessons regarding the successes and failures of trade unions, in organising and representing the interest of a section of India's poor population. We do this through a description of a number of key themes in the development of trade unions and labour history, since the growth of the colonial industries, and discuss how these have contributed to the extent in which unions have been able to include and be representative of sections of the population. These relate to themes of 'outside intervention' in union organisation, the nature of recruitment of labour and unions' role, the evolution of the labour market – and legislation – over the twentieth century, and the gradual exclusion of women from the workplace and implications for their representation in unions. The concluding section will bring the description back to thinking about conditions for organisations by and for the poor.

## **1. Growth and decline of colonial industries: trade unions and the role of outsiders**

In current debates of Indian economic development, it is often forgotten that it has had a fairly illustrious industrial history.<sup>3</sup> While much of the traditional rural industry may have disappeared, India created, between 1850 and 1914 the world's largest jute manufacturing industry, the world's fifth largest cotton industry, and the world third-largest railway network – even though by the time of Independence, as today, India was still largely non-industrial. The industries were located near the continent's main ports, Bombay, Calcutta, Madras and Karachi. Total employment in Indian manufacturing grew from about 500,000 in 1900 till more than 2.5 million by the time of Independence.

Both the cotton and the jute industry underwent major expansion towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: cotton mills in western India employed about 60,000 people in 1880 and 260,000 in 1913, while the jute industry, mostly near Calcutta, grew from 50,000 jobs in 1880 to over 200,000 by 1910. Both have continued to be major employers of unskilled labour throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, though with serious booms and busts, at different points of time, and in both cases a secular decline throughout the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

---

<sup>3</sup> Morris, M.D. 'The Growth of Large-Scale Industry to 1947', in: *The Cambridge Economic History of India*, Vol.2, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983, pp.553-676.

## Employment in the jute industry, 1880-1988

<i>Bengal</i>	
1880	42,000
1900	111,000
1920	280,321
1930	328,177
1940	284,720
<i>West Bengal</i>	
1950	285,585
1960	208,000
1970	223,000
1980	246,529
1988	225,151

Source: Indian Jute Mills Association (IJMA), Annual Reports.

Even though total employment in manufacturing even at the time of Independence amounted to only a few per cent of the Indian labour force, it's growth has attracted a great deal of attention. The Government of India produced a major report on industrial labour about every decade since 1890, and the Government of Bengal published a similar number – initially with a concern whether sufficient labour was available, but soon to a large extent with worries about 'industrial unrest'. The growth of Indian industries attracted the interests of international trade unions, and employment practices were influenced greatly by ILO regulation.

And of course, trade unions became a significant feature of industrial and political life. But from the early history, the nature of labour organisation was disputed. On the one hand, officials like the Bengal labour commissioner (in 1935), emphasising the concentration of 300,000 jute mill workers in a close stretch of 20 miles north and south of Calcutta warned that "[n]owhere in the world are there better territorial conditions for labour organisation than round about Calcutta."<sup>4</sup> Protests and strikes – and other forms of protest, including dilatory work behaviour, irregularity in attendance – were never absent in the jute mills, from the 1890s onwards as described by the pioneer of Bengal's labour history, the late Ranajit Das Gupta,<sup>5</sup> and Amal Das for Howrah (the industrial town opposite of the river from Calcutta).<sup>6</sup> Waves of protest occurred during the swadeshi movement in Bengal during 1905-08, and militancy appears to have increased during the 1920s. Since Independence, militancy flared up from the mid 1960s onwards, while the industry went into crisis, and even

---

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History. Bengal 1890-1940*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1989, p.116

<sup>5</sup> Ranajit Das Gupta, 'Poverty and Protest: A Study of Calcutta's Industrial Workers and Labouring Poor, 1875-1899', in: R Das Gupta, *Labour and Working Class in Eastern India. Studies in Colonial History*, KP Bagchi, Calcutta, 1994.

<sup>6</sup> Amal Das, 'Outside Intervention in Jute Mill Strikes – Howrah, 1870-1930, in de Haan and Sen. Also, Subho Basu, 'Workers Politics in Bengal 1890s-1929. Mill Towns, Strikes and National Agitation' Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge, 1994; and Anthony Cox, 'Rationalisation and Resistance: The Imperial Jute Industries of Dundee and Calcutta, 1930-1940', Fellowship Dissertation, Cambridge, 1997.

around 1990 one could not but be impressed by vocal and influential trade unions organisations.

However, on the other hand, militancy and frequent strikes were not necessarily accompanied by stable organisation. Numbers on membership of trade unions have been – and still are – notoriously unreliable: an inquiry in 1945 showed that about 18 per cent of workers were members of unions, and in 1952 the general secretary of the Bengal Chatkal Mazdoor Union warned that 95 per cent of jute mill workers were not organised.<sup>7</sup> Many an observer, most notably Dipesh Chakrabarty (1989: Chapter 4) has concluded that there was a paradox of organisation: evidently there has been great discontent among the workers, dissatisfaction often led to protests, and the Indian Jute Mills Association in the 1930s set up its own intelligence to be prepared, but this was not related – at least during the colonial period – to a form of stable organisation.<sup>8</sup>

After Independence, the nature of organisation did of course change significantly. However, my own observations, intermittently during 1989-93 suggested that trade union organisation remained fairly fluid – even though official figures, confirmed by workers' testimonies, do show significant increases in trade union membership after Independence.<sup>9</sup> With the decline of the industries since the 1960s, the role of unions had changed drastically. During the 1960s unions had become, again, increasingly militant, but its nature was thoroughly political, fuelled by political party differences rather than – I would argue – workers' long-term concerns.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, trade unions while increasing in numbers became increasingly powerless because of the emergence of the phenomenon of 'lock-outs', the employers' strike, in which factories were closed for extended periods of time, sometimes as reaction to the power struggle against unions, sometimes – in a period when changed hiring practice had made it difficult to vary workers' 'supplement' – perhaps as a covert means to respond to changes in the product market. Where the paradox of the beginning of the 20th century had been militancy without stable organisation, the paradox at the end of the century was the large number of unions even within one factory without concomitant ability to defend the interests of the workers.

One of the possible reasons for the specific form of workers' organisation may have been the role of outsiders in the trade unions, which has been extensively discussed in the historiography of labour and trade unions. This has included some degree of links with international trade union movements, including during the early part of the twentieth century, but has mainly consisted of a range of Indian middle class men,

---

<sup>7</sup> Chakrabarty, 1989, p.116.

<sup>8</sup> After Independence, much higher figures started to be quoted, but these are notoriously unreliable, as trade unions generally do not maintain membership registration. Many people told us that they joined unions or parties from which they expected to get an advantage. Some said that they had paid donations to all unions to avoid their anger, that they supported the strongest union, and that workers are opportunists.

<sup>9</sup> A de Haan, *Unsettled Settlers. Migrant Workers and Industrial Capitalism in Calcutta*, Rotterdam, 1994, Chapter 9.

<sup>10</sup> As an indication of this fluidity, I observed that between 1991 and 1993, the influence of BJP politics in the industrial area – which has by and large been spared communal conflicts – appeared to have increased.

with a variety of backgrounds: social reformers who took of the plight of poor workers against the conservative regime of mostly British employers and the colonial state, communists developing Indian chapters of the international workers' movements, and the nationalist movement that associated itself with or consisted of groups of industrial workers. In the case of the jute industry, it needs to be highlighted, particular circumstances shaped the nature of a possible 'outsider': capital was mostly foreign, either British (in fact, with lower management from Scotland) or 'Marwari' (ie from western India), while most of the worker (increasingly) were non-Bengali – the Bengali educate middle class, the *bhadralok* became an almost natural candidate for the role of outsider, typically distrusted by the colonial officials.

When the first signs of protests emerged, employers and officials alike have blamed this on agitation by trouble makers, and outside instigation.<sup>11</sup> Even though in many cases employers recognised workers' concerns, the legitimacy of organisation was disputed. A dominant view among employers was one of a relatively calm and satisfied (usually migrant, as discussed below) worker – an apparently Orientalist and certainly paternalistic view that was carried forth well after Independence. Organised protest, so was the image, could only be the result of agitation by people who did not belong to the rank of the workers. And at least the colonial government made frequent use of section 144 of the Penal Code to expel agitators (Chakrabarty 1989: 131).

Much of the (radical) historiography has played down the role of outsiders. According to Ranajit Das Gupta (1994: 351), for example, reflecting on an official view (DIG of Police) of the possibility that agitators were present, "may be incited to mischief by the native papers", highlighted that no evidence in support of the insinuation existed, that the native papers did not show much concern for the plight of the workers, and that even mill managers were aware of agitation arising within the ranks of workers. Das Gupta and others' description, moreover, highlighted the large number of reasons, directly related to wages, work practices, and work and living conditions that were direct causes of forms of protest.<sup>12</sup> And the lack of sustained organisation could, at least in part, be attributed to a repressive political environment.

When reflecting on the lack of sustained workers organisation, in the 1920s, reformist minded officials like Gilchrist highlighted the lack of education and illiteracy among workers. Interestingly, this view was shared by some of the trade union leaders: KC Roy Chowdhury, a local labour union leader, in the early 1920s stated that "constructive trade unionism will not take root ... unless the soil is weeded and

---

<sup>11</sup> It may be important to emphasise that much of the description is based on official records, that very few oral and written testimonies of workers' exist, and that we thus, as Chakrabarty put it, forced to read between the lines to get an understanding of the world of workers and their organisation. My own research focused on oral history, but this remains limited too, for example highlighted in the common statement that things were better in the past.

<sup>12</sup> In a number of cases protests revolved around cultural-religious issues, for example related to recognition of religious holidays. While the living and working environment has remained to a large extent segmented, along regional, ethnic and religious lines, with a few exceptions trade unions did not organise along such lines.

workers receive primary instruction” (in Chakrabarty 1989: 128). The significance in this remark is not in the truth or falsehood of his remark, but in the fact that it came from a union leader, implying an assumed distance between leader and subject. For the more radical organisers, this concern obtained the form of ‘political education’ (including about the Russian revolution), but even Indrajit Gupta in the 1950s showed great concern for workers ‘cultural and social activity’ (ibid: 129-30).

While many radical historians, as described, have downplayed the role of outsiders, Dipesh Chakrabarty, does find evidence of their pre-eminent role, but shifts the focus on the paradox to a deeper level, of ‘culture’. He does not see a necessary contradiction between involvement of outsiders and sustained organisation, nor sees workers as passive instruments of the leaders’ will, but highlights personalistic forms of leadership (sometimes couched in terms of ‘zamindari’ – landlord – control) and paternalistic – or in the case of Prabhabati Das Gupta during the 1929 strike, maternalistic – authority over the workers: “I will insist that even these people [Bengali intellectuals, *bhadralok*], for all their sacrifice, remained imprisoned in the *babu-coolie* relationship insofar as the nature of their contract with the working class is concerned” (Chakrabarty 1989: 150). An old worker we interviewed in 1991 still did remember Ms Das Gupta, and the successful strikes she led – but not as part of sustained workers’ organisation.

The extent and importance of outsiders in working class organisation may and probably will remain a matter of dispute. However, I do find it plausible that they played a crucial role – in fact, that the history of labour has continued to be written by outsiders may be seen as proof of their sustained importance (until today there are no known records or testimonies by workers). This is not to argue that this role has not changed (or that this is either good or bad). On the contrary, with the changed political circumstances of Independence at least the Bengali middle class became very differently situated in their intermediation on behalf of the workers, and with the sometimes violent political differences between Congress and Communist supporters in the 1960s this again changed significantly. The point to recognise, however, and of no surprise probably for many observers of forms of organisation particularly by the poor (and with similarities in Bombay for example), is that sustained organisation often takes the form of alliances, including entry points into the dominant political and cultural terrains.

But the form such organisation takes has of course implications – and a longer-term view may present a rather different picture from a shorter-term one. Arguably, while perhaps essential in terms of organisation of the working poor during the colonial period, the intermediation from the start had close political affiliations, and these worked out strongly after Independence.<sup>13</sup> The Congress-Communist differences were particularly relevant, but much more fractionalisation occurred within both camps.

---

<sup>13</sup> In this context, the discussion of hierarchy is central. Most studies, Chakrabarty's in particular, stress that the Indian working class has been characterised by a strong hierarchical culture. Industries like jute have been organised in a hierarchical fashion, trade unions have not operated on democratic principles, and the workers’ ‘cultures’ were though to be equally hierarchical.

Between the late 1930s and mid-1960s, these differences or factions had been well-managed and played off against each other by employers.

From the end of the 1960s, with the rise of the communists in West Bengal, this changed radically (even though the political agenda of the Left Front has been focused on rural areas), and the employers' association felt themselves rapidly losing the control that they had previously taken for granted: <sup>14</sup> wage structures, delinking wages from productivity, and increased security of work all became part of the victory of workers' organisation, but at a time when the industry went into a serious decline, with decreasing employment, and increasing irregularity of employment through the phenomenon of lock out.

As indicated, within one factory large numbers of trade unions could be encountered even around 1990, despite the great 'offensive against workers', <sup>15</sup> and the history of wage negotiations suggest that a fair amount of bidding occurred between the different unions (also, as described below, unions often were part of patronage networks through which jobs were obtained). It seems that the factions were largely driven by political differences rather than the result of growth of organisation within the ranks. This led to great progress in workers' conditions, but the gains were temporary, and - as described below - for an increasingly small part of the labour force. This illustrates, perhaps, a familiar - theoretical and probably practical - dilemma of intermediaries (though changing in nature) contributing greatly to the capacity of workers to organise, while at the same time making such organisation less sustainable or at least subject to a variety of motives and incentives.

## **2. Do structures determine organisation? Patterns of recruitment and migration**

In this second part of the paper we look at how functioning of trade unions has been influenced by the nature of recruitment and employment of labour. Two main characteristics, both of which, too, have been studied well in the historiography of labour and featured frequently in contemporary writings are the fact that workers were migrants, and the personalistic character of recruitment.

First, while the very first jute mills near Calcutta employed mostly local, Bengali labour, the employers quickly moved on to employ migrants, mostly from (current) Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, with considerable numbers from Orissa, Andhra Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. In the literature, the nature of this shift towards migrant labour has been disputed: according to some this was the result of a shortage of local labour; according to others - and this argument has been made particularly strongly for other parts of India - it was an employers' strategy, to reduce the likelihood of workers'

---

<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, while the history of trade union organisation is well studied for the colonial period, the more recent period is not well documented; much of my information on this is based on employers records; see A de Haan, *Unsettled Settlers*, 1994: Chapter 7).

<sup>15</sup> Biren Roy, 'Jute Mill-Owners' Offensive against Workers', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 5 September 1992, pp.1893-4.

organisation. For the Calcutta jute mills, I have found no evidence that such a strategy was actively employed, and I have attributed the change from local to migrant labour as the result of a very rapid expansion in the labour market, combined with the pre-existence of active migration patterns from many of the areas of recruitment.

While the reasons for the increase in migrant labour in itself may be important for the story about workers' organisation, the main argument here is around the implications of the nature of migration and labour recruitment. Crucially, the pattern of migration was, and to a large extent has remained, circular. Rather than entire families moving to the industrial area, typically single male migrants moved (as sex ratios for urban industrial areas showed), leaving families behind,<sup>16</sup> maintaining very close links with their villages, and returning frequently.

Ever since this pattern of migration emerged, it manifested itself in various both convenient and inconvenient ways for employers. It was often thought that this made them less committed to the workplace, and responsible – particularly in the early decades of the industry – for high rates of labour turnover. The close links with the village also gave rise to a seasonal shortage of workers, as migrants left the city in large groups particularly during the summer months.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, it also proved to be very convenient, in particular during major economic crises like in 1931, when following the 1929 slump lots of jobs were cut, and workers moved en masse back to the rural areas, without signs of protest, they disappeared, as Labour Commissioner Gilchrist observed, as snow for the sun.

The outlook of workers I interviewed gave a rather different perspective of this pattern of migration from the one that emerges from the radical historiography. Many workers, returning to the village did not need explanation, and answers included exclamations like 'What to do? My house is there!'. Many said that they go when there was a 'need' or 'work': marriage, an emergency, taking care of the land (land disputes being a reason for prolonged absence), education of the children. Visiting the family was a key reason for going to the village, for one or two months per year, quite often longer and frequently beyond the allowed period of leave (and that medical certificates could be bought was a public secret).

What, then, are the implications of this pattern of migration for forms of organisation? I would argue that, just as this could be both convenient and an irritant for employers, for trade union organisation this provides both an advantage and a challenge – but that it is likely to impact upon the form of organisation. As highlighted above, unorganised militancy was quite common in the early years of the industry, and the

---

<sup>16</sup> The pattern of migration varied somewhat across regional and perhaps religious communities, with in the case of my own field research much higher incidences of family migration among migrants from southern Orissa and Andhra. But across communities, female migration did occur and I come back to this below.

<sup>17</sup> Some debate exists for the reason of this annual exodus: while some have argued that this was related to seasonal agricultural activities, I concluded that the return has been mainly during the festive and marriage season, and if anything after the main harvest. But in any case, it is important to emphasise that rural and urban lives form an integrated phenomenon from the perspective of the worker.

option of exit appears to have been exercised quite frequently (with the changing labour market situation and increasing surplus of labour, presumably, this has changed, as discussed below). Strikes could be maintained longer, because workers would go home – evidence suggest that this phenomenon that existed in a 1929 strike still existed in a strike in 1992. On the other hand, the dual existence of the workers makes it more difficult to organise workers on a sustained basis, and many a trade union organiser has shared the concerns of the employers about the ‘lack of commitment’ of the migrant worker to the industry and urban area.<sup>18</sup> In any case, in understanding the specific form of this form of organisation, the complexity of both material livelihoods and the (inter-related) social-cultural orientation needs to be taken into account.

The pattern of migration is closely intertwined with the second key characteristic of labour recruitment and employment. Labour relations have invariably been characterised as personalistic (and employment practices in the 1920s sometimes as chaotic). Relations between management and labour were extremely hierarchical (backed up by repressive colonial power), personified through a range of intermediaries, typically the Bengali labour clerk and the notorious *sardar*.<sup>19</sup> The last played a significant role in shop-floor management but particularly in the recruitment of labour, especially during the early years of the industry when there was a premium on bringing additional new workers in, and labour turnover was high. There is also evidence that the sardars exercised control over the replacement of workers, perhaps particularly the system of *badli* labour (temporary workers, particularly significant during the annual period when many workers left). Successive changes in labour management practices and legislation have half-heartedly and largely unsuccessfully tried to dispense with this role.

How trade unions related to the sardars has not been subject to systematic investigation, as far as I am aware. It is almost inevitable, however, that trade union organisation to a large extent followed the existing networks of which sardars were a central part. As I have argued extensively elsewhere (de Haan 1994), sardars were not just a creation of employers in the absence of ‘modern’ labour management – though they certainly fulfilled an important function – but also part of the social network that created the environment in the industrial area, and linked living space including in rural areas to the work place. Social networks were, and have remained – though labour market conditions have changed significant as described below – key to obtaining jobs. And certainly for the period for which I have first-hand information, it

---

<sup>18</sup> For example, a union leader said that workers are only interested in earning money to take it back home. This has been observed in research on unions elsewhere in India too.

<sup>19</sup> Das Gupta has highlighted the central importance of the sardari system - and linked to that the importance of personal ties - till 1937, when the first labour officers were introduced; R Das Gupta, ‘Structure of the Labour Market in Colonial India’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, November 1981, Special Number, pp.1781-1806. Chakrabarty emphasises that a large part of the sardar's authority was based on fear, and the use of naked physical force: *Rethinking Working Class History*, pp.109 ff; also O Goswami, ‘Multiple Images: Jute Mill Strikes of 1929 and 1937 Seen Through Other's Eyes’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 21, 3 1985, pp.547-83.

was clear that trade union leaders, at least at lower levels, did play an important role in the distribution of available jobs; trade unions were, in fact, part of a closed-shop system, though not necessarily based on formal membership.

The story that seems to emerge, thus, is about the importance of ‘external’ factors for the forms organisations are likely to take. In this case, both the migratory nature and continuing rural-urban links, and the personalistic character of recruitment, has exercised a great influence, sometimes enhancing the potential for organisation (as unions derived strength from the role of union leaders in labour recruitment), sometimes weakening it, and sometimes making the process of organisation less equitable. How the structures that originated early on impacted the longer-term history of organisation is the subject of the next section.

### **3. Structures (2): how economic fluctuations may shape organisation**

While patterns of recruitment and labour control, as argued above, influenced the form of organisation a great deal, economic busts and booms and changes in labour markets and job opportunities have continuously changed the conditions for, and dynamics of trade union organisation. We made already references to some of these changes above, and in this section we deal with this question more systematically. It may be appropriate to divide the long history of the industry and the accompanying history of labour organisation into three periods: expansion up till the 1920s, relative stability till the 1960s, and a period of turmoil and decline since then.<sup>20</sup>

Up to the late 1920s, the demand for labour was generally thought to outstrip supply. This perception was perhaps not quite accurate, and partly just a common complaint of employers’, but from both the official records that showed high labour turnover and oral testimonies of workers suggesting getting a job was very easy, one may conclude that workers were in a relatively advantageous position – even though there is little evidence that the high demand for labour resulted in significant increases in wages (in fact, real wages appear to have been fairly stable until the late 1960s).

As described above, however, during this period the forms of organisation remained fairly fluid. On the one hand, workers did show much militancy, arguably voted with their feet, and unmediated forms of protest occurred frequently. On the other hand, attempts by organisers from outside were fairly new, and took place in a relatively repressive environment. And the gang leaders played an important role for the workers, but to a large extent the premium was about bringing more people in. The relative fluid nature of the organisation that existed was, arguably, demonstrated in the crisis in 1931: large numbers of jobs were cut, but very little protest emerged (in

---

<sup>20</sup> Details, and references, on changes in the industry can be found in de Haan 1994: Chapter 7.

fact, the event did not feature in the workers' memories) and workers appear to have chosen for an option of exit, going back to their villages.<sup>21</sup>

The decades after 1929/1931 appear to have been a long period of relative calm. The industry adapted to the 1929 crisis, with restrictions in production and some attempts of rationalisation during the 1930s. With the outbreak of the war, the industry became more profitable, and in the period immediately after Independence and Partition it had to cope with the fact that its supply of raw jute had been cut-off but production levels remained high and if anything increased. Labour legislation did however change radically after Independence.

Rationalisation during the 1950s implied a reduction of jobs (women lost out in particular, as discussed in the next section). We know perhaps too little of the role of trade unions during this period, particularly how they reacted to the changed labour market. What we do know is that radical union leaders – like Indrajit Gupta – continued to be concerned about the lack of stable organisation. The outside organisers now found themselves in a very different political circumstance: while mill ownership and management remained in the hands of foreigners and Marwaris, government officials were not as clearly on their side as they were before Independence (though this does not necessarily mean they were more favourably disposed to the – migrant – worker).

From the little evidence we have for the period of the 1950s/60s, it appears that corporatist principles predominated within the industry. Labour legislation – which in this period started to prescribe hiring and firing procedures, for example through a ruling that rationalisation should not lead to dismissals - was the result of government intervention (and sometimes had to be 'explained' to workers). Works Committees were introduced and employers saw this as the main institution for negotiating rationalisation. It is significant, and perhaps need to be seen in the context of the lack of stable trade union organisation, that very few strikes or other forms of protest emerged while many jobs did disappear. Jobs were becoming more secure, labour conditions improved marginally, but the benefits were for an increasingly smaller number of workers.

The crisis of the industry that started in the mid 1960s had a number of reasons: decline in exports, imposition of an export duty, and withdrawal of foreign capital. Significant for the analysis here is how labour conditions changed during this period. As was highlighted above, from 1965 onward strikes suddenly became much more common (taking the industry by surprise), wages started to increase significantly, and employers started to resort to 'lock-outs' where previously they tried to change production levels through – at least on paper – negotiated compromises.

---

<sup>21</sup> A 70-year-old retired female worker from Andhra also said that there were no unions in the past: *paelle union kaha raha?, khali bara sardar, laine sardar, e sab hai* (where were unions in the past? There were just the bara sardar, line sardar, all that was there).

Some of the employers, in a similar way in which they used to blame outsiders for unrest, now blamed ‘inter-union and intra-union rivalries’. While one does not need to accept this employers’ view, there is something rather paradoxical about the events after the mid-1960s, and how these differed from the period before. The increased militancy started to occur at the same time as the crisis of the industry deepened. Moreover, demands and protests were often not related to the most serious aspects of the crisis; for example unions appeared to have been completely powerless against the phenomenon of strikes. The strikes and workers’ victories around 1970 did not feature in the oral histories of workers we interviewed; rather, they saw it as a period of unrest, indiscipline and murders.

During the period of fieldwork in the 1990s, factionalism and political domination were central characteristics of labour organisations. Titaghur Jute Mill for example was said to have fourteen unions, CITU, INTUC and AITUC – all three closely affiliated to the main political parties being the strongest. From interviews, it was not difficult to conclude that unions were not popular, that workers at best approached them for direct benefits of help (for which, they were likely to have to pay small bribes). And as before, trade unions were closely involved in the recruitment of worker (and in effect operated a closed shop system), that workers would become members of unions to get a job, and had close links with labour contractors.

Thus, at one level, the form of labour organisation was successful, as through whatever the dominant political alliance was the workers have been able to obtain benefits. But at the same time, it seems to have brought in a certain distance between the developments in the industry and demands voiced by organisations, and political motivations (ie not directly linked to the industry) arguable have dominated the long-term interest of the industry (rather than leading to a demise of unions). There was certainly nothing inevitable about this pattern, but it appears that the dominant form of organisation has made it vulnerable to developments taking the turn it took. In the process, and this is illustrated in the next section with reference to female labour, the benefits were obtained for an ever-smaller number of workers.

#### **4. Women in the industry and trade unions**

This last section of the paper – which will be subject to major revision/development – focuses on the conditions that have led to a limited representation of women in unions. This is, of course, partly related to the small percentage of women in the industry, but this is not the main story, and in fact what needs explanation is the decline of female labour during this century, and the role that trade unions have played in this.

In the early stages of the jute industry, a fairly large number of women joined the industry (though not nearly in the same proportions as modern export-oriented industries in Bangladesh and elsewhere). There were geographical differences, as described extensively elsewhere: comparatively more women from Andhra Pradesh and southern Orissa than from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh worked in the industry. It is

not entirely clear whether this pattern was there so strongly from the start of the industry in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, but it certainly developed fairly early on. These *differences* do not appear to have been determined by patterns of recruitment within the industry - though the level of female employment and particularly its decline from the 1930s onwards had a much more unified force behind them (and has arguably led to a spreading of notions restricting mobility of women).

#### Female labour in the jute industry, 1912-1971

Year	Women (number)	Percentage of total workforce
<i>Bengal</i>		
1912	31,329	15.7
1920	44,545	15.9
1930	52,144	15.9
1935	37,749	14.3
1940	36,640	13.9
1945	38,789	13.7
<i>West Bengal</i>		
1950	35,944	13.6
1955	22,375	8.9
1960	9,419	4.4
1962	8,700	3.0
1971		2.5

Sources: till 1960 IJMA figures; the 1962 and 1971 figures are from the Ministry of Labour, Labour Bureau, 1973.

It may be important to reflect on the reasons for the decline of female employment. The precondition was created by the development of a surplus of labour, which started with the crisis of 1931, but did not immediately take on a structural nature because of large fluctuation on both sides of the labour market during the 1930s and 1940s. The first piece of female-specific legislation, introduced in 1891 – which prohibited night work by women, made maternity leave compulsory, and limited their working day to eleven hours - had little effect, because of infractions and the government's practice of exempting particular mills. Further 'protective' legislation was introduced during the 1920s/30s, but again this legislation did not result directly in the exclusion of women. It was only in the 1950s that employers started to argue that legislation had made female employment costlier, and that the restrictions on carrying weights and on working in specific occupations made it a problem to employ women.

Legislation was largely a result of official concerns about the welfare of women – rather than the result of organised protest. From the 1920s, female labour became defined as a 'problem', including because of their 'irregular' lives, the fact that many men left their wives in the villages and presumed temporary alliances in the industrial area. This official concern, thus,

provided the rationale for legislation – but it may also have functioned as legitimisation for the exclusion of women later on.

A further factor responsible for the disappearance of women was the rationalisation of production carried out in the 1950s. Employment decreased by almost one-third in ten years: in 1948 there were 315,000 workers in the industry, and in 1961 a low of 197,000 was reached. But the rationalisation was not gender-neutral: whereas before, employers had not objected to women working, they now considered them unfit for factory work, especially when new (high-speed) machines were introduced. In the 1960s, there was an explicit drive to reduce the number of female workers in the mills of Thomas Duff & Co. for example, with its chairman arguing that some mills ‘could do a lot better’ in getting women to resign (the official records emphasised natural attrition and voluntary retirement, and shifts in production were used to speed up the process).

What was the reaction of trade unions to the decline of female labour? For sure, as described by Leela Fernandes,<sup>22</sup> there were occasions that unions formally included demands from women, but these never reached high priority, or were even raised during tripartite negotiations. Also, and mirroring the earlier paradox of militancy without sustained organisation, women have displayed considerable degrees of militancy. ‘Gherao’, plus embarrassment of male officials, have been common strategies. But the militancy and protests of women have not been integrated systematically in the working of trade union organisation.

Exclusion of women had at least three aspects, illustrating how over time the organisation of workers became increasingly confined to an ever smaller group, increasingly male. First, women hardly ever (if at all) became trade union leaders (as there were no opportunities for women to become *sardars*) – the role of Ms Das Gupta would not be an exception to this as she was not a worker herself (even if she did have much appeal to workers). Second, the demands of women were never an important part of the demands of the male-dominated unions, even when there was considerable amount of spontaneous protest. Third, the unions did not oppose and often have been instrumental in the displacement of women from the industry,<sup>23</sup> themselves reinforcing a notion - that possibly became stronger as the 20<sup>th</sup> century developed - of the male breadwinner.<sup>24</sup> I witnessed that it was common for trade unions to request jobs for women, but only because they had become widowed or otherwise were single heads of households.

## 5. Organisations of the poor: some concluding thoughts

---

<sup>22</sup> L Fernandes, ‘Displacing Women Workers on the Margins of Working Politics in the Jute Mills’, in de Haan and Sen, 1999, pp. 185-90.

<sup>23</sup> Fernandes 1999: 185; my own incidental observations also suggested that local union leaders were largely in favour of reservation of jobs for men.

<sup>24</sup> S Sen, *Women and Labour in Late Colonial India. The Bengal Jute Industry*, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

This paper has described the history of a particular form of organisation in a particular set of circumstances: boom and bust of a major industry, with outsiders playing an important role in organisation of workers, and the increasing exclusiveness of the organisation. This concluding section tries to bring the description back to thinking about conditions for organisations by and for the poor. To do so, it may be helpful to use a framework proposed by Fox in research in Mexico, asking the question how civil society ‘thickens’.<sup>25</sup>

A first pathway through which this can happen is referred to as state-society convergence, in which reformist officials within the state facilitate the emergence of autonomous forms of organisation (including in corporatist forms in the two decades after Independence). As we have seen this has played a very important role in the case of trade union organization, but it also proved a two-edged sword, and the long-term view adopted in this paper brings out some of these dynamics: on the one hand, outsiders were essential in organization, and gave the organisation an enormous amount of strength particularly in the more repressive environment of the colonial periods; on the other hand, arguable it made the organisation more vulnerable to a variety of motives, not always in the interest of the broad set of people they represent, as was arguably demonstrated from the late 1960s onwards.

The second pathway centres around collaboration between external and local civil society actors. Again, coalitions played an important role in the formation of trade unions. The 1990s wave of global alliances in a sense was not new, as trade union members from the UK and elsewhere did take up the case of workers in Calcutta, and international communism did lend much weight to the organisations – be it that this may have been largely indirectly, through political parties, which as we have seen have contributed to factionalism within workers organisation.

The third pathway distinguished by Fox is bottom-up mobilisation, and this remains a core issue in trying to explain the long-term trends of workers organisation. A key theme throughout the century, affecting the entire labour force in the 1920s and women in particular during the 1950s has been the paradox of militancy and lack of sustained organisation (or connectedness to the dominant forms of organisation, as in the case of women). Thus suggest, I would put forward as hypotheses, that even (or perhaps because?) in these circumstances that provided ideal ground for mass organisation, the channelisation of mobilisation was essential, but that the *form* in which protests were channelled has been equally crucial for the development of the organisation.

In conclusion, I would like to point to what may be considered the largest dilemma of trade unions in countries that are marked by an ‘informal sector’ comprising about 90 per cent of the labour force, and in contexts of de-industrialisation of sectors in which trade unions traditionally have had the largest foothold: can they broaden their interests and objectives in a way that make them more representative for larger

---

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in A Bebbington et al., *Local Capacity, Village Governance, and the Political Economy of Rural Development in Indonesia*, forthcoming in *World Development*.

sections of the poor population (where SEWA has most notably filled this gap)? The history of organisation among organised workers indicates that they have become increasingly exclusionary, suggesting that a radical change in orientation would be required before they would take on a broader role. The role of unions has become increasingly restricted to defending the interests of an ever-smaller group of workers, and the roles of union leaders and *sardars* seemed to have become increasingly intertwined. A key question that emerges, therefore, is whether unions would be able to lift themselves out of this squeeze, and innovate to become representative of a wider section of the urban (and by implication rural) population.