

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Exploitation of the Poor, Communal Squabbles, and the Emergence of Organised Labour in British India

P.K. VISVESVARAN

Mr. P.K. Visvesvaran is Faculty, Madras School of Social Work, Chennai.

Colonialism, Class and a History of the Calcutta Jute Millhands, by P. Ghosh, 2000, Chennai: Orient Longman Limited, pp. 284, Price: Rs. 385/-.

INTRODUCTION

In this three-in-one hard cover volume, the author provides copious information on the exploitation of agricultural workers and small farmers by the upper caste landlords and British planters of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century India. Equally copious data are also found on the endemic communal disharmony between Hindus and Muslims and the resulting mass violence and internecine hatred, which sapped the energies of the working class. It also contains information on sporadic resistance offered by agricultural labourers to the centuries-long exploitation to which they had been subjected and on the development of an organised, industrial labour movement among the jute mill hands of Calcutta.

The backdrop to the above events in British colonial India and a government, which often aligned itself with the native upper classes, rather than being interested in rendering social justice to the long-suffering poor people of the country. The role played by India's freedom movement and its leaders in organising the working class into a viable labour movement has an important place in this volume. The author has made a handsome contribution to the understanding of all of the above themes and sub-themes.

METHODOLOGY

This being a study of events that took place almost a century ago, the author has adopted, appropriately enough, the *ex-post facto* technique for gathering the required information. He has delved into State archives, newspapers, journals, other publications of the said era, and other private sources. He has also had interviews with those who could recall vital events. The resulting massive data have been presented in chronological order with lucid commentaries and incisive, summing-up notes. Among the tabulated data, two instances stand out and are worthy of special mention. Table 1.1 (p.27) presents figures on population per square mile in Patna Division during 1872 and 1881. One is astonished to find that the concentration or density of population of over 8,000 persons in some places comes close to the situation in today's urban areas! The author says that overpopulation in these agricultural areas pushed 'rent up' and 'pulled wages down'. By drawing attention to the then population density, the author has successfully pinpointed an important source of the misery of the poor. Incidentally, one wishes that the author had given a glimpse of the density of the Muslim population. This could have provided an insight into the endemic nature of the Hindu-Muslim conflict.

Table III.5a (p. 140) is another eye-opener. It reveals that in the city of Calcutta the number of women for 1000 men had steadily declined from 552 in the year 1872, to 507 in the year 1901, to a mere 470 in the year 1921. In this way, the reader is compelled to think of the resulting urban, social problems — prostitution, sexually transmitted diseases and fatherless children, to name a few. The author has indeed put tabulated data into effective use.

CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

The author has ear-marked over a third of the book for an elaborate discussion on the exploitation of the agricultural workers and the jute millhands by the affluent classes, both in Bihar and in Bengal. It is interesting to note that today, nearly a century later, the situation has not changed much, at least in the agricultural and other unorganised sectors.

The remaining pages are devoted to a discussion on communal disharmony and out-breaks of rioting that arose from the denial of religious rights, and from mutual intolerance among the major religious groups, the Hindus and Muslims. For example, the ritualistic

slaughter of animals by Muslims was objected to and physically thwarted by Hindus leading to clashes, and violence including attacks on women belonging to the other group. Such hostilities and group hatred ought to have physically and mentally enervated the working class and the poor among both the groups leaving* them little time or energy to ponder over the means to tackle their real oppressors. This should offer food for thought to those indulging in such squabbles and those who encourage the same.

ORIGINALITY

The author repeatedly argues that the development of a conscientious, industrial labour depends, in a given society, on its cultural background and situation and the prevailing socioeconomic and political circumstances. The jealous and oppressive British colonial rule was a powerful deterrent to the development of a full-fledged indigenous capitalism, he says. He adds that the average labourer's communal self was no hindrance to the concurrent development of a working class awareness, and the ability to identify and share common occupational interests with fellow-workers, who pursued a different faith and whose customs and practices were often obnoxious. The average worker, thus *warped* or wove his multiple selves into a harmonious unity and never left uncomfortable about being, what other might call, a bundle of contradictions, the author says. These are certainly new ideas that are worthy of critical consideration. He has put forward yet another idea regarding the role played by communal conflicts in colonial India, which requires a more elaborate treatment. This will be discussed at a later stage.

ASPECTS OF AUTHOR'S NARRATIVE

The book under review is surely an erudite piece of work written in an extremely readable manner. The quality of editing proof-reading has been very good. Errors are few and far between.

Examples:

For	Read
...remittances for the city (p. 11)	remittances from the City
Agricultural stratification has existed	...far longer than...

for longer than
 historians would
 care to remember (p.15)

CONCEPTUAL CLARITY AND LOGIC IN ANALYSIS

Generally speaking, the author has presented his facts and arguments with admirable clarity. His analysis of the historical information has been incisive and masterly, with one glaring exception.

The author's decision to use the same word 'struggle' to refer to both communal riots (Chapter 4) and to the labour movement of the working class (Chapter 5) is unfortunate, regrettable and even perplexing. It is appropriate for Chapter 5, not so in Chapter 4.

For, communal riots are hostile actions initiated by one community against another, resulting in violence directed against each other. Therefore, it seems inappropriate to label the riotous action of one communal group, say Muslims, against another, say Hindus as 'workers' struggle'. At best it can only be an 'struggle'. However, in the very next Chapter (namely, the fifth) he once again uses the same term, 'struggle', to refer to something entirely different. In this case it is an 'external' conflict, in the sense that the working class as a whole, setting aside their communal differences and intolerance, for the time being, offers resistance to an employer who has been oppressive and exploitative.

The author's attempt to equate the two seems unwarranted. Moreover, the author says in his conclusion that the workers' internal struggle often provided occasions for them to initiate external struggle. The reader knows that could only be an incidental and unpremeditated by — product of the workers' communal stir. The fact that some communal rioters clashed with the police and thrashed some British officers does not amount to a planned, premeditated and organised protest against colonial rule.

Frequent outbreaks of plague also led to rumour-mongering and suspicions. For example, some workers believed that injections and vaccinations during plague outbreaks led to deaths among the natives. This led to paranoid attacks by the natives against foreign nurses, medical personnel, as well as innocent aliens in the vicinity (p. 174). Does the author want us to believe that such sporadic incidents amounted to an organised protest against alien rule?

Or, for that matter, a group of miscreants when nabbed or questioned by the police, may let loose a diatribe against the government,

the ruling party, or both. Is this to be considered a respectable or credible form of campaign against those in power? The author seems to want us to believe it is indeed so.

CONTENTS OF THE BOOK

The first Chapter, 'The Living Heritage' is also the longest. It does not have to do with Calcutta or Bengal at all, but is entirely about Bihar which regularly supplied workers to the Calcutta mills. 'The Living Heritage' is about the plight of agricultural workers who were thoroughly exploited by the land-owning upper classes. Incredibly low wages and miserable living conditions were common features. No wonder the agricultural workers preferred to migrate to neighbouring Bengal and work in the jute mills, once again for meagre wages. Since they had left their families behind, they could save a portion of their wages and remit it to their relatives left behind in Bihar who were, thus, enabled to carry on agricultural work despite the numerous problems and exploitative conditions faced. This chapter also carries information on the occasional resistance shown by agricultural workers to oppressive conditions. It also gives instances of communal fights between Muslims and Hindus, which occurred at regular intervals and were part and parcel of everyday life of the poor working class.

In Chapter 2, attention shifts to the appalling working and service conditions in the Calcutta jute mills. Most workers put in 10.5- 13.5 hours of work every day. A white overseer could strike the workers with impunity or claim a female worker for a night. The author says that workers were generally ready to submit to these and other abuses (P.97).

Chapter 3, 'Outside the Factory', describes the deplorable condition under which the workers lived — 'bad sanitary conditions, lack of ventilation and drainage, over-crowding of huts; and the nearest public latrine was at least one mile away' (p. 126); where each one of the seats had to be shared by at least 400 persons. A few pages of this Chapter are devoted to describe how the other (affluent) half, namely the mill-owners and the British rulers, lived a comfortable and luxurious life.

Chapter 4, already referred to earlier in this review essay, once again deals with communal uprisings and bitter conflicts between Muslims and Hindus, mainly over the intolerance of one another's customary festivities and religious observances.

The last Chapter, 'Workers' Struggles, Part II', narrates the gradual emergence of trade unions in the jute mills and workers' participation in the nationalistic struggles against the British, which included the Khilafat Movement. In this movement, Indians, regardless of religious affiliation, united to show their solidarity with Turkey's struggles against foreign intervention in their (Turkish) affairs.

The author has presented his findings in a lucid style and with erudite and succinct comments. However, the facts presented by the author are, for the most part, depressing and disturbing. The miserable living and working conditions of both farmers and industrial workers at the turn of the twentieth century, described in graphic terms by the author, combined with a faithful narration of the various forms of skull-duggery, exploitation and plain cheating to which they had been subjected to by their cruel masters, followed by the sickening record of communal squabbles occurring at regular intervals, have a dampening effect on the reader's spirits.

Many pages of the book are almost exclusively devoted to these two themes: workers' miserable living and service conditions, on the one hand, and their continuous participation in the mutually destructive, communal conflicts, on the other. In contrast, union and unionising activities and workers' involvement in the freedom movement hardly take up around 60 pages or just a fourth of the entire book. This might well leave the reader in somewhat low spirits.

The author's approach has been to record ably and diligently all the historical facts, the bright as well as the gloomy ones. Communal riots are what they have been — tales of mindless violence, killing and wounding of people, destroying property just because they belonged to the other group. These facts cannot be whitewashed and the average reader will balk at the suggestion that somehow the Hindus and Muslims were not exactly at each other's throats, but were only venting their ire at the British rulers, their mis-administration and misrule.

Therefore, the author's contention that communal identity and loyalties 'offered much larger space for opposition towards the principal enemy of the workers, the colonial state (p. 196)', is not really convincing.

OTHER WORKS ON THE SAME THEME

We will now see how some aspects of the volume under review compare with aspects of five other books, written by various other authors on the same theme.

Indian Labour Movement by G. Ramanujam (1990) describes how the labour movement evolved in this country. For obvious reasons, the author makes extensive reference to the Indian independence movement, which sought to free the nation from alien rule and how this struggle contributed to the development of trade unions in this country. There is no reference to communal riots, for the author seems to assume there was no connection with such partisan struggles and the labour uprising.

In B.L. Mehta's *Trade Union Movement in India* (1991) there are just a couple of references to the Bengal workers (and peasants) party. M.V.D. Bogaert, in his book on *Trade Unionism in Indian Ports*, (1970) says that the heavy manual labour in Calcutta's industries were mostly Hindi-speaking labour drawn from North Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. He observes that the Calcutta docks were relatively free from communal violence. Communalism was first injected into workers' movement by Suhrawardy around 1935, and it reared its head in the unions in 1965 and resisted the leftist leanings of the labour.

V.B. Karnik's *Strikes in India* (1967) carries a lot of information identical to what is found in the volume under review: humiliating treatment of jute workers by the European managers, and disputes raised by Muslim workers over their right to observe Bakri Id as per the dictates of their faith, despite the Hindus' sentimental objections.

There is one more book on the same theme that could be called Tamil Nadu's exact counterpart of the book under review. It is C.S. Krishna's *Labour Movement in Tamil Nadu* (1989). Both the authors describe the plight of the migrant workers in almost identical terms.

A worker with a debt of Rs. 110 at the rate of 75% interest was in terrible distress (Krishna, 1989: 25).

It was found that 76% of these families were in debt to the tune of Rs. 91 per family on the average (Ghosh, 2000: 137).

...agricultural labour and industrial labour were often so closely inter-related that a man might spend parts of the year on agriculture and part on industrial labour (Krishna, 1989: 17).

The typical migrants preferred to leave their families behind and visited home annually or more frequently if they could manage if (Ghosh, 2000: 13).

Even the description of physical assaults on workers by the European bosses are identical.

The departmental 'Dorai' (European boss) got so enraged, that he had the offending worker brought to the place, caught hold of him by the

hair and gave him a shake or two, threw him down and gave him a few kicks (Krishna, 1989: 80).

... Spence, the European manager not only refused leave for the day to the worker who had asked for the day to the worker who had asked for it, but proceeded to beat up the man, kicking him several times in the groin (Ghosh, 2000: 99)

The average size of the quarters was 9 feet by 8 feet (Shiva Rao, cited by Krishna, 1989: 27).

The average size of the room was 9¹/₂ ft. by 8¹/₂ ft (Ghosh, 2000:138).

Examples of similarities in facts and descriptions could easily be multiplied.

Some of the differences between the two volumes are that Krishna has no instances of communal violence in Tamil Nadu to cite. This may be because Muslims here constituted only a small minority (Krishna, 1989: 17) unlike in Bengal where there were more Muslim workers and who also earned more (Ghosh, 2000: 139 [Table III]).

On the other hand, members of the lower castes were in the majority in Tamil Nadu (Krishna, 1989: 17) and this led to occasional caste clashes among workers, which has been induced by the scheming European masters to create disunity and to break up strikes (Krishna, 2000: 175). Also Krishna uses the term struggle (Chapters 3 and 5) to refer only to labour disputes (and not to communal flare-ups which were practically non-existent in this part of the country).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In sum, Ghosh's central thesis is that evolution of the industrial labour force in India exhibited features which require an atypical theoretical framework (p.244). Unlike in the West, industrialisation in India took place under a colonial state and this crucial factor gave a contextual form to the contours of the bourgeoisie and the working class (pp.245-246). The author goes to the extent of saying that the workers in the jute mills did not consider the Anglo-Scottish management their major enemy. The chief adversary was rather the colonial state itself (p.246). The average reader has no reason to quarrel with this view.

The author also speculates that the village-based, urban industrial worker's zealous dedication to the interests of his religion stemmed from his rural origin, and his class consciousness, from his experiences as a millhand. These two tendencies were 'strangely intertwined, separate yet integrated within the same labour force (p.248).'

The average reader once again knows that people do harbour within themselves numerous inconsistent loyalties, notions and attitudes without being quite aware of it. Therefore, the author's conclusions along the above lines are not unacceptable.

It may be emphasised that what is not quite acceptable is the author's choice of the term 'workers' struggle' to describe either Hindus' struggle against Muslims or vice versa (Chapter 4). Communal squabbles, by their very nature, are bereft of class sentiments and, therefore, are not worthy of being labelled as 'workers' struggles'. Even if the author's contention that communal riots sometimes resulted in demonstration by one of the groups involved — either the Hindus or the Muslims — against the state (p. 196) were true, that alone does not justify dubbing communal eruptions as workers' struggles.

The above provisos notwithstanding, the volume under consideration is sure to be found extremely readable by anyone who is interested in the history of India's working class. Further, it is of special interest to social workers and sociologists, who would like to acquaint themselves with the history of exploitation of the poorer classes by the better-off sections in this country. The same professional groups will also find this volume a rich source of information on India's notorious and endemic communal squabbles and continual bad blood among groups. All said and done, the book under review could be said to have made a useful contribution to an increased understanding of important aspects of the life of the poorer classes in this country.

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