

Preface

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At the beginning of the 1990s the discipline of labour history seemed to be in serious crisis. The editorial in Supplement 1 to this journal in 1993 was seriously concerned that, having peaked during the 1960s and 1970s, interest in labour history had declined very rapidly by the 1990s. The decline of “old labour history” prompted the question whether this was the end of labour history itself. The current phase of globalization, coinciding with the rapid decline of the industrial working class in advanced capitalist countries, the retreat of the state, the emergence of subcontracting, and the demise of the Soviet Union, was the context for nascent doubts about the foundational basis of labour history.

However, recent years have witnessed a growing scholarly interest in historical labour studies, especially in Latin America and South Asia. This revival is different both in its location and in its central concerns. Earlier, the major emphasis of labour history research was on the core countries such as North America, Europe, Australia, and Japan. Now, research on the labour history of the capitalist peripheries is increasingly attracting international scholarship. The concerns of this new labour history are not confined to the traditional working class alone; much attention is also paid to migrants, the self-employed, and indentured labourers.

This new labour history also feels an urgent need to reconstitute the older frameworks, which had revolved around fixed binaries of space, time, and social relations. Increasingly, labour historians have to contend with the existing notions of pre-modern and modern, free and unfree, formal and informal labour relations, and with traditional spatial divisions such as factory and field, urban and rural. With the expansion of the process of informalization and feminization of the workforce, the centrality of the male, unionized factory or transport worker may no longer be tenable. Areas that have gained prominence in recent years include issues of labour mobility, the changing legal construction of labour relations, notions of solidarity, gender relations, multiplicity of labouring identities, and the impact of new technologies on work.

Indian historians have provided an important impulse to these developments. Not only have they published a number of significant studies in recent years – as the select bibliography at the end of this volume emphasizes – they founded, ten years ago, the Association of Indian



Figure 1. Some founders of the Association of Indian Labour Historians, at the founding meeting at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, December 1996. Professor Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, the chairperson, is fourth from right.
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Labour Historians, which, partly through its conferences, promotes national and international communication among researchers and fosters young talent.¹ This Supplement would have been inconceivable without its activities.

That labour history is flourishing in India is not of course a coincidence. The prospect of India as one of the world's major manufacturing hubs and destinations for services outsourcing in the coming decades, along with the phenomenal expansion of the informalization process, has pushed the labour question willy-nilly centre stage. This Supplement seeks to consolidate and showcase some of the best new research inspired by those developments.

The new research eschews traditional schemes. While recognizing that the category of "labour" was originally connected with the emergence of

1. The Association was founded at a meeting at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, in December 1996. The idea arose during a conference on "South Asian Labour: Local and Global Linkages" held in October 1995 at the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam. In 1998, in collaboration with the V.V. Giri National Labour Institute in Noida, the Association founded the Archives of Indian Labour. See <<http://www.indialabourarchives.org>>.

modern industrial society, the new labour history feels a need to question the chronological divide that has resulted in a marked emphasis on the colonial period, to the disadvantage of the developments that preceded and followed that period. The temporal divides of the pre-modern/modern/contemporary and the theme of transition across these boundaries have been a major organizing principle of labour history. Labour history has had to contend with the uncomfortable fact of the persistence of pre-modern forms of labour relations and the coexistence of industrialization and deindustrialization. It has become increasingly evident that these lines have been far too sharply drawn. Given the “transitional” nature of social relations under colonialism and the dynamic of caste and convention, some of the contributions to this Supplement are devoted to the institutional forms and categories of pre-colonial and pre-industrial Indian labour history.

Equally problematic are the classical accounts of labour mobility, which relegated it to the prehistory of class formation. Confronted with the persistence of mobility among workers, these classical accounts interpreted it as incomplete proletarianization and partial labour commitment. The problems with these accounts of mobility are becoming increasingly evident – after a century and a half of industrialization labour mobility remains a dominant issue in South Asian labour history. South Asian labour was mobile in the pre-colonial and colonial periods and remains mobile in the post-colonial era.

This volume opens with a review article by Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, the doyen of the new Indian labour history. Bhattacharya outlines how research has developed in recent decades and makes a forceful appeal for studies comparing South Asia with other areas of the global south. He substantiates his hypothesis that there are important homomorphies between colonial social formations of the past and contemporary underdeveloped countries.

Michael Fisher’s chapter traces the labour history of Indian seamen from the emergence of intercontinental sea trade between India and Europe from the beginning of seventeenth century to the establishment of colonial empires. He locates the changing nature of labour relations, from “free” to “unfree” labour, on board the trans-oceanic ships, in a merchant-capitalist era dominated by Dutch, English, and other northern European joint-stock corporations. In the process of studying the “unevenly changing interactions between indigenous patterns of labour relations and the fundamentally different European models”, Fisher’s research extends Indian labour history transnationally beyond India’s shores and chronologically back to the pre-colonial period.

Ian Kerr’s chapter explores the world of pan-Indian circulating and itinerant labour, which worked on wide varieties of construction sites in the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial periods. Underlining the

continuity and significance of these groups, he argues that most of the requirements for labour power for construction work in the pre-colonial, colonial, or post-colonial periods were met from within (increasingly better integrated) labour markets involving circulating labour. He further argues that the earlier manifestations of migration in protoindustrial, predominantly agrarian societies with pre-industrial forms of capitalism and different political structures (city-states, the segmentary states of earlier south India, or territorially vast empires for example) have received too little attention. These circulating workers, or people like them, were present early in the history of India and continuously thereafter. Their numbers grew dramatically during the high colonial period due to an explosive increase in the demand for construction labour occasioned by the massive infrastructural building drive by the colonial state.

Jan Lucassen's chapter questions the existing wisdom about labour history, particularly in the orthodox Marxian perception, that collective class-consciousness and action are both linked to the emergence of modern industrialization in western Europe and North America. This perception had a profound influence on the writings of the labour historians of the colonial world of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. His research on the history of brickmakers' strikes between 1848 and 1849, at the site of the Ganges Canal builders during the 1840s and 1850s in northern India, offers a critical appraisal of the supposed link between modern industrialization and collective labour action.

Ravi Ahuja extends Michael Fisher's analysis to the late-colonial and post-colonial periods. He looks at the tens of thousands of south Asian seamen who manned European ships in the first half of the twentieth century. Given their profession, these *lascars* were extremely mobile geographically, but very immobile socially. Throughout this period, they were at the bottom of this hierarchically segmented international maritime labour market. Ahuja explains this by pointing out that British and "British-Indian" maritime labour law, the immigration laws of metropolitan countries, and extra-legal structures of exclusion and containment *in combination* were fairly effectual in controlling the mobility of Indian seamen and in reproducing "a segregated pool of poorly paid and legally inferior colonial labour".

Rana Behal shows how, prior to Independence in 1947 and in collaboration with the Indian Tea Association, the Assam Valley tea planters tried systematically to dominate, discipline, and control workers by a combination of two strategies: immobilizing labour within the plantation complex once the workers' had arrived there, and curbing their contact with the outside world. Both strategies aimed to prevent the formation of collective labour organizations. After first showing how the ITA became an extraordinarily effective pressure group within the colonial state, Behal provides a detailed reconstruc-

tion of how these strategies were enforced in the day-to-day lives of the coolies.

Prabhu Mohapatra examines the culture and forms of protest among Indian indentured labourers in the West Indies during the last phase of the indentured labour regime (1880–1920). He focuses on four different sets of representations of community identity: the annual Muharram festival, and the public activities of three individuals: two prolific letter writers in the colonial newspapers, and the author of one of the rare literary texts produced by Indians during the period. Mohapatra concludes that no singular identity developed among the Indian diaspora, although all forms of identity bore a relation to the local labour regime.

Shankar Ramaswami takes us to contemporary Delhi. In a pioneering essay, he explores themes of proletarian masculinity and humour among migrant workers in a metalworking factory. Ramaswami's lively narrative describes metalworkers' vocabularies and practices of joking and horseplay, with particular reference to their homoerotic and heteroerotic imageries, as well as to their subtle auto-critiques.

Willem van Schendel concludes the volume with a wide-ranging essay. Focusing on Bengal and north-east India, he examines eight partly overlapping themes that promise to be especially effective in broadening the history of labour in this region. Van Schendel points out, for example, that historians of industrial labour have so far focused disproportionately on the jute factories in colonial Calcutta (Kolkata). He argues that the "dynamic and persistently finely graded labour relations" in agriculture are deserving of greater consideration, as are the amazing variety of gender roles, labour trafficking, the cultures and meanings of labour, and the labour implications of shifting cultivation (*jhum*) and wet-rice cultivation. Van Schendel's essay can be read as a programme for future research.

Originally, it was intended to include an essay by Rajnarayan Chandavarkar in this Supplement. However, Raj (as he was known to everyone) died unexpectedly on 23 April 2006, while on a visit to the United States. He was fifty-two. As homage to this great scholar, we publish the unpolished draft of his chapter. It is an important contribution to a crucial theme of Indian social history: the decline of the industrial "jobber" (labour recruiter) in the 1940s.

Raj's death is a great loss. Not only was Raj one of the foremost Indian labour historians, he was also an inspiring colleague and a superb teacher. We dedicate this collection of essays to his memory.