Pakistan, the lower castes in Bengal were successfully wooed by the Hindu Mahasabha to accept caste Hindu leadership and to join up with the Hindus in the pre-partition communal convulsion. Clearly, as Bandyopadhyay concluded, the political aspirations or self-consciousness of the lower castes did not seriously threaten Hindu political hegemony.

A strong point of this book is that in exploring the past the author never loses touch with the present. His questions almost emanate from the prevailing political situation in India in the last leg of the twentieth century. The rise of the Hindutva brand of politics, alongside the growing importance of those political parties whose principal agenda appear to be concerned with the political and social demands of the lower castes, including that of the *dalits*, has brought to the fore the question of caste hegemony and the nature of protest against it. Bandyopadhyay’s answer is that the caste-based hierarchy was always flexible enough to accommodate changes in the society. And therefore, in present times it has been possible for the champions of Hindutva to enter into political understandings with the representatives of the lower castes, solely for the purpose of forming a government. The unfortunate fact remains that such understandings are fundamentally opportunistic in nature, and that they do not signify any real change in the notion of hierarchy in the broader society.

*Parimal Ghosh*


Does class matter? “Yes”, writes Subho Basu, “we can recover it as a defused [or, maybe, diffused] form of social and political entity that can be made and remade depending on the contingency of immediate social and political circumstance” (p. 283). He grounds this assertion in an empirical examination of workers’ movements in the Bengal jute industry from its inception to the general strike of 1937. Jute workers’ politics is read, however, in relation to major political events of Bengal: the Swadeshi movement (1905); the non-cooperation and Khilafat movements (1918); the rise of the socialist movement (1920s); provincial autonomy and the communalization of Bengal politics (1930s).

The last four chapters of this book – the bulk of it, that is – draws together the various strands of Bengal politics and chronologically examines the relationship between workers’ movements with these wider political currents. The author examines the multiple links and dynamic relationship among workers’ micro-politics, institutionalization, state structures, and “high politics”. He argues a strong case for a political reading of labour history: “This study asserts that the social history of labour cannot be separated from the political history of institutions of governance, political parties, and trade unions” (p. 277). One of the more innovative aspects of the book is the depiction of the dominance of jute capital in municipal institutions of jute towns. The alliance between European capital and colonial state, the combination of race and class dominance, the author argues, created a politically volatile environment within which workers had to devise their strategies of survival as well as their collective struggles.

In arguing for a “political” understanding of class, Basu affirms R.S. Chandavarkar’s
thesis, “that [...] social categories were not given in the first place but politically constructed, and that the process of the social formation of the working class was shaped by an essentially political dimension at its core.” Basu places his arguments between two opposing approaches in Indian labour historiography: the notion of “class as a monolithic construct that manifested itself through socialist parties and trade unions”, and the emphasis on “other forms of monolithic constructs, such as communities based on primordial loyalties” in order to “fill the absence of class” (p. 283). The former refers to the orthodox Marxist view, which dominated Indian labour history until the 1980s, writing the history of labour in terms of progressive organization and collective activities like strikes and trade unionism. The latter refers to Dipesh Chakrabarty’s provocative book on jute workers, *Rethinking Working-Class History* (1989), arguing the difficulty of conceptualizing a “working class” in the Indian context and the continued significance of “pre-capitalist” identities such as (religious) community among factory workers.

Chakrabarty’s thesis is not one of imperfect class formation. He rejects the possibility of subordinating community to “needs of capital”, instead posing community as an alternative category for understanding factory workers, their relationships with the employers, the state, and with each other. The implicit substitution of one master identity, “community”, anchored to pre-capitalist culture, for another, “working class”, shaped by the exigencies of colonial capital, has provoked a younger generation of scholars in India to explore other competing categories in the context of labour. It has been followed by Janaki Nair’s examination of caste and gender in a comparative study of Kolar gold mine workers and Bangalore textile workers, my own work, and Leela Fernandes’s work on the importance of gender in the construction of a jute working class. Other scholars have examined the construction of tribal identities, and the complexities of the colonial state’s rhetoric on “free” labour.

Basu does not engage directly with these competing categories and their implication for applying any monolithic identity, class, or community in understanding factory workers. He does, however, accept that class cannot be accorded primacy any more than it can be regarded as a “master identity”; rather, “class” is an element in a “complex pattern of identity formation in interaction with diverse forms of political processes” (p. 283). So does class matter? Only to the extent that without a notion of class “we are left with the danger of viewing workers as prisoners of diverse forms of primordial loyalties and as guided by predetermined destinies” (p. 283), or as “trapped within the pre-capitalist loyalties of caste, religion, and region” (p. 13). The question does, however, remain: If class matters, how and

5. There are a number of full-length studies and research papers. For a fuller discussion of these trends, see Arjan de Haan and Samita Sen, *A Case for Labour History* (Calcutta, 1999), and Arjan de Haan, “Towards a ‘Total History’ of Bengal Labour”, in Sekhar Bandyopadhyay (ed.) *Bengal: Rethinking History* (New Delhi, 2001).
to what extent? Since gender, caste, and tribal identities are, of course, neither “pre-capitalist” nor “primordial loyalties” but also capitalist and necessarily politically constructed, how do we square the notion of class with these competing identities? How do we approach a notion of class that is not grounded in production relations? These questions were debated in a variety of fora in the 1980s and 1990s, particularly among English labour historians. Does the history of the jute workers contribute any new insight to this debate?

Basu’s book is part not only of the “new” labour history of India in the last three decades, but also of a recent crop of writings on the jute industry and its workers. The book draws, often explicitly, on this rich corpus: Ranajit Dasgupta, experimenting within the framework of Marxist scholarship to write a “social history” of jute workers; Parimal Ghosh examining rural and communitarian political influences; Nirban Basu exploring the relationship between nationalist movements, party politics, and trade unions; Amal Das writing on the political history of jute workers in one particular region, Howrah; and Tanima Ghosh researching the economics of the industry and wage determination, to name a few.6

In common with a number of the above-mentioned authors, Basu re-examines a persistent shibboleth of Indian labour history: the “rural connection” of factory workers. He concludes that return migration to villages was a manifestation of rural loyalties but also a survival strategy in the urban labour market. Here he is in disagreement with Arjan de Haan’s recent work on the migration of jute workers, arguing for a more dynamic relationship between village and city,7 and Chandavarkar, who argues that urban jobs were as often a strategy for survival in the village as the other way round.8

Basu also examines the relationship between Bengal’s urban elite and the jute workers in a variety of contexts: the workplace in which middle-class Bengalis worked in clerical capacities; in the towns, where the bhadralok sought the physical and political marginalization of workers; and in the political arena, where workers were drawn, contained, and mobilized for a variety of agenda. He argues, however, for recognizing the workers’ agency in their relationship with the political leadership, and the ways in which their participation shaped and influenced party strategy. His discussions raise, but do not quite consider, two questions of contemporary concern. How do we consider the question of workers’ agency within the context of party-affiliated competitive trade unionism? What is the implication of progressive organization for the fluid and intertwined network of the urban poor and their experience of elite-employer-state nexus? These questions may help us understand the threats to the organized working class in recent years and the nature of their response to it, as well as the political role (or lack thereof) of the so-called “informal” sector workers who constitute more than 90 per cent of the country’s workers.

Samita Sen

6. For representative samples of these authors’ work as well as an extensive bibliography, see Haan and Sen, A Case for Labour History.
7. Arjan de Haan focuses on the ritual, social, and emotional contents of urban–rural relationships; Unsettled Settlers: Migrant Workers and Industrial Capitalism in Calcutta (Calcutta, 1996).