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ON DEIFYING AND DEFYING AUTHORITY: MANAGERS AND WORKERS IN THE JUTE MILLS OF BENGAL CIRCA 1890-1940*

I

I INTEND TO ARGUE HERE A RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN "PROTEST", "authority" and "consciousness" in the labour history of colonial Bengal. I am mainly concerned with the workers in the jute mills in and around Calcutta, the majority of whom were migrant peasants and artisans from the present-day Indian provinces of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh.¹

Certain preliminaries are in order. By "authority" I refer to the power of managers and their European superintendents, called Assistants or European Assistants, in the jute mills. They were mostly Scotsmen from Dundee and its neighbourhood; the *Handbook and Guide to Dundee and District* published in 1912 reported that "the overseers, managers and mechanics in the Indian jute mills [were] almost wholly recruited from Dundee".² I overlook here whatever complexities may have characterized relationships *within* the managerial hierarchy in the mill. I also overlook, in this article, the special role of the *sardars* (Indian jobbers) who occupied a grey zone between management and labour. I include them in my category of "workers" and thus ignore the complex relations between the *sardars* and ordinary workers below them. One reason for doing this is that working-class protests were often led by the *sardars* themselves.

There are also some important points³ that need to be borne in mind, as they lend a perspective to the discussion that follows. Over the long run the jute industry had an abundant supply of labour, but because of the organization of the labour-market (for example, the *sardari* system), several short-term imperfections remained. Indivi-

* Thanks are due to David Arnold, Partha Chatterjee, Bernard S. Cohn, Ranajit Guha, Anthony Low, Michael Pearson, Kalpana Ram and Roger Stuart for comments on an earlier draft. I alone am responsible for any errors of fact or judgement.

¹ For the social and cultural background of this working class, see my "Communal Riots and Labour: Bengal's Jute Mill-Hands in the 1890s", *Past and Present*, no. 91 (May 1981), pp. 140-69, and the references therein.

² *Handbook and Guide to Dundee and District* (British Association, Dundee, 1912), p. 118.

³ A longer and substantiated statement on the political economy of the jute industry is provided in my "Conditions for Knowledge of Working-Class Conditions: Employers, Government and the Jute Workers of Calcutta, 1890-1940", in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies*, ii (forthcoming).

dual mills often experienced temporary shortage of labour. Some degree of labour-poaching between mills seems to have existed till the mid-1920s. The short-run fluctuations in labour supply were strong enough to induce the managers to retain the practice of keeping one or two weeks' wages in hand (till at least 1928). The fluctuations, however, were not strong enough to make them introduce the obvious measures necessary to build up a permanent labour force, such as pension schemes, provident funds and so forth. Further, the industry had no explicitly coded service regulations for its labourers. Even service records of individual workers were not maintained. These were to be introduced in 1937, but not properly till 1948.

II

Let me begin with some typical cases of working-class protest in the 1890s.

In 1895 there was a riot at the Kankinara Jute Mill after the manager had refused a wage increase. The manager "narrowly escaped", though "Iron bolts &c., were thrown at him and his house was attacked". Next year in the Baranagar Jute Mill, spinners, demanding increased wages, "surrounded the manager and the Spinning Master . . . assaulted an Indian clerk and showered brickbats into the mill premises".⁴ Muslim "coolies" at the Kamarhati Jute Mill were refused leave on the Id day in 1895. They responded by striking the "Manager and the durwans [gatekeepers, armed retainers] by throwing brickbats at them".⁵ The same year Hindu workers of a mill at Titagarh protested in a similar way when they were not allowed leave on the day of the Annapurna Puja (a Hindu religious festival). The manager was beaten up, as well as the police who came to save him.⁶

Two very well known instances of labour protest of these years were an 1895 strike at the Budge Budge Jute Mill and an 1899 strike at the Bowreah Cotton Mill. Regarding the former, the *Amrita bazar patrika* report ran as follows:

On Tuesday last [June 1895] . . . a serious riot took place at Budge Budge. Nearly seven thousand labourers of the Budge Budge Jute Mills mustered in the vicinity of the bungalow, where European employees of the mill reside. It appears that the labourers fell out with their Sirdar [*sardar*] and proposed to strike if his services were not dispensed with. The mill authorities declining to accede to the prayer, the labourers in a body assembled and broke down the panels of the bungalow by

⁴ West Bengal State Archives, Calcutta (hereafter W.B.S.A.), Judicial (Police), Jan. 1896, A nos. 6-11.

⁵ See Ranajit Das Gupta, "Material Conditions and Behavioural Aspects of Calcutta Working Class, 1875-1899" (Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Occasional Paper, xxii, Calcutta, 1979), p. 97. The Id festival occurs at the end of Ramadan, the ninth month of the Muslim year during which strict fasting is observed during daylight hours.

⁶ *Indian Daily News*, 5 Apr. 1895, quoted *ibid.*, p. 97.

pelting stones and brickbats. The Europeans fired on the mob . . . along with two police constables . . . a durwan of the mills . . . has been assaulted by the mob.⁷

The Bowreah Cotton Mill disturbance was caused by the reelers who for some time past had been pressing for a wage increase. This refused, the reelers struck work and the manager issued a notice closing down the mill. The events that followed are thus described in the words of the manager, A. M. Downs:

Soon after the reelers to the number of 2-300 surrounded the mill office with threats to murder me . . . [Downs quickly collected four European officers around him]. I told them [the officers] that . . . being 5 Europeans together they [the workers] would leave us alone. I immediately left the office. We were surrounded and one man took me by the shirt front and demanded his wage. I . . . told him to clear out. I then had a blow on the right shoulder. When this took place I clubbed my umbrella and cleared a space around me, and one man received the blow on the body and smashed the umbrella. This was the only weapon in the hands of the Europeans. We were attacked by bamboos, brickbats and parts of the machines broken by workers for this purpose.⁸

The manager and the assistants eventually used gun fire but were themselves also rather badly hurt. "One of my Assistants", said Downs, "had his topi smashed; another lost his; mine was knocked off and my head cut open with a brickbat, the blood covering my clothes".

The details of such incidents are obviously bloodstained, but they help to underscore one point. Irrespective of their demands, working-class protest against mill authorities frequently contained a strong element of vengeance in it. In many of these protests, violence was directed personally at the manager, his European assistants, the *durwans*, and when they were inaccessible, their houses and mill property.

It is this element of personal violence that has prompted a recent study of the nineteenth-century Calcutta working class to describe these protests as exhibiting "a somewhat primitive defiance of authority".⁹ The operative word here is "primitive" and a little reflection on it may help us in setting the perspective of this article. In what sense was the jute mill workers' defiance of authority "primitive"? Destruction of mill property and "physical violence against the employers", it is said in the study in question, "reminds us in some ways of the Luddites".¹⁰ This reference to the Luddites suggests two connotations for the word "primitive". It could refer to a particular period in the history of working-class protest in Bengal (presumably the early years of industrialization). On the other hand, it could have an ahistorical status and could refer to an implicit (since this is never

⁷ Quoted in Sukomal Sen, *Working Class of India: History of Emergence and Movement, 1830-1970* (Calcutta, 1977), p. 83.

⁸ W.B.S.A., Jdl. (Pol.), Dec. 1899, A nos. 22-9.

⁹ Das Gupta, "Material Conditions and Behavioural Aspects of Calcutta Working Class", p. 141.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 30, 32.

spelt out in the text under consideration) and *a priori* classification of forms of protest into some "lower" and "higher" types. In fact a conflation of both these senses — the old/new and the lower/higher oppositions — is suggested in the way the study contrasts the working-class protests of the 1890s with those of the 1870s and 1880s — note for instance the use of words like "transcend" and "new": "the miniature-scale deputations, 'mobbings', strikes, violent troubles [of the 1890s] . . . revealed that they [the workers] were trying to *transcend* the blind, individualistic, instinctive forms of reaction and to find *new*, more powerful and effective forms of protest".¹¹ "Primitive" then also seems to imply here "blind, individualistic, instinctive forms of reaction".

Now there are serious historical and theoretical problems involved in looking at the history of working-class protest in Bengal in terms of a pre-conceived hierarchy of "stages", based essentially on the peculiar historical experience of England.¹² Space will not permit a fuller treatment of the question here, but this paper will seek to demonstrate that the metaphors of "primitiveness", "instinct" or "blindness" are singularly unfortunate in the present context. They do not help us to understand why working-class protest in the Calcutta jute mills was frequently marked by a strong degree of physical violence or personal vengeance. It will be argued here that we do not understand a particular expression of defiance until we have examined the particular forms of manifestation of the "authority" that is under challenge. The way the mill worker chose to register his protest had something to do with the way he related to authority. Far from being "blind", it depended on how actually he saw authority.

Besides, employment of personal violence/vengeance against managers was not just a nineteenth-century phenomenon in Calcutta. It characterized much of working-class protest in the twentieth century as well. For instance, at the Birla Jute Mill in Budge Budge, one day in March 1937, when strikers from a neighbouring mill came in a procession, waving red flags, and "paraded in front of the mill", the spinners got out "in a body" and "assaulted the European Engineer".¹³ The manager of the Kankinara Jute Mill was "assaulted" in another case of labour protest in January 1937.¹⁴ Again later in the year, in June, as he was "remonstrating" with the spinners for "disobeying mill regulations", he was "suddenly hit by a bobbin".¹⁵ A note from the district magistrate of the 24-Parganas said:

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

¹² I have discussed some of these problems in a larger critique of Das Gupta's paper. My critique and Das Gupta's reply are available in "Some Aspects of Labour History of Bengal in the Nineteenth Century: Two Views" (Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Occasional Paper, xl, Calcutta, 1981).

¹³ W.B.S.A., Home (Political) (Confidential), no. 128/1937, pt. 3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, no., 484/1937.

Yesterday's trouble arose when an Assistant Manager warned one of the operatives for bad work. He refused to obey the Assistant Manager's orders and [said that] he must have the Manager's orders. The Manager then came to the spot and upheld the Assistant Manager's orders. The man refused to obey and was then asked to leave. He refused to do so and struck the Manager on the head with a bobbin. A number of other operatives also threw bobbins at the Manager and [the] Assistant Manager.¹⁶

A strike caused by a reduction of staff at the Northbrook Jute Mill in December 1937 featured a similar kind of violence. "The mill hands", a government report said, "were excited". They "became rowdy . . . and indulged in rough play by throwing bobbins — one spinner being rather badly hurt".¹⁷ In July 1939 the weavers of the Shamnagar Jute Mill "attacked the European Officers inside the mill in a body" over what the police thought was "a trifling matter" and assaulted them, damaging some mill property too in the process.¹⁸ In August of the same year the weavers of the India Jute Mill "assaulted the manager and two European Assistants", as the police report said, "without any provocation".¹⁹ Earlier in 1936, a strike in Hukumchand Jute Mill on 9th April was marked by working-class violence whereby "four Europeans were injured" and a *durwan* killed.²⁰ Even when there was no actual physical violence against the manager, there was always a possibility of this occurring. There was a strike in May 1937 at the Khardah Jute Mill, caused by the dismissal of a few spinners. No violence was seen in this case, but the management handed over to the police "some iron bars" that had been found with the spinners and the police thought that "this . . . might [have] led to an outbreak of violence".²¹

Should all my illustrations appear to come from the 1930s, here is the text of a telegram that the Bengal government sent to Delhi, regarding a "riot" at Anglo-Indian Jute Mill on 18 May 1926:

Mill hands demanded increased wages and attacked [the Manager's] office. Outside crowd broke in mill gates and pushed European Assistants to their quarters. The European Assistants who are members of auxiliary force fired nine shots in air with service rifles and dispersed crowd.²²

Such examples could be multiplied. The manager of the Bally Jute Mill "went to surprise the workers of the weaving department" one day in June 1926. He was immediately "attacked by 260 to 300 weavers and assaulted by many of them who threw shuttles, bobbins and other missiles at him causing injuries". The manager thought that his decision to suspend "the wages of four sirdars of the depart-

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, no., 128/1937.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, no., 60/1937.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, no., 446/1939.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, Govt. of Bengal, "Fortnightly Confidential Reports on Political Situation in Bengal, First Half of January to Second Half of June 1936".

²¹ *Ibid.*, Home (Polit.) (Conf.), no. 128/1937, pt. 3.

²² National Archives of India, New Delhi (hereafter N.A.I.), Dept. of Industries and Labour, file no. L881 (15) of 1926.

ment . . . [had] led them to organise an attack on him".²³ During the 1920-1 phase of "industrial unrest" in Bengal, certain similar incidents occurred. The strike of 6 July 1920 at the New Central Jute Mill, Howrah, occurred over the arrest of some weavers accused of "a serious assault upon [a] European Assistant".²⁴ Labour protests in the Wellington Jute Mill or the Union South Jute Mill in early 1921 exhibited very similar features — "assaults, on managers or assistants".²⁵

Even the so-called "blind, individualistic" form of protest was quite in evidence in the twentieth century. In November 1926, Razak, a mill-hand belonging to the Hooghly Jute Mill, was "charged with having assaulted seriously the Mill manager, Mr. Wilson".

It is alleged [a newspaper report said] that the accused was having a chat with some coolies and the mill manager took him to task for it. The accused grew furious and struck the manager with a lathi which separated the thumb from the forefinger of his hand.²⁶

What does such protest signify? Why did defiance of authority take the expression of personal vengeance? To answer these questions we need to examine the mode of functioning of authority in the mills. The next two sections focus on this aspect of the problem.

III

The nature of managerial authority in the Calcutta jute mills comes out very clearly in some of the documents pertaining to the mid-1930s. These were years of crisis when such authority was challenged by a massive upsurge of labour protest and strikes, organized under Communist leadership. The captains of the industry, the government of Bengal and the Indian Jute Mills Association (I.J.M.A.) then set about introducing certain "reforms" in jute mill labour-management practices. Sir Edward Benthall, then chairman of Bird and Company, tried at this time to get his managers to accept "reforms" like Whitley Councils or works committees, labour officers, welfare officers alongside "healthy" (which meant employer-promoted, anti-Communist) trade unions.

Benthall's proposals met with strong opposition from the managers. He was quickly warned against doing anything that undermined the authority of the manager in the eyes of the workers.²⁷ Two

²³ *Amrita bazar patrika*, 1 Dec. 1926, carries a report on this case.

²⁴ W.B.S.A., Commerce Dept., Commerce Branch, July 1921, A nos. 40-2, contains the *Report of the Committee on Industrial Unrest in Bengal*. See "Appendix".

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Amrita bazar patrika*, 3 Nov. 1926.

²⁷ Centre for South Asian Studies, Cambridge (hereafter C.S.A.S.), papers of Sir Edward Benthall (hereafter B.P.), box 11, "Paul" to Benthall, 7 July 1937. I have not yet obtained permission to quote directly from these papers.

of his managers objected to the idea of a works committee on the ground that the workers would read this only as a sign of the manager's weakness.²⁸ Indeed, managerial sabotage made ineffective some of the works committees set up under pressure from Benthall. One committee soon ran out of topics to discuss as managers could not find issues on which consulting the workers could be considered worthwhile.²⁹

Benthall recognized the nature and strength of this opposition, and the manager's point of view was soon accommodated within his general strategy for containing labour unrest. He gave up the idea of purely western-type Whitley Councils where workers and managers sat as supposedly equal partners and took decisions jointly on matters affecting production and the worker's life. Such equality would be too un-Indian. If managers and workers were to get closer together through some institutional arrangement, then that arrangement had better be a panchayat (traditional Indian village council), which was "indigenous", rather than a Whitley Council, which would be "foreign".³⁰ For, as Benthall eventually came round to accept in 1941, there was still a lot in the "Ma-Baap" relationship that was supposed to exist between the manager and the worker in a jute mill.³¹

"Ma-Baap" literally means "parents". Managers obviously claimed that they were *in loco parentis* to the worker.³² The worker was a "child" and was thought incapable of "rational", "adult" behaviour. He could be easily led astray; strikes, for instance, were always seen as the handiwork of "ringleaders" or "outsiders".³³ He was unreasoning and unpredictable, and managers often expressed surprise at the "suddenness" of working-class protest.³⁴ The worker was therefore childlike. A typically parental statement which Sir Alexander Murray (a noted industrialist in colonial Bengal) introduced into the body of the report of the Committee on Industrial Unrest (1920-1) ran as follows (note the key words): "Labour, in its *ignorance*, is certain to make *unreasonable* demands which could not be granted without destroying industry, but *firmness* in refusing

²⁸ C.S.A.S., B.P., box 12, "Paul" to Benthall, 21 July 1937.

²⁹ In this particular committee, all that they could discuss were the prospects of the Muhammadan Sporting Club — these were years of heightened Hindu-Muslim tension in the working class — in the Calcutta Soccer League. Once the club won the league, however, there was nothing else to talk about. C.S.A.S., B.P., box 11, "Paul" to Benthall, 19 July 1937.

³⁰ C.S.A.S., B.P., box 16, "Paul" to Benthall, 26 Nov. 1940; also box 11, Benthall to "Monty", 15 July 1937.

³¹ *Ibid.*, B.P., box 16, Benthall to "George", 5 Apr. 1941.

³² Interview with Mr. G. D. Butchart, Dundee, Oct. 1979.

³³ Even a casual reading of the weekly reports on strikes available in the W.B.S.A., Home (Polit.) (Conf.) series will bear this out.

³⁴ See, for example, W.B.S.A., Home (Polit.) (Conf.), no. 818/1936, Govt. of Bengal letter no. 522 Com[merce] of 1936.

such demands needs to be mingled with much *patience* and *consideration*".³⁵

This statement encapsulates the two necessary aspects of a "Ma-Baap" authority. On the one hand, managers had to be seen as dispensers of "parental" justice (showing the "patience" and "consideration" that Murray mentioned). Approaching the manager with complaints about an oppressive *sardar* was obviously an indication that managers were seen and even partly accepted in this role. Even in some of the Communist-led jute mill strikes of 1937, workers frequently demanded that there should be "no dismissals except by the manager or a European" — an obvious reference to the oppression the workers suffered at the hands of the *sardars* or their accomplices, the Bengali mill-clerks.³⁶ But, on the other hand, being seen as patient and kind was not enough; managers also needed to be seen as disproportionately powerful figures, embodying the "firmness" of Murray's prescription. The power relationship between the manager and the worker had to be as visibly asymmetric as between an adult and a child.

The exemplary manager was someone whom the workers would "look up to . . . as a sort of God". This is how John Finlay, the manager of the Hastings Jute Mill, was described in 1894 by a visitor from Dundee:

John Finlay . . . is the Nestor among the mill men now . . . [He] has tact, mother-wit, and common sense in the management of the workers. He is intimately acquainted with their language and character, and the consequence is that things go on smoothly. There are no better workers in the world than those in the Indian jute mills. A paternal despotism suits them exactly. Whenever they get to believe in their manager as one who will be kind though firm with them, who, while demanding absolute obedience, will give them absolute fairplay, their loyalty is secure. They look up to him as a sort of God.³⁷

This quotation overestimates the importance the manager normally attached to learning the worker's language or about his character. According to an official report of 1906, the average jute mill manager, "usually a kindly Scot from Dundee", knew "but little of the language which his employees talk[ed] . . . [and] often [could not] freely communicate with them". He did not have "much acquaintance with their manners and habits" either.³⁸ This description seems closer to reality and is borne out by the evidence of the Benthall papers. One persistent complaint of Benthall and his partners during the frequent

³⁵ W.B.S.A., Commerce Dept., Commerce Branch, July 1921, nos. 40-2 (my italics). A note by J. H. Kerr says: "This was Sir A. Murray's own idea". Cf. the advice given by the Bengal government to jute mill managers in 1937: "It should be realised that the workers are crude and ignorant but appreciate kindness"; see Indian Jute Manufacturers Association (hereafter *I.J.M.A.*), *Report, 1937* (Calcutta, 1938), p. 126.

³⁶ See W.B.S.A., Home (Polit.) (Conf.), nos. 484/1937, 60/1937.

³⁷ Anon., "The Calcutta Jute Mills", in *Dundee Year Book, 1894* (Dundee, 1895), p. 95.

³⁸ B. Foley, *Report on Labour in Bengal* (Calcutta, 1906), para. 23.

jute mill strikes of 1937 related to the absolute lack of managers and supervisors who knew the language of the workers well enough to be able to act as mediators between labour and capital, especially at moments of increased tension and hostility.³⁹ But the shallowness of the manager's knowledge was never seen to stand in the way of his "Ma-Baap" authority. In 1923, a lady doctor investigating the conditions of female workers in the jute mills came across typical instances of assumed "deification" of the manager. The manager of the Baranagar Jute Mill No. 2 told her how the "temporary wives [of workers] go over to other men, upon which there is trouble, and then the manager is required to give a decision . . . [He] said his Sunday mornings were often given up to such work". At the Lothian Jute Mill, the manager pointed out to the doctor a Bengali woman worker. "Once when one of her 'husbands' had been beating her when she was pregnant, she appealed to Mr. Macnab [the manager] who, when he found the offence was proved, dismissed the man from the mill". Another instructive case was the manager of the Fort Gloster Jute Mill:

The manager of this mill succeeded his father, and has himself been here 29 years . . . I noticed as we went round the mill *he did not hesitate to hit workers lightly with his cane*. He himself settles disputes among the workers, gives divorces etc. He allows a wine shop and toddy shop inside the workers' village, says there is less 'budmasheri' [villainy] and he has more control over his workers if they get drunk inside the village than out.⁴⁰

Such arrogation by the manager of absolute authority to himself was obviously dependent on the worker seeing him as absolutely powerful, while in reality the manager's actual powers were often quite limited.⁴¹ For the "Ma-Baap" relationship to work it was necessary for the manager to have an overpowering presence and for the worker to be made to feel it. If this were not so, no manager would have dared to walk among his workers, alone, flicking his cane about, hitting them casually, as the Fort Gloster Mill manager did in the incident mentioned above.

What made the manager appear so powerful and big, and the worker powerless and small? What was the technology, so to speak, of such magnification?

IV

It is when we touch on this question of "magnification" that we realize that the manager's authority was essentially colonial. It de-

³⁹ C.S.A.S., B.P., box 12, Benthall to "Paul", letters of 1, 5, 21 Aug. 1937, and "Paul" to Benthall, 11 Aug. 1937.

⁴⁰ W.B.S.A., Commerce Dept., Commerce Branch, Apr. 1923, B no. 77 (my italics).

⁴¹ Raising wages, for example, was often not within the manager's power. Even orders for "lock-outs" at times came from the Managing Agent's Head Office. B. C. Roy Papers, held at the Nehru Memorial Library, New Delhi, have some correspondence (from the early 1920s) bearing on the problem. See also W.B.S.A., Home (Polit.) (Conf.), no. 215/1930.

rived more from the colonial situation than from technology or any other factor internal to the production process. The word "colonial" is meant here to include what was indigenous to Indian society. There is, of course, no denying that the authority of the mill manager was bolstered up by his position as a member of the ruling race. But in some respects one also cannot help noticing the essentially Indian nature of this authority. Hence the close resemblance — often commented upon in the nationalist press — of the jute mill manager's authority to that of the nineteenth-century indigo-planter in Bengal, who in turn modelled himself on the Bengali (or north Indian) landlord.⁴²

The Scottish manager in a Calcutta jute mill was something that he could never have been at home. Our 1894 visitor observed: "The jute mill manager in India is a much more important personage than his brother in Dundee . . . He lives in a spacious bungalow, beautifully furnished, and has quite a retinue of servants to attend to him".⁴³

Thus it was the typical signs of ostentatious colonial power that made the manager more important than he would have been in Dundee: "spacious bungalow", lavishly furnished, a large "retinue of servants". The words speak of plenitude and excess, which marked the life-style of the Scottish assistant as well. The Scotsmen in Calcutta presented such a novel spectacle to the Dundee gentleman whom we have been quoting so far that he proceeded to record their life-style in utmost detail. To an Indian reader, many of the details would seem obvious and trivial, but their presence in the pages of the *Dundee Year Book* goes to show how strange and exotic they must have appeared to the readers in Dundee. The Scottish jute mill assistant, it was reported, "lives well". "[He has] a bearer, a Mahomedan, who helps off and on with his clothes, takes charge of his room, attends him at table, stirs his tea, lights his pipe". And this is how the assistant spends his daily life:

When a mill man gets up in the morning . . . his attendant brings him a cup of tea with some toast and sometimes a couple of eggs. This is called *chota haziri* (little breakfast). When the real breakfast time comes, he sits down to *several* courses, consisting of fish, stewed steak and onions, eggs, curried fowl and rice, with the usual addenda of tea or coffee, with bread, butter and jam. Instead of the tea, some prefer beer or iced water, while others take a peg. The 'peg' is a great Indian institution . . . It consists of a glass of whisky, a bottle of soda water, and a lump of ice all tumbled into a tall glass . . . The 'peg' is responsible for the downfall and early death of many a fine promising young man . . . The tiffin (luncheon) . . . is

⁴² For evidence regarding the nationalist press, see Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903-1908* (Delhi, 1973), p. 227; P. Saha, *History of the Working Class Movement in Bengal* (Delhi, 1978), p. 111. For evidence of similarities between the indigo-planter's tyrannical authority and that of the Bengali landlord, see Blair B. Kling, *The Blue Mutiny: Indigo Disturbances in Bengal, 1859-1862* (Philadelphia, 1966); Ranajit Guha, "Neel-Darpan: The Image of a Peasant Revolt in a Liberal Mirror", *Jl. Peasant Studies*, ii (1974).

⁴³ Anon., "Calcutta Jute Mills", p. 104.

less elaborate than the morning meal . . . and when the day's work is over, and bathing and dressing accomplished, the whole chummery sit down together to their evening meal consisting of a soup, fish, joint, side dishes, pudding and fruit. The various fruits in season are on the table at every meal. A plentiful supply of ice is provided by the Company.⁴⁴

Nutrition was obviously not at the centre of such an eating routine — the reference to the “peg” makes that clear. Eating was a ritualized expression of a colonial ruling-class culture, a well-defined culture with its own vocabulary — *chota haziri*, “peg”, “tiffin” — signifying, again, excess and plenitude. An American gentleman who lived and worked in the jute-manufacturing circles of Calcutta in the 1920s noted with interest the emphasis his European colleagues placed on their living styles. He wrote:

Europeans in India must keep up a certain standard of living. In fact, this is so vital to the white man's prestige that most of the big firms will not allow their juniors to marry on less than a thousand rupees a month. And this did not go far when I was in Calcutta. Take the servants alone, a married couple must keep . . . Ten servants seem a lot for a couple with modest means, but there is no way of cutting down.⁴⁵

There was an irony of history in all this. For the mill managers and assistants were often themselves of working-class origin,⁴⁶ but out in the colony they were transformed overnight into members of the ruling class and the ruling race. They sat on municipal committees, were made Honorary Magistrates,⁴⁷ and socialized with the British civil servants in the colonial bureaucracy.⁴⁸ In short, they became the bearers of the colonial rule in *mufassil* (“provincial”) Bengal. Even *bhadralok* (“respectable person” of the middle class) enterprise in the mill areas often depended crucially on their patronage.⁴⁹ An interesting example of such colonial transformation is the career of James Robertson of Dundee, who went out to Bengal in 1874 as the manager of Shamnagar Jute Mill. A certificate from the Douglas Foundry in Dundee dated 25 January 1866, described him as one who “has served a regular apprenticeship of 5 years to us as a machine maker and has been with us as a journeyman for some

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 100-2.

⁴⁵ D. W. King, *Living East* (New York, 1929), p. 40.

⁴⁶ “The overseers, managers and mechanics in the Indian jute mills are almost wholly recruited from Dundee. There are hundreds of such men who have passed through Dundee's technical classes, and a certificate of attendance at the technical college has come to be regarded as proving that the holder has been willing . . . to acquire a knowledge of the principles of jute manufacture”: *Handbook and Guide to Dundee and District*, pp. 118-20.

⁴⁷ See W. B. S. A., Home (Polit.) (Conf.), nos. 307(1-32)/1920, 22/1930.

⁴⁸ Thus reminisced T. G. Holman, an I.C.S. officer serving in Bengal in the 1920s and 1930s: “Social life in Hooghly was brisk . . . Alethea and I had many happy times with the gentlemen in jute at Angus [Mill]. They had a delightful swimming bath and a very well kept nine hole golf course, where I had the good luck to win the Chinsura Challenge Trophy . . .”: India Office Library, London, MSS. Eur. D884, T. G. H. Holman papers, “Bengal Diary”, p. 306.

⁴⁹ See my “Sasipada Banerjee: A Study in the Nature of the First Contact of the Bengali Bhadralok with the Working Classes of Bengal”, *Indian Hist. Rev.*, ii (1976).

months".⁵⁰ But two farewell addresses that he received in 1885 when he retired from the Shamnagar Jute Mill show him in a very different light. One address, from the local residents, mentioned how "mill employees and the villagers . . . looked upon him as the promoter of their welfare and happiness". Another, from the secretary of a local school, was even more supplicatory in its tone:

Mr. James Robertson . . . the worthy gentleman, whose good feelings towards the natives . . . induced him to commiserate the want of an English School . . . It is he, who favoured [the school] with a donation and . . . took a lively interest in the Examination and distribution of prizes . . . To preserve his memory hereafter, we beg of him for [a] miniature in photograph . . . to be suspended in the school.⁵¹

The effect of such colonial "magnification" of one's power and status was not lost on the mill manager or his assistant. To quote the 1894 visitor again:

When the mill assistant arrives out in Calcutta his circumstances undergo a change. He may have been known in Dundee as Sandy Tamson: but out here he is changed at once into Alexander Thomson, Esquire, weaving master, and all his letters are so addressed.⁵²

The effect was not lost on the worker either. K. C. Roy Chowdhury, a trade unionist active mainly in the 1920s, mentions in his diaries how, during his time, jute mill workers always preferred a "rich" Indian as their spokesman when it came to dealing with the sahibs. They were very pleased, Roy Chowdhury says, to see trade union leaders come to attend meetings in their own motor cars.⁵³ In other words, the worker registered the signs of managerial authority and wanted his leader to match up to them.

In the jute mills of Bengal, then, managerial power worked more by making a spectacle of itself and less by the quiet mechanism of "discipline" that acts through the labour-market, technology and the organization of work.⁵⁴ In the "classic" case of metropolitan capitalism, the "place of the slave-driver's lash is taken by the over-looker's book of penalties". Thus wrote Marx.⁵⁵ In the colonial capitalism of Bengal, as I shall now proceed to show, the lash remained more important than the fine-book.

⁵⁰ Archives of Thomas Duff and Company, Dundee (hereafter T.D.A.), bundle on James Robertson.

⁵¹ T.D.A., the bundle on Robertson contains these addresses.

⁵² Anon., "Calcutta Jute Mills", p. 100.

⁵³ Papers of K. C. Roy Chowdhury, diary no. 3, entry for 7 Apr. 1923. These papers, at present in my possession, were made available through the courtesy of Basudha Chakrabarty and Nabaneeta Deb Sen.

⁵⁴ For the concept of "discipline", see Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Harmondsworth, 1979), p. 220 and *passim*. In short, "discipline" is "to substitute for a power that is manifested through the brilliance of those who exercise it, a power that insidiously objectifies those on whom it is applied; to form a body of knowledge about these individuals, rather than to deploy the ostentatious signs of sovereignty" (p. 220).

⁵⁵ Karl Marx, *Capital*, 3 vols. (London, 1946), I, p. 424.

V

If we look at the manager's authority through the worker's eyes, three characteristics of such authority stand out. They are related but separable.

First, *authority was personalized*. Factory rules were seen as the manager's will. Issues like wage increases, wage cuts, dismissals or lock-outs were perceived as matters of his personal choice. A telling case was a riot that broke out at the Anglo Indian Jute Mill on the morning of 18 May 1926. The mill had just laid off some workers, so the atmosphere in the mill was tense. It had also changed its working hours as a result of which women workers expected a rise in their wages:

In making his morning rounds at 6.30 in the mill a mob began following the Manager round and a few bobbins were thrown. The manager then went into his office which was immediately surrounded by a crowd of 2000-3000 . . . deputations were sent to the Manager to ask him to increase the wages. On his saying that it was not in his power, bricks were thrown at the office windows and the windows . . . were smashed.⁵⁶

Much violence followed. A later police report repeated that the raising of wages was indeed *not* within the manager's power: "Managers have no say in the matter of wages, which are controlled by the [Managing] Agents".⁵⁷ Why did not the workers believe this? Because they were used to seeing authority as an unrestrained expression of the manager's personal will. On the Friday preceding the riot — which was also their pay-day — the same manager had refused to pay them when he heard "some murmuring" among the workers. He had warned them instead that he would cancel all due wages unless workers (then on strike) joined work by the following Monday. In the absence of explicit service or wage regulations in the industry, such a warning could have only appeared to come from the manager personally.

Even in the course of routine conversations with the workers, managers and assistants projected their authority not only in the imperative, but often in the first person singular. A sample of "useful sentences" taken from a manual of spoken Hindi — put together for use in jute mills — will make that clear.⁵⁸ It should be noted that the word used to mean "I" was "ham" (or "hum") which literally meant "we". The British in India used it often as a substitute for the royal "We". The sentences thus sought to impress upon the mind of the worker a sense of the manager's (or assistant's) "sovereignty", his unlimited power:

⁵⁶ For details, see W.B.S.A., Home (Polit.) (Conf.), no. 286(1-4)/1926.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Mohiuddin Ahmad, *Essentials of Colloquial Hindusthani for Jute Mills and Workshops*, 2nd edn. (Calcutta, 1932), pp. 88-91.

- | | |
|---|--|
| a) Agar tum kārkhānā men
phir jhagra karegā to
ham tumko jāwāb degā. | If you quarrel again
inside the factory,
I shall sack you. |
| b) Tum do mahinā huā
ghar gaya thā. Ham
tumko abhi jāne nahin
degā. | It's now only a couple of
months since you've been back
from home [village]. I shall
not allow you to go now. |
| c) Tum abhi ek mahinā
talab baghair kām
karo. Agar tumharā
kām achcha hogā to
ham tumko barābar
rakhegā. | You work now for a
month without any
wages. If your work is
satisfactory, I shall
keep you permanently. |
| d) Jo ādmi kāl der se
āgē ham uspar
jurmānā karegā. | I shall fine anyone who comes
in late tomorrow. |
| e) Ham jaise boltā hai
waisā karo nahin to
kām chhor do. | Do as I say, or give up your
job and leave. |
| f) Tum donon kā kasūr
hai. Ham donon ko
jāwāb degā. | You are both guilty. I
shall sack you both. |
| g) Agar Barā Sahib
dekhegā to wuh
bahut gussā hogā. | Look, if the Bara Sahib
["big boss"] happens to see this,
it will make him very angry. |

Small wonder, then, that authority was seen in personal terms. As a Bengal government report once said: "The ensuing of trouble on the appointment of a new Manager is not an infrequent occurrence".⁵⁹

Secondly, apart from being personalized, *authority was excessive*. I use the word "excess" in opposition to the word "economy". In Marx's (or Foucault's) discussion of capitalist discipline, managerial and supervisory authority is seen to operate through an articulated body of rules and legislation which have the effect of ensuring an economy in the use of managerial power.⁶⁰ In the jute mills of Calcutta, however, there prevailed the idea that the managers should be in complete and unchallenged control of their labourers. No "outsider" could be allowed to intervene in the manager-worker relationship. Thus in October 1905, the manager of the Fort Gloster Jute Mill lost his temper when he saw some of his clerks and workers wearing *rakhee*.⁶¹ The *rakhee* to him was a sign of the presence of the "outside agitator". He "struck a Bengali clerk and two or three Mohammedan mill-hands" which led to a strike.⁶² During the Khilafat movement in 1920, the manager of the Union Jute Mill came across

⁵⁹ See N.A.I., Dept. of Industries and Labour, file no. L881(11) of 1921; W.B.S.A., Home (Polit.) (Conf.), no. 32/1940.

⁶⁰ The point is discussed in greater theoretical detail in my "Conditions for Knowledge of Working-Class Conditions".

⁶¹ A piece of thread worn around the wrist as a mark of brotherhood — a traditional Hindu custom. During the agitation against the partition of Bengal in 1905 Hindu Bengali leaders often exchanged *rakhees* with Muslims to indicate Hindu-Muslim unity. See Sarkar, *Swadeshi Movement in Bengal*, p. 287.

⁶² *Bengalee*, 18 Oct. 1905.

"a hartal [strike] leaflet posted on the wall of the mill". In a dramatic demonstration of his anger, not only did he tear it off the wall but he also "trampled it under foot" before the watching eyes of his workers.⁶³ Managerial reaction was the same when the Government of Bengal intervened to settle the 1929 general strike. A deputation of employers to the Government bitterly complained how, as a result of such "unfortunate action . . . control of labour had . . . passed out of the hands of the employers".⁶⁴

Such insistence on exclusive control of labour was not for the fear of the "agitator" alone. In a highly imperfect labour-market there was also the fear of temporary, but serious, labour shortage. The following report from 1918 brings out this aspect of the problem:

A manager . . . starting a new mill heard that a mill across the river was out on a strike and so he sent a sardar with a launch to get some of the labour. The sardar came back without the labour and was ordered to go back once more. But he again returned alone. To the manager's question he replied that there was a sahib with a gun standing on the ghat [steps leading from the river-bank to the river] daring him to come near.⁶⁵

Thirdly, *authority bore marks of terror*. Excessive authority obviously depended on a certain use and demonstration of physical force. Managerial power had a necessary extra-legal dimension to it.

There was the Voluntary Artillery Force of which "nearly every jute mill assistant" and manager were members.⁶⁶ The object of raising the force was to meet labour unrest "with arms".⁶⁷ As some of my examples will have shown, this was no empty threat. Besides, throughout the period under discussion, assaulting the worker physically was an extremely common practice — far too common, in fact, for it be overlooked as any individual manager's personal failing. The nationalist press was always full of complaints about this aspect of managerial behaviour. A report that appeared in the *Bengalee* of 2 August 1906 describing how the manager of the Indian Jute Mill once kicked one of his weavers while "using abusive language at the same time" was typical of the genre of such reports. Jute mill workers, it is said, often compared their bosses to ill-tempered horses, as in dealing with either one faced the danger of getting kicked.⁶⁸ Matters came to a head in 1926 when a Scottish assistant actually killed a weaver by kicking him in a fit of anger.⁶⁹ The ensuing scandal

⁶³ W.B.S.A., Home (Polit.) (Conf.), no. 106(1-36)/1920. The Khilafat movement in India during the years 1920-1 took the form of pan-Islamic protests in support of the sultan of Turkey.

⁶⁴ N.A.I., Home (Polit.) (Conf.), no. 257/1 and K. W. of 1930.

⁶⁵ J. C. Kydd, "Industrial Labour in Bengal", *Bengal Economic Jl.*, ii (1918), pp. 345-6. See also Anon., "Calcutta Jute Mills", p. 95, for similar instances from the 1890s.

⁶⁶ Anon., "Calcutta Jute Mills", p. 102; W.B.S.A., Home (Polit.) (Conf.), no. 307(1-32)/1920.

⁶⁷ *I.J.M.A. Report, 1895* (Calcutta, 1896), appendix, pp. 76-80.

⁶⁸ Interview with Jyotish Ganguli, Calcutta, Sept. 1979.

⁶⁹ For details, see W.B.S.A., Home (Polit.) (Conf.), no. 177/1926.

and uproar in the press, and mounting working-class grievance over physical "torture", forced the I.J.M.A. to assure the government in 1929 that "there will be no corporal punishment" in the mills.⁷⁰ This was not a very effective assurance, for we hear of physical assaults by managers and assistants as late as 1938 or 1940.⁷¹ By then the assumptions underlying the so-called "Ma-Baap" relationship had obviously become part of a strong managerial tradition in the jute mills.

Even more vicious, from the worker's point of view, was organized managerial terror (as distinct from sporadic physical assaults) that was unleashed on labour at moments of protest. In the flow of such excessive, organized managerial violence, the police, the *sardars* and the *durwans* often acted as capillaries, aiding the flow.

Sumit Sarkar records an early instance of this. The workers of Fort Gloster Jute Mill had gone on strike in March 1906. "On the night of 12-13 March", Sarkar writes, "mill durwans, a mob of upcountry coolies and some police constables launched a violent attack on the neighbouring villages of Khajari, where many of the [striking] workers lived".⁷² Abdul Momin, one of the organizers of the 1929 general strike, mentions the use by managers of hired Kabuli "goondas" (thugs, hooligans) when the strike was on.⁷³ During a strike at the Ludlow Jute Mill in May 1928, the manager one day let off "the blacklegs" (working in place of the strikers) "two hours before the usual time", and they, "assisted by the Jamadars [*durwans*] and other servants of the mill, armed with lathis, swords, sticks and daggers, set upon the [striking] workers in their quarters and inflicted serious injuries on them". A month later at the same factory, the women went out on strike. One day during the strike the manager "induced" (in the language of a newspaper report) the women leaders of the strike to come to his office:

Thereafter the gates were locked up and strikers were threatened with prosecution if they failed to rejoin at once. The police and the Jamadars of the mill continued to intimidate them all along. On their refusal to resume work, several of the leaders were severely assaulted and immediately put under arrest. The rest of the women workers were . . . assaulted and dispersed, being forcibly dragged by their hair.⁷⁴

It should be emphasized once again, however, that this projection of authority in personalized, excessive and terrorizing terms was not a European invention on the Indian soil. Nor was it a European monopoly. Even after making allowances for the haughtiness and arrogance of a ruling race, the evidence points to remarkable similarities between the managerial style described above and that obtaining

⁷⁰ N.A.I., Dept. of Industries and Labour, file no. L881(24) of 1930.

⁷¹ W.B.S.A., Home (Polit.) (Conf.), nos. 381/1938, 32/1940.

⁷² Sarkar, *Swadeshi Movement in Bengal*, p. 229.

⁷³ Abdul Momin, "Chatkal sramiker pratham sadharan dharmaghat" [The First General Strike of Jute Mill Workers], *Kalantar*, 12 Aug. 1970.

⁷⁴ *Amrita bazar patrika*, 3 May, 10, 22 June 1928.

in the Indian-managed cotton mills in Bengal. The Communist-run newspaper *Ganabani* published a report in 1928 which described how the workers of the Dhakeshwari Cotton Mill near Dacca had been treated by the management on demanding a rise in wages. The Bengali manager of the mill — who eventually forced them out of the factory with the help of his *durwans* — hurled a shower of abuse on the workers, using the Bengali equivalents of “bastard”, “swine”, and “son of a bitch”.⁷⁵ The details of the following police report on a strike at the Indian-owned and Bengali-managed Bangoday Cotton Mill (on the outskirts of Calcutta) are also instructive:

. . . in the afternoon [of 6 April 1937] one Kartic Ch. Dey, weaver, while working in the Bangoday Cotton Mill was assaulted by one Ganesh, Head Jobber of the weaving department . . . At this other weavers of the department took objection and complained . . . to the weaving-in-charge Godu Babu who took no action but threatened with further assault and discharge. So these Bengali weavers determined not to work in the company and wanted their pay. As arranged by Godu Babu these weavers about 64 in number . . . went to the mill gate on 7.4.37 at 11.30 hrs to take their pay, when some Darwans and coolies [coolies] came out of the mill gate with lathis and under the direction of Godu Babu and the mill manager Kunja Babu assaulted the . . . weavers . . . causing injuries.⁷⁶

VI

The strong resemblances between the managerial styles of the Scottish jute-mill manager and the Bengali cotton-mill manager point to the existence in both cases of a culture obsessively concerned with the employment and maintenance of the visible signs of domination and subordination. However much the British in India may have improvised on it, this culture was undeniably Indian in origin and it refused to come to terms with the bourgeois notion of “contract” that, theoretically at least, underlay the wage-relationship between labour and capital. Abusing the worker verbally or physically, addressing him in the disrespectful form “tum” (see the Hindi sentences quoted above) or the even more disrespectful “tui” (which was used by the Dhakeshwari Cotton Mill manager) were all signs of the worker’s lowly social status and, in so far as he accepted them, of his subordination. “Ma-Baap” relationship was thus the name that managers gave to their near-feudal domination. Up to a point it must have worked. But as workers’ protests show, the relationship broke down quite often. When exactly did such moments occur?

Let us go back to the case of the Anglo-Indian Jute Mill manager in 1926, the gentleman who was subject to much working-class violence when he pleaded his inability to grant a wage increase. As

⁷⁵ *Ganabani*, 13 Sept. 1928, excerpted in Gopal Halder (ed.), *Communist* (Calcutta, [1976?]), p. 25.

⁷⁶ W.B.S.A., Home (Polit.) (Conf.), no. 128/1937, pt. 1.

we know, the workers thought this to have been his personal choice. But that was to be expected; authority perceived as personalized could only be "arbitrary". But arbitrariness was not sufficient to provoke protest. If it were, jute mills in Bengal would never have seen any moments of "peace". In this case, the manager was seen as not just "arbitrary", but also "unfair". He was arbitrary in an unfair way. The *combination* was explosive. The workers here believed — wrongly, but that does not matter — that while other managers in the mills had already agreed to a wage increase, the gentleman here was holding this back quite unreasonably.⁷⁷ The supposed agreement of the other managers had already made the demand reasonable and just. So in holding it back, the manager was withholding something that the workers thought was due to them. He was therefore unfair and deserving of punishment.

Time and again, through instances of working-class protest, we return to the worker's notion of "fairness" and "justice". The worker reacts when he sees himself being deprived of something that he thinks is justly his. Such an injured sense of fairness and complaints about the manager's unreasonableness permeate the following petition that the workers of eight jute mills of the Titagarh area sent to the District Magistrate in 1931. This was a time when the mills were laying off thousands of men. Managers, fearing trouble from outside workers, had ordered entries into or exits from the mills to be strictly controlled. The petition is indicative of the workers' views at a time of heightened tension:

... at the time we are working in the mills we find ourselves imprisoned, as it were, with no liberty even to go to answer the calls of nature. If any of us pressed by an urgent call goes out his token is taken away and he is dismissed. If any of our relatives in our houses happen to fall ill or if any danger befalls any member of our family at the time we are working in the mills, we cannot get any information as the gates of the mill are kept closed and no one is allowed to go in or come out. We do not see why this rule should have been introduced, regarding closing of gates
...⁷⁸

The petition is quite clear on the working class "logic" of protest: "... when for many years in the past the gates were kept open during working hours there was no trouble whatsoever in the working of the mills". Thus it was not because there was trouble that the gates were shut — which would have been the managerial view — it was because the gates were shut that there was trouble. In point of fact, this was not a "true" explanation; there had been much trouble before even when "the gates were kept open". But the "truth" of the statement

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, no. 286(1-4)/1926.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, no. 150/1931.

lay elsewhere: the closing of the gates symbolized the manager's unfairness, and it was this that called for protest.⁷⁹

In the absence of more documents from the workers themselves, their notion of fairness or justice is difficult to disentangle and analyse in depth. Yet some aspects of the question are clear. The worker's idea of fairness was related to his idea of what was customary (or *riwaz*). "Unfair" was what was not done. If attending to ailing relatives or "urgent calls" was his "duty" and therefore customary — even if it meant interrupting work — then that was fair. Whoever or whatever stopped him from doing so was unfair.

Chitra Joshi in her work on the Kanpur (in Uttar Pradesh) textile mill workers — workers from the same cultural region as the jute mill workers — has identified a notion of "fair wage" that the workers there had.⁸⁰ A similar notion can be discerned in the case of jute mill workers too. A "fair" wage was what a labourer in a neighbouring mill received (or what a neighbour working for a different mill did). In other words, fair was what was seen as "customary". Therefore, if one manager granted wage increases (for whatever reasons) and another in a neighbouring factory refused to do so (for whatever reasons, again), the latter was unfair because he was denying workers what had become customary (in other mills) and thus rightfully theirs. The general strikes of 1929 and 1936-7 provide good illustrations of this. This was also at the heart of some of the important conflicts of 1920 — the year of "industrial unrest". At the Hooghly Jute Mill in November 1920, the spinners asked the manager for a wage increase "alleging other mills are getting it". The manager denied this, but — and this is significant — "says if others get it they shall also". The spinners went on strike, and the strike quickly spread to the mills in the town of Howrah — the Ganges, Fort William and Howrah Jute Mills. The strikes broke out on the same day, ended on the same day, and all had the same demand for a 25 per cent wage increase. The only way the government could explain the spread of this strike which originated in a single isolated mill on the other side of the river was by pointing out that, though isolated, the Hooghly Jute Mill "belongs by intercourse to the Howrah group,

⁷⁹ The gate occupied quite a crucial position in the architectural plan of the mill, as far as the exercise of managerial power was concerned. It was a means of controlling entry and exit. It was also where workers were physically checked by *durwans* for possible "thefts" and other offences. Scuffles between workers and *durwans* at the gate were quite common. Managers often ordered the gate to be closed as a demonstration of their will (as in the case of a lock-out) — hence, as a demonstration of a counter-will, gate-crashing by striking workers. See *ibid.*, Home (Polit.) (Conf.), no. 128/1937, pt. 3, note of 4 June 1937 by the Inspector General of Police; N.A.I., Dept. of Industries and Labour, file nos. L881(30) of 1931, L881(10) of 1924.

⁸⁰ Chitra Joshi, "Kanpur Textile Labour: Some Structural Characteristics and Aspects of Labour Movement, 1913-39" (Jawaharlal Nehru Univ. Ph.D. thesis, 1982). I am grateful to Ms. Joshi for letting me read two of her chapters in draft.

quite a proportion of the labour of the Howrah mills living in its neighbourhood".⁸¹

To appear "just", however, an idea did not always require the force of real tradition behind it. An arbitrary reference to the *kanoon* (law) of the land or to a superordinate authority was often sufficient to establish something as time-honoured (and thus a matter of "right"), much the same way as insurgent peasants would invoke the authority of the *raj* against an oppressive landlord. In April 1936, for example, the workers of the Hooghly Jute Mill went on strike and the authorities issued notices asking them to vacate their rooms in the mill's coolie-lines. Much violence resulted, but what preceded the violence is even more interesting. Debendra Nath Sen, a Communist leader, told the strikers: "as you pay rent and as you are employees in their Mills, the proprietors have *no right* to eject you all of a sudden . . .". In a later meeting another leader, Abdul Aziz, was even more forthright: "The notice given by the Sahib is *not lawful*. *He does not conform to the laws of the government*".⁸² Of course, both Sen and Aziz were wrong in their knowledge of the law, as a prolonged court case later proved, but the argument worked. When the manager went to the lines with his assistant and *durwans* to evict the workers, they were greeted by a very heavy dose of working-class anger and violence.⁸³

It is easy to see that the worker's notion of fairness became inextricably bound up with the question of defending what was "customary" and thus with his traditional sense of honour and dignity. This came out strongly in strikes over alleged acts of misbehaviour towards women by assistants or *durwans*, where striking was a matter of protecting the women's *izzat* (honour).⁸⁴ Another good example is the case we have cited earlier of the manager of the Union Jute Mill who tore up a Khilafat leaflet in 1920 and trampled it underfoot in the presence of his Muslim workers. He was "chased to his private quarters by a number of workmen who threw brickbats at the doors and windows". The workers later told the police that "as there were certain religious verses quoted in the notice, the trampling under foot was . . . insulting to their religion".⁸⁵ In other cases of protest, too, there always remained an element of the worker's dignity being at stake. In December 1905, when two "ringleaders" of the protesters at the Fort Gloster Jute Mill were arrested, workers "promptly went on strike, and . . . told the . . . police . . . that in arresting the two men they had all been insulted".⁸⁶ In January 1933, when the "Burra

⁸¹ *Report of the Committee on Industrial Unrest in Bengal*, "Appendix".

⁸² *I.J.M.A. Report, 1937*, pp. 136-7 (my italics).

⁸³ W.B.S.A., Home (Polit.) (Conf.), no. 207/1937.

⁸⁴ See, for example, *Report of the Committee on Industrial Unrest in Bengal*, "Appendix"; N.A.I., Dept of Industries and Labour, file no. L881(10) of 1924.

⁸⁵ W.B.S.A., Home (Polit.) (Conf.), no. 106(1-30)/1920.

⁸⁶ Sarkar, *Swadeshi Movement in Bengal*, p. 228.

Sahib" of the Waverley Jute Mill "roughly handled some of the weavers whose production did not prove satisfactory", it was not just "bad yarn" that the weavers complained of. They actually "resented . . . this alleged bad behaviour and . . . severely assaulted him with shuttles and iron instruments, necessitating his removal to the hospital".⁸⁷

Thus it was at points when the manager was not only arbitrary but both arbitrary and unfair (and thus unreasonable and insulting) that there was protest. At these moments the "Ma-Baap" relationship broke down. It not only broke down: more important, the terms of the relationship became instantaneously reversed.⁸⁸ The manager's view of the worker as a "child" was replaced by the worker's view of the manager as a "despot". Working-class vengeance took the place of managerial terror, and protest now bore marks of retaliation which the worker needed to stamp on the manager's body (since authority was personalized) or on the body of his assistant or *durwan* or on objects bearing a relationship of contiguity⁸⁹ to them, such as their bungalows, quarters or offices (that is, mill property). Using the anthropologist's language, we may thus schematize this "reversibility":

<u>Manager</u>	:	<u>Unreasonable—Powerful</u>
<u>Worker</u>	:	<u>Unreasonable—Powerless</u>
	:	<u>Despot</u> <u>Terror</u>
	:	<u>Child</u> <u>Vengeance</u>
	:	<u>Manager's Violence</u>
	:	<u>Worker's Violence</u>

Protesting, then, became a ceremony of defiance. The rebel worker inverted the terms of his relationship with the manager or the supervisor and overturned the two major everyday signs of his subordination: abusive language and physical violence. This inversion of relationships can be seen in most instances of working-class protest in the period under study. But an example from the nineteenth century would probably serve to show it in its pristine clarity. We reproduce here a letter that the authorities of the Alliance Jute Mill wrote to the I.J.M.A., reporting a "disturbance" at their mill on 6 July 1897:

We continued full working until about 10.30 A.M., when notice was brought that a large gang of men armed with *lathies* had attacked the gate, burst it open, and

⁸⁷ *Amrita bazar patrika*, 14 Jan. 1933.

⁸⁸ Cf. Foucault's discussion of the inversion of relationships that "normally" existed between the sovereign's terrorizing power and ordinary people, where violence became "instantaneously reversible": Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, pp. 59-60, 63.

⁸⁹ For the concept of "contiguous" (or metonymic) relationships, see Edmund R. Leach, *Culture and Communication: The Logic by which Symbols Are Connected* (Cambridge, 1976); Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York, 1979), pp. 59-60.

were surrounding the Mill. As things looked serious the engine was stopped and the Europeans went off to their houses to arm themselves, but before they got back to the compound the Mill was surrounded by two to three thousand excited men all armed with *lathies*, and with their clothes tightly tied up, shouting all kinds of abusive language and making threatening gestures with their sticks. The Engine, the governor gear was broken, and other damage done. It was only the prompt appearance of some of the Europeans with fire-arms that prevented the rioters from continuing their course of destruction and attacking the European quarters, upon which a body of men were marching. When asked to state their reason for causing the disturbance the only reply was a shout of defiance, with abusive language, a brandishing of their *lathies* and a shower of bricks. A few shots fired in the air, and a charge or two of snipe shot at their legs, got them to retire as far as the gate which they again attacked with their sticks and broke to pieces. This and the throwing of bricks appeared to satisfy them for a time.⁹⁰

The coming of the nationalist movement in the twentieth century introduced competing ideologies and organizations into the field of industrial relations in Bengal. As the nationalist movement gained momentum and the legitimacy of the British presence suffered erosion, workers naturally felt more encouraged to challenge the authority of their superiors at work. Yet it is possible to recognize a continuing structure in the nature of working-class defiance of authority all through the history of "political mobilization" of labour. There are, for example, uncanny similarities between the modes of labour mobilization of the Swadeshi⁹¹ period (1905-8) and those, under Communist leadership, of the 1930s. The red badge replaced the *rakhee*, slogans like "Mazdur ki Jai" (Victory to the Workers) replaced "Bande Mataram" (Glory to the Motherland), but the "bourgeois" nationalism of the Swadeshi *bhadralok* and the Marxism of the later *bhadralok* Communist often spoke to the worker with the same voice. Thus if the sight of the worker wearing the Swadeshi *rakhee* angered the manager in 1905, this is what Zaman, a Communist leader, told the workers of a jute mill in 1938: "[He] . . . asked workers . . . to enter the mill for work with red badges on and with lathis. He gave them instructions to assault anybody objecting to their wearing badges".⁹² In 1905 Aswini Banerji, the Swadeshi nationalist labour organizer, told his followers "that it was the slave who tempted, invited, nay compelled tyranny and that if they could return 2 blows for one, their burra sahibs . . . would begin to respect them".⁹³ Years later, in 1937, the Communist Niharendu Dutt Majumdar had the same message for the working class: ". . . if any workman was assaulted by a manager, the workers should retaliate by hitting him back".⁹⁴ The particular ideological content of the preachings do not seem to have been crucial. "Bande Mataram" was

⁹⁰ *I.J.M.A. Report, 1897* (Calcutta, 1898), "Appendix".

⁹¹ "Swadeshi movement" refers to the anti-partition movement in Bengal between the years 1905 and 1908. "Swadesh" literally means "one's native land".

⁹² W.B.S.A., Home (Polit.) (Conf.), no. 31/1938.

⁹³ Sarkar, *Swadeshi Movement in Bengal*, p. 237.

⁹⁴ W.B.S.A., Home (Polit.) (Conf.), no. 128/1937.

as good as "Mazdur ki Jai" when it came to signifying defiance. At the Kamarhati Jute Mill in June 1937, spinners charged with bad work defied the manager's order to leave, and "struck the manager on the head with a bobbin". "A number of other operatives also threw bobbins at the Manager and Assistant Manager", whereupon the police arrested "several of the rioters". "Immediately a crowd of about 1000 workmen assembled in front of the thana [police station] shouting slogans such as 'Mazdur ki Jai'. . ." and demanded their release. When asked why, the "ringleaders" replied "*it was their order*".⁹⁵ How similar to the incidents at the Fort Gloster Jute Mill in December 1905, where one day, when a "considerable amount of unrest" already existed in the workers' minds over a recently concluded strike, the cry of "Bande Mataram" was "taken up by one department after another", the European assistants "hustled about the place", and the police were told by the workers, on arresting two people, that "all brothers in the mill, all brothers in Bengal; that in arresting the two men they had all been insulted".⁹⁶

These similarities across the separation of decades are not accidental. They arise from the fact that both the Swadeshi *bhadralok* and his later Communist successor had to address themselves to the already existing working-class modes of defying authority. These modes were rooted deep in the worker's understanding of authority and in the manager's projection of it. Physical violence against the employer was not necessarily a "primitive" defiance of authority; it was rather an acknowledgement of the way authority was represented in the jute mills and elsewhere. In the very nature of defiance was mirrored the nature of authority.

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⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ *Amrita bazar patrika*, 18 Dec. 1905; Sarkar, *Swadeshi Movement in Bengal*, p. 228.